

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, FAKE NEWS, AND — MEDIA LITERACY

PRIMARY SOURCE UNIT

GRADE LEVELS: 4–8

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HOW TO USE THIS UNIT

The following unit offers multiple entry points into developing an understanding of media literacy. The unit framework and primary sources can be integrated into classrooms of grades 4–12. Each lesson has student objectives that can be accomplished within 40 minute periods over the course of several weeks. A midpoint writing assessment, whole class capstone debate, and final, independent writing assessment are included. Support materials are integrated into the lessons, and the primary source document pages can be found at the end of the unit guide.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The War of the Worlds audience study conducted by the Princeton Radio Project is the primary source document that is the springboard for making historical connections and learning how to consume and share information responsibly. Using the War of the Worlds 1938 broadcast, this scaffolded unit teaches students the value of media literacy and being smart consumers of information by building in interdisciplinary exercises related to the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast and fake news, with optimal embedded technology components. The primary source materials convey that history is subjective, and is constantly being evaluated and interpreted.

LESSON 1

INTRODUCTION TO BROADCAST AND VISUALIZATION AND COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

1–2 WEEKS : 40-minute periods

Students read and/or listen to *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* directed and narrated by Orson Welles 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast, excerpts of the H.G. Wells novel, or adaptation of the novel to serve as background.

Students create Window Boxes (8) to help visualize the broadcast (YouTube).

To create window boxes, student draw a line down the middle of the page vertically. Then, they will draw three vertical lines to create eight rectangles (a.k.a. window panes). Students use each of the window panes to visualize scenes throughout the broadcast.

Differentiation: Scaffold questions throughout the broadcast to highlight specific areas that provide opportunities for sketching vivid scenes.

LESSON 2

WHAT IS MEDIA? CONNECTING TO RADIO BROADCAST

1 DAY: 40-minute period

OBJECTIVE

Students develop a shared definition of media and identify how the radio broadcast falls under the umbrella of media.

WHOLE CLASS BRAINSTORMING

The teacher introduces the word “media” to the class. Students are asked what they know about media. The teacher records their answers.

The teacher reviews their answers and then gives a definition.

Create a whole-class shared definition based on a combination of their contributions and the dictionary.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Students jot on post-it notes using the following frame:

“I know that media is... But, I don’t know that media is...”

Allow students to share in a community circle. This activity acknowledges that they have some knowledge and what else they would like to know moving forward in this unit, which should be responsive based on the previous knowledge exhibited by students.

You may want to create a share chart where you can hang up the students’ post-its.

LESSON 3

ZEROING IN ON FAKE NEWS

1 DAY: 40-minute period

OBJECTIVE

Students will respond to statements on “fake news” using a graffiti wall. They will participate in an initial class discussion on whether the War of the Worlds broadcast is “fake news.”

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

For this lesson, you will want to use a credible article on the topic of fake news. It should be an article that you can extract parts from which will get your students talking. Suggestions include statistical information, quotes from experts, and statements that could be interpreted more than one way. Consider your student’s grade level, reading level, and maturity level to help you determine what is best for your students.

After you select your articles, extract 5–10 statements that you would like students to respond to. Write those statements in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Hang the posters in different areas of the room or spread out across a wall with tape.

Additionally, you will want to find several fake articles in their whole format for a later piece of this lesson. Again, consider the maturity level of your students when making selections about the content.

LESSON 3 CONTINUED

ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Students will participate in a “Whip Around” format and respond to the question: “What is the most important thing that you learned about the word ‘media’ in our last lesson?”

TEACH

Now that we know what “media” is, we are ready to dig into a new term: “Fake News.” Today, we will participate in a silent conversation to read about fake news. You will walk to a poster, read the statement on the poster and then respond to what you are thinking. Feel free to write questions, comments, opinions, and sketch. You can also respond to a response from one of your peers if you agree, disagree, or want to add on.

Allow students at least 8–10 minutes.

After 10 minutes, instruct students to now revisit each of the posters and read the comments.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Invite students to a circle and initiate a whole class discussion on what was surprising about the statements and the feedback from peers. Try to support students as a facilitator and allow them to sustain the conversation.

Students learn about critical consuming strategies — offer students a video or article or infographic that highlights components of critical consuming.

LESSON 4

STORYTELLING AND CREDIBILITY

3–5 DAYS: 40-minute periods

PART 1: How credible is what I am reading? (1–2 DAYS)

OBJECTIVES

- Students will sift through at least 2 articles and use criteria to determine whether the articles are real or fake.
- Students will provide evidence to support their decisions.
- Students will develop a fake news article using a rubric.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

For this lesson, you will want to provide your students with real and fake articles that offer them a chance to use their developing skills. Some sources that have published lessons include Scholastic and National Geographic. Additionally, decide what elements of determining whether fake news is credible you want to hone in. This will inform the “teach” part of your lesson. The teach portion below is only a suggestion.

ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Ask students to contribute to a whole class conversation that answers the question: “What surprised you about the topic of fake news?”

LESSON 4 CONTINUED

TEACH

Critical consumers learn how to spot fake news by assessing the credibility of a piece. Credibility is how believable the piece is. Critical consumers ask themselves questions like, “Who are the quoted experts in this article?” and “Can I find out more about them?” This is only one way to assess credibility.

PARTNER WORK

Students will work in partnerships to decipher whether the articles you present them with are fake or real. Distribute a teacher-made checklist of components that you want them to focus on. Additionally, you may want to allow them access to a device that connects to the Internet for cross-checking.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Students share out in partnerships their analysis with the whole class.

LESSON 4 CONTINUED

STORYTELLING AND CREDIBILITY

3–5 DAYS: 40-minute periods

PART 2: How credible is what I am writing? (1–3 DAYS)

OBJECTIVES

- Students will generate a fake news headline.
- Students will provide evidence to support their decisions.
- Students will develop a fake news article using a rubric.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

For this lesson, you will want to plan on modeling a piece for your students to demonstrate your expectations. The rubric below is a suggestion. Review with your students what is appropriate in terms of content. This is an excellent opportunity to allow for focused work on components such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Additionally, consider compiling the students' finished products into a booklet so that they can all assess each other in terms of credibility.

ENGAGE STUDENTS

Present students with your fake headline.

Consider using a website like [Break Your Own News](#) to make it appear credible.

Have a whole class discussion on what they think.

LESSON 4 CONTINUED

TEACH

We have spent time learning what “media” is and how we need to be critical of what we see, hear, and read. One way for us to further internalize this is to write our own fake news articles. We will write using the lens of credibility — Can we write an article that is believable to our audience? An article with elements of both real and fake?

MODEL

Demonstrate to your students how to create a fake news headline by modeling how to start with a level one headline and revise it into a level 3/4 expectation. Consider presenting the first row of the rubric to your students at this point so that expectations are clear.

INDEPENDENT WORK TIME

Students should complete a headline/project (if you are using a newsreel generator) and self-assess using the rubric.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Ask the students the following questions:

“What does creating a fake news headline feel like?”

“Did this experience change the way you feel about fake news?”

After students complete this task, consider administering the mid-point formative assessment over the next few days. Students should use their headline to guide their thinking. You may want to provide students with an exemplar piece and analyze it with your students to refine the rubric. Additionally, you can provide a scaffold, such as a teacher-made graphic organizer, to support students as they brainstorm.

FAKE NEWS ARTICLE RUBRIC

Sample from a 5th Grade Classroom

ASK YOURSELF	1	2	3	4	STUDENT SCORE	TEACHER SCORE
Did I create a catchy headline?	I need to create a catchy headline.	I wrote a headline, but I need to make it catchier.	I wrote a headline that is catchy and will engage readers.	I wrote a headline that is catchy, uses vivid language, and will leave the reader wondering.		
Did I develop a lead paragraph that identify the essential facts? <i>Who?</i> <i>What happened?</i> <i>When?</i> <i>Where?</i>	I need to write a lead paragraph that identifies the essential facts.	I wrote a lead paragraph but I need to include more or less information to support readers with the essential facts.	I wrote a lead paragraph that includes the essential facts. It is concise and between 2-3 sentences.	I developed a lead paragraph that identifies the essential facts. It is concise and between 2-3 sentences. The "facts" are visual, and the reader can easily picture what is happening.		
Did I include quotations from experts and/or witnesses?	I need to include quotations from experts and/or witnesses.	I included a quote from expert or a witness. I need to explain who they are. I need to make sure the quote is relevant to the story.	I included a quote from expert and/or a witness. I explained who the expert/witness is and made sure the quote is relevant to the story.	I included a quote from both an expert and a witness. I explained who the expert and witness are and made sure the quotes are relevant to the story.		
Did I blend a combination of real elements with fake elements?	I need to blend a combination of real elements with fake elements.	I may have 1-2 examples of both real and fake elements. I should include more.	I have at least 3-4 examples of both real and fake elements.	I have at least 3-4 examples of both real and fake elements. I wrote my story in such a way that it is difficult to tell fact from fiction.		
Did I add background information to give the reader more context into the situation?	I need to add background information to give the reader more context into the situation.	I added some background information to give the reader more context into the situation.	I added background information to give the reader more context into the situation.	I added several pieces of background information to give the reader more context into the situation.		
Did I demonstrate an understanding of comma rules?	I need to demonstrate an understanding of comma rules.	I may have followed some comma rules, but this is not done consistently.	I mostly followed comma rules. I may have 1-2 errors.	I followed all comma rules.		
Did I demonstrate an understanding of capitalization rules?	I need to demonstrate an understanding of capitalization rules.	I may have followed some capitalization rules, but this is not done consistently.	I mostly followed capitalization rules. I may have 1-2 errors.	I followed all capitalization rules.		
Did I write in complete sentences?	I need to write in complete sentences.	I may have written some sentences correctly. However, I need to revise and edit fragments and/or run-on sentences.	I wrote in complete sentences. Some of my complex sentences are written correctly.	I wrote in complete sentences. I wrote complex sentences correctly.		
Did I use quotation marks correctly?	I need to use quotation marks correctly.	I used quotation marks. Some parts are punctuated correctly.	Most of the sentences with quotation marks are punctuated correctly.	All the sentences are punctuated correctly.		

LESSON 5

HOW CREDIBLE WAS THE WAR OF THE WORLDS BROADCAST?

2 DAYS: 40-minute periods

OBJECTIVES

- Students develop inferences using excerpts from a primary source.
- Students participate in a whole class discussion on how the broadcast techniques affected credibility using the following speculative questions based on the primary source documents.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Preface, excerpt from “Princeton Radio Research Project – Orson Welles Broadcast Study” 1938–1944, Folder 3724, Box 361, Series 1, General Education Board records, Rockefeller Archive Center

STUDENT REFLECTION

It is important that the educator reads the document in its entirety.

While reading, identify phrases and sentences that could be used to develop thoughts about possible answers to the suggested questions below. Extract the phrases and sentences from the document and type them up separately. Place them in an investigation envelope along with the specific question that they are connected to.

LESSON 5 CONTINUED

ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Return the War of the Worlds window boxes from Lesson 1 back to students.

Encourage them to turn and summarize with their partner the visuals that they drew.

Return as a whole group and open the conversation with the following question:

“Does the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast count as fake news?”

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

On October 30, 1938 at 8:00 PM, Martians invaded Grover’s Mill, New Jersey, according to Orson Welles of The Mercury Theatre. Grover Mills, New Jersey is a real place that exists only 4 miles away from Princeton University. The day after the broadcast, newspapers printed the following headlines: “Radio Drama Listeners in Panic, Take War Drama as Fact.” The Princeton Radio Group was known for studying the way radio influenced listeners. They received a grant for \$3,000 to learn why people panicked.

TEACH

Today we will use the Princeton Radio Research Report to make inferences on how credible the War of the Worlds broadcast was on its audience. An inference is a conclusion that is made using evidence. You will receive a question along with excerpted lines from the document. You will use the excerpted lines as evidence and consider how they connect to the question. These will be your inferences.

LESSON 5 CONTINUED

MODEL

Select a question and the inserted lines to demonstrate the task and process to students. Language frames to support their inferring work should be shown here as you think aloud, “This excerpt says... which makes me think...”

Example: How do you know radio was a significant part of peoples’ lives during this time?

Evidence: “informing all segments of a population of current happenings”

Sample Phrasing: This excerpt says “Informing all segments of a population of current happenings,” which makes me think that at the time of the broadcast, the radio was a way for all people to find out the news.

WORK TIME

Have students work in groups to develop inferences on a particular question. Make sure to provide them with several excerpts from the suggested page that will support their generation of ideas.

SHARE

Groups should share out their ideas with their peers.

After the share has concluded, return to the initial conversation starter:

Does the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast count as fake news?

Ask students if they have changed their opinion based on any new information that they have learned.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO USE WITH THE PRINCETON RADIO RESEARCH STUDY

<i>Preface</i>	Page 1	What are some fears that the American people had experienced prior to this broadcast?
		What supposedly happened in England in 1926 when The War of the Worlds was broadcasted there?
	Page 3	What is the rationale for the study on how the War of the Worlds broadcasted affected listeners?
	Page 4	How do you know radio was a significant part of peoples' lives during this time?
<i>Prestige of Speakers</i>	Page 5	Why do you think the play contained so many experts?
		How did the "experts" contribute to making the play more believable?
<i>Specific Incidents Understood</i>	Page 6/7	How might the mention of real places cause listeners to think there was really an invasion?
<i>Everyone Baffled</i>	Page 7/8	How does the play transition from believable to unbelievable?
<i>Radio As Accepted Vehicle for Important Announcements</i>	Page 9	What conflicts had radio already introduced listeners to prior to the War of the Worlds broadcast?
		What surprises you about the comments of some of the people who were interviewed?

LESSON 6

POINT OF VIEW WRITING AND FLIPGRID

1–2 DAYS: 40-minute periods

OBJECTIVES

- Students will write a point-of-view narrative to illustrate the perspective of a listener of the War of the Worlds broadcast.
- Students will identify a role, establish the audience, confirm the format, and focus on the topic.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

If you plan to use Flipgrid as a tool for sharing, prepare the grid ahead of time and consider setting it to private. Additionally, expect to expand on the lesson by providing students with a tutorial on how to use the platform if they do not have experience using Flipgrid.

BRAINSTORM

Make a web designed to elicit responses to the following question: How do you think the listeners of the 1938 War of the Worlds Broadcast felt while the show was on? Accept and jot down all responses even if a student does not provide evidence for their reason.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The Princeton Radio Research was conducted to determine why listeners panicked on the evening of the War of the Worlds broadcast. They interviewed many audience members about their experience that night. They compiled and used dialogue from the interviews to reinforce their findings.

LESSON 6 CONTINUED

TEACH

In order to develop an understanding of how listeners felt during and after the 1938 War of the Worlds Broadcast, we can put ourselves in the role of a listener who was interviewed. We establish who our audience is, confirm that we will expand on the format which is a line from the interview, and maintain focus on the topic.

This is called RAFT writing and it is a strategy to support our thinking about what else the listeners reported from that evening. It is important to note that we do not know any specifics about the listeners who were interviewed and what they said before or after their documented lines.

MODEL

Select a line from the document that can be expanded upon. Write in front of the students so that they can make noticings and observations about how the initial idea progresses. Consider modeling a second piece as a “We do.”
(Construct the piece together)

Sample:

It didn't sound like a play the way it interrupted the music when it started.

I couldn't ignore the breaking news alert that blared through the airwaves.

I sat closer to the radio and raised the volume. Explosion on Mars? Who cares!

The music came back on and I finished the last bits of my homework.

But suddenly, the music broke again and that time, I had to listen.

WORK TIME

Students select a line from the document and expand on the ideas. When they have completed their work, encourage them to record their response onto Flipgrid. If not, prepare them for sharing during your close.

SHARE

Play the Flipgrids or allow students to share out their response.

Close with an ending question:

“How do you think this activity contributes to your understanding of Fake News?”

LESSON 7

LOOK, LISTEN, LEARN

1–2 DAYS: 40-minute periods

OBJECTIVES

- Students will identify how information is shared in current times.
- Students will analyze the words, tone, word choice and body language of Orson Welles in two videos.
- Students will compare the two video clips from the night after the broadcast and 17 years later on a T-chart.
- Students will state a claim about the credibility of Orson Welles' apology and provide evidence to support their thinking.
- Students will discuss the positives and negatives of accessing news through different media formats.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

Review the YouTube videos and confirm that technology is working properly. Watch the video and consider clipping the videos to emphasize certain parts for timing purposes.

The first video can be found at:

[Orson Welles Apologizes For The War of the Worlds' Mass Panic](#)

The second video can be found at:

[Orson Welles' Sketchbook – Episode 5: The War of the Worlds](#)

LESSON 7 CONTINUED

BRAINSTORM

As a community, compile a list of ways that people share information this year. Accept all answers, including social media. If you are concerned that acknowledging social media is not appropriate, consider skipping the brainstorming section.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Orson Welles was an actor and member of the Mercury Theater, who participated in the [1938 War of the Worlds Broadcast](#). Twice during the broadcast, he provided information to listeners to confirm that this was, in fact, a remixed and updated version of the classic science fiction novel by H.G. Wells presented in the format of the news update.

For example, in the first few moments of the broadcast, he stated, “In the thirty-ninth year of the twentieth century came the great disillusionment. It was near the end of October. Business was better. The war scare was over. More men were back at work. Sales were picking up. On this particular evening, October 30, the Crosley service estimated that thirty-two million people were listening in on radios.”

Additionally, the broadcast was interrupted and the following announcement was made: “You are listening to a CBS presentation of Orson Welles and The Mercury Theatre on the Air in an original dramatization of The War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells. The performance will continue after a brief intermission. This is the Columbia... Broadcasting System.”

Nonetheless, Welles offered an apology the day after the broadcast due to the “hysteria.”

LESSON 7 CONTINUED

TEACH

A few lessons ago, we discussed how inferences are a conclusion made using evidence. We can make inferences about a person by considering their facial expressions, body language, word choice and tone of voice. By studying these elements which serve as our evidence, we can make a conclusion about the person.

Introduce the language frame:

I noticed that... <what do you see?>

and I know that... <what do you know from your life about what you have just seen?>

so this makes me think... <provide an inference>

Distribute the T-chart and review it with students. Play the first video twice and allow for authentic conversation and reactions to emerge. Encourage students to only write evidence down on their chart and decipher whether they are making observations or inferences.

Invite students to share out their opinions on whether they felt Orson's apology was credible. Encourage them to use the language frame, provide reasoning, and give specific evidence.

After the initial conversation has concluded, show students the second video twice. Again, they should record their observations.

Now, invite students to use their new evidence to share whether their thinking has changed or been proven.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Ask the students the following questions:

"If Orson Welles had presented his apology through the radio, what would have changed for you?"

"Does the way that you experience news matter and change its credibility?"

LESSON 8

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SUGGEST?

2 DAYS: 40-minute periods

OBJECTIVE

Students will analyze statistics and create a visual poster to highlight the relationship of the numbers to the information provided.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

Preview articles and primary sources that contain statistical information connected to the War of the Worlds Broadcast. Extract texts that are appropriate for your students and their mathematical abilities. For example, if a student has not encountered percentages in their math curriculum, interpreting facts that do contain percentages may be challenging for them.

Sources to consider include:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/10/30/241797346/75-years-ago-war-of-the-worlds-started-a-panic-or-did-it>

<https://slate.com/culture/2013/10/orson-welles-war-of-the-worlds-panic-myth-the-infamous-radio-broadcast-did-not-cause-a-nationwide-hysteria.html>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210409205827/https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/TheWaroftheWorlds.pdf>

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2003/fall/war-of-worlds.html>

ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Remind the students how earlier in the unit, they listened to the broadcast and created window boxes to sketch and visualize. Ask them how sketching helped them to better understand the broadcast.

LESSON 8 CONTINUED

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Statistics is the science of data and involves collection, analyzing, understanding, and presenting data. Statistics can be used to make a point and to tell a story. Often, we see numbers and statistics embedded into news pieces.

TEACH

Today, we are going to study some number facts and use our visualizing abilities to help us understand exactly what those numbers mean. First, we will read a selected text and identify the numbers used within the text. Then, we will ask ourselves, what does this number suggest? Finally, we will sketch out our understanding of the statistic within the text to explain to a partner.

MODEL

Select an excerpt and guide students through the process. Language that will support this work includes:

- I notice... which makes me think...
- This suggests that...
- This number/statistic appears significant because...
- This number/statistic makes it clear that...

After thinking aloud, sketch out a representation of the text and explain it to the students.

MODEL

Allow students to sift through a selection of extractions before selecting one to focus on. Provide them with time to complete the process. Have students meet in small groups to share out their thinking.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Remind the students that numbers and statistics can be used to tell a story.

Have a closing conversation focusing on this question:

“How can numbers and statistics contribute to the credibility of news?”

LESSON 9

WAS THE 1938 WAR OF THE WORLDS BROADCAST FAKE NEWS?

3 DAYS: 40-minute periods

OBJECTIVES

- Students will evaluate the provided sources to draw conclusions that either support or deny whether the War of the Worlds Broadcast was fake news.
- Students will establish their stance and organize their supporting evidence.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

When building the Evidence Collector for students, reflect on the entire unit and include documents that lead to debatable conversation. At this point, you may also want to add in additional sources that the students have not encountered that offers multiple viewpoints. An example of primary sources that can support either side are two letters that were sent to the Federal Communication Commissions. Also, do not underestimate the power of visuals such as newspapers and cartoons. If all students have access to the Internet, you may allow students to find their own sources and provide opportunities for conferring to help them vet the reliability and credibility of the source.

ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Ask the students to turn and talk to a partner about whether they believe the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast was fake news.

LESSON 9 CONTINUED

TEACH

When you shared with your partner how you felt about whether the War of the Worlds broadcast was fake news, you took a stance and initiated an argument. When you develop an argument, you state your claim and support the claim with reasons and evidence from credible sources to justify your thinking. Conversely, you prepare for opposing perspectives by identifying counterpoints and distinguishing arguments against them.

Before we have our class-wide debate on this issue, we must emphasize the significance of preparation by using an evidence collector. An evidence collector is a tool that you interact with while you sift through documents. It is a way to organize your thinking prior to the event so that you are prepared to defend your thinking.

MODEL

Use a video clip or other visual documents to demonstrate to the students.

Use techniques from earlier in the unit to support your analysis of the credibility of the document.

WORK TIME

Plan to give students an adequate amount of work time over several sessions to work independently, partnerships or in small groups. Conferring with students should occur at this time.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Each session should end with a reflection. Some questions you could ask are:

“How did today’s work time help you prepare for our debate?”

“What are you planning for tomorrow’s work time?”

“Why do you think it is a good idea to organize your evidence?”

WAR OF THE WORLDS EVIDENCE COLLECTOR

Sample from a 5th Grade Classroom

SOURCE	This document proves the War of the Worlds Broadcast WAS fake news	This document proves the War of the Worlds Broadcast WAS NOT fake news	This document can be used to support BOTH sides of the argument	Notes to use for your argument
<i>Document A</i> The War of the World Letters: A New View of Orson Welles' Infamous Broadcast				
<i>Document B</i> Princeton Radio Research Project Study Excerpts: "Prestige of Speakers"				
<i>Document C</i> Orson Welles' Apology				
<i>Document D</i> Excerpts from "JitterBugs and Crackpots: Letters to the FCC about War of the Worlds Broadcast"				
<i>Document E</i> Excerpts from "The War of the Worlds Was a Myth"				
<i>Document F</i> Cartoon from the Winnipeg Tribune				

LESSON 10

THE DEBATE

1 DAY: 40-minute period

OBJECTIVES

- Students will defend a claim about the War of the Worlds broadcast with reasons and evidence from credible sources.
- Students will respond with counterpoints that further define the validity of their claim.
- Students will participate in the debate following a set of agreements that are established by the group.

PREPARE BEFORE LESSON

If students have not engaged in a debate, it is critical that you establish a list of agreements with your students. This may add an additional day to your unit, but will have a powerful impact on the community and hold them accountable to a respectful debate. Additionally, there is no specific way proposed for running a debate since there are a variety of strategies for class-wide debates. Select a method that you believe will benefit the students in front of you.

If your experience with debates is emerging, consider some of these resources:

- Pick A Side
<https://learn.teachingchannel.com/video/quick-classroom-warm-up>
- Socratic Seminar
<https://learn.teachingchannel.com/video/using-socratic-seminars-in-classroom>
- Four Corners
<http://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/four-corners>

LESSON 10

CONTINUED

TEACH

Share the method of your debate with students. Have them watch a video of students engaging in the method and break down what they see happening.

GROUP WORK

Allow an adequate amount of time to engage in the debate. Consider video-taping so that students can review at a later time.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Ask the students the following question:

“What impact did today’s debate have on your thinking?”

CULMINATING TASK (optional)

OBJECTIVE

Students will construct an argumentative essay to answer the question:
Was the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast fake news?

PREPARE BEFORE TASK INITIATION

Develop a rubric based on state standards, content objectives, and expectations of the writing process that will meet expectations. Distribute the rubric along with the task.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 1

P R E F A C E

On the evening of October 30, 1938, thousands of Americans became panic-stricken by a broadcast purported to describe an invasion of Martians which threatened our whole civilization. Probably never before have so many people in all walks of life and in all parts of the country become so suddenly and so intensely disturbed as they did on this night.

memo on p. 2

Localized panics are frequently reported on shipboard, in congested buildings that have caught fire, or in specific areas suffering some natural catastrophe. More widespread panics are comparatively rare. Nevertheless, panics such as that occurring in the United States on the evening of October 30, 1938, are by no means ^{confined} ~~localized~~ to our own country or our own times.

Panics resulting from financial crises and commercial miscalculations are probably as old as commerce itself. Prior to the eighteenth century such panics were generally due to an undersupply of goods, caused by crop failures, political disturbance, or the like. In the later stages of our expanding economy, an overabundance of goods has led to successive crises, and business cycles generally accompanied by widespread fears among the increasing number of publics involved.

The most similar predecessor to the panic resulting from the War of the Worlds' broadcast occurred on January 16, 1926, in England during a period of unusual labor strife and shortly before the general strike. On that day the traditionally complacent English listener was startled by a description given by Father Ronald Knox (in the customary news broadcast) of an unruly unemployed mob. The mob was said

Preface, Excerpt from "Princeton Radio Research Project - Orson Welles Broadcast Study", 1938-1944
Folder 3724, Box 361, Series 1, General Education Board records, Rockefeller Archive Center

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 1 CONTINUED

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to have attempted demolition of the Houses of Parliament, its trench mortars had brought Big Ben to the ground, it had hanged the Minister of Traffic to a tramway post. The London broadcast ended with the "destruction" of the British Broadcasting Corporation's station. After the broadcast, the newspapers, police and radio stations were besieged with calls from frantic citizens. However, the panic created by Father Knox's broadcast did not cause either as widespread or as intense a fear as the Orson Welles program.

Many people may wonder what justification there is for conducting an elaborate investigation of a panic which was, after all, ephemeral and not sufficiently important to be recorded by historians. There are essentially two ways to rationalize this study: one is hopefully scientific, the other frankly didactic.

Such rare occurrences are opportunities for the social scientist to study mass behavior. They must be exploited when they come. Although the social scientist unfortunately cannot usually predict such situations and have his tools of investigation ready to analyze the phenomenon while it is still on the wing, he can begin his work before the effects of the crisis are over and memories are blurred. As far as the writer is aware, this is the first panic that has been carefully studied with the research tools now available to the social scientist. A complete description of a panic should, in itself, be of value to anyone interested in social problems.

Furthermore, the attempts to determine the underlying psychological causes for a widespread panic in 1938 should give us insight into the psychology of the common man and, more especially, the psychology of the man of our times. From this point of view the

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investigation may be regarded as more than a study of panic. For the situation created by the broadcast was one which shows us how the common man reacts in a time of stress and strain. It gives us insights into his intelligence, his anxieties and his needs, which we could never get by tests or strictly experimental studies. The panic situation we have investigated had all the flavor of everyday life and, at the same time, provided a semi-experimental condition for research. Students of social psychology should also find here some useful research tools. They will see shortcomings in the methods employed and should be able to profit from mistakes which have been pointed out wherever the writer has detected them.

A more practical justification for such a study concerns the educational implications which an understanding of this panic may have. Although citizens are not confronted every day with potentially panic-producing situations, they do face social or personal crises where their good judgment is taxed to the limit. If they can see why some people reacted unintelligently in this instance, they may be able to build up their resistance to similar occurrences. And if they are ever caught in a really critical situation, the information recorded here may help them make a more satisfactory adjustment. At least, it will be discovered how superficial and misleading is the account of one prominent social scientist who said that "as good an explanation as any for the panic is that all the intelligent people were listening to Charlie McCarthy."

In spite of the unique conditions giving rise to this particular panic, the writer has attempted to indicate throughout the study the pattern of circumstances which, from a psychological point of view, might make this the prototype of any panic.

insert from p. 1 & 2

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The fact that this panic was created as a result of a radio broadcast is today no mere circumstance. The importance of radio's role in current national and international affairs is too well known to be recounted here. By its very nature radio is the medium par excellence for informing all segments of a population of current happenings, for arousing in them a common sense of fear or joy and for exciting them to similar reactions directed toward a single objective. It is estimated that of the 32,000,000 families in the United States 27,500,000 have radios - a greater proportion than have telephones, automobiles, plumbing, electricity, newspapers or magazines. Radio has inherently the characteristics of contemporaneity, availability, personal appeal and ubiquity. Hence, when we analyze this panic, we are able to deal with the most modern type of social group - the radio audience - which differs from the congregated group of the moving picture theatre and the consociate group reading the daily paper. The radio audience consists essentially of thousands of small, congregated groups united in time and experiencing a common stimulus - altogether making possible the largest grouping of people ever known.

Because the social phenomenon in question was so complex, several methods were employed to seek out different answers and to compare results obtained by one method with those obtained by another. Such an approach seems advisable in analyzing any problem in social psychology. Otherwise, the investigator has difficulty in demonstrating that his assumption has not been "proved" merely because his method would give him no contradictory evidence. Furthermore, should the investigator reach no positive conclusions, he is unable to tell whether his presuppositions and theories are wrong or whether the fault lies in his method. The use of a pluralistic approach in a

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study such as this is particularly urgent since the phenomenon under consideration was of so transient a nature. Also, so far as was known, no other extensive investigation was being independently conducted on the problem, thus making it impossible to check one set of data and interpretations against another.

The bulk of our information is derived from detailed interviews of 135 persons. Over 100 of these persons were selected because they were known to have been upset by the broadcast. The names of the persons who were frightened were obtained almost entirely by the personal inquiry and initiative of the interviewers. The names of persons who were listed in the newspapers as having been frightened failed to produce more than a half-dozen interviews. Many more names were finally obtained than could possibly be interviewed with the limited funds available. Every attempt was made to keep the group fairly representative of the population at large. However, no pretense is made that the group is a proper sample of the total population, and the results and interpretations of the complete study do not depend on such a sample. Twenty-eight persons who were not frightened but who tuned in late to the broadcast were included in the group interviewed.

The interviews were limited to the New Jersey area for reasons of finance and supervision. All names of respondents used in the text are fictitious and identifying characteristics are disguised, but the true flavor of the case studies is preserved. The interviewing began one week after the broadcast and was completed in about three weeks. The regrettable delay in getting to the respondents was unavoidable for two reasons: funds were not immediately available to begin the study; highly trained interviewers are difficult to obtain,

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and the danger of delaying the interval between such an experience and an interview is probably less than the danger of obtaining an inadequate or unreliable report from an unskilled interviewer.

Since the ⁵134 detailed interviews provide one of the chief bases for our conclusions and interpretations, wherever we have obtained statistical indices we have been confronted with high probable errors of so small a sample. Many of the tables contained in the text and in Appendix A do not show statistically significant differences. A rigid statistician would probably prefer to omit any reference to such inconclusive data, and would point out the psychologist's capacity to rationalize almost any result he may obtain.

But "significance" should have other meanings than a difference that is three times its probable error. Without throwing statistical caution to the winds, data that seem to indicate trends or tendencies have been used in the study as a basis for speculation and theory. In social psychology, especially, so many variables are frequently operating to determine a given reaction, in a given situation, that clear-cut statistical results are the exception rather than the rule in small populations. But such results do provide hunches and pointers. Furthermore, a pattern of individually, statistically insignificant results may reveal some broad, consistent trend. The reader is forewarned here, then, that some of our results should be considered more as indicators of factors likely to be important than as demonstrated facts from which we may draw unequivocal conclusions.

Quotations have been freely used to illustrate psychological processes which might lose their real significance by a barren statistical figure. They have also been included at times wherever language failed and meaning could be better conveyed by the impression gained from a quotation.

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PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 2

Radio as accepted vehicle for important announcements

The first wide use of radio in the country was to broadcast election returns. Since that time, important announcements of local, national and international significance have been repeatedly made. A few short weeks before this broadcast, millions of listeners had kept their radios tuned for the latest news from Europe, apparently about to go to war. They had learned to expect that musical programs, dramas, broadcasts of all kinds would be cut off in a serious emergency to inform or warn an eager and anxious public. A large proportion of listeners, particularly those in the lower income and educational brackets, have grown to rely more on the radio than on the newspapers for their news.² The confidence people have in radio as a source of news is shown in the answer to a question asked by the Fortune poll- "Which of the two - radio or newspaper - gives you news freer from prejudice? Seventeen per cent answered "Newspaper," 49.7 per cent think that radio news is freer from prejudice, while the rest either think both media are the same, or don't know which is the less prejudiced.

From the "Meridian Room in the Park Plaza" of New York City, the listener tuned to the Mercury Theatre on this fateful night, heard the music of Ramon Raquello and his orchestra. "Soon after the first piece had begun an announcer broke in, "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program of dance music to bring you a special bulletin from the Intereontinental Radio

2. Fortune, August 1939, p. 65. For a thorough discussion of radio news broadcasting, see Paul Lazarsfeld, Radio and Printed Word, Section 2.

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News." With our present distance it is easy to be suspicious of "inter-continental" news. But in the context of the program, such skepticism is reduced. This report brought the story of the first explosions on Mars. The music was resumed only to be followed by another break: "Ladies and Gentlemen, following on the news given in our bulletin a moment ago, the Government Meteorological Bureau has requested the large observatories of the country to keep an astronomical watch. . ." This bulletin contains the information that "a huge flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of Grovers Mill, New Jersey." The swing band gets in 20 seconds more. Then the invasion continues uninterruptedly.

Almost all of the listeners, who had been frightened and who were interviewed, mentioned somewhere during the course of their retrospections, the confidence they had in radio and their expectation that it would be used for such important announcements. A few of their comments indicate their attitudes:

We have so much faith in broadcasting. In a crisis it has to reach all people. That's what radio is here for.

The announcer would not say if it was not true. They always quote if something is a play.

It was told so emphatically and we have so much faith in the radio.

When I hear news on the radio I believe it is authentic.

I always feel that the commentators bring the best possible news. Even after this I still will believe what I hear on the radio.

It didn't sound like a play the way it interrupted the music when it started.

I naturally thought it was true because of the way the news flash came on the air.

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What I hear on the radio I believe is authentic. It is the most important instrument in directing people in disaster.

I always believe the news I hear on the radio. This was just like real news and left no doubt in my mind that it was true.

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PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 3

Prestige of speakers. It is a well known fact to the social psychologist, the advertiser, and the propagandist that an idea or a product has a better chance of being accepted if it can be endorsed by, or if emanates from some well-known person whose character, ability, or status is highly valued. The effect of this prestige suggestion is specially great when an individual himself has no frame of reference by means of which he can judge or give meaning to a particular situation that confronts him and when he needs or is interested in making a judgment or finding a meaning. The strange events reported by the announcers in this broadcast were so far removed from ordinary experience and yet of such great potential and personal significance to the listener that he was both bewildered and in need of some standard of judgment. As in many situations where events and ideas are so complicated or far removed from one's own immediate everyday experience that only the expert can really understand them, here, too, the layman was forced to rely on the expert for his interpretation.

The logical expert in this instance was the astronomer. Those mentioned (all fictitious) were Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory of Chicago, Professor Pierson of the Princeton Observatory, Professor Morse of MacMillan University in Toronto, Professor Indellkoffer of the California Astronomical Society and "astronomers and scientific bodies" in England, France, and Germany. Professor Richard Pierson (Orson Welles) was the chief character in the drama.

When the situation called for organized defense and action the expert

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was once more brought in. General Montgomery Smith, Commander of the State Militia at Trenton, Mr. Harry McDonald, vice-president of the Red Cross, Captain Lansing of the Signal Corps, and finally the Secretary of the Interior described the situation, gave orders for evacuation and attack, or urged every man to do his duty. It is interesting to notice that only the office of the Secretary of the Interior was named. Here the listener was affected entirely by the institutional role and status of an unnamed speaker. The institutional prestige of the other experts and authorities is obviously more meaningful and important than the individuals themselves.

This dramatic technique had its effect.

I believed the broadcast as soon as I heard the professor from Princeton and the officials in Washington.

When the Princeton professor talked to the people then I was really scared.

I knew it was an awfully dangerous situation when all those military men were there and the Secretary of State spoke.

If so many of those astronomers saw the explosions they must have been real. They ought to know.

All those authorities told us it was true and who am I to doubt them.

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PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 4

Specific incidents understood. The realistic nature of the broadcast was further enhanced by descriptions of particular occurrences that a listener could readily imagine. Liberal use was made of the colloquial expression to be expected on such an occasion. The gas was "a sort of yellowish-green;" the cop warned "One side, there. Keep back, I tell you;" a voice shouts, "the darn thing's unscrewing." An example of the specificity of detail is the announcement of Brigadier General Montgomery Smith: "I have been requested by the Governor of New Jersey to place the counties of Mercer and Middlesex as far west as Princeton, and east to Jamesburg, under martial law. No one will

Specific incidents understood, excerpt from "Princeton Radio Research Project - Orson Welles Broadcast Study", 1938-1944
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was once more brought in. General Montgomery Smith, Commander of the State Militia at Trenton, Mr. Harry McDonald, vice-president of the Red Cross, Captain Lansing of the Signal Corps, and finally the Secretary of the Interior described the situation, gave orders for evacuation and attack, or urged every man to do his duty. It is interesting to notice that only the office of the Secretary of the Interior was named. Here the listener was affected entirely by the institutional role and status of an unnamed speaker. The institutional prestige of the other experts and authorities is obviously more meaningful and important than the individuals themselves.

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PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT 5

Everybody baffled. The events reported proceeded from the relatively credible to the highly incredible. The first announcements were more or less believable although unusual to be sure. First there is an "atmospheric disturbance," then "explosions of incandescent gas." A scientist then reports that his seismograph has registered a shock of earthquake intensity. This is followed by the discovery of a meteorite that has splintered nearby trees in

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in its fall. So far so good.

But as the less credible bits of the story begin to enter, the clever dramatist also indicates that he, too, has difficulty in believing what he sees. When we learn that the object is no meteorite but a metal casing, we are also told that the whole scene is "a strange scene like something out of a modern Arabian Nights," "fantastic," that the "more daring souls are venturing near." Before we are informed that the end of the casing is beginning to unscrew, we experience the announcer's own astonishment: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is terrific!" When the top is off he says, "This is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed. . . This is the most extraordinary experience. I can't find words. . . ." A few minutes later, Professor Pierson says, "I can give you no authoritative information- either as to their nature, their origin, or their purposes here on earth. . . . It's all too evident that these creatures have scientific knowledge far in advance of our own. It is my guess. . . ." After the battle at Grovers Mill between the Thing and the soldiers, the announcer gives the listeners a final justification for the incredulous reports to follow: "I have a grave announcement to make. Incredible as it may seem, both the observation of science and the evidence of our eyes lead to the inescapable assumption that those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army from the planet Mars."

The bewilderment of the listener is shared by the eyewitness. When the scientist is himself puzzled, the layman recognizes the extraordinary intelligence of the strange creatures. No explanation of the event can be provided. The resignation and hopelessness of the Secretary of the Interior, counseling us to "place our faith in God," provides no effective guide for action. No possible frames of reference can be applied to judge the rapid-fire of events. Panic is inescapable.

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ABOUT US



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ABOUT US

The Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) is a major repository and research center dedicated to the study of organized philanthropy and the Third Sector. It holds the records of over forty major foundations, cultural organizations, and research institutions, as well as the papers of over one hundred individuals associated with these organizations.

The Research and Education (R&E) Program at the RAC brings together historians, educators, and archivists to explore topics in the history of philanthropy for public, scholarly, and professional audiences and to cultivate new audiences for archival research. The team's activities include digital publishing, conferences and workshops, educational outreach, practitioner engagement, and a competitive research stipend award program.

R&E develops and makes available archive-based interdisciplinary projects and curricula for levels ranging from upper elementary grades to graduate study. These materials support the development of information literacy and research skills, as well as deeper engagement with primary sources and the practice of history. R&E also works to strengthen the bridge between education and archives by hosting workshops and discussions for a growing professional network through its Archival Educators Roundtable.

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