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# Annals of Psychological Warfare: How to Induce Panic

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## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Annals of Psychological Warfare: How to Induce Panic

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**Abstract:** The author discusses the phenomenon of panic in a wartime setting because of psychological warfare, as well as in other settings.

One component of political psychology comprises how to influence large numbers of people to think, feel, desire, and behave. Sometimes this influence is intended for the interests of these people, sometimes for the interests of the influencer. Scientific experiments intended to validate theory and practice of influence often are constrained by moral, ethical, legal, logistic, political, and financial criteria. Thus, when large numbers of people are influenced beyond the controls of the scientific experiment, scientists analyze such events in an a posteriori fashion. They seek to infer the main independent variables, i.e., the causal factors leading to influence, after the fact as if the events constituted a natural experiment. Inferring the causal factors of influence after such events allows scientists to identify not only how to influence people but also whether previously validated influence tactics and strategies still work and their theoretical underpinnings still seem to make sense.

As an example, a television station based in the nation-state of Georgia recently broadcasted a mock newscast that Russia was invading Georgia with bombers, tanks, and ground troops. (See Andrew Kramer's article in *The New York Times* of March 14th entitled "Panic in Georgia after a Mock News Broadcast"). Among at least some Georgians, panic ensued. There were about 15 minutes to three hours' worth of people dashing for safety, stocking up on bread and gasoline, overloading cell phone systems, and calling in to emergency rooms with a higher than usual frequency of complaints about chest pain and other symptoms associated with heart attacks.

Questions then arise about what factors might have caused the panic, why many people did not panic, and how valid are the lessons learned from similar events.

Kramer reports that a former director of the Georgian television station compared the situation to that which occurred in the United States on October 30, 1938, when the Mercury Theater of Orson Welles staged a radio broadcast of an adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. In Wells's story, Martians are attacking Earth—in Welles' adaptation, central New Jersey. Newspaper reports of this event included inferences and descriptions of panic among some people, including overloading telephone switchboards, running into the streets while manifesting terror, harassing police to obtain details of the invasion, and fleeing in automobiles.

Very soon after this radio broadcast, Princeton University's Hadley Cantril, a social psychologist, headed an investigation of the situation with the use of federal funds already available to study group and collective psychologies. Data and analysis from the investigation resulted in *The Invasion from Mars* published in 1940 and authored by Cantril with significant help from Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog. (This book also was reviewed in significant psychology journals, e.g., by John Jenkins in the 1940 edition of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and Paul Farnsworth in the 1941 edition of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*.)

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Cantril and his associates identified specific factors that seemed to have helped lead people to panic. These factors included (1) a communication mode (viz., the radio) judged to be a highly credible source; (2) a seemingly authoritative speaker/ speaker's voice within a highly credible news show format; (3) an alleged event which, if true, probably could not have been quickly controlled or stopped; (4) an alleged event that was easy to understand regardless of its credibility; (5) a "real world," social context within which listeners approached the broadcast including unsettling social, political, and economic issues (e.g., the Depression, alarming politico-military events in Europe); (6) an initial disclaimer that the events in the broadcast were fictional not being repeated soon enough for listeners who tuned in late but who did not stick around for any further disclaimers; (7) overt and latent beliefs and expectation about such an event—viz., the beliefs among some people that an invasion by Martians or other space aliens was likely); (8) non-existent or inadequate checking of alleged facts through alternative sources coupled with focusing on any data that would confirm alleged facts; (9) a negative correlation between socio-economic class and educational level on the one hand and panic on the other; and (10) two pure but ambiguous psychological factors—personal susceptibility and felt ego involvement—negatively correlated with another pure but ambiguous psychological factor: critical ability. (To be fair to Cantril, a significant effort was made to define each term, but the result was that one ambiguous term was defined by yet other ambiguous term. As an example, personal susceptibility was defined as lack of self-confidence, amount of worry, phobia, insecurity, and religiosity including, but not limited to, attendance at church. Operational definitions of each of these terms and the weighting of these terms to each other and to panic—i.e., a delineation of modifying and moderating effects—were not provided. Also not provided were the putative relationships among all 10 of the above factors.

IBPP readers may hope that the Cantril of the Georgian panic is already at work collecting data and engaged in analysis to infer causal factors of influence and how much of what might have been germane in the Welles adaptation applies to the Georgian televised broadcast. It is encouraging (scientifically, not humanistically) that both events occurred in times of unsettling real world events. In the Georgian these include the memories of a recent war against Russia, two breakaway Georgian territories seeking independence, significant domestic economic problems, and considerable domestic political instability. Other similarities include dramatized news broadcasts about military invasion and involved similar panic symptoms such as overloading communications systems and outright fleeing. Three significant differences are the higher degree to which some Georgians have ascribed the broadcast to a government plot, the possibility that the Georgian broadcast might have been intended as satire, and the fact that the Welles adaptation occurred during an evening with high expectations of simulated horror potentially inducing panic, at least in New Jersey—viz., Halloween.

Panic-inducing broadcasts obviously have a use (at least before one applies a means and ends assessment) during war, insurgency, pre-revolutionary and proto-revolutionary activity, electoral campaigning, coups, and blatant resource grabs. Perhaps, more positively, there is theoretical work on Welles adaptation and on *The War of the Worlds* film adaptation by Steven Spielberg to suggest that cultural products that represent or induce panic may lead to a cathartic alleviation of anxiety and present stimulating opportunities for personal creativity activity (see Adela Abella's article on "The War of the Worlds or the Transformations of Narcissism" in the 2008 edition of "La Psychiatrie de l'Enfant.") And groups of people may work together to mitigate pre-existing panic (see Elise Clerkin and her associates' "Sudden Gains in Group Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Panic Disorder" from the 2008 edition of *Behaviour Research and Therapy* . .

So, for those of us not already in a panic because of the recently passed health-care legislation in the United States, the reaction to it, or the process leading up to it, what might we conclude? There may be

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both enduring and changing causal factors implicated in influencing panic, even if more recent work on the psychology of rumor might suggest there is more that is enduring than changing (see Ralph Rosnow's "Psychology of Rumor Reconsidered" in the 1980 edition of *Psychological Bulletin* and Nicholas DiFonzo's *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* published in 2007. From Cantril, through publications on the induction of collective panic during wartime by the National Research Council in 1943 and 1945, to the present, panic induction remains a political psychological tool.

Future applied research must contend with ever-evolving social networking mediated by technology such as Twitter, Facebook, the blogosphere, and proliferations of television and radio channels. But this research may need to be grounded in the remote past. It is from evolutionary psychology perspectives that the socio-emotional core awaiting activation is to be found (see Randolph Nesse's "An Evolutionary Perspective on Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia" in the 1987 edition of *Ethology and Sociobiology* and Isaac Marks and Adolf Tobias's "Learning and Unlearning Fear: A Clinical and Evolutionary Perspective" in the 1990 edition of *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*).

It is from the evolutionary perspective that one might best understand Franklin Roosevelt's quote "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." Fear and even panic may or may not be adaptive. Paradoxically, there will be times when no longer fearing and no longer panicking may be something that truly should induce fear and panic even beyond that experienced for invading Russians and Martians. [Comments may be sent to [bloomr@erau.edu](mailto:bloomr@erau.edu)]. (Keywords: Information Warfare, Panic, Psychological Warfare.)