

Alien invaders at WROV

IT WASN'T quite in the same league with Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" radio drama nearly 50 years ago. But when Roanoke radio station WROV told listeners on April Fool's Day that it was fighting a takeover attempt by the Roanoke Times & World-News, some of them reacted as if the Martians had indeed landed.

And no wonder. WROV itself sounded besieged. The station's story was that this newspaper had suddenly decided it needed a broadcast outlet for its news, and WROV had been chosen as the target for the corporate power move. A part of the threat to WROV's integrity was that the station's adult-contemporary music format would be changed to "elevator music."

The way disc jockey Sam Giles made it seem, a phalanx of newspaper trucks filled with armed editors was on its way to the studios on Cleveland Avenue. "We really don't know why they want our station," said the DJ. "We have barricaded ourselves inside the studio and security guards have been called to patrol the station."

Well, we don't know, either, why we or anybody else would want the station. But WROV's telephones began to ring with calls from people who took it seriously, and staffers had trouble convincing them otherwise. There were others who saw the spoof and wanted to add to the fun. One caller purporting to speak for the Norfolk Southern

said that if the station were taken over, the railroad would retaliate against the newspaper by moving its headquarters out of Roanoke. And so on.

Later in the day, the "crisis" eased, as a Federal Communications Commission official took the station's side and helped obtain a temporary restraining order. WROV could go back to playing music and broadcasting actual news; Times & World-News trucks could dismantle their cannons and get about delivering the afternoon edition. But reaction to the joke made station staffers feel good. "It's great to know that so many people care about WROV," commented operations director Mike Bell. "I guess Roanokers have finally found out how much of a hot property we are."

Nice. But one hazard of being known as a hot property — as many companies have learned — is that the corporate raiders along Wall Street begin casting covetous eyes. Then you have to scramble to cover your stock options, devise "golden parachutes" for company executives, and maybe take on a big load of new debt — the "poison pill" — to discourage attempts at takeover.

We weren't offended by WROV's prank, and wouldn't wish such troubles on the station or its management. Still, they should be careful. While they're manufacturing news and playing jokes on faithful listeners, somebody might sneak onto their hot property and open up a real radio station. Then where would they be?

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