THE GULLIBLE RADIO PUBLIC.

The federal communications commission is considering what action it should take regarding the recent broadcast of the H. G. Wells phantasy, "The War of the Worlds." A considerable number of people, perhaps several thousand in all, were frightened by the broadcast, but it would do them a serious injustice to say they were frightened out of their wits; all the evidence indicates they never had any wits to lose.

By and large the radio audience isn't very bright. Perhaps it would be more useful to say that some members of the radio audience are a trifle retarded mentally, and that many a program is prepared for their consumption.

Newspapers, books, magazines, the stage, and even the movies strain the fat boys' powers of understanding and appreciation, but they can generally find something on the air which is within their comprehension.

If it is the duty of government to encourage imbecility by safeguarding it, then the communications commission ought to do something drastic about "The War of the Worlds." Otherwise no action will be taken. No harm has been done; on the contrary, the incident may have jogged a few persons into a realization of their intellectual limitations. Possibly some hundreds of citizens have learned that they are not as smart as they thought they were. Possibly, too, they have been taught that credulity is an intellectual vice and skepticism is an intellectual virtue.

The practical joke is in bad repute, and probably justly so, but it was not without its uses. There is an educational value in left-handed monkey wrenches, lumber stretchers, type lice, badger hunts, and even in pins on the school seat. They teach caution. A generation brought up amid such sturdy institutions is disposed to look behind honeyed words and handsome offers. A generation brought up on practical jokes rejected free silver; a later generation accepted the promise of a prosperity to be achieved by means of scarcity.

Some congressman, thinking to make political medicine, has denounced the broadcast of the Wells novel as a hoax and demanded laws and punishments. It was not a hoax; it was fiction, and any normally intelligent man, even if he tuned in late, could not have failed to recognize it for what it was within a minute or two.

If the radio ever goes in for hoaxes in a big way, perhaps some sort of law or regulation forbidding them may be indicated, but the likelihood of any such thing happening is extremely remote. Hoaxes, like other forms of practical joking, are out of fashion and have been for a generation or more, thanks largely to the growing sense of responsibility on the part of newspaper editors. No law was required to accomplish that result. Incidentally, it would be extraordinarily difficult to write a law forbidding the broadcasting of hoaxes which would not at the same time prevent some of our most successful politicians from using the radio to address their constituents.