



CSP: Radio – War of the Worlds

The aim of this Factsheet is to explore how the radio text *War of the Worlds* (1938) can be applied as a Close Study Product to both the AQA AS and A Level assessments.

Close Study Products

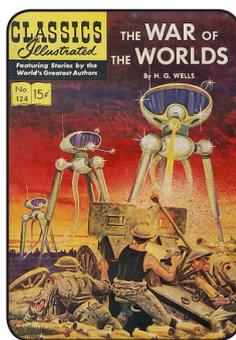
Close study Products (CSPs) are a range of media products that must be studied in order to meet the requirements of the new A level specifications and prepare students for the exam. A 'product' means something produced by a media industry for a media audience, for example, a radio or television programme, a website or a video game.

CSPs are examples of either contemporary or historical media products and should be used to support the study of the theoretical framework (Media Language, Media Representations, Media Audiences and Media Industries). They are also useful as a way of exploring the theories and debates required by the subject content. Students will also be required to understand the ways in which the CSPs reflect the social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts.

Exam Hint: For the AS Media Studies examination 'War of the Worlds' should be studied with reference to all four elements of the theoretical framework (Language, Representation, Industries, Audience) and all relevant contexts. For the A level students should focus only on Media Industries, Media Audiences and the relevant contexts in their study of this CSP.

War of the Worlds as a Media Text

Orson Welles' 1938 radio play is an adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel of the same name, first published in 1898. It tells the story of an alien invasion and the ensuing conflict between mankind and an extra-terrestrial race from Mars. The text has been frequently interpreted as a commentary on British Imperialism and Victorian fear and prejudice. The book has been adapted for both radio and (several) films, including the 2005 version starring Tom Cruise. It was also famously turned into a best-selling musical album by Jeff Wayne in 1978 (recently updated by Gary Barlow as a touring stage musical).



War of the Worlds: Historical Context

Orson Welles' radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* has become notable not for the broadcast itself but for the reaction it received, and the subsequent press reporting of the audience's reaction to the broadcast. It is often highlighted as an early example of mass hysteria caused by the media and used to support various audience theories.

Broadcast live on 30th October 1938, popular myth has it that thousands of New Yorkers fled their homes in panic, and all across America

people crowded the streets to witness for themselves the real space battle between earth and the Martians. The Trenton Police Department (close to the site of the fictional invasion) received over 2000 calls in less than two hours, while the *New York Times* switchboard received 875 calls from concerned listeners wanting to know where they would be safe. Such hysteria was caused by Welles' clever adaptation of the story, reporting on the events through faux newscasts, and presenting the narrative in a way that has been described as "too realistic and frightening." The following morning newspapers across the country revelled in the mass hysteria it had caused. The *New York Times* headline read, "Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact."

Extract from the New York Times (31st October 1938):

MANY FLEE HOMES TO ESCAPE 'GAS RAID FROM MARS'—PHONE CALLS SWAMP POLICE AT BROADCAST OF WELLES FANTASY

A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners between 8:15 and 9:30 o'clock last night when a broadcast of a dramatization of H. G. Wells's fantasy, "The War of the Worlds," led thousands to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction in New Jersey and New York.

The broadcast, which disrupted households, interrupted religious services, created traffic jams and clogged communications systems, was made by Orson Welles, who as the radio character, "The Shadow," used to give "the creeps" to countless child listeners. This time at least a score of adults required medical treatment for shock and hysteria.

In Newark, in a single block at Heddon Terrace and Hawthorne Avenue, more than twenty families rushed out of their houses with wet handkerchiefs and towels over their faces to flee from what they believed was to be a gas raid. Some began moving household furniture.

Throughout New York families left their homes, some to flee to near-by parks. Thousands of persons called the police, newspapers and radio stations here and in other cities of the United States and Canada seeking advice on protective measures against the raids.

In recent years, however, different sources have suggested that the mass hysteria reported by the press was an exaggeration of the actual events. Indeed, contrary to another myth, the broadcast was not a hoax sprung on an unsuspecting audience. Rather it was a scheduled broadcast and was announced as "an episode of the Mercury Theatre on Air." CBS radio also carried out warnings that it was a fictional show at the start of the broadcast and again at forty and fifty-five

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minutes into the show. Radio editor for the New York Daily News, Ben Gross, in his 1954 memoir also debunks the myth of mass hysteria by claiming that “New York’s streets were nearly deserted that night.” Research also suggests that only a small number of people actually listened to the broadcast. Nevertheless, Orson Welles’ version of *War of the Worlds* remains a useful text to study since it has long fuelled the debate about the influence that media texts can have on audiences.

It also highlights the role the news media can have in distorting the truth and even creating moral panic. Author Brad Schwartz in his 2015 book ‘Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles’s War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News’ suggests that hysteria it caused was not entirely a myth. “Instead it was something decades ahead of its time: history’s first viral-media phenomenon.” He argues that “the stories of those whom the show frightened offer a fascinating window onto how users engage with media content, spreading and reinterpreting it to suit their own world views. But it’s even more important to understand how the press magnified and distorted those reactions, creating a story that terrified the nation all over again, so that we can recognise when the same thing happens today. Our news media still have a penchant for making us fear the wrong things, of inflating certain stories into false Armageddons, as they did with *War of the Worlds*.”

Exam Hint: AQA have recommended a useful overview and discussion of the context for the radio adaptation. It can be accessed at:

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91622-war-of-the-worlds/>

War of the Worlds and Media Language

Orson Welles had a glittering career both as a stage and screen actor as well as a director and producer. He pushed back the boundaries in cinema (with *Citizen Kane*) and in radio (with *War of the Worlds*). He played with the form and style of both to create some of the twentieth century’s most celebrated media texts. He also experimented with the new technologies of the time exploring the possibilities of both radio and cinema.

His version of *War of the Worlds* reworks a Victorian narrative about an alien invasion (which he considered “boring”) and turns it into an exciting radio play through his use of **pastiche**. By borrowing the **conventions** of the radio newscast, he is able to create real moments of shock and awe, which almost certainly account for the strong reaction it received. By creating a **hybrid form** – mixing conventional storytelling with news conventions – Welles blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction in a way that audiences had never experienced. David Miller in his textbook ‘Introduction to Collective Behaviour’ writes that after its broadcast “some people called [CBS] to find out where they could go to donate blood. Some callers were simply angry that such a realistic show was allowed on air, while others called CBS to congratulate Mercury Theatre for the exciting Halloween programme.”



Activity: Look at the script extract from the opening of the ‘War of the Worlds’ (below). How does it communicate narrative using sound only? Suggest ways this might i) restrict or, ii) enable the writer to tell a story of epic scale.

ANNOUNCER: . . . This weather report comes to you from the Government Weather Bureau. . . . We now take you to the Meridian Room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York, where you will be entertained by the music of Ramón Raquello and his orchestra.

(MUSIC: SPANISH THEME SONG [A TANGO] . . . FADES)

ANNOUNCER THREE: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. From the Meridian Room in the Park Plaza in New York City, we bring you the music of Ramón Raquello and his orchestra. With a touch of the Spanish. Ramón Raquello leads off with “La Cumparsita.”

(PIECE STARTS PLAYING)

ANNOUNCER TWO: Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program of dance music to bring you a special bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio News. At twenty minutes before eight, central time, Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory, Chicago, Illinois, reports observing several explosions of incandescent gas, occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars. The spectroscope indicates the gas to be hydrogen and moving towards the earth with enormous velocity. Professor Pierson of the Observatory at Princeton confirms Farrell’s observation, and describes the phenomenon as (quote) like a jet of blue flame shot from a gun (unquote). We now return you to the music of Ramón Raquello, playing for you in the Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel, situated in downtown New York.

(MUSIC PLAYS FOR A FEW MOMENTS UNTIL PIECE ENDS . . . SOUND OF APPLAUSE)

ANNOUNCER THREE: Now a tune that never loses favor, the ever-popular “Star Dust.” Ramón Raquello and his orchestra . . .

(MUSIC)

ANNOUNCER TWO: 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 on any further disturbances occurring on the planet Mars.

Activity: Listen to first 20 minutes of the broadcast and identify how the play attempts to pastiche the codes and conventions of radio news. How does it employ the codes and conventions of the science fiction genre? To what extent might war of the Worlds be considered an intertextual product?

The original hour long radio broadcast is available to listen to at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWI4g>

Activity: Listen to the first 20 minutes of the broadcast, identify examples of how media language is used to convince the audience that the Martian invasion is real. Now listen to the full broadcast (especially from 38.50 to 57.02), can you identify ways in which it is clear to the listener that this is a work of fiction.

War of the Worlds and Media Representations

The broadcast is a significant example of how a media product constructs a **representation of reality**. Understanding the social context, including the issues and concerns of late 1930s America, helps to explain why the audience may have responded to the text as if it were real. In September 1938, one month prior to the plays broadcast, Hitler signed the Munich Agreement annexing portions of Czechoslovakia and creating the 'Sudetenland'. Europe's failed appeasement of Germany was viewed with much concern and for many it seemed that another world war was inevitable. At this time, both the radio networks, including CBS, frequently interrupted programmes to issue news bulletins with updates on the situation in Europe. As a result, audiences became familiar with such interruptions and were thus more accepting of Welles' faux newscasts at the beginning of the play. Indeed, for the listeners, it didn't *sound* like a play. This was further compounded by the fact they many listeners tuned into the broadcast five minutes after the start and would have missed the disclaimer. Instead what they would have heard were further interruptions, the convincing voices of experts and an eerie silence as a reporter's words are cut off.

For most Americans, as for most Europeans, these were scary times which put them on edge. Many listeners believed that what they were listening to was an account of an invasion by the Germans. One listener claimed "I knew it was some Germans trying to gas us all, but when the announcer kept on calling them people from Mars I just thought he was ignorant."

Could the War of the Worlds broadcast create mass hysteria again?

Remarkably, Orson Welles' script has been restaged on at least two separate occasions leading to similar responses from an unsuspecting audience. The most shocking of these was in 1949 when a radio station in Ecuador's capital Quito updated and adapted the script to fool its 250,000 population. On this occasion, no introduction was issued before the broadcast warning listeners that this was a fiction. The station worked in conjunction with the local newspaper to issue made up stories of unusual activity in the skies in the days before the broadcast. As a result, everyone in Quito fell for it, including the military who were deployed to fight the aliens. When word got out that the broadcast was a hoax people's fear turned to anger. The radio station was stormed and the building torched. Six people lost their lives in the blaze, while the perpetrator of the hoax is said to have fled the country.

War of the Worlds and Media industries

Much as the 1960s were regarded as a 'golden age of television' the 1930s and 1940s were considered to be the 'golden age of radio.' During this era radio was still a relatively new medium but was widespread in homes across America. It was increasingly competing with newspapers for audiences and advertisers and, in 1938, was winning the battle.

Activity: War of the Worlds was broadcast by the CBS Radio network. Founded in 1927 CBS Radio was one of two network radio stations broadcasting to the nation. (Its competitor, NBC, had launched a year earlier.) CBS Radio continues to operate as a radio broadcaster and is part of the CBS Corporation which has interests in publishing and music as well as being a major news and television producer.



It has been suggested that the panic was trumped up by the newspapers to rubbish this new medium which it viewed as a huge threat. "Radio is new but it has adult responsibilities. It has not mastered itself or the material it uses," said the editorial leader in the New York Times on November 1st 1938. Professors Jefferson Pooley and Michael J Socolow writing in Slate magazine in 2013 state: "How did the story of panicked listeners begin? Blame America's newspapers. Radio had siphoned off advertising revenue from print during the Depression, badly damaging the newspaper industry.



So, the papers seized the opportunity presented by Welles' programme, perhaps to discredit radio as a source of news. The newspaper industry sensationalised the panic to prove to advertisers, and regulators, that radio management was irresponsible and not to be trusted."

Similarly, in modern times, newspaper proprietors like Rupert Murdoch have seen their newspaper's profits – and perhaps very their existence – threatened by another new media form: the internet. New developments in technology have always threatened the existing media institutions and this was no different in the 1930s.

The Federal Communications Commission

Much like OFCOM or the Press Complaints Commission in the UK, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is an independent body of the US government to regulate the communications industry. Following the War of the Worlds broadcast the FCC received a

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number of complaints from the public, including a letter from the City Manager of Trenton (the New Jersey town where over 2000 frightened residents called the police department):

“Gentlemen: To avoid a reoccurrence of a very grave and serious situation that developed in this community last night, due to the public’s misinterpretation of the broadcast through WABC at about 8:15, dramatizing H. G. Wells’ “War of the Worlds”, which completely crippled communication facilities of our Police Department for about three hours, I am requesting that you immediately make an investigation and do everything possible to prevent a reoccurrence”

Congress also demanded that laws be passed to prevent such a broadcast from happening again, but the FCC’s investigation concluded that such action was unnecessary. WABC, which aired the programme in New York, pointed out that it had “made clear four times on the program that the entire content of the play was entirely fictitious.” Welles made a very public apology and the CBS network promised to take steps to prevent further events ever happening in the future.

War of the Worlds and Media Audiences

Orson Welles’ broadcast is frequently cited as an example to support passive audience theories, such as the Frankfurt School’s ‘Hypodermic Syringe Theory’. This states that audiences consume and respond to media texts in an unquestioning way, believing what they read, see or hear. This might be true of the audiences of the 1930s, unfamiliar with new media forms like radio, but in the modern age it carries less weight. It is questionable as to how far most of the audience were actually duped by the broadcast. As has been noted, those who ‘bought into’ the idea of an invasion, may well have been influenced by external factors such as the social and political context of the time. It was *not* impossible to believe that a foreign power was invading American soil in 1938.

Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory might offer a more accurate explanation of the audience’s behaviour in response to the radio broadcast since it emphasises the longer-term effects that media texts have upon audiences. Based on his research into television viewing, cultivation theory states that high frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages and the belief that they are real. Heavy viewers of TV are thought to be ‘cultivating’ attitudes that seem to believe that the world created by television is an accurate depiction of the real world. Applied to *War of the Worlds* it could be argued that an audience familiar with the frequent interruptions to radio shows over the weeks leading up to the broadcast did not question the faux invasion broadcasts during Welles’ production.

Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory is useful when considering how the audience for *War of the Worlds* interpreted the text (as either fact or fiction). He argues that audiences might read a media text in different ways. The **dominant or preferred reading** by the audience is the one intended by the creator of the text. However, a person might read it in an **oppositional** way depending upon factors such as their age, gender or background. For example, a young male is likely to ‘read’ page three of *The Sun* as a bit of harmless fun (the preferred reading), whereas a female might regard it as offensive. Hall also suggests that readings of a media text might be **negotiated**. This is an acceptance of the preferred reading but modified in a way that reflects the audience’s own position, experiences and interests.

Activity: Apply Hall’s Reception Theory to ‘War of the Worlds’. Listen to the broadcast in its entirety; what do you think was Welles preferred reading of the text? What are the oppositional or negotiated readings of the text? Try to express each in a sentence. What factors would have influenced the audience’s reading of the text?

Would audiences react in the same way today?

The 1938 and 1949 radio broadcasts of *War of the Worlds* clearly had the power to deceive at least some of the listening audience, but could any media product create such an impact today? Are audiences too sophisticated and media-literate to be fooled by a similar stunt? In the late 1990s, and inspired by Orson Welles’ 1938 broadcast, two young filmmakers made the low budget film *The Blair Witch Project*. Supposedly made up ‘found footage’ shot by three student filmmakers who go missing while shooting a documentary about a local legend (the Blair Witch), the film sparked debate among audiences as to whether the footage was actually real. However, given that audiences received the text in a movie theatre (or on video and DVD) it is unlikely to have fooled the audience in quite the same way – or with the same authority – as a series of radio news bulletins.

Activity: Consider if Welles’ script for *War of the Worlds* was broadcast on radio today. Would audiences react in the same way? Give reasons why/why not.

Glossary

Pastiche: An artistic work in a style that imitates that of another work or artist. For example, Quentin Tarantino’s film *Django Unchained* imitates aspects of the typical western movie.

Codes: A system of signs (symbolic or technical) that create meaning. For example, how the camera is used to communicate narrative in a film or how sound effects are used to communicate narrative in a radio play.

Conventions: The generally accepted ways of doing something. For example, all television soap operas are set in close-knit working class communities.

Hybrid form: A thing made by combining two different elements. For example, the film *Shawn of the Dead* is a mixture of the comedy and horror (zombie) genres.

Intertextuality: The ways in which media texts are interrelated and the meanings that arise out of this. Adverts frequently steal images from popular culture to promote their unique selling point. For example, a Volvo advert shows Snow White standing by the roadside thumbing a lift accompanied by the strapline: The Volvo XC90. With Seven Seats. Sorry.

Acknowledgements: This Media Factsheet was researched and written by Mike Chappell and published in April 2018 by Curriculum Press. Media Studies Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136