

VCF UCSC - KZSC

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UCSC radio station gets in trouble with 'earthquake' report

SANTA CRUZ (AP) — UC-Santa Cruz's radio station, KZSC, apologized to shaken listeners for its "War of the Worlds" style report of a major earthquake in Southern California last night.

"I didn't intend to do this harm to anyone. I'm sorry. The station is sorry," said student Roger Takacs, who created the fictional program.

The broadcast said a major quake had just occurred in Los Angeles, killing thousands of people and causing huge fires, floods and mudslides. It was intended to increase earthquake awareness, Takacs said.

A disclaimer was read twice. But many listeners thought the broadcast — featuring bulletin updates and comments from a cooperative university seismologist — was real.

Almost immediately after the program's 7 p.m. start, furious listeners, many with relatives in Southern California, flooded the station with calls.

"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."

Twenty minutes later, station manager Maggie O'Grady, who didn't know what had been planned, ordered the show off the air, replacing it with apologies.

"The situation is that this young programmer who is overly eager decided to do a simulation with a faculty member," O'Grady said. "It was a very bad mistake in 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."

Takacs earlier contacted the Federal Communications Commission to make sure the broadcast would be legal. He also warned local fire stations but neglected to tell station management.

The program resembled Orson Welles' famed 1938 broadcast based on "The War of the Worlds," H.G. Wells' novel about a Martian invasion. Thousands of people were panicked by that realistic program.

Takacs' broadcast also was realistic, beginning with a bulletin: "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."

Several minutes later, it continued with an update saying all power in Southern California was out, fires were everywhere, and the rupture of aqueducts caused widespread flooding.

"Initial injury reports have from 2,000 to 10,000 dead and between 60,000 to 300,000 injured," the update said.

Between bulletins, Karen McNally, A UCSC earth sciences professor who was in on the show, described what could be happening in Los Angeles, about 300 miles to the south.

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

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

"This is a nightmare," she said.