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UNDERSTANDING THE 1918-1920 CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF THE SPANISH
FLU
AS TOLD THROUGH *THE NEW YORK TIMES* AND
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

by

Gertrude Misornu Ofori-Parku, B.S.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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ABSTRACT
UNDERSTANDING THE 1918-1920 CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF THE SPANISH
FLU AS TOLD THROUGH *THE NEW YORK TIMES* AND
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Gertrude Misornu Ofori-Parku, B.S.

Marquette University, 2021

Global pandemics have become one of the major health crises that happen to society from time to time. Past occurrences, including disasters and pandemics, are events that we learn from and draw upon to better understand current happenings. One way by which we build and understand historical trends and events, including pandemics, is through press coverage of those events. One significant pandemic in history was the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. This thesis explores the cultural narrative about the Spanish Flu as told through *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* between 1918 and 1920. Through the constant comparison method, three story themes emerged: The Impact on Business, The Origin of the Disease, and Finding the Cure. It was concluded that the overarching narrative was how the Spanish flu impacted businesses and activities, mainly in sports and entertainment. There were no substantive descriptions of the pandemic in press coverage, and most of the reference made to the Spanish Flu was either related to trade and business or the war efforts, which shows how rooted the American society is in capitalism as a cultural narrative.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

History has always been an integral part of our human existence. Building knowledge and understanding of historical events and trends enables us to develop a greater appreciation for current events today. History also helps us understand the culture and how it evolves over time. We can look back to history to find answers and solutions to mind-boggling questions. One way by which we build and understand historical trends and events is through press coverage of those events. Many past occurrences, including disasters and pandemics, are events that we learn from and draw upon to better understand current happenings. One recent happening is the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts and scholars forecast that the COVID-19 pandemic could become the biggest pandemic to be recorded in modern history (Scudellari, 2020). Yet, COVID-19 is not our first pandemic. Throughout human history, the world has experienced different epidemics and pandemics that have affected the respiratory system and had similar symptoms as the COVID-19. One notable pandemic that put the world into a state of chaos, anxiety, and fear similar to what we are experiencing today is the 1918 Influenza pandemic, commonly known as the Spanish Flu.

The 1918 Influenza pandemic, or the Spanish Flu, significantly impacted the world for nearly three years, from 1918 to 1920. Previous studies have indicated that the Spanish Flu was the biggest pandemic in modern history (Adams, 2020; Barry, 2017; Buear, 2020). According to Dave Roos (2020), the 1918 influenza pandemic became known as the “Spanish Flu” because Spanish journalists were some of the only journalists in the world reporting on the Influenza. This was because the so-called Spanish Flu also

occurred during World War I, when countries like England, France, and the United States had imposed wartime censorship, which meant newspapers could not report anything that could harm the war efforts (Roos, 2020). Spain, in stark contrast, did not impose any form of press censorship during this time. Thus, even though the Flu did not originate from Spain, news coverage did, giving it the name “Spanish Flu.” The origin of the strain of the virus that mutated to cause the Spanish Flu remains unknown to this date.

However, some theories suggest it originated in England, France, China, Germany, and even the United States (the first U.S. case was reported at an army camp in Kansas) (Little, 2020; Humphries, 2013). What is known is that during the early stages, it had similar symptoms as the “normal” flu but became very deadly and lethal as the spread expanded worldwide at an unimaginable speed. This spread pattern and the Spanish Flu's uncertainty are very similar to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

This similarity between the 1918 Spanish Flu and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic makes it essential to look back on history to understand the social discourse about the Spanish Flu that occurred at the time. Doing so could provide insight into confronting the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. As Beštić-Bronza (2020) rightly said, “the crucial knowledge that existed in confronting the flu epidemic of 1918 came from the results of previous epidemics.” Therefore, it is essential to understand the Spanish Flu to employ that knowledge in future pandemics. By considering such questions as: how did the media portray the Spanish Flu at the time? What did journalists at the time encourage people to think about the pandemic? and What was the public discourse about the Flu as reflected in the press narratives? We can understand how the media portrayed social, economic, and societal issues surrounding the Spanish Flu through the stories and articles

they reported on and covered. The knowledge acquired will add to our understanding of how society sees and handles pandemics in the past and future. Hence, this thesis asks:

What were the cultural narratives about the Spanish Flu as reflected in 1918-1920 press coverage in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal?

Before turning to the literature review, it is essential to note the similarities between the 1918 Spanish Flu and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted this study. Scholars such as Barry (2017), Beštić-Bronza (2020), and Efron & Efron (2020) examined the origin and mortality of the 1918 Flu, the implications of the disease, and the impact it had on the lives of people around the world. Barry (2017) argued that during World War I, the Spanish Flu started in the U.S. and spread to France with the American troops' arrival. Barry's historical research pointed to an earlier outbreak in Haskell County in Kansas. Beštić-Bronza (2020), in his study on the demographic implications, found that the 1918 influenza killed even young people between 18 and 45, running against the widespread belief at the time that the Flu only affected children, older people above 65, and people with weak immune systems. Barry (2020), in his opinion piece in *The New York Times*, titled "The Single Most Important Lesson from The 1918 Influenza," argued that the Spanish Flu killed between 50 million and 100 million people of the global human population, which, when adjusted, would equal between 220 million and 430 million people today. Similarly, in a 2018 article commemorating the 100 years after the Spanish Flu, the WHO emphasized that the speed and intensity with which the Spanish Flu struck the world was almost indescribable. By the time it subsided in 1920, the Flu had infected about 500 million people, one-third of the world's population, and tens of millions of people were believed to have died (WHO, 2020).

COVID-19 has loomed worldwide in strikingly similar ways and generated a great deal of fear about the disease. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is the respiratory pathogen infectious disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-COV-2 (WHO, 2020). The WHO first learned about COVID-19 cases in Wuhan, in the People's Republic of China, on December 31, 2019. This infectious virus quickly spread worldwide and was officially announced as a global pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020. At that time, more than 118,000 cases were reported in 114 countries, with 4291 deaths (WHO, 2020). In short, COVID-19 quickly disrupted the lives and livelihood of people around the world.

As of July 12, 2021, there were 186,411,011 confirmed cases, with 4,031,725 confirmed deaths in 223 countries, areas, or territories worldwide, and as of July 8, 2021, there were 3,078,787,056 vaccine doses administered (WHO, 2021). The pandemic's impact has been visible and evident in everyday lives and economies across the globe. For example, the World Bank forecasted that world economies were likely to experience the deepest global recession seen in decades, even though some governments provided their citizens fiscal and monetary support. Furthermore, the World Bank predicted that the pandemic's recessions were likely to leave "long-lasting scars on investment, human capital, loss of work and schooling, fragmentation of global trade, and supply linkages," among others (the World Bank, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted the political sphere with competing messages about the disease and its impact. For example, in the United States, then President Trump and a significant number of his followers speculated that there was no need to create fear and panic with the discourse about the pandemic as there is no such

thing as COVID-19 (Thomas & Gittleson, 2020). At different times and on various media platforms, Trump's 2020 messaging on the virus encouraged people to think that it did not exist, and he downplayed the impact of COVID-19 by calling it other names, including a "hoax," a "foreign virus" or the racially charged "China virus." Trump's rhetoric fits well with Hoppe's (2018) observations about how pandemics are named and become racially charged. The first consideration is whether, in an age of global hyper-interconnectedness, fear of the other is rightly irrational or has a rational basis. Second is the persistence of xenophobic responses to infectious disease in the face of contrary evidence. Finally, promoting an association between foreigners and a particular pandemic can be a rhetorical strategy for either promoting fear or imparting a sense of safety to the public (Hoppe, 2018).

Competing with President Trump's rhetoric, on the other hand, was Dr. Anthony Fauci, a physician, immunologist, and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) since 1984. Fauci publicly shared the medical perspective on the seriousness and the impact of COVID-19 (NIAID, 2020). Medical experts, including Dr. Fauci, argued that there should be more education on the subject in the public sphere. They argued that citizens need the right information to make informed and correct decisions about what is going on and know how to respond.

Against this backdrop and the apparent similarities between these two pandemics, little is known about the 1918 pandemic, including how the press covered it. This study aims to address this gap in our understanding by examining what cultural narratives were told about the Spanish Flu in press coverage by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* during the first two years of the pandemic.

As will be shown, many scholars have studied past pandemics, including similar respiratory viral pandemics, and their work can serve as a pool of resources to understand how the world has dealt with pandemics over the years. Chapter 2 reviews some of this scholarly literature to give perspective to this thesis. This literature review focuses on media and non-media studies on both pandemics in general and the Spanish Flu. Chapter 3 reviews the method of analysis and explains how the data was collected. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings and interpretations, and finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the discussion and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The world has experienced various public health crises, global epidemics, and global pandemics, ranging from mild respiratory diseases and influenza to very health-threatening influenza and other infectious diseases, going as far back as two or more centuries ago. During emerging public health crises, it is believed that news organizations disseminate information rapidly, much of which can be uncertain, difficult to verify, and even dynamic. News and how it is reported plays a critical role in shaping how we see the world (Lippmann, 1922). The media has played various roles in what and how information about such pandemics was communicated to multiple stakeholders, including the general public. This study will focus on the press coverage of one of the great pandemics in history, known as the Spanish Flu or the 1918 influenza pandemic. As will be discussed below, the Spanish Flu has been largely missing in modern history for a very long time, and examining the press coverage will help gain an understanding of the cultural narratives that surrounded the disease by finding answers to the research question:

What were the cultural narratives about the Spanish Flu as reflected in 1918-1920 press coverage in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal?

The following literature review begins with examining what we know about the Spanish Flu overall, followed by a review of previous scholarship on press coverage of pandemics in general and press coverage of the Spanish Flu in particular.

Non-Media Related Studies of the Spanish Flu

The 1918 pandemic influenza, also known as the Spanish Flu, is one pandemic in history wherein little to nothing is known about what the news narratives reported on the pandemic. As shown below, most scholarly literature on the Spanish Flu reviewed other issues such as the disease's mortality, demographics, and origin. While there have been studies on the 1918 influenza pandemic recently, it had mostly been missing from the historical record for a long time (Segal, 2020). Segal noted that the Spanish Flu destroyed society for “nearly three agonizing years, on a scale that had not been seen since the bubonic plague wiped out at least one-third of Europe’s population in the late Middle Ages. Some 675,000 Americans died, more than the U.S. casualties of all the wars of the 20th century combined” (Segal, 2020). Korr (2013) also threw more light on the number of people affected by the disease. The 1918 pandemic killed an estimated 675,000 Americans and between 20–40 million people worldwide and was unusual in that it was deadliest for those aged 20 to 40 years old (Korr, 2013).

However, for decades after, the pandemic somehow “vanished” from the public’s mind. According to Segal, even scholars disregarded the subject with it cropping up “with rare exceptions, in novels, paintings, plays or movies” (Segal, 2020). The first significant account of the Spanish Flu was published in 1976 by Alfred Crosby, who was puzzled by the lack of any impression left by the disaster. This was published as “Epidemic and Peace” and was later reissued as “America’s Forgotten Pandemic” (Crosby, 1976). Many other scholars have since sought to find answers to why little to nothing was said about the pandemic for so long.

Historian Nancy Bristow explored the experiences, remembrances, and meanings of 1918 Influenza for those who lived and died in that terrible time, examining the pandemic from the ground up rather than the top down. Bristow concluded that the Americans “forgot” the pandemic in public memory and lore because they survived it with existing social roles, expectations, and institutions intact, noting that “optimistic and redemptive narratives remained dominant strains in American culture” (Bristow 2012, p. 193). She characterized this tendency as “troubling” because it too quickly minimizes stories of personal anguish and private hardship during the pandemic.

Esparza (2020), in his history of pandemics, suggested that past pandemics varied in morbidity, mortality, intensity, and frequency, with ten significant pandemics occurring at a frequency of three per century. According to Esparza, these various pandemics led to the formation of the germ theory of disease. During this era, the medical community abandoned the old ideas about miasmas, or atmospheric perturbations, as the cause of epidemics and pandemics. They replaced these ideas with modern concepts about transmissible microbial agents as the cause for such pandemics (Esparza, 2020). Esparza concluded that the germ theory provided a basis for future preventive interventions such as keeping general good hygiene, access to clean water, and now, the popular social-distancing strategies that cut across most of the protocols put in place for these respiratory pandemics over the years, including the 1918 pandemic, and even now in the era of COVID-19 (Esparza, 2020).

Similarly, Snyder & Ravi (2018) and Le Blanc (2020) also studied past pandemics, emphasizing the Spanish Flu. Snyder & Ravi (2018) focused their historical analysis on the common socioeconomic, political, and environmental factors underlying

the 1818 and 1918 pandemics. They concluded that the overarching common underlying factor for the pandemic was globalization, which they explained as the “transcontinental movement of military forces by ascendant global powers” (p. 411). They also considered the roles of cholera and the Spanish Flu in shaping global health norms and modern public health practices and examined how strategic applications of soft power and broadening the focus of health security to include sustainable development could help the world prepare for pandemics of the future. On the other hand, Le Blanc (2020) offered a brief historical review of the important events that led to the Spanish Flu pandemic and what efforts were taken at the time to contain it. He argued that “although medical advances have been remarkable over the past century, the public health tools and medical procedures used to contain and control virus outbreaks had not advanced with as much modern innovation.” Also, he noted that the “same isolation and quarantine, face masks and ventilators, social distancing and disinfectant techniques being used to fight the COVID-19 pandemic were used back in 1918” (Le Blanc, 2020, p.81).

According to Nichols, Bristow, Ewing, Gabriel, Montoya, & Outka (2020), the Spanish Flu was, for a long time, a topic that was omitted from most modern-day history. Thomas Ewing, one of the co-authors, emphasized this by saying that he taught twenty-first century European and world history many times without ever mentioning this Influenza. In hindsight, the authors offered three reasons for this omission. First, they believed that there were many other important issues and events to cover, including World War I, post-war settlement, the Russian revolution, the rise of anti-colonial movements across Africa and Asia, and women's suffrage. Secondly, in Nichols et al. (2020), Ewing notably argued that he was ignorant about the pandemic's scale and scope,

which no one taught him and did not appear in most textbooks and scholarly works that aided his teaching. Finally, even though the Influenza was costly, there was this vague sense that the pandemic did not change anything as compared to the decisive turning points that the end of World War I and other revolutions brought.

Nonetheless, Nichols et al. (2020) conceded that these reasons are faulty in themselves since the pandemic did mark essential developments in scientific knowledge and research, setting the stage for research into what type of flu virus mutated to cause the lethal 1918 Pandemic wave. Nichols et al. (2020) also acknowledged that the 1918 Pandemic affected people's relationship with the natural environment. The institutional structures of communities, such as schools and businesses, were closed for most pandemic periods and during the 1918 pandemic too. Other scholars such as Adams (2020), Beštić-Bronza (2020), and Doležal (2009) questioned why little was said about the 1918 pandemic in press coverage. Beštić-Bronza (2020) explained that it was not until the 1970s that the Spanish Flu began to gain ground in medical science history. He added that the historiography of the 1918 influenza started with the first international conference dubbed "Reflections on the Spanish Flu Pandemic after 80 Years: Causes, Course & Consequence," which was held in South Africa in 1998. Even then, the subject did not attract much attention beyond the 36 scholars who gathered to deliberate on it. Doležal (2009) also remarked that for the most part, modern American literature is remarkably silent about the "global crisis" (aka the Spanish Flu) even though it "killed nearly as many American servicemen as those who died in battle, ten times and over that number of American civilians, and twice as many people in the world who died in combat on all fronts in the entire four years of the war" (Doležal, 2009; Crosby, 2003).

Byerly (2010) notably suggested that the American military experience in World War I and the influenza pandemic were closely intertwined. Byerly argued that the war advanced Influenza in the crowded environments of military camps in the United States and the Western Front's trenches in Europe. The virus traveled with military personnel from camp to camp and across the Atlantic. From September through November 1918, Influenza and pneumonia sickened 20% to 40% of U.S. Army and Navy personnel, at the height of the American military involvement in the war. Byerly concluded that the high morbidity rates interfered with induction and training schedules in the United States and rendered hundreds of thousands of military personnel non-effective. More so, during the American Expeditionary Forces' campaign at Meuse-Argonne, the epidemic diverted urgently needed resources from combat support to transporting and caring for the sick and the dead. Influenza and pneumonia killed more American soldiers and sailors than enemy weapons (Byerly, 2010).

Chertow, Cai, Sun, Grantham, Taubenberger, & Morens (2015), focused on the history of the 1918 Spanish Flu and its circulation within the United States. Focusing on clues to early detection of pandemic viral emergence, they found that high pandemic influenza mortality was primarily due to increased incidence of, but not increased severity of, secondary bacterial pneumonia. Chertow et al. (2015) concluded that there were two pre-pandemic occurrence peaks of probable Influenza (December 1917 to January 1918 and March to April 1918), which differed markedly from the September to October 1918 pandemic onset peak in their clinical-epidemiologic features and argued that seasonal or endemic viruses might have caused them. Nevertheless, rising proportions of very low incidence post influenza bronchopneumonia (diagnosed at the

time as Influenza and bronchopneumonia) in early 1918 could have reflected circulation of the pandemic virus five months before it emerged in pandemic form. They concluded that detecting pandemic viruses before they occurred could be possible by surveillance of special populations (Chertow et al., 2015). Nickol & Kindrachuk (2019) found that despite the public health advancements in the 100 years following the 1918 – 1919 pandemic, including widespread access in the developed world to an efficacious influenza vaccine, influenza viruses remain a global public health threat. They concluded that “our continued vigilance against influenza must not only include a research driven-focus but also include public outreach and awareness campaigns that increase the general understanding of the healthcare burden associated with influenza infections” (Nickol & Kindrachuk, 2019 p. 7). Other scholars have examined the biomedical response to Influenza by studying the trajectory of vaccine development (Schwartz, 2018); or reexamined both speculations and evidence surrounding the high mortality of the Flu and the unknown origin of the epidemic (Gagnon, Acosta, Madrenas, & Miller, 2015).

Another dimension to the 1918 pandemic that scholars studied were the religious and lay explanations attributed to the Flu (Phillips, 1987). Phillips quoted Weber, who said that man is at his most religious state when powerless, and uncertainties in their human subsistence are highly superficial. According to Phillips (1987), religious opinion on why the pandemic happened was not uniform. He categorized the religious and lay explanations into four areas. The first group attributed the epidemic directly to God as either a punishment or to further a divine purpose. Secondly, people attributed the pandemic indirectly to God. This group of people attributed it to human abandonment of social circumstances. The other two groups attributed it to deliberate exploitation by

malignant people or groups and the unintentional result of the fight on the Western and European front.

Although the pandemic claimed many lives, public opinion in German society focused on the military and political functions of the war rather than the raging disease. All over Europe during the same time, little was said about the pandemic. All attention was on the war activities. For example, scholarly literature about the description of the setbacks of the Austro-Hungarian forces in Herzegovina and Bosnia around November 1918 did not have even a single line about the Spanish Flu's impact in the Australians historical archives (Murphy, 1982). The German historian Eckard Michels (2010) emphasized how small the Spanish Flu's real influence was compared to other developments around World War I, especially during the last few months of military operations in German society.

Dicke (2015), who focused on public awareness and understanding of the Spanish Flu, concluded that there was a near-universal lack of preparation, fear, or panic, among other signs of personal concern in areas not affected by the 1918 Influenza. This means that while some regions affected severely by the disease were in states of anxiety and panic, people in the areas that were not affected by the disease showed close to no signs of personal concern. This lack of concern, however, raised the question of why. Why would people not be concerned in unaffected areas when the pandemic was causing havoc in different parts of the world? Dicke (2015) argued that the most likely reason was a lack of public information or conversations on the subject matter. Dicke further suggested that the most likely reason why the pandemic produced neither anxiety nor action in unaffected places appeared to be due to "cognitive inertia." He explained this

was “the tendency of existing beliefs or habits of thought to blind people to changed realities” (Dicke, 2015, p. 197). People only change or adapt their preexisting beliefs and habits if there is extensive counter information to challenge those beliefs. It appeared there was little or no information to make people adjust their beliefs and traditions. Similarly, Garner’s (1996) study of how newspapers reported disasters found that the more geographically detached from the location of the disaster the news source is, the more likely that news source will tend to depersonalize its coverage. Garner (1996) wrote that:

stories focusing on floods and the impact on individuals are rare in national coverage, making it difficult for the average reader to understand and relate to those affected. The local media, in comparison, provide its readers with a sense of community and a way to cope (p.84).

Finally, such scholars as Efron & Efron (2020) emphasized that Spanish flu information could not be rapidly circulated as expected. So, mortality and severity increased during the second and third waves of the pandemic, partly because there was an imposed wartime censorship at the time (Humphries, 2013). Walloch (2014) tried to close in on the gap in scholarly writing about the Spanish Flu and argued that most writers depicted the epidemic as a medical horror story, focused on desperate attempts to limit the contagion as it overwhelmed hospitals and public health departments, making it serve as a cautionary tale warning against hubris in the face of implacably mutating viruses. Despite all this inquiry into the Spanish Flu, there has been little to no research on the communications processes used during the 1918 Pandemic, including press coverage.

There has, however, been considerable research on press coverage of pandemics in general, and I turn to that research next.

News Narratives about Pandemics in General

According to Outka (2014), the general public is often seen as passive and, in most cases, vulnerable to pandemic influenza. She argued that communication usually promotes public compliance with prescribed guidelines without instigating complacency, panic, or unruly responses. Nonetheless, communication about health crises often ends up inspiring fear and panic in the general public. Beyond a particular time of compliance, Outka (2014) argued that people become complacent about adhering to such prescribed guidelines. Gerlach (2016), drawing on other scholars, and using framing analysis, concluded that news narratives about the Ebola outbreak conveyed messages through a three-face narrative. The news coverage began with sounding the alarm, followed by mixed messages, crisis, and containment (Holland & Blood, 2010; Nerlich & Halliday, 2007; Ungar, 2008; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). These scholars argued that the news narratives told stories about how disease outbreaks pose a growing threat to society, the uncertainties about the disease, how people are expected to respond, and finally, medical expertise and health authorities' achievements with the disease. Furthermore, Wald (2008), in her study of press coverage of the Ebola outbreak, identified an "outbreak narrative." She stated that:

In its scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations, the outbreak narrative follows a formulaic plot that begins with identifying an emerging infection, includes a discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment. As

epidemiologists trace the routes of the microbes, they catalog the spaces of global modernity. Microbes, spaces, and interactions blend together as they animate the landscape and motivate the plot of the outbreak narrative: a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority, and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster (p.2).

According to Wald (2008), the press outbreak narrative, in the end, reaffirms the authority of science and the security of national boundaries. Similarly, Everts (2013) and Davis, Stephenson, & Flowers (2011) argued that journalistic disease stories culminated into the narrative that the disease was contained through the effort of medical practitioners and health authorities, who retain a heroic status within the narrative, and that public anxiety was controlled through the repetition of familiar narrative structures and frames. Koteyko, Brown, and Crawford (2008), in their study to ascertain metaphoric presence in the U.K. press coverage of the Avian Flu, concluded that journalists seeking to describe pandemic events and render them intelligible and newsworthy to the general public employed several metaphors at different junctures in their stories. Koteyko et al. (2008) argued that “fundamental metaphor scenarios based on culturally or phenomenologically salient objects or experiences used in reporting allow the media, scientists, and policymakers to reduce the complexity of the threat posed by a disease and to engage disease control and risk management strategies that appear to make instinctive or intuitive sense to journalists, experts and arguably the public in a particular situation” (Koteyko et al., 2008, pp. 258/9). Similarly, Dudo, Dahlstrom, and Brossard (2007) studied the risk-related assessment of avian influenza coverage in U.S. newspapers using

a five-dimensional conceptualization (namely, risk magnitude, self-efficacy, risk comparisons, sensationalism, and thematic and episodic framing). Their findings revealed that the newspapers' coverage predominantly was episodic and displayed sensationalism with minimal information that promoted self-efficacy. Both the Koteyko et al. (2008) and Dudo et al. (2007) findings and conclusions attest to the critical role that the media play in seeing the world around us, even though these two studies focused on different indicators and parameters.

Similarly, Stephenson and Jamieson (2009) studied contemporary Australian newspaper coverage of pandemic influenza in humans. Their analysis and findings suggested that the specter of pandemic influenza was depicted as invoking a specific form of nation-building. They concluded that the newspaper coverage on pandemic influenza in the Australian society positioned health as central to their national security, without the newspapers reporting the reasons for this position or the potential implications. Other scholars have also examined the press coverage of some pandemics over the years, mainly through quantitative methods. For example, Husemann and Fischer (2015) examined press coverage of a pandemic (H1N1 in Germany) using quantitative content analysis. They found that media awareness seemed to be strongly related to the actual situation in the pandemic because changes in the number of infected people were associated with nearly identical changes in newspaper articles that reported on the pandemic. Husemann and Fischer (2015) concluded that the extent of information provided differed during the pandemic. The use of fear appeal was minimal (about 10%), but a large number of the articles (about 32%) analyzed contained the message characteristic they called "self-efficacy" (Husemann & Fischer, 2015). Also, Smith,

Rimal, Sandberg, Storey, Lagasse, Maulsby & Links (2013) examined factors related to international news coverage of H1N1 and the role of the news media as an information source during an emerging pandemic. They found that pandemic planning did not predict newsworthiness. However, countries with avian flu experience had higher news volumes, and coverage of the H1N1 increased after the country recorded their first case (Smith et al., 2013). Smith and his colleagues concluded that newsworthiness was enhanced in the case of a perceived localized threat.

There was one study that covered several media platforms which were more popular culture focused. Mark Davis (2017) brought a different dimension to the study of how media influences the communication of pandemics with his “pandemic story world” through subjects of films, online games, and television literature. Davis argued that “pandemic narratives travel across and blend the genres of science, fiction, alien invasion, and zombie horror” (Davis, 2017, p. 1). He drew on examples from public communications and popular culture and dialogues with interviews and focus groups and concluded that pandemics become objects of knowledge in narratives and are appropriated to communicate a pandemic’s temporal and affective qualities in the circumstances of an actual outbreak. Davis believed that the media played a central role in the communications employed by public health agencies and authorities in charge of informing and advising the public on how to conduct themselves during a pandemic outbreak (Davis, 2017). This thesis contributes to research on news narratives about pandemics by examining press coverage of the Spanish flu pandemic. As will be shown below, there is minimal research in this area.

Press Coverage on Spanish Flu

Roger Heinrich is one of the few scholars who studied the Spanish Flu's press coverage. In his paper titled "Small Town Newspaper and a Metropolitan Newspaper Report on a Deadly Virus: A Content Analysis of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918," Heinrich found most of the news reports speculated the cause of the illness as war-related and also found that government officials were by far the most quoted sources of the information published in the two newspapers that he studied (Heinrich, 2011). Heinrich based his analysis on Kovach and Rosenstiel's nine elements that journalists must adhere to in providing information to people. Even though Heinrich focused on the scope and sources of the press coverage and not the discourse about the disease, he offered a good starting point for a study on press coverage that focuses on news as a cultural narrative. Christina M. Stetler conducted another close-to-media-related research on the Spanish Flu. Stetler (2017) explored the epidemic by analyzing the city of Pennsylvania's "response between September 1918 and March 1919, bringing together reports, newspaper articles, vital records, and medical research to tell a comprehensive experience" about the Spanish Flu (p.464). She argued that the public narrative would have spoken to the advances in medicine and the professionalism gained in doctors' and nurses' medical fields. In contrast, individual patient stories would tell a different tale. Stetler, drawing heavily on Bristow's book, argued that:

Newspapers of the period struggled for a middle ground between extreme optimism for the future and pain felt by those immediately affected by the epidemic. While journalists too joined the upbeat chorus of optimism with expressions of faith in modern science and a conviction that progress was sure to

follow in the wake of the epidemic, they could not ignore the human element to the experience. Many newspaper articles described the heartache the epidemic wrought by covering the hard statistics of the number of dead reported through the various health agencies. Even as the newspapers wrote about the facts of the past epidemic and the current consequences, it also tended to dilute these reports in storylines that recreated the upbeat narrative of the health care professionals (Stetler, 2017 p.481)

Stetler concluded that life moved on in the long run, and people's minds turned to other issues far from anything pandemic-related. For example, in the fall of 1919, when the pandemic had begun to dwindle, Congress enacted the Eighteenth Amendment, also known as the Volstead Act, which prohibited the making, transporting, and selling of alcoholic beverages ushering in the Roaring Twenties and the rise of organized crime. The following year the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment granted universal women's suffrage. The 1918 influenza epidemic became a minor footnote to history, one rarely discussed in the conversation on World War I (Stetler, 2017).

As discussed above, there is evidence to show how scholars have examined some aspects of the Spanish Flu, from morbidity to mortality, frequency, and demographics, among others, to how different parts of the world dealt with the Flu. What has been largely missing from existing research is understanding the larger cultural narrative about the 1918 pandemic as reflected in the press coverage of the happenings. The two exceptions being the studies mentioned above by Heinrich (2011) and Stetler (2017). This thesis seeks to address this gap in the historical record by examining the press

coverage of the 1918 Spanish Flu in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* between 1918 and 1920.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis is rooted in the research tradition that studies news reporting and journalism as a depository for cultural narratives (Bird & Dardenne 1997), allowing researchers to enter into a culture and period through news stories. This theoretical framework will help us understand the Spanish Flu's cultural narratives through the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* press coverage. Scholars such as Lippmann (1922), Cohen (1963), McCombs, and Shaw (1972) have all emphasized the influence and role that the media (the press, for this research) plays in shaping the larger narratives we hold about and how we see the world. The news that the media covers contain information about culture, values, beliefs, ideals, right and wrong, and parameters that one should not go beyond (Cohen & Young, 1981). Bird and Dardenne (1997) argued that individual news stories contribute to the constant narrative of human activity. Even though parts of cultural stories may change, the overarching "symbolic system" does serve as a cultural model. Cultural narratives are increasingly recognized as powerful enablers in connecting our past to the present and building a sustainable future platform. Buozis & Creech (2018) added that news narratives could be viewed as "textual artifacts" that reveal the representation structures that tell how news works as a sort of standardized and industrialized truth coming into action.

Berkowitz & Liu (2014) also provided a perspective on the news as cultural narratives shifting the focus on the traditional understanding of the social construction of news. They argued that the social structure of news focuses on the concerns about bias

and truth. In contrast, the cultural construction of news focuses on the “meanings that grow both from the culture of journalism and from the society in which the journalism is embedded” (p. 301). Also, Berkowitz (2011), in his book, “Cultural Meanings of News,” argued that news could be considered a form of the cultural story that interconnects to larger well-known narratives. He argued that:

It becomes clear that the values inherent in cultural narratives inform news in a predictable way so that news ultimately reproduces cultural values and contributes to their longevity. News as a familiar narrative becomes a helpful way of seeing news for what it is and helps account for the easy connection between the journalists and the media audience. It should also be clear from these videos that narratives pervade the news much more deeply than the specific case studies the artist introduce, challenging the reader to go beyond simple identification of a narrative and move outward towards an understanding of the news as part of the culture it serves (p. 243).

In sum, it is evident that news is a form of cultural narrative (Berkowitz, 2011; Ettema & Glasser, 1988; Lipari, 1994; Oslon, 1995). As White (1984) pointed out, any set of events can be plotted in different settings and ways. This means that journalists greatly influence the meaning we make out news and shapes audience expectations and reactions. Hence drawing on these understandings, examining the Spanish Flu press coverage will help me construct meaning from the stories surrounding the Flu as was told by journalists at the time. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology that I used in this research.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

To answer the research question: *What were the cultural narratives about the Spanish Flu as reflected in 1918-1920 press coverage in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal?* I also needed to address several sub-questions, including what were the Spanish flu stories being told? What elements were present in the news stories to produce a particular set of meanings? How were the stories being classified and contextualized by the press? What range of meanings and interpretations were opened up by how the press configured the accounts? What was public opinion about the pandemic as reflected by the press coverage?

In order to answer the overarching question and sub-questions, I analyzed newspaper articles in *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* (simply referred to as *The Journal* and *The Times*) from January 1918 to April 1920, completing a detailed textual analysis using the constant comparison method. This chapter first defines textual analysis and the constant comparison method and why it is appropriate for this study. The chapter also provides a write-up on the two newspapers that were chosen for this study and provides the rationale behind the two-year time frame. Finally, the section concludes with the sampling method.

Textual Analysis and Constant Comparison Method

Hall (1996) first developed textual analysis as an alternative research method to content analysis. Textual analysis is “a process of examining and interpreting data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Cobin and Strauss 2008, p. 1). It is a method used to critically examine cultural artifacts or texts to

establish meaning (Flener, 2008). Textual analysis is different from content analysis because it uses an interpretive approach, allowing the researcher to examine all aspects of the text, including stylistic language, omissions, and visuals (Lester-Roushinzamir & Raman, 1999). There are three steps identified in textual analysis, including defining the potential frames or themes, closely reading their texts, and interpreting the findings (Flener 2008). Brennen (2017) argued that textual analysis helps to examine what issue is being addressed, what position the author takes, the writer's claim, is it justified, and who the intended audience is. She argued that the meaning of our social realities is formed through language. Therefore, a careful examination of news articles published on the Spanish Flu would help us understand the cultural narratives and social realities created from the language used by the journalists at the time. Textual analysis in media studies is also linked to Kracauer's publication "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis." In this article, Kracauer (1952) argued that quantitative content analysis in which the researcher only counted articles that have been broken into pieces is often found to have "inaccurate analysis" (p. 632). For Kracauer, the textual analysis aims to reveal all the potential meanings in the text being analyzed. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) rightly put it, qualitative analysis is a process of examining and interpreting data to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge.

According to Hall (1975), a textual analysis requires a deep focus on the text, in this case, multiple readings, to discover the text's pertinent patterns and themes. Lule (1995) also pointed out that analyzing text reveals how language and press conventions depict categories in a text. The textual analysis involves "understanding language, symbols, and pictures existing in texts to gain information concerning how individuals

make meaning of and communicate life and life experiences” (Allen, 2017). Textual analysis is a type of analytic frame wherein researchers unravel and interpret stories told within the context of research and shared in everyday life. Scholars who conduct this type of analysis make diverse – yet equally substantial and meaningful interpretations and conclusions by focusing on different text elements. The elements include, but are not restricted to, how the story is structured, what functions the story serves, its substance, and how it is performed (Allen, 2017). Texts, ranging from newspapers, television programs, and blogs to architecture, fashion, and furniture, are deconstructed to understand the text’s meanings (Given, 2008). Hence, this method can help discover the social discourse that transpired during the 1918 pandemic.

The constant comparison method involves the breaking down of qualitative data into discrete “incidents” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or “units” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and coding them into categories. The categories are derived from the text being analyzed and derived from the researcher’s study as significant to the inquiry focus. Usually, there are no pre-determined categories, but categories of meanings and relationships are derived from the dataset through inductive reasoning, drawing inferences from the dataset. This means that a constant comparison method offers the researcher the means to access and analyze text so that an integrated model or theory emerges to explain the social phenomenon under study. Categories undergo definition and content changes, and the relationship between categories is developed and refined throughout the analysis process. As summarized by Taylor and Bogdan (1984): “in the constant comparative method the researcher simultaneously codes and analyzes data to develop concepts; by continually comparing specific incidents in the data, the researcher refines these

concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model” (p. 126). Hence, the constant comparison method process triggers thoughts that lead to both descriptive and exploratory categories.

Period and the Newspapers

I chose January 1918 to April 1920 as the time period because that was the heat of the moment for the 1918 pandemic. According to the CDC (2021), the Spanish Flu came with three waves; the Spring of 1918, the Fall in 1918, and the Winter of 1918. This third wave subsided during the summer of 1919. Therefore, January 1918 to April 1920 was identified as the time period needed to capture all the news about the Spanish Flu that could be reported in the newspapers at the time. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* were selected because these two newspapers have worldwide influence and readership (*The Economists*, 2012). Both papers were around during the 1918 pandemic, even though they were not regarded as national newspapers at that time. Also, with the help of two librarians for the Marquette University Library, we tried to get the circulation statistics of these two newspapers at the time but couldn't find them. Nevertheless, these two newspapers covered what was happening at the time.

Founded in 1851, about 67 years before the Spanish Flu pandemic broke out in 1918, *the New York Times* has been consistent with publications and has gained importance in the newspaper industry. More than any other U.S. newspaper, *The New York Times* has won 130 Pulitzer Prizes (Victor, 2018). The Times is ranked 18th globally by circulation and 3rd in the U.S., with over 480,000 circulations (Top 10 U.S. Daily Newspapers, 2019). The news organization has presented itself as a credible

source for media and has long been regarded as the industry's national newspaper of record.

The Wall Street Journal was founded in 1889 and is the second-largest newspaper in the U.S., with a circulation of about 2.8 million copies, including about 1.8 million digital copies (Top 10 U.S. Daily Newspapers, 2019). According to Carew (2020), “the journal’s circulation expanded further with the *Asian Wall Street Journal* launch in 1976 and the *Wall Street Journal Europe* in 1983. The special editions in thirty-eight local languages worldwide, the *Wall Street Journal Sunday*, and WallStreetJournal.com were added in the last decade of the twentieth century. Leading this growth, the flagship *Wall Street Journal* had become the largest circulation newspaper in the United States” (Wendt, 1982).

Sampling

An in-depth textual analysis provided a rich dataset of customs and language for study, need to answer the research question:

What was the cultural narrative about the Spanish Flu in 1918-1920 press coverage in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal?

News articles were gathered from the Marquette University Library, the *New York Times* newspaper database, and the University of Fordham Library database for the *Wall Street Journal* (online archives). The search terms “Spanish flu,” “influenza,” “Spanish influenza,” and the years 1918 to 1920 were used as keywords. All newspaper articles with the keywords were collated as the initial data set for the research and analyzed through textual analysis and the constant comparative method. Before turning to the analysis, it is important to mention that the number of stories about the Spanish Flu

covered by the press was limited, in part because countries like the United States had imposed wartime censorship which limited reporting on anything that could potentially harm the war efforts (Roos, 2020). Nonetheless, the search generated 475 initial results. Upon careful examination of the initial search results, I streamlined the sample to 202 articles, eliminating newspaper advertisements with the keyword “Spanish Flu” in them. In sum, a total of 202 newspaper articles from *The Times* and *The Journal* about the Spanish Flu were analyzed. *The New York Times* newspaper had 41 articles, while *The Wall Street Journal* newspaper had 161 articles. As discussed in Chapter 4, I believe the relatively small number of stories about the Spanish Flu pandemic was due to the press censorship in place at the time (Roos, 2020) and the differences in types of news coverage the two newspapers provided.

In order to find answers to the above research question, I conducted a textual analysis of press coverage of the Spanish Flu in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The first step in the coding process was identifying the main story elements that characterized the Spanish flu coverage, followed by analyzing how these elements of stories combined to produce themes. Story elements are distinct from themes in that they are primarily factual and descriptive in nature. According to van Dijk (1991), “news reports follow a hierarchical schema, consisting of conventional elements or categories such as headlines, lead, the main event, context, history, verbal reaction, and comments” (p. 114). These themes help create meaning and interpretations, allowing for evaluating events in terms of our hopes and fears about the events. They provide a basis for advocating a way forward and enable us to identify and contextualize the actions of actors and agencies involved in the circumstances that the press reported. I also collected

all words, phrases, quotes, and references to the Spanish Flu, along with attributions about the 1918 influenza. I then used the constant comparison method to help sort and categorize findings into key themes or patterns. Story themes were then identified to construct a cultural narrative about the Spanish Flu.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, I determined that the news discourse covered a range of issues from who to blame for the pandemic, its origins, how medical experts dealt with it, and how citizens responded. Coding and reorganizing news elements a second and third time emerged the themes that will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

As I noted earlier, Beštić-Bronza (2020) rightly said, “the crucial knowledge that existed in confronting the flu epidemic of 1918 came from the results of previous epidemics.” This thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of pandemics by examining the news stories published in *The Times* and *The Journal* from January 1918 to April 1920 to construct the cultural narratives about the Spanish Flu. As will be shown, three story themes emerged from the analysis. These are The Impact Narrative, The Origin of the Disease, and Finding the Cure. The Impact was the most prominent theme with four narrative subthemes: The Effects on Trade and Business, the Abandonment of Events and Activities, the Casualties, and the Disease as an Attack or a Plague on Humans. The Origin of the Disease was the next largest theme, with one subtheme entitled the Blame narrative. The Finding the Cure theme was the smallest, with the Outlier as a subtheme. These findings will be discussed in the next section of this thesis, Chapter 4.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings and Interpretations

This thesis paper explores the cultural narrative about the Spanish Flu as told by *The New York Times* (*The Times*) and *The Wall Street Journal* (*The Journal*). I chose *The Times* and *The Journal* because they were well-established newspapers and had attained the status of national newspapers. The study examined press coverage of the Spanish Flu by *The Times* and *The Journal* between January 1918 to April 1920. Of the 202 articles collected on the Spanish Flu, 41 articles were from *The New York Times* newspaper, while 161 articles were from *The Wall Street Journal*. Not too surprisingly, there were fewer news articles than expected that had anything to say about the Spanish Flu pandemic, with the least coming from *The Times*. Following Roos (2020), I believe this was, in part, due to the wartime censorship that was imposed. I also believe that these two newspapers had different perspectives and focuses, which impacted the number of stories produced and influenced the types of news stories collected.

The Journal was and is a publication geared to business/trade issues and readers interested in these issues. It also had a more local and domestic focus. In effect, of the 161 news stories from *The Journal*, 125 were about the impact on business, making this the weight of *The Journal's* coverage on the Spanish Flu. The rest (36 collectively) were news stories that described the Spanish Flu's impact as an attack on humans and recorded the case numbers (14 news stories); what drugs medical professionals were using to treat the disease as well as what they were doing to find a cure to the disease (9 news stories); where the Spanish flu originated from (8 news stories); and how it caused activities and events to be abandoned (7 news stories).

On the other hand, *The Times* had a broader focus that included but was not limited to business news, and it tended to have more of an international perspective. Of the 41 news articles from *The Times*, 25 were about the origin of the Spanish Flu, making this the weight of *The Times*'s coverage on the Spanish Flu. The rest (16 collectively) were about news stories that described the Spanish Flu's impact as an attack on humans and recorded the case numbers (5 news stories); what drugs medical professionals were using to treat the disease as well as what they were doing to find a cure to the disease (5 news stories); how it caused activities and events to be abandoned (4 news stories); and the impact on business (2 news stories). Given the weight of *The Times* news coverage, it appeared to have focused almost solely on the origin of the disease and then essentially ignored any other potential impacts on its readers.

The news stories were sorted and categorized into various narrative themes using the constant comparison method. Three (3) narrative themes emerged: The Impact, The Origin of the Disease, and Finding the Cure. The Impact was the most prominent theme with four narrative subthemes: The Effects on Trade and Business, the Abandonment of Events and Activities, the Casualties, and the Disease as an Attack or a Plague on Humans. The Origin of the Disease was the next most prominent theme, with one subtheme titled the Blame narrative. The Finding the Cure theme was the smallest theme, with one subtheme titled The Outlier.

The Impact theme considers the various ways that the Spanish Flu impacted society in terms of its fatality, how it affected business and trade, and how some events and activities were abandoned due to the influenza pandemic. The Origin narrative focuses on the news stories that focused on determining how the disease came to be and

how it got into the U.S. The last theme, Finding the Cure, concentrate on the news articles that suggested what medical professionals did to find a cure for influenza, including identifying the drugs used to treat the disease and efforts being made to have enough facilities to treat people. The subsequent subsections will discuss these themes in detail, beginning with the Impact narrative theme. The rest of the themes will follow in descending order as listed above.

Theme One: Impact Narrative

The Impact narrative emerged as the most prominent theme of the analysis and consists of four (4) narrative subthemes. The largest of the subthemes is the Impact on Business and Trade (127 news stories), followed by the Abandonment of Events and Activities (11 news stories), then, the Number of Casualties (10 news stories), and the Attack/Plague on Humans (9 news stories). Overall, a total of 146 out of 202 news stories fit this overall theme, which focuses on how the Spanish Flu affected businesses. Not surprisingly, given that *The New York Times* was silent primarily about the Spanish Flu, only eleven (11) news stories out of the 146 were from *The Times*. The remaining stories originated from *The Journal*. However, there was not much difference in the coverage of the Spanish Flu when both papers reported on the impact of the disease. News stories in this theme used words and phrases such as “impact,” “effects,” “affected,” “as a result of,” “due to” in their description of how the Spanish Flu obstructed society at the time. These descriptions work to promote the impression that the U.S. was hit severely and significantly by the ongoing pandemic at the time. How this all played out in the news coverage can be seen in the subthemes, which are explained in the subsequent sections beginning with the Impact on Business and Trade Narrative.

Impact on Business and Trade Narrative.

During this study, *The Journal* was mainly silent on the Spanish Flu pandemic unless it had something to do with how it affected trade and business operations that brought revenue to the government or individual businesses. Most press coverages focused on government agency businesses or trades. This became the general narrative in the pandemic press coverage and was the most significant theme that emerged from the analysis in general and under the impact narrative theme in particular. Perhaps not surprisingly, *The Journal* published almost nothing about the Spanish Flu's effect on events that directly affected citizens' livelihood. Of the 146 news stories on the Spanish Flu that made up the Impact Narrative, 127 were business-oriented, with 125 published by *The Journal* and only two (2) published by *The Times*. The two stories from *The Times* did not stand out in any particular way. All of the discourse reported in both newspapers followed the same trend of attributing the outcomes on business to the influenza pandemic.

Discourse about the effects of the Spanish Flu stories on business and trade covered the pandemic's impact on the production of coal, anthracites, steel ingots, pig iron, bituminous, and the telephone industry, among others. For example, there were news reports that the influenza was "interfering seriously" ("Bituminous Output Ahead of 1917 Production," 1918) with production, especially in the eastern fields where the output for the Atlantic seaboard and southern territory was not up to requirements. Reportedly, there was a "decrease of more than a million tons in anthracite shipments for November compared with the preceding month" ("Anthracite Shipments Off," 1918). In some mining regions, there was reportedly a slight recovery from the "reduction in

output” (“Anthracite Production Decreased,” 1918) caused by the epidemic. For example, one news story reported that production of pig iron and steel ingots had “decreased by several percent” (the news story did not specify by what amount) due to the influenza pandemic, which was “far from having died out” (“Pig Iron Production,” 1918) and another also noted that “this decrease in production” had been due to the Spanish Flu (“Coal Producers Expect,” 1918).

Similarly, news accounts reported that the “widespread epidemic of influenza [had] caused serious inroads on the retail merchandise trade and that in many cities, the health authorities [had] shut down the stores” (“Influenza Checks Trade,” 1918). Finally, *The Journal* reported that “in 1918, the epidemic was at its worst in November, and was reflected in a decrease of more than 1,000,000 tons Anthracite compared with the preceding month” (“Anthracite Shipments Fell Off,” 1920). Overall, the focus of the news reports pointed to the impact of the Spanish Flu on businesses and the war effort.

Other news articles focused on the wholesale and retail trades. One news article, for example, reported that “both the wholesale and retail trades [had] been hit badly by the Spanish influenza epidemic. Mill production [was] being curtailed, and even government businesses held up” (“Textile Trade Hit,” 1918). Another explained that “owing to an epidemic of Influenza at Lima, Peru, all departments of the Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation were paralyzed” (“Cerro de Pasco,” 1918). Another news story reporting on Youngstown connected the slowdown in production to employees being sick when it stated that:

Due to illness of employees, twenty puddling furnaces of the A.M. Byers Co., at its Girard, O., plant, are idle. Sickness is impeding mill operations to a greater

extent than coal shortage, officials say. Influenza is making inroads into the operating forces of all district iron and steel producers and is combining with fuel and transportation difficulties to impede schedules. In the general office force of a local producer, 50 employees and officials were absent on one day because of sickness (“Sickness Affects Steel Operations,” 1920).

This story wasn’t the only one to make this connection. Other news accounts also reinforced previous narratives that workers' absenteeism due to the Spanish Flu harmed businesses.

According to news accounts, the Spanish Flu reportedly impacted the “absence” of workers and caused a “shortage of hands,” which led to a “lower scale” of production. News articles also reported that the trades were “hit badly” by the Influenza, which “shut down” most businesses, resulting in such things as “relatively small” returns on businesses, an “adverse influence” on anthracite production, or more simply, businesses being crippled because of the Spanish Flu pandemic. One industry that was impacted was the telephone industry. *The Journal* reported that the “telephone system [had] been crippled,” that there was an “embargo on unnecessary calls,” and those telephone offices had been crippled to 55% of their capacity, forcing the industry to a “reduction in goals.” In one news account, for example, an official at Bell was quoted as saying that “although there are 1000 central operators ‘absent from the influenza epidemic’ compared with 2000 during the last few days, the situation is still serious, particularly in Brooklyn” (“Telephone Service Crippled,” 1918). Other news stories reported that “about 2,000 switchboard operators are absent due to Spanish influenza” (“Telephone Situation Unchanged,” 1918) and “that nearly one-third of the central operators in the four

boroughs are absent with Spanish influenza” (“Telephone Co. Challenging Calls,” 1918). Still, other news stories reported that “with 1600 central office operators absent with Spanish influenza in New York City, the telephone company has issued another appeal to telephone users asking them to particularly restrict their telephone calls” (“American Telephone & Telegraph,” 1918) unless it was “essential.”

In ways strikingly similar to the telephone industry stories, news accounts also indicated that the Spanish Influenza led to a lot of workers absenting themselves from work in other industries, including construction, steel mill operations, as well as coal mining, and other businesses. In the two newspaper articles published in *The Times* that fall under the Impact on Business and Trade subtheme, it was reported that the epidemic of Spanish Influenza had “seriously interfered with rapid ship construction,” putting some of the shipyard workers on the city’s “ineffective list,” and that the epidemic delayed coffee shipments (“Special to The New York Times,” 1918; “Epidemic Delays Coffee,” 1918). Collectively, the press coverage by both newspapers told readers that businesses were facing significant economic distress because of the Spanish Flu. These news accounts did not tell readers how this news impacted them personally or economically or how they could protect themselves in the face of these hardships.

A few news accounts did mention the impact of the businesses’ distress on customers as consumers, but here, again, it wasn’t how the disease directly impacted people. Instead, the few news accounts that mentioned consumers were skewed to focus on how the pandemic affected government, state, and city revenues. For example, one new story reported that the Spanish Influenza “affected” passenger rail travel in the northwest substantially, with a drop of \$90,000 a month in October and November due to

influenza (“Influenza Reduced Travel,” 1918). From the beginning of the news story, one would be tempted to believe that the news account would sympathize with the ordinary passenger and describe how the Spanish Flu had impacted the “passenger.” The focus, instead, was rather on how the reduced passenger travel had affected the city’s revenue. Put together, *The Journal’s* primary focus was on informing its readers that the Spanish Flu had a negative toll on businesses without necessarily giving out information that would help the public keep safe, at least economically.

On the other hand, even though most of the stories reported by *The Journal* were primarily narratives about the adverse impact on business and trade, there were five (5) news stories from *The Journal* that talked about how some businesses, especially the insurance industry, thrived amid the pandemic. For example, one news article reported that “despite the abnormal mortality occasioned by the influenza-pneumonia epidemic, the assets of the Home Life Insurance Co. are shown in the annual report to have increased more than 4% because people are afraid of dying” (“Home Life Insurance,” 1919). Another news report noted that “in the closing months of 1918 and in January of this year (1919 implied), the large life insurance companies wrote an unprecedented amount of new business, which they attribute[d] to the influenza epidemic” (“New Life Insurance Due to Influenza,” 1919). These news accounts suggested that the Spanish Flu created a lot of fear and panic, prompting people to purchase life insurance policies resulting in these insurance companies seeing a surge in their writings and revenue.

The insurance industry was not the only one to benefit from the Spanish Flu. According to press accounts in *The Journal*, some mining industries also experienced a

positive impact despite the ongoing Spanish Flu pandemic and the war effort. One news account, for example, reported that:

despite the fact that several hundred men were called into service, that there were hundreds of employees forced to absent themselves on account of influenza, the Farrell works of the Carnegie Steel Co. smashed several monthly and yearly records for the year just ended. In December, the universal mill broke the previous high record for tonnage made in October, which stood for 12 years. The annual output was also the greatest in history. The open-hearth furnaces also made more steel in 1918 than in any other year. One of the remarkable things about these departments is that the increased tonnage resulted without the expenditure of any money for extensions or improvements” (“Farrell Works Make New Records,” 1919).

Another news article reported that despite the epidemic of influenza that incapacitated about one-third of the ship workers, “the record-breaking total for September was surpassed by nearly 50,000 deadweight tons. There were added to the American merchant marine in October, 79 completed new ships of 415,908 deadweights tons” (“All World's Shipbuilding Records,” 1918). Aside from the positive impact in the marine industry, other news articles reported that even though “operations and output have been interfered with during the past two months at mines and plants both in this country and in Mexico by the influenza epidemic,” it was also reported that the “influenza troubles” with production had taken a “decided turn for the better” (“U.S. Smelters Earnings,” 1918).

Ironically, even the issue of traffic was reportedly impacted positively by the pandemic. For example, in one news story, it was reported that the city’s traffic situation

had been reduced due to influenza. This news report quoted Mr. Frank Hedley, who was vice president and general manager of the Interborough Rapid Transit Company and the New York Railways Company, as he expressed the opinion that the reduction in the city's traffic situation was mainly because of "the fear of Spanish influenza which induces people to walk whenever possible" ("City's Traffic Reduced," 1918). These news accounts reflected the news reports mentioned above about how passenger rail travel had reduced significantly due to the influenza pandemic. However, based on press accounts, the Spanish Flu pandemic had its most significant impact on trade and businesses. This did not mean that the pandemic didn't have other impacts. The pandemic also had adverse effects on some events and activities, so that they had to be abandoned or postponed. This is the next subtheme discussed below.

Abandonment of Activities.

The Abandonment of Activities theme emerged from eleven (11) newspaper stories, with four (4) from *The Times* and seven (7) from *The Journal*. Articles within this subtheme tended to describe activities and events as being "closed up," "abandoned," "postponed," "banned," "suspended," or as having come to a "standstill" due to the Spanish Flu pandemic. This was especially true in the areas of sports and entertainment. For example, one news story from *The Times* reported that football, basketball, and boxing were the major sports that "came to a standstill." The news account also noted that sports promoters, most significantly, in states in the east, such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New Jersey, "closed up" because of a request from their different Health Departments ("Influenza Halts Boxing Activity," 1918). There were no indications about resumption, and news accounts indicated that these sporting activities

would be idle for some time to come while the pandemic continued. The same news story suggested that the followers and fans of these sports were reportedly unhappy with the uncertainties surrounding the resumption of these activities (“Influenza Halts Boxing Activity,” 1918). The same news story also reported that businesses were closed, and that states and counties were under lockdown, so people could not move freely about their everyday activities. Similarly, other news articles from *The Times* described how a boxing bout was “prevented” due to the Spanish Flu and how college games were also “canceled” due to the influenza pandemic (“Influenza Epidemic may Prevent,” 1918; “Football Plans Halted,” 1918). Finally, one news article reported that, because the influenza epidemic has “closed” a lot of theatres, the movie or entertainment industry was also severely affected (“No New ‘Movies,’” 1918; “May Abandon Campaign,” 1918).

According to other news reports, even government agencies had to postpone or reschedule serious governmental issues. In an article published by *The Journal*, for example, it was reported that the Supreme Court “decided to prolong its recess from October 21 to October 28, because of the influenza epidemic” (“Supreme Court to Prolong Recess,” 1918). Similarly, Department of Agriculture officials reportedly informed their members that the national woolgrowers’ convention meetings were “indefinitely postponed” (“National Wool Growers Convention,” 1919). Other newspaper articles quoted Secretary Rich of the Boston Stock Exchange, who reportedly said that all offices “shall have a skeleton organization” because of the “epidemic of influenza” (“Grip Closes Boston Exchange,” 1918). Taken together, these news stories point to the fact that the Spanish flu impacted the daily livelihood of the people, especially those from entertainment and sports to the stock exchange and government operations. The Spanish

Flu, however, did more than impact business and entertainment. It impacted people's lives, as the references to lockdowns indicated. But few news accounts directly addressed this issue. Instead, some stories reported the number of cases and the number of deaths that occurred. I turn to this subtheme next.

Casualties.

This Impact subtheme emerged from eight (8) news stories from *The Journal* and two (2) from *The Times*. These news accounts focused on the impact of the Spanish Flu as determined by the case numbers and deaths which were published in the newspapers, as were any records that suggested or predicted the end of the pandemic. The analysis indicated that *The Journal*, especially, was worried about the recorded number of Spanish Flu cases. For example, one article reported that in a little over three months after the start of the pandemic, "deaths" from influenza and pneumonia had reached "five hundred thousand" in the U.S. The story explained that the number was several times more than the "mortality from all causes among our soldiers in service" ("Insurance Casualties," 1919). In other news articles, it was generally reported that the outbreak of the influenza epidemic had led to "larger casualty lists" from both abroad and within ("Life Insurance Writing," 1919) and that the census bureau reported "102,357 deaths from influenza and pneumonia" during twelve weeks from September 21 to December 14, both inclusive, in forty-six cities ("Epidemic costs life," 1918). New accounts also reported that the war department had announced that "17,000 members of the United States Army died of influenza" in the military stations of the U.S. during the epidemic ("Deaths from Influenza in U.S. Navy," 1918). These "large casualty lists" reporting the number of people who had contracted the disease and the number of people who had died from it or

both signified the casualties were way more extensive than was expected. And, as evidenced by the business-related stories, these cases and deaths were having an impact on the nation. Despite many casualties, however, the small number of stories in this theme raises the question of whether the press was allowed to directly report on the personal cost of the pandemic, given the belief that such coverage could harm the war efforts (Roos, 2020). Ironically, only one newspaper article in *The Journal* suggested that “the situation is said to be improving” (“Cerro de Pasco,” 1918). This article was published in December of 1918, when the pandemic's first wave seemed to be going down. Apparently, the prediction that the situation was “improving” proved to be misguided as second and third waves of the disease would soon follow. Apart from this news story, there was no mention in any of the news narratives that suggested an improvement in the pandemic situation. Instead, the remaining press coverage in the Impact theme tended to focus more on the impact the Spanish Flu pandemic had on the people's daily lives, which was described as an attack or plague on humans, which is the subtheme I turn to next.

The Attack/ Plague Narrative.

In all, the Attack/Plague subtheme emerged from nine (9) news stories, with three (3) from *The Times* and the remaining stories coming from *The Journal* (6 articles). *The Journal* focused most of its’ press coverage on the impact of the Spanish Flu on the American people using strong adjectives such as an “attack,” “plague,” “menace,” or a “raging,” “paralyzing,” “severe epidemic” in its descriptions of the pandemic. The language of *The Times* did not differ from what was seen in *The Journal*. Together, these descriptions help promote the feeling that the U.S. was in a battle that was ongoing and

extreme in nature. For example, one article from *The Journal* reported that C. L. Townes died “following an attack of influenza” (“Fuel Administrator of Mississippi,” 1918). Another news story said that the president of the Chicago Board of Trade, ~~who~~ had been seriously ill of pneumonia following “an attack of Spanish influenza,” and had died (“Head of Chicago Trade Board Dead,” 1918). The attack narratives continued with other news stories reporting that the Tennessee Copper Co. workers were “suffering severely” from effects of the influenza epidemic, which “attacked” 95% of its working force” (“Tennessee Coppers Acid Output,” 1918) or that Doctor Grayson, President Wilson’s physician, had announced that the president had just escaped an “attack of influenza” (“President Escapes Influenza,” 1920). When news narratives were not describing the Spanish Flu as an attack on people, they were portraying it as “a paralyzing epidemic of influenza,” which had, among other things, brought the nation to a maximum national financial output (“Candid Self-Confidence,” 1918). Similarly, another *Journal* newspaper article published that the Spanish Flu pandemic had impacted navy camps:

and has been and still is appallingly menaced by influenza, which here, as in some other cities, has attained the dimensions and momentum of a plague and due to both the war and the severe epidemic of influenza that raged during the last three months causing 22% to death due to the war and 51% to those due to the influenza epidemic (“Epidemic Loss,” 1919).

In summary, taken together, these subtheme narratives suggest that the Spanish Flu pandemic was a deadly enemy that had come to rage, plague, and attack to kill humans, especially Americans (as there were little to no references to peoples from other nations) and that there was little to be done about it. There was little to nothing on

education about the disease within these news narratives. The only difference in coverage happened when *The Times* would liken the Spanish Flu to grippe symptoms. However, this comparison to grippe did not come as a definite education or description of what the disease looked like and how people could live amidst the pandemic. The coverage does raise such questions as: if the disease was this deadly, why did the newspapers not report how people could take care of themselves? The following section discusses the second most prominent theme, which discusses news reports that sought to find the source of the disease.

Theme Two: The Spanish Flu Origin Narrative

As noted in the literature review, the Spanish Flu disease did not originate from Spain even though it bore the Spanish Flu moniker (Little, 2020; Humphries, 2013). Both newspapers, however, worked to identify the origin of the disease and reinforced the debate over the origin of the Spanish Flu. *The Times* had more newspaper stories tracing the Spanish flu's origin than *The Journal*. Out of the 202 news stories analyzed, 27 (19 from *The Times* and eight (8) from *The Journal*) were categorized as Origin stories as they used such words and phrases as “started,” “originated,” “traced,” “came from,” “brought by,” and “was introduced” to suggest or trace the origin of the Spanish flu. There were no significant differences across the news articles coverage, and the stories primarily focused on finding the source or tracing the origin of the disease while comparing the symptoms with other past pandemics such as “Smallpox” and “Hamlloar” [sic] (“Spanish Influenza Much Like Grippe,” 1918). Indeed, both newspapers compared the Spanish Flu with other diseases even as they struggled to trace the origin of the Spanish Flu.

According to one article mentioned above published in *The Times* on September 22, 1918, the Spanish Flu was likened to the grippe and described as being accompanied by all the symptoms of the grippe but differed from this disease only in that it was more severe and more likely to lead to pneumonia if not checked in time (“Spanish Influenza Much Like Grippe,” 1918). In an attempt to describe the symptoms of the Spanish Flu and connect it to where it might have originated, the same newspaper reported that influenza originally came as the grippe (a previous outbreak). The news account described the “new influenza,” referring to the Spanish Flu, as characterized by “excessive sneezing, reddening and running of the eyes, running of the nose, chills followed by a fever of 101 to 106 degrees, aching back and joints, loss of appetite, and a general feeling of debility” (“Spanish Influenza Much Like Grippe,” 1918). Yet, the news accounts did not recommend what to do. Instead, the same *Times* news article reported that “Spain disclaimed the unwelcome guest” and then concluded that the Spanish Flu was a “new evil” (“Spanish Influenza Much Like Grippe,” 1918) that, like other evils of the war, must be traced to Germany. The newspaper offered two theories for this position: The first was that the new trench bacteria must have been born in the German lines where the troops, poorly fed and clothed, were living in a reduced state of vitality and that the bacteria must have been carried from “Flanders into Spain by the strong winds to the Spanish coast over the last winter before the outbreak.” The second theory was that the disease was carried into Spain by the German submarine boats’ crews (“Spanish Influenza Much Like Grippe,” 1918). In short, *The Times*, in one news article, not only compared the Spanish Flu to the grippe, but it also sought to trace the origins of the pandemic. When Spain denied responsibility, the newspaper turned to the nation's

war-time enemy Germany. As will be shown, other *Times* news accounts did the same thing.

In one of *The Times* newspaper article, Lieut. Col. Phillip S. Doane supposedly said that the outbreaks of Spanish influenza, which had given army officials some concern, may have been “started by German agents who were put ashore from a submarine” (“Special to The New York Times,” (1918). Other news stories made similar comparisons or assertions about origin when they noted that “reported cases were British sailors from an Australian ship lying alongside a Brooklyn pier” and “Steamships arriving today from England and France” were responsive (“31 New Influenza Cases in New York,” 1918; “General Ireland Returns,” 1918). Contrary to the popularly held belief at the time that because of the name “Spanish Flu,” it originated from Spain, the *Times* news narratives here show that everyone subscribed to that belief, including the *Times*. Nonetheless, the news accounts reflected a concerted search for the origin of the flu, and they seemed willing to blame any country outside of the United States or, as will be shown, the war itself.

In contrast to *The Times*, *The Journal* simply referred to the Spanish Flu as a byproduct of World War I. The newspaper reported that “the present epidemic is accepted as a war product” (“Deaths from Influenza in U.S. Navy,” 1918). This report was based on the premise that the first cases of the Spanish Flu were recorded in military camps, both in the U.S. and around Europe, and *The Journal* article argued that the disease broke out because of the ongoing war at the time (“Deaths from Influenza in U.S. Navy,” 1918). One interesting news story in *The Journal* that made indirect reference to

the Spanish Flu, in an attempt to describe the Flu and trace its origin, narrated a brief two-line conversation between a doctor and his patient:

Wife of profiteer: are you quite certain I've had the very latest form of influenza?

Doctor: Quite, madam. You coughed exactly like the countess of Wessex –
London punch (“The Latest in Coughs,” 1918).

This particular news article suggested that whoever had the latest form of coughs was suffering from Spanish Influenza and was the likely source. Even though both *The Times* and *The Journal* are U.S.-based newspapers, both reported on people who contracted the disease from London. Ironically, neither newspaper mentioned any U.S. officials who may have contracted the disease. In effect, the Spanish Flu Origin theme encompassed the news narratives that attempted to trace the disease's source or origin. As will be discussed below, while both newspapers compared the Spanish Flu with other diseases even as they struggled to trace the origin of the Spanish Flu, they also worked to identify who/what was to blame. They even criticized the government for the outbreak and the outcome of the disease. I call this subtheme the “Blame narrative,” which I discuss next.

The Blame Narrative.

The Times was the only paper that published news stories that generated the blame narrative theme. Out of 41 total Spanish Flu news stories from *The Times*, only six (6) news articles suggested that citizens, the press, and the medical professionals alike, blamed the pandemic on the government and how poorly it managed the situation. Even though this theme's scope is small, it adds to the narrative that people generally wanted to find or trace Spanish Flu-related problems to a source. The news stories reported

situations where people either “criticized” or “blamed” the government for how the situation with the Spanish flu pandemic was handled. The news articles also reported narratives that citizens blamed some government officials for the Spanish Flu. One such news story reported that one “doughboy,” as they were called, criticized and accused the former attorney general saying, “We fought for democracy, and you gave us Spanish Flu and prohibition” (“Flu’ and Prohibition,” 1919), meaning that even though they gave their lives to fight in World War I, they came back home with a disease. This incident happened when the Former Attorney General Gregory, one of the passengers on the USS von Steuben, delivered a speech to the soldiers (“Flu’ and Prohibition,” 1919). According to the press account, the criticism was received with shouts of applause from the other 6000 troops from the three means of transport arriving from France. The *Times* also explained that people were under strict lockdown and mandated to follow strict health protocols such as wearing masks and not having large gatherings, which the troops saw as prohibiting their freedom.

Other Blame narratives in *The Times* suggested that the general public also blamed the government for not giving equal attention to the pandemic as they gave to World War I. *The Times* news accounts stipulated that had the government provided the necessary attention to the pandemic, and things would not have gotten out of hand. For example, the vaccine that some medical professionals were advocating for the prevention and treatment of the Spanish Flu was a pre-existing vaccine that was discovered to help prevent the Flu. This position, however, was not readily accepted by other health professionals, according to *The Times* article published on October 17, 1918. In the article, Dr. Ellis Bonime reportedly stated that “I hope that the time for its general

adoption by the medical profession will not be long delayed, but health commissioner Copeland refused” (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918). Another news report suggested that since some of these interventions (implying that there were other unstated interventions) were not readily accepted, the situation lingered and prolonged the disease's intensity and fatality. The news report also argued that “had the immunization been used, last year in the army cantonments, the ravages of pneumonia caused by the Spanish Flu would have been prevented” (“Tells of Vaccine to Stop Influenza,” 1918). In each of these news accounts, both the medical profession and the press blamed the government for the pandemic. The press did this by calling out the government for its lack of attention to the pandemic. The medical profession did so by calling out the government for its lack of urgency in accepting the proposed vaccine.

In summary, the Origin narrative theme portrayed the discourse about the Spanish flu as a mystery or puzzle, and both the press and the people appeared to need to find the source to assign blame. This led to news stories trying to trace the Spanish Flu to countries and territories and even blame the disease on other people as this narrative continued. A few news stories reported how medical professionals handled the situation with treatment and preventive measures. This is the next major theme of “Finding the Cure” that is discussed below.

Theme Three: Finding the Cure Narrative

This theme emerged from fourteen (14) newspaper articles, five (5) from *The Times*, and nine (9) from *The Journal*, with one subtheme called the Outlier, which consisted of two news stories from *The Journal*. This theme captures all the narratives that pertain to what the medical professionals did to address the Spanish Flu. It ranges

from drugs used, the demand for those drugs, to vaccines that came to be accepted for the treatment and prevention of the Spanish Influenza. According to press accounts, some physicians tend to jump to the conclusion that patients had the Spanish Flu if they were suffering from the common flu symptoms, which proved to be similar to what medical professionals described as symptoms for the Spanish Flu. For example, one news story attempted to explain that regular flu symptoms are not necessarily cases of the Spanish Flu. In an effort to explain this, the newspaper reported that a “typical follicular exudate on the tonsils clearly showed that the symptoms are attributable to an ordinary attack of the follicular tonsillitis” (“Only 20 New Cases,” 1918). According to another news story, “Drugs for Influenza Advance in Price” (1918), in order for health professionals to be able to distinguish the difference between the Spanish Flu and other flu-like diseases, doctors:

must not expect to find a new symptom complex, and those who have seen a large number of cases of influenza will readily recognize the cases that seem to be current. It is desirable so far as practicable to have cultures taken from the throat and the blood to isolate, if possible, the organism responsible for the disease.

(“Drugs for Influenza Advance in Price,” 1918).

As these news accounts suggest, the Spanish Influenza symptoms were very similar to existing other flu-like diseases, making it difficult for doctors to distinguish between the “normal” flu and the Spanish Flu at the initial stages. There was also the previously mentioned *Times* news account which reported that a previous outbreak of grippe was a less virulent form of grippe and that the “new influenza” was characterized by a whole

list of symptoms. Yet, the news accounts did not recommend what to do about the “new influenza.”

Other news articles focused on the drug market and possible drugs the medical professionals used to combat the Spanish Flu, likely medicines that were considered for use, and how the demand for these drugs affected their prices. The news stories used words and phrases such as “preventive drugs,” “short of supplies for drugs,” “curative drugs,” “demand for drugs increase,” among others, to describe the situation in the medical field. As shown below, the medical professionals were described as looking for preventive drugs to prevent more cases, ultimately leading to vaccines. At another point, they were reportedly considering which drugs would be curative. In other situations, the demand for these curative drugs caused their prices to increase, and the increase in demand caused shortages in their supply. For example, according to one report, “there is no letup in the demand for drugs used in combating the Influenza epidemic. It was estimated that approximately 1,000,000 persons in this country have either had or have the disease in one form or another. The demand for preventive and curative drugs has been in proportion” (“Drugs for Influenza Advance in Price,” 1918). Other news stories in *The Journal* reported that “stocks have become so depleted” that they were impacting “price changes” for a variety of drugs, such as “aspirin, antipyrine, acetphenetidin, asafetida, and quinine” (“Peace Starts Active Selling of Drug Supplies,” 1918; “Drug Markets Affected by Spanish Influenza,” 1918). One news account reported that due to the influenza epidemic, the “drug and chemical markets were woefully short of supplies,” particularly in essential medicines, such that even though the prices of drugs in the likes of “Quinine sulfate” had increased, it was still not in abundance despite recent Java

importations (“Drugs and Influenza,” 1920). Even other news stories reported that “the demand” for a variety of drugs utilized in treating the disease such as “aspirin, antipyrine, acetphenetidin, asafetida, and quinine” is likely to “keep firm for the drugs market” (“Drug Markets Steady,” 1918). Most news stories mentioned some of the various drugs used to combat the disease. Some focused on how the demand for these drugs influenced prices, causing them to move upward, while the others focused on how the need for these same drugs had helped to keep the drug market firm and steady after a long “dullness in the drug and chemical markets” (“Drug Markets Steady,” 1918). These news stories also suggested that even though there had been other epidemics before the Spanish Flu, the medical professionals were unprepared for another epidemic or pandemic when the Spanish Flu occurred. This was evidenced in news accounts that indicated that these medical professionals were operating on a “trial-and-error” basis with these drugs, which in the end increased the demand for them and impacted their prices on the drug market.

On the other hand, one news account in *The Journal* reported that the vaccine that came to be accepted for use in the prevention and treatment of the Spanish Flu had also been used to treat and prevent similar diseases like pneumonia for several years. Yet, as was reported in “Grip in the Y.M.C.A.” (1918), there appeared to be a debate among the medical professionals about the best approach to this disease. Some reportedly believed that the old vaccine, which was “perfected as much as six years ago,” should be good enough to be accepted as the “vaccine for the Spanish Influenza’s” treatment and prevention. The reported reason was that the “technique for utilizing the vaccine” had already been thoroughly worked out and used for years. To bolster this assertion, Dr. Ellis Bonime reportedly said that the vaccine was very “successful when administered as

a preventive to 450 Y.M.C.A. workers,” adding that all those who took “the three doses of the vaccine did not contract the disease” (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918). That being said, *The Journal* also noted seven people who took only “one treatment” suffered slight symptoms that “resembled grippe” produced by the Vaccine (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918), and that one person who took the first treatment but refused to continue with the second and third treatments contracted the Spanish Flu and died. Medical experts reportedly believed that the individual could have survived “except that treatment for the disease was refused” (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918). The news story also reported that another school of thought supported developing an entirely new vaccine to fight the Spanish Flu and did not readily “accept the Vaccine” (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918). *The Journal* also suggested that it was unfortunate that some medical authorities wasted time experimenting when a “thoroughly successful vaccine was already at hand” (“Grip in the Y.M.C.A.,” 1918).

In summary, the Finding the Cure narrative theme portrayed the medical professionals as not having a definite direction about handling the disease. Even in the face of possible solutions, there were debates about which direction actually to go. The coverage does raise such questions as if the medical professionals had a definite sense of direction or solution to the pandemic, could it have changed the course of the disease? What could have happened if they were not divided in their perspective and approach to handling the situation? News accounts about the Spanish Flu indicated that things would have been handled better if the medical professionals were prepared and had a unified sense of direction in controlling and managing the disease. Despite this largely negative

coverage of the pandemic, there was, however, two largely positive stories. The following section explains the outlier subtheme.

Outlier

One interesting finding from the analysis was the narrative that portrayed health facilities as a “savior” during the Spanish Flu pandemic. According to news accounts, fundraisers were organized to support a collective group of hospitals in New York City. Two newspaper reports from *The Journal* stated that the president and treasurer of the United Hospital Fund campaign committee, namely Robert Olyphant and Albert H. Wiggin, respectively, and the City’s Health Commissioner, Dr. Royal S. Copeland, strongly endorsed the fund. Dr. Royal S. Copeland reportedly stated that “during the influenza epidemic last year, thousands of persons now alive must have died except for the noble service of these institutions” (“United Hospital Fund Started,” 1918). The narrative reported that the most incredible “public calamity” that could ever happen would be the “closing of these private hospitals,” supposedly because of lack of funds to keep running these private health facilities (“United Hospital Fund Started,” 1918). It was also reported that the city itself was utterly ill-equipped and unprepared at the present moment to “assume responsibility” for the care of all its sick citizens in “its own hospitals” (“United Hospital Fund Started,” 1918). According to the news accounts, the United Hospital Fund was started under the slogan “Give the Sick a Chance” to cover the deficit incurred in the free work of forty-six New York City private hospitals (“United Hospital Fund Started,” 1918). The other news story, also published by *The Journal*, reported that Senator Weeks introduced a “resolution asking \$1,000,000 be appropriated to fight the spread of Spanish influenza,” which was now prevalent in many sections of

the country and needed more funds to be able to finance treatment (“Asks for \$1,000,000 to Fight Influenza,” 1918).

In summary, this subtheme explains how expensive financing the treatment and prevention of the Spanish Flu was, such that extra funds had to be raised to manage the disease. In summary, the “Cure” narrative relates to efforts to treat the sick. The drug companies were arguing over drugs and working to find the cure. Doctors were arguing about the symptoms and effective meds, while others were working to ensure hospitals and healthcare facilities were available.

Summary

Both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* had different focuses and perspectives, which affected the scope and issues of their coverage. The limited coverage given to the pandemic seems to indicate that wartime censorship efforts described by Roos (2020) impacted the coverage of the Spanish Flu. *The Times* news coverage of the Spanish Flu focused on finding the source of the disease. *The Journal*, on the other hand, was very domestic and business-focused, hence producing the kind of findings I got from the analysis.

The overall narrative that emerged from the analysis was that while the Spanish Flu caused many deaths, it primarily impacted businesses. The coverage described how the Spanish flu decreased the production of anthracites, coal, bituminous, and steel. This decrease in production was mainly attributed to worker absenteeism due to workers being infected with the disease. The narrative suggested that the Spanish flu pandemic was a plague that had come to attack people resulting in their deaths. Taken together, this

narrative presents the idea that the Spanish Flu, by its nature, was negative, that it disrupted American businesses and entertainment and thus American's livelihood.

Another smaller narrative that emerged was the source or origin of the disease. Together, the two papers extended the conversation around where the Spanish Flu originated from, attributing the source to Germany, England, France, and to soldiers who were coming in and out from war camps with the disease. Even though the news stories did not come out with a definite source of the illness, one thing was clear: they could not definitively determine that it originated in Spain. The news narrative also conveyed the idea that the medical professionals struggled as they did their best to find solutions in preventive and curative drugs for the disease to minimize its impact and effect on society. This became a challenging quest, but evidently, they adopted medicines and vaccines preexisting to help treat and prevent the disease.

All in all, the overarching narrative provided by *The Times* and *The Journal* about the Spanish Flu did not do much in the way of informing or educating their readers about what the Spanish Flu was or how to respond to it. There was little to nothing on the symptoms except when they were compared to other milder diseases such as grippe, nor was there information about where people should go for treatment (including, whether or not there were designated locations for that), or what health and safety protocols people should follow. The news as a cultural narrative framework argues that news helps shape what people think about their events. The dominant narrative or picture of the Spanish Flu offered by these two newspapers was how businesses were affected. In the final chapter, I provide a detailed discussion and conclusion, position the complete study

within a larger frame of related literature and theory, give the limitations, and offer future research directions.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

Pandemics and epidemics have come and gone over the years, having different impacts on society and leaving room for scholars to study and work with relevant authorities to put measures in place or prepare for future occurrences. Nevertheless, whenever such pandemics occur, it seems the world is not ready for their devastating effects and impact. This thesis set out to examine one such pandemic in history, the Spanish Flu, to add to the body of existing knowledge about the pandemic and broaden the research on the press coverage of the Spanish Flu. Living amid the recent COVID-19 pandemic raises many questions about how people dealt with previous pandemics in history. Experts and scholars forecast that the COVID-19 pandemic could become the biggest pandemic to be recorded in modern history (Scudellari, 2020). Before then, the Spanish Flu was regarded as the biggest pandemic in contemporary history (Adams, 2020; Barry, 2017; Buear, 2020). This similarity between the 1918 Spanish Flu and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic makes it essential to look back on history to understand the social discourse about the Spanish Flu that occurred at the time.

By considering the overarching question: *What was the cultural narrative about the Spanish Flu in 1918-1920 press coverage in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal?* We can begin to understand how the media portrayed social, economic, and societal issues surrounding the Spanish Flu through the stories they reported on and covered. This thesis is rooted in the research tradition that studies news reporting and journalism as a depository for cultural narratives (Berkowitz, 2011). The cultural

narratives approach speaks to the extent to which media texts reflect the prevailing societal values and cultural context.

This thesis analyzed 202 newspaper articles from both *The Times* and *The Journal* using textual analysis and constant comparison techniques. As discussed earlier in the literature review, studies have shown that wartime censorship in the U.S. prevented journalists from publishing anything that could harm the war effort (Roos, 2020). In a way, this affected the press coverage of the Spanish Flu as well, influencing the amount of data collected and analyzed. Nonetheless, three-story themes were identified, namely: The Impact Narrative as with four narrative subthemes: The Effects on Trade and Business, the Abandonment of Events and Activities, the Casualties, and the Disease as an Attack or a Plague on Humans; The Origin of the Disease Narrative, with one subtheme titled the Blame narrative; and Finding the Cure Narrative with one subtheme titled The Outlier.

As noted in the theoretical framework, journalism plays a crucial role in what narratives people believe through what they write and report as news. The findings were exciting, but it was evident that World War I indeed overshadowed the press coverage of the Spanish Flu, and not much was said about what was happening concerning the 1918 pandemic itself. Only a few newspaper articles referred to or mentioned how the Spanish Flu affected aspects of human lives, including what they might experience if they had the disease. There was no direct mention of the disease in terms of symptoms, mortality, or even how people should live their lives amidst the pandemic. Instead, the newspapers compared the Spanish Flu symptoms to other diseases such as grippe by describing

grippe symptoms. In most of the press coverage, any reference to the disease was almost always about how it had affected trade, businesses, and livelihood.

The overarching narrative that emerged was how the Spanish Flu affected and impacted businesses. This narrative was dominated by *The Wall Street Journal*, which shows how rooted American society is in capitalism as a cultural narrative. Both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* offered different focuses and perspectives of the Spanish Flu for their readers, which affected the scope and issues of their coverage. *The Times* tended to have a smaller number but wider variety of 1918 pandemic-related news stories, including those that focused on business. *The Journal*, on the other hand, had a very domestic and business-focused approach to its pandemic news coverage. However, the question remains unanswered: why did *The Journal* have more news stories on the Spanish Flu than *The Times* amidst the wartime censorship? There is not much to say about this issue. As Humphries (2013) and Roos (2020) pointed out, there was wartime censorship in place in the United States wherein stories that were viewed as having a potential negative impact on support for the war effort were limited at best. But the news stories suggested that *The Journal*, as a business-focused newspaper, centered their news coverage on giving regular business updates to their readers and not necessarily reporting on the Spanish flu as the main subject in their coverage. On the other hand, *The Times* appeared to be giving their regular international and war updates and only mention the Spanish Flu as a reference to what is happening alongside the war. Since wartime censorship was in effect, and other social and cultural issues such as prohibition and women's suffrage were gaining press attention, it is possible the *Times* didn't feel the need to devote more coverage to the pandemic.

In all, *The Times* focused on news stories that were tied to the origin theme, and *The Journal* focused on news stories that were more business-oriented with little to nothing on letting people know how to take care of themselves during the pandemic. These two papers did not provide any information on the Spanish flu that would be helpful for people looking for informative news stories. For example, information about which facilities to report to in the event of being infected, what protocols people should follow when in public spaces, and even which telephone numbers to call in case of emergencies were not provided by either newspaper. The missing coverage would mean people would likely be uninformed about what to look out for in order to identify the Spanish Flu and unprepared when they were infected with the disease. Ironically, the overarching narrative also depicted the Spanish flu as a deadly evil or plague that had come to attack people to death. This narrative was reinforced through news accounts that only focused on the increasing case numbers and fatalities yet provided nothing useful for people trying to recover from the disease. If people were looking for reports to describe the disease and address how they should protect themselves and keep safe, these two newspapers would not be a good source. By focusing so heavily on the impact of business, the newspapers, especially *The Journal*, did not take the opportunity to serve the readers personally by providing guiding information about how to survive the pandemic – either economically or physically.

Another critical finding was reflected in the origin narrative. While the press coverage appeared to reinforce the idea, the Spanish Flu did not originate from Spain, which did not keep the newspapers from searching for its origin. This was especially true for *The Times*, which seemed determined to blame another foreign country, the war, or

U.S. government officials. Aside from this, there were no indications of fearmongering or race-baiting within the news coverage beyond the obvious by trying to blame someone else.

The Cure theme suggested that even though there had been other epidemics before the Spanish Flu, the medical professionals were unprepared for another epidemic or pandemic when the Spanish Flu occurred. News accounts indicated that these medical professionals were probably operating on a “trial-and-error” basis with these drugs and vaccines, which in the end increased the demand for them and impacted their prices on the drug market. This became a challenging quest, but according to press accounts, medicines and vaccines were eventually adopted to help treat and prevent the disease. In the end, there was not a lot of specific information about how the medical professionals were handling the situation with the disease beyond suggesting that there was an ongoing debate among key stakeholders on vaccines and medications to treat people suffering from the Spanish Flu. While it is unknown what impact this type of narrative would have on the public, the overarching narrative about the cure for the disease was not encouraging, which could mean that the people could lose confidence in how the medical system dealt with the disease.

In sum, the press coverage from both *The Times* and *The Journal* at the time did not do much toward informing or educating their readers on what the Spanish Flu was or how to respond. There was little to nothing on the symptoms, where people should go for treatment (whether or not there were designated locations for that), or what protocols people would follow. News narratives help shape what people think about the events around them. The only picture of the Spanish Flu offered by these two newspapers

primarily was how businesses were affected. *The Times* presented the narrative as though only people directly involved in the war were affected by the disease. In contrast, *The Journal* narrative worked as though the Spanish flu only affected trade and businesses.

The general idea and patterns of wartime reporting and commentary could account for why there is much less coverage. That is, during wartime, newspapers not only dealt with government censorship issues but also self-censorship. This is because the press would not want to put the country under threat. So, to maintain that, first of all, they tried to avoid stress or panic among readers since it was in the midst of the war; and second, they wanted to avoid any concerns about making the U.S. look weak. As other scholars have noted, there are a lot of limits during wartime; you have to frame your words very carefully; you have to make sure you report the issues without coming across as calling the government a failure (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Iwamoto, 1995; Murray, Parry, Robinson, & Goddard, 2008). But for the *Wall Street Journal* being an economic paper, talking about local economics somehow made it acceptable. For example, as stated earlier from Stetler's (2017) research about journalism at the beginning of World War I, journalists fell in line with the narrative that censorship was an economically sound decision for the U.S. So, in terms of wartime protection and support, *The Journal* was not breaking any laws or norms by reporting about trade and business issues, including the impact of the pandemic. But it would likely have been a problem if journalists reported the people's stories and human-interest frames related to the pandemic because then the impact on the American people would have raised concerns about morale. In all of this, the end result was little was said about what the disease was like.

Finally, both newspapers presented the Spanish Flu from different perspectives. *The Times* solely reported the news stories about the Spanish Flu in a way that made people think of the disease from the lens of where it was coming from, who to blame, and how soldiers and military camps were impacted. If people at the time just read *The Times* for information on the disease, they would not have learned much apart from stories that tried to tell them where the influenza originated. In the same way, *The Journal* almost solely provided news stories about the Spanish Flu from a business perspective in a way that would make people think and believe that the disease only impacted businesses and also created the impression that the impact on business and trade was more important than the impact on humans since the coverage did not address that aspect of the pandemic.

Discussion

This thesis fits into other research about the Spanish Flu, such as that of Efron & Efron (2020), who emphasized that Spanish flu information could not be rapidly circulated as expected, and Walloch (2014), who tried to close in on the gap in scholarly writing about the Spanish Flu and argued that most writers depicted the epidemic as a medical horror story by focusing on desperate attempts to limit the contagion as it overwhelmed hospitals and public health departments. Press accounts didn't really distribute information about the disease, or its impact beyond business, with one exclusive story about the impact on hospitals. This thesis also makes it a bit clearer why the Spanish Flu was missing from American History for a long time, as argued by Korr (2013), Nichols et al. (2020), and Segal (2020) since the news accounts studied in this thesis did not give much information on the disease likely due to both the focus of the

individual newspapers as well as the government censorship or self-censorship impacting the nature of the coverage as argued by Humphries (2013) and Roos (2020).

There have been a lot of studies on the Spanish Flu's history, mortality, and morbidity (Chertow et al., 2015; Esparza, 2020; Gagnon et al., 2015; Korr, 2013), public awareness and understanding of the Spanish flu (Dicke, 2015), religious and lay explanations attributed to the flu (Philips, 1987), the important events that led up to the Spanish Flu (Le Blanc, 2020), the socio-economic, political, and environmental factors underlying 1918 pandemics with a comparison to the 1818 pandemic, (Snyder & Ravi, 2018), and the biomedical response to influenza (Schwartz, 2018). As provided by *The Times* and *The Journal*, the overarching narrative of the Spanish Flu touched on some of these issues. Press coverage certainly conveyed information about mortality but little about publishing awareness beyond its impact on business, finding the source, and finding a cure for the disease. As was revealed in Philips (1987), there were no religious explanations, no attributions of the pandemic to God as either a punishment or a course to further a divine purpose.

But the press coverage on the Spanish Flu did not follow the pattern that the above scholars identified in their studies of news coverage of pandemics in general. As noted in the literature review, other studies of press coverage of other pandemics have shown that news coverage of pandemics tends to begin with sounding the alarm, followed by mixed messages, and crisis and containment (Holland & Blood, 2010; Nerlich & Halliday, 2007; Ungar, 2008; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). Even Outka's (2014) "outbreak narrative," which argued that communication about health crises often ends up inspiring fear and panic in the general public by giving detailed information about the

pandemics and giving out compliance guidelines, was not present in this study. The press coverage of the Spanish Flu in these two newspapers most likely did not instigate that kind of fear that Outka predicted since the newspapers did not give much information about the disease.

Finally, this thesis becomes the third inquiry into communications processes used during the 1918 Pandemic, including press coverage. The first was Heinrich's (2011) study that focused on Kovach and Rosenstiel's nine elements that journalists must adhere to in providing information to people. This study expands his work by pointing to the overarching narratives that the press told about the Spanish Flu's impact on businesses especially. The second is Stetler's (2017) study of newspaper coverage of the Spanish Flu pandemic and other sources she labeled as vital records and medical research. Her focus was on providing a comprehensive insight into the happenings in Philadelphia during the Spanish flu pandemic. Stetler observed that the less coverage in 1919 was due to reasons such as striving for "middle grounds between optimism for the future and pain felt by those immediately affected the epidemic" (p. 481). I think this may have accounted for some of what I found in this analysis since it could mean that the need for optimism overshadowed the latter, even though this did not surface in any of the news articles analyzed. This possibly also explains why there is less coverage; sometimes, it wasn't even government censorship, but it was self-censorship by the newspapers because they did not want to put the country under threat.

Comparing the then and now, the Spanish Flu was reported to be the biggest pandemic in modern history (Adams, 2020; Barry, 2017; Buear, 2020), and COVID-19 is projected to become the biggest, as argued by Scudellari (2020). Since COVID-19 has

received much media coverage, a study into the COVID-19 cultural narrative should be more insightful. In-depth research looking at both pandemics critically in terms of comparison of their mutation processes, waves, mortality, morbidity, categories of people most vulnerable and affected, among others, would be very appropriate. For example, Stetler (2017) noted that “the Philadelphia Board of Health closed all public schools and canceled all indoor Liberty Loan meetings. With the number of ill and dead mounting, the Board of Health also closed all saloons, theaters, and churches” (p. 469). This is very close to the experience we are having with COVID-19. Businesses shut down (bars, parks, saloons, theaters, churches, schools, just to mention a few, were closed), a lot of travel restrictions, and our life practically looked like it had come to a standstill. As was pointed out by some scholars, one thing is for sure that the 1918 pandemic came as a shock and unexpected to societies that had believed they were gaining mastery over pandemic diseases (Condrau & Worboys, 2007; Crosby, 2003; Crosby, 1976), as it appears to be the case with the COVID-19. Even though these observations with COVID-19 are anecdotal, they do point to the need for further study.

Limitation

Because of World War I, the censorship imposed at the time greatly affected what the press published about the Spanish Flu in the United States. Also, Stetler (2017) points that since journalists, at the time, joined the need for optimism with more focus on exhibiting faith in modern science and a conviction that progress was for sure, it would also account for the low coverage about the hard facts and accounts that could instill fear in the general public.

This translated into the most significant limitation of this thesis in the small nature of the collected sample. Ultimately, the small sample size of the two newspaper sources proved to be limiting since they did not generate many news stories on the Spanish Flu, especially with the *New York Times*. There were no substantive descriptions of the pandemic in press coverage, and most of the reference made to the Spanish Flu was either related to trade and business or the war efforts. It is possible that expanding the newspaper sample to include more newspapers from around the nation, especially local papers, would have provided a more expansive view of the pandemic.

Future Research

Further research into understanding the cultural narratives can look at more newspapers, different time periods or a more extended time period, and even other sources other than press coverage, if there are any (for example, congressional reports). These findings will either hold up or may prove just to be products of the two newspapers themselves. Also, Stetler's study focused on the local newspapers of Philadelphia, which produced the kind of results she had. Based on her results, local coverage is starkly different from the more national coverage. Garner (1996) had similar findings. Hence future studies should examine local, regional, national, international coverage to determine the differences in narratives at these various levels. It will help understand how both wartime and self-censorship impacted coverage.

Similarly, the idea of the wartime effort and the narratives that come from it are different or play differently at national, regional, and local levels. Such research can also help explain the structure of journalists and journalism, who journalists are talking to, about what, and their context. For example, to know about the impact of the pandemic at

the local level, you need to go to local papers to know if human interest was covered, how they were labeled, what was happening with the public system, even the local economies, among others. We can also get a better look at the economic impact on local communities by looking at local papers. Since the two newspapers in this study had somewhat national and international exposure and focused on the economic impact at the national front, talking about stocks and trade, the majority of the population is not engaged in, the effect at the local or human-level remained unclear. As Stetler (2017) and Garner (1996) point out, if you really want to know what happened to the people in the United States during the pandemic, including the economy, you have to go to press coverage of regions and towns. Local newspapers would likely have been doing more human-interest coverage, including on the pandemic, and their need to serve their readers could possibly have limited any war-time self-censorship beyond that imposed by the government.

It would also be interesting to do a comparative analysis of the Spanish Flu as the biggest pandemic in modern history and the recent happenings of the COVID-19 pandemic since the similarities are so striking. The newspapers in this study underreported the dangers of the pandemic, engaging in “it's just the flu” type reporting; thus, they underplayed the Spanish Flu even though it was deadly. Do journalists still do this now? Would this happen now with the COVID-19 pandemic? Based on personal experience, I would say yes, it can happen in 2021, and it has been happening. Nonetheless, research would need to be done to determine whether or not this is, indeed, the case.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, there are some striking similarities and differences between the Spanish Flu and the current COVID-19. The biggest so far, per my observation, is the “blame game.” With COVID-19, the blame focus is on China. In 1918 the news narratives blamed Germany; indeed, it was common for both newspapers to blame someone else other than the U.S. (even when there was evidence it might have started in the U.S. (e.g., Kansas). In the Spanish Flu press narratives, the pandemic was linked to Germany, the war, the situations overseas that caused it, how German soldiers brought it from the war, or it was even terrorism. However, at that point, they did not have bioterrorism in the legal language, and as is often in crises, it's very common for governments and the press to try to place the blame outside their jurisdiction in the name of geopolitics. For that matter, World War I (and World War II) brought home how interconnected the world is. As research on the Spanish Flu has shown, pandemics do the same, but this interconnectedness is established through disease spreading. For example, it can be said that colonialists brought their diseases to the U.S., which significantly impacted the health and lives of native people. It can also be noted that World War I and the Spanish Flu did the same thing. In this sense, pandemics are political, especially during wartime, and as efforts to curb the disease and the rhetoric about the disease continue, germs continue to be shared, which leads to the pointing of fingers (Germany, China). Ironically, it appears that the U.S. always manages to escape the blame.

Furthermore, the Outlier theme provides other connections to COVID-19 in terms of supporting hospitals and fundraising, among others. In this recent pandemic, we have seen so much more of the kind of reporting portrayed in the outlier theme such that we see all of these hospitals, nurses, and doctors described as heroes. This is because these

professionals and hospitals have dealt with an influx of COVID-19 patients well beyond their physical capacity (meaning hospital beds and supplies to treat the patients) and well beyond their physical well-being (working exceedingly long hours, often without necessary protective equipment). COVID-19 has become politicized and has polarized the nation (Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020). Therefore, it would be interesting to research what the difference is in terms of the coverage now (COVID-19) versus back then (1918 pandemic), in part, to know who sets the agenda. During the 1918 pandemic, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* set the agenda for what the nation talked about. What has changed in 2021 may be that these prominent newspapers clearly no longer set the agenda. We now live in a world of intermedia agenda-setting, with the most significant attribute being the role of social media. For example, many stories on Twitter or other platforms make it into mainstream news services. More personal stories originating on social media are seeing the national press like the *Times* and the *Journal* pick up their accounts. In other words, people via social media have become such a big part of the media landscape, and this has impacted coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, I think we cannot ignore a comparative analysis between these two pandemics.

Last but not least, a more longitudinal examination of the Spanish Flu would be appropriate to ascertain whether or not the coverage of the pandemic evolved over the course of the pandemic itself. For example, most of the scholars that have studied pandemics have found different results in coverage at various stages of the pandemic trajectory (Holland & Blood, 2010; Nerlich & Halliday, 2007; Ungar, 2008; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). So, it would be good to explore if the Spanish Flu was reported differently over time throughout the pandemic. Together, all of these studies can help

explain the 1918 pandemic's coverage and clarify some (if not all) of the results found in this analysis.

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