

Radio show sows panic

KZSC 'quake report' shakes up listeners

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SANTA CRUZ — A "War of the Worlds" style broadcast on KZSC radio reported that a major Southern California earthquake killed thousands Thursday night, inciting outrage among listeners and apologies from the UC Santa Cruz station.

Although a disclaimer was read twice before the show was abruptly yanked off the air, many listeners thought the broadcast was authentic. The show used taped "live" bulletin break-ins during programming and had a UCSC seismologist playing along.

The first bulletin was broadcast around 7 p.m. as follows:

"This is a special report. Los Angeles has just been hit by a major earthquake estimated at magnitude 8.5 to 9.0. Initial reports indicate it is centered on the San Andreas Fault. ... Damage reports are high."

A few minutes later it continued with another "live update" that read in part:

"All power in Southern California is out. There are fires everywhere and the San Onofre nuclear power plant is on red alert."

"Initial injury reports have from 2,000 to 10,000 dead and between 60,000 to 300,000 injured. ... The aqueducts have all ruptured. There is flooding everywhere, though some flooding is helping to put out major fires. There are major mudslides."

Between bulletins, UCSC Earth Sciences Professor Karen McNally, who was part of the broadcast, described what would be happening in Los Angeles.

Almost immediately, the station was deluged by angry callers who had been panicked by the hoax, according to station management. Many of the callers apparently had relatives in Southern California.

The show had been on less than 20 minutes when KZSC station manager Maggie O'Grady, who didn't know what had been planned, pulled the program off the air and began to broadcast

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apologies.

"I hear we caused a major panic and I feel really bad about that," said Roger Takacs, a student who created the program. "I didn't intend that at all. I didn't intend to do this harm to anyone. I'm sorry. The station is sorry."

The intent, according to Takacs — who uses the name Roger Craig on the air — was to shock people into earthquake awareness. Before the program, Takacs contacted local fire stations to warn about the program and contacted the FCC to ensure it was legal. He broadcast two disclaimers during the program, about 15 minutes apart.

He neglected, however, to tell station management.

"The phones began ringing non-stop — all the lines at the station that could possibly ring," Takacs said. "A lot of people were calling me an idiot, saying it was inappropriate to create so much panic."

O'Grady was extremely displeased. She was in a meeting when the calls began coming in, she said, and as soon as she realized what was happening, she ordered Takacs to stop the program.

"The situation is that this young programmer who is overly eager decided to do a simulation with a faculty member," O'Grady said. "They worked out a similar (program) to the old 'War of the Worlds' broadcast. ... It was a very bad mistake and judgment on his part, and we will do everything we

can to rectify this with our audience and any member of the community who has been unduly alarmed."

O'Grady said she had no reservations about pulling the program off the air.

Among highlights of the show was tape broadcast as if it was live from Los Angeles, but actually recorded during a massive earthquake in Alaska during the early 1960s.

O'Grady said the station takes its role in the community seriously, and noted KZSC is part of the campus emergency broadcasting system.

"This is a nightmare," she said. "I'll have to notify the administration immediately."