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Underestimating a Catastrophe: U.S. Media Coverage of the Spanish Flu, August to December 1918

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ABSTRACT: This historical study examines how the American press covered the influenza pandemic of 1918 and 1919 during the second and deadliest wave of the outbreak. It analyzes the coverage published in the New York Times and the Washington Post between the first of August and the end of December 1918, drawn from the archives of both newspapers, and reads that coverage against the scholarly literature on the pandemic, on wartime censorship, and on the naming and stigmatization of infectious disease. The study argues that the American news media underestimated the catastrophe of the pandemic so as not to distract the public from the news of the First World War, and that it stigmatized Spain in the name it gave the disease, associating the epidemic with a country whose neutral stance during the war had allowed its press to report the outbreak freely. Three roles emerge from the coverage across the five months examined: reassurance that the epidemic would bring no serious consequences, association of the disease with a foreign country, and, only late in the period, the raising of public awareness of the precautions that might limit the spread.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although accurate and reliable information about the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 is not trusted by many people, still the role of media coverage of the pandemic is the significant influential factor affecting societies.¹ It is noteworthy that the period of time that received extensive interest on the Spanish flu was the two years that came after the pandemic (1920-1922). Scholar Janice Hume mentioned that magazines like Good Housekeeping, Dial, Ladies' Home Journal, Harper's Monthly Magazine, New Republic, and Scribner's Magazine did not include articles or news information about the 1918 influenza.² Further, it was easier for reporters to report stories about World War I. Thus, in 1918 alone, Reader's Guide reported 223 stories under the headings of "war" compared to only twenty-six about the Spanish influenza that took more American lives.

The influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, known as the "Spanish Flu", was the most serious health disaster in modern history. The Spanish flu broke out in 1918 while World War I was still raging.³ The chaos caused and political decisions made during the First World War further spread and exacerbated the disease's effects. The pandemic swept the population in three successive waves: the first in the spring of 1918, the second, which was the most deadly and killed 90 percent of the total victims, in the fall of 1918, and the third from the winter of 1918 to the spring of 1919.⁴ By the end of that wave of the pandemic, more than half of the world's population became infected.⁵

The researcher selected the period between the first of August 1918 to the end of December 1918 to be examined because the second wave of the 1918 pandemic, which was between September and November 1918, is considered as the most deadly wave. It is suggested that the American media, through its coverage of the Spanish flu, deliberately misled the American audience. This researcher argues that the American news media underestimated the catastrophe of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 in order not to distract them from the news of the First World War, while also deliberately stigmatizing Spain in the name of the 1918 pandemic and associating the epidemic with Spain, as a result of Spain's neutral stance throughout the world war. The news media used Spain as a scapegoat to further distract the American public.

This research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how the U.S. media dealt with the 1918 influenza pandemic and to better understand whether the U.S. media lied and misled the masses in terms of their response to the 1918 influenza pandemic. During the second wave of the 1918 influenza pandemic in the fall of 1918, people experienced the most severe conditions. In addition to the return of soldiers from World War I to the U.S. by summer 1918, the researcher selected the period between August 1918 to December 1918 to examine in this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One might ask why would an understanding of such media coverage of historical pandemics be important? Schudson emphasizes that the press can construct the mental worlds in which we live, and news media can also give legitimate importance to these constructed mental worlds as well as a kind of priority.⁶ The importance and uniqueness of this historical research stem from the fact that examining historically how media dealt with and delivered information about such a pandemic might offer new insight into the theoretical concept of the “media coverage” in terms of the underestimation of a deadly worldwide catastrophe. Further, it should also help in understanding the complex roles that media might play in delivering a causal relationship between foreign populations and the spread of the epidemic, potentially the promotion of irrational fear and stigma. Not only do American media institutions and corporations downplay the disease's spread, but there is also a lack of scholars' attention to the Spanish flu.

Throughout the history of epidemics of influenza, people have known and experienced various pandemics. In the 19th century alone, people across the world faced four great pandemics of influenza.⁷ Although some researchers claim that the 1918 influenza pandemic started to appear in France in 1916 or China and Vietnam in 1917, many other scholars emphasize that it first appeared to be of U.S. origin. Macfarlane Burnet, the Australian immunologist and Nobel laureate, emphasized that the disease began in the United States and spread to France due to the arrival of American troops in World War I. Therefore, all indicators showed that camp Funston is considered the first place where the 1918 pandemic started. However, there are a few references which claimed that Haskell County is the center of the 1918 pandemic spread.⁸

In all respects, the 1918 pandemic is mentioned, but only periodically and incidentally. The U.S. government policy toward the truth of the 1918 pandemic was a serious upsetting and misleading policy. President Woodrow Wilson continuously urged Congress to pass the Sedition Act which aimed to punish with 20 years in prison to “utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United State...or to urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production in this country of anything or things...necessary or essential to the prosecution of the war.” Therefore, public health officials began to lie while the 1918 influenza bled into American lives.⁹

Scholars emphasized that press and public officials lied and misled the masses in terms of their response to the 1918 influenza pandemic. John Barry brought forth various forms of these misleading scenes. For example, Surgeon General Rupert Blue said, “There is no cause for alarm if precautions are observed.” New York City's public health director declared “other bronchial diseases and not the so-called Spanish influenza...[caused] the illness of the majority of persons who were reported ill with influenza.” The Los Angeles public health chief said, “If ordinary precautions are observed there is no cause for alarm.”¹⁰

John Barry, the author of *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, wrote that there was a huge concern that any negative news would damage the U.S. state government's war efforts by hurting Americans' morale. Additionally, by the time that the 1918 influenza hit Wisconsin and journalists began to tell the truth about the pandemic, journalists were threatened with prosecution under the Sedition Act. However, only one national public health leader quoted by the Associated Press depicted that this is no ordinary influenza by any other name. In the same regard, there was another representation that the so-called Spanish influenza was nothing more or less than old-fashioned gripe.¹¹

The situations in Little Rock and Des Moines are not much different. The Arkansas Gazette, for example, just a few miles away from Little Rock in its headline wrote, quote, Spanish influenza was playing the gripe, which was the same old fever and chills. In the same situation of Des Moines, Iowa, the city attorney who was part of the emergency committee writing the response to influenza, reported that writing related to the 1918 pandemic might carry with it the potential for prosecution.¹²

Most of the death cases of the 1918 pandemic took place between mid-September and mid-December, which coincided with the end of World War I. Patterson and Pyle (1991) wrote that the world death cases are spread across the world; the United States of America had the highest absolute numbers with 550,000 death cases, followed by India which had between 12 and 20 million death cases, and China which had between 4 and 9.5 million. The numbers for Europe were approximately between 2.3

and 4.8 million deaths. Regarding the name of “Spanish Influenza”, John Barry argued that it came from the fact that Spanish newspapers reported the pandemic widely due to Spain's neutral stance during the War.¹³

Before the spread of the Coronavirus outbreak all over the world, the Spanish flu was globally considered the worst epidemic disease throughout the history, and it is unclear whether the current crisis Covid-19 will eventually prove to be more deadly. Like the Covid-19 pandemic, the Spanish flu infected a number of celebrities such as the United States President Woodrow Wilson¹⁴ and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and killed the Brazilian President Francisco de Paula Rodrigues Alves. But the world's attention was focused on the First World War and its consequences, perhaps because many governments imposed a ban on the media from publishing news about the effects of the epidemic in wartime. Since the media coverage of the pandemic was weak, we find little mention of it in history books and popular culture. Therefore, this historical research will dig deeply into the history of the 1918 influenza pandemic.

From a scientific perspective, the Spanish flu was widely studied in both medical journals such as *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, as well as general science journals (such as *Science* and *Scientific American*). From an economic perspective, a clear evidence of the lack of economists' attention to the Spanish flu is provided by the American Economic Association and its journal, the *American Economic Review*. None can possibly believe that there was no single paper devoted to the Spanish flu or to relevant health issues in the period between the 31st Annual Meeting (held in December 1918) to the 34th Annual Meeting (held in December 1921) of the American Economic Association. However, there was only one article of the *American Economic Review* in that period that referred to the Spanish flu, and it is no longer than only a metaphorical article.¹⁵ The Spanish flu pandemic seriously interfered with business in the district of Boston during October, 1918.¹⁶ Likewise, in the districts of Philadelphia, New York, Alabama, St. Louis, Richmond, and Dallas the Spanish flu significantly destroyed business and trade. Labor shortage was the most notable effect because the Spanish flu pandemic affected mainly men and women aged between 15 to 44 years old.¹⁷

The first wave of the Spanish Flu pandemic began in spring 1918 and quickly infected people all over the world when the influenza was identified for the first time in March, 1918.¹⁸ The second wave of the Spanish Flu pandemic was between September and November 1918, while the third wave was during early 1919.¹⁹ Regarding the third wave, it involved fewer countries compared with the second wave, which was exceptionally severe. The Spanish flu was caused by an influenza H1N1 virus.²⁰ The Spanish flu spread in three waves: in March 1918 the first wave began in the Midwest of the United States and spread to Europe, Australia, China, and North Africa. Then, the second wave, which was the more deadly wave, began in August in France and spread around the world. Lastly, the third wave, which was the last wave, hit a few countries at the beginning of 1919.²¹

The 1918 influenza pandemic, in its horrific scale, is difficult to understand. This pandemic infected 500 million people worldwide and caused death to nearly 50 million victims across the world. This huge number of victims is more than the total numbers of World War I deaths.²² Historians now argue that the fatal severity of the second wave of the Spanish flu was caused by a mutated virus spread during the World War I troop movements. Due to the return of soldiers from World War I to the U.S., a devastating wave of the Spanish Flu hit American shores in the summer of 1918 which was identified as the second wave of the pandemic. Arthur Hunter pointed out the exceptionally high death cases in the United States in the last three months of 1918.²³ Those returning soldiers who had been infected with the virus spread it to the general population and in the crowded cities.²⁴

In addition to finding American media institutions and corporations that downplayed the disease's spread, and the state's attempts to appear patriotic during wartime, many of the official authorities in the U.S. made tragic decisions, thinking that it would lead to an end to the flu pandemic of 1918. Philadelphia's response to the pandemic, for example, was too little and too late. Dr. Wilmer Krusen, who was the director of Public Health and Charities for Philadelphia, insisted mounting fatalities were no larger than that of the normal flu, but not the “Spanish flu.” Following the American history of the Spanish flu is a curious matter. On September 28, 1918, Philadelphia held a Liberty Loan parade attended by tens of thousands of citizens, spreading the virus like wildfire.²⁵ 10 days after, 200,000 Philadelphians were sick, and 1,000 Philadelphians were dead by the virus. Officials in the city then went to close saloons and theaters. A few months later, in March 1919, over 15,000 Philadelphians had lost their lives. The situation in St. Louis, and Missouri was different.²⁶ In St. Louis, for example, officials strictly imposed schools and movie theaters shut down, and public gatherings were strictly banned. Consequently, the mortality rate of the pandemic in St. Louis was just one-eighth of Philadelphia's death rate.

Scholar Trevor Hoppe discussed the ways that media might play a role in delivering a causal relationship between foreign populations and the spread of the epidemic, which promoted potentially the irrational fear and stigma of foreign people.²⁷ Trevor Hoppe also mentioned that media outlets often tend to go to great lengths in order to reassure their local readers first, and global audience secondly, that they were safe. Hoppe also showed that health communication scholars noticed that media coverage of any emerging infectious disease will quickly shift from the strategy of promoting audience's fear to the strategy of emphasizing safety, and associating the epidemic with foreigners or a foreign country.²⁸

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Questions

Three questions organize the analysis that follows:

The first concerns the volume and distribution of attention: how much coverage did the New York Times and the Washington Post give the pandemic in each month between August and December 1918, and how was that coverage distributed across the two newspapers?

The second concerns the framing of risk: how did the two newspapers characterize the danger the disease posed to their readers, and on whose authority did they characterize it?

The third concerns naming and stigma: what name did the two newspapers give the disease, and how did that naming associate the epidemic with a foreign country?

3.2 Sources and Procedure of Analysis

Information for this research was collected based on a variety of primary and secondary sources. The archives for the New York Times and Washington Post between the beginning of August 1918, to the end of December 1918 are located on the official websites for both newspapers. Both the New York Times and Washington Post are selected in this research because of their prominence and popularity in the era, and they were also listed as the only medium to reach a truly local American audience in the years examined.²⁹

Every article related to the pandemic published by either newspaper within that five-month window was retrieved from those archives, counted by month and by newspaper, and read closely. The reading attended to the information the articles conveyed about the spread of the disease, the precautions they urged upon readers, the officials they quoted, the level of alarm or reassurance they expressed, and the name under which they reported the disease. The articles are described below in the order of the months in which they appeared, so that any change in the volume, the tone, or the seriousness of the coverage across the second wave of the pandemic becomes visible.

The secondary collection includes all manner of books written about the Spanish flu, particularly since the end of the pandemic. Some of these sources touch upon how the pandemic caused more casualties than the First World War, which was about to end when the pandemic rapidly spread during the second wave. Furthermore, there are a variety of journal articles and literature that contributed to the key terms of this article such as the crisis, public memory, the American periodical, public anxiety, a changing America, and coverage of the epidemic that proved quite valuable to this project.³⁰

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Volume and Distribution of the Coverage

The media coverage of the 1918 influenza epidemic began through the magazines that were indexed in Reader's Guide by September of 1918. Both the Washington Post and New York Times have initially pursued an attitude similar to that which underestimated the catastrophe of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, while also deliberately stigmatizing Spain in the name of the 1918 pandemic as a result of Spain's neutral stance throughout the world war. The Washington Post and New York Times provided predictions about the severity of the epidemic stigmatizing it as the Spanish influenza and reassured readers that the epidemic would bring no serious consequences and everything was under control.

Table 1. Articles Related to the Pandemic in the New York Times and the Washington Post, August to December 1918

Month (1918)	New York Times	Washington Post	Total
August	6	0	6
September	7	9	16
October	4	103	107
November	1	34	35
December	0	1	1
Total	18	147	165

4.2 August 1918

Although the second wave, which was the most deadly wave, began in August 1918 in France and soldiers returned from World War I to the U.S. by summer 1918, the Washington Post never published any article related to the pandemic during the month of August 1918. However, the New York Times published six articles related to the pandemic. Those six articles are distributed between various issues during the month. Those articles depicted news information about the pandemic regarding the role that the U.S. seaports' guards played during a strict lookout on incoming steamships from Europe whose passengers or crews might have developed Spanish influenza. Also, the articles gave attention to the precautions that should be taken in order to stop the spread of the pandemic and how it would be impossible to quarantine every vessel which arrives with ease. Along with those six articles, the New York Times linked the pandemic with the name Spanish flu. Regardless, the New York Times published the story of the considerable number of "American negroes" who have been to France on horse transports, as reported, noting that they contributed to the epidemic's spread.³¹ Additionally, the six articles were published by the New York Times depicted that the Government of Switzerland highlighted the need for the necessity to erect many hospital and isolation camps. In this regard, the articles also revealed the role of the Red Cross in helping with \$125,000 for the erection of hospitals and the financing of other relief measures to combat the Spanish Flu.³²

One of the six articles reported that "Dr. Edward G. Cornwell of 1,218 Jackson Avenue, Brooklyn, who treated the patients from the ship, said yesterday that the immediate cause of Mrs. Olsen's death was bronchial pneumonia. As far as he could determine, he added, no symptoms of Spanish influenza had been evident in any of the cases, and he was treating them on a diagnosis of pneumonia. At the hospital, it was learned that the patients had not been isolated, and, it was asserted, they would not have passed Quarantine had they been suffering from true Spanish Influenza. One of them is Arvid Sundstrom, 17 years old, whose father makes his home at the Hotel Lorraine."³³

Another one of those six articles published that Dr. Leland E. Cofer, health officer for the Port of New York, emphasized that there was not the slightest danger of an epidemic of Spanish influenza in New York. Another article was published in the same month to handle publicity's concern and calm the Americans down from the danger of the Spanish Flu.

4.3 September 1918

During September 1918, the Washington Post published nine articles, while the New York Times reported seven articles related to the Spanish Flu. Beginning with the Washington Post's articles, only one article was reported on September 19, 1918, while the rest were all together published on September 29, 1918. The article that was published on the issue of September 19, 1918 depicted a commercial of a raincoat that "protect from the Spanish Flu".³⁴ Further, another article is no longer than a brief column depicting the symptoms of the disease such as a burning throat and dry, and streamy eyes.³⁵ In the same regard, another article was just a short article reporting that Health Commissioner Schenck declared that many cases of the Spanish Flu are nothing more than bad colds and old-fashioned grip, and the disease will be eradicated of itself in a week or two due to fair and warm weather.³⁶ Another very brief article was published to declare a case of death confirmed with the Spanish flu.³⁷ Another brief article declared that the local draft board had delayed sending 23 registrants due to the prevalence of the Spanish flu.³⁸ Last but not least, another brief article revealed the proceedings of the meeting of Congress and committees and how they passed the resolution appropriating \$1,600,000 for the public health service in combating the Spanish influenza menace. Then

the second half of the article went on to cover the Senate's calls for the necessity of the United States to use all possible speed in getting coal to Italy and the support of the allied forces in the war.³⁹

As previously mentioned, the New York Times published seven articles during September that directly related to the Spanish Flu. Those seven articles spread across different issues during the month. There is one article that revealed “although twenty-five cases of Spanish influenza were recently taken from a ship arriving at New York persons in this city are in no danger of an epidemic, according to Dr. Royal S. Copeland, the Health Commissioner.”⁴⁰

The article goes further to calm the people and tell them by the end of the article that the disease will normally run its course in three days and that so far there was no known cure for it. Another article depicted a discussion of Health Officials to create an educational campaign. The article clarifies those ways of instructing the public how to prevent the spread of influenza from cases that might come to the city according to the Health Officials in that discussion.⁴¹ Another article published the death of 30 new cases in Upton, New York and went further to report that physicians of the city have to report all cases of communicable diseases to the Department of Health within twenty-four hours of discovery. The article also depicted that Health Commissioner Royal Copeland decided that the old ways to prevent the Spanish Flu would not do better, and he decided to put the Spanish Flu and pneumonia on the list of diseases that must be reported. A level of seriousness in terms of dealing with the Spanish Flu is shown in this article.⁴² One detailed article reports that 150 cases were confirmed with the Spanish Flu. Despite the increase in the cases, the article depicted that the Health Commissioner saw there was no cause for alarm, but caution was required, and they strongly urged persons not to fail to take the necessary precautions against it.⁴³ The article went further to repeat the same symptoms of both pneumonia and the Spanish Flu. Another article written by the 22nd of the month reported that “only” twenty new cases were originated in New York City, in addition to the twenty-five new cases which had arrived to the Staten Island Marine Hospital.⁴⁴ In the same regard, one more article was published in the same day which illustrated that the Spanish Flu was much like gripe malady (the virus that gives one a fever, sore throat, and a headache), and the Spanish Flu is not dangerous unless neglected. The article went further to provide further information regarding the history and symptoms of the Spanish Flu.⁴⁵

4.4 October 1918

October 1918 remarked the most momentous coverage of the Spanish Flu from the Washington Post by 103 articles that contained the Spanish Flu. The New York Times, in this regard, appeared with only four articles related to the Spanish Flu. Beginning with the New York Times' articles, the articles depicted the Spanish Flu as a misunderstood disease, but the health authorities of America understood the Spanish Flu well enough to know that it spreads rapidly where people are crowded together in railway trains, theatres, places of amusement, stores, factories, and schools.⁴⁶ The articles also showed that workers were given vaccines for both prevention and treatment of the Spanish Flu.⁴⁷ However, still the articles did not even connect the high death rates with both pneumonia and the Spanish Flu.

The articles started to pay attention to the disease as well as public assemblies of all kind, which had been forbidden. During October 1918, according to the collected articles in the New York Times: in comparison to Boston, which has had 100,000 cases, and Philadelphia, where the total two days ago was 20,000, New York City has gotten off lightly. Only 8,000 cases had been reported as of yesterday. According to the Health Department, there are approximately 6,000,000 individuals in this metropolis, although many cases may still go unreported.⁴⁸

Following the Washington Post coverage of the Spanish Flu during October 1918, 103 articles were monitored. Earlier during the first week of the month, the Washington Post coverage went to reveal the death cases.⁴⁹ A very brief article on October 10, revealed that 115 new cases were reported during the past 24 hours out of the twelve deaths reported, which only occurred during the last 24 hours in Norfolk, Virginia.⁵⁰ Another article on the same day reported the story of the first death in the student army-training corps at the University of Virginia because of the Spanish Flu according to the article.⁵¹ Another short article published on October 15 covered that two French scientists found influenza germ through their success in isolating the infectious agent that caused Spanish influenza.⁵² A very long article was published on October 17, which depicted that the great sports week that was planned for November 11 to 18 in 1918 as part of a drive to obtain funds for war charities would meet with a hearty response in Washington unless the influenza epidemic was not under control at that time. The article went further to illustrate that some excellent football teams' activities have been greatly curbed by Spanish Flu.⁵³ Another article was published on the same day, October 17, that represented the story of Alexander Patrick Finnegan, a star all-around athlete at Georgetown University last year, who had died of Spanish influenza.⁵⁴ Another short article was also published on October 17

and highlighted a list of names' deaths and their addresses in Washington D.C. on October 16.⁵⁵ Some of the articles were published in October to just announce the deaths of the Spanish Flu and represent them as victims of the Spanish pandemic.⁵⁶

Another short article was published on October 19 that depicted that there were masks designed and those masks must be worn by barbers, waiters, waitresses, cashiers at cafes, and persons employed at soda fountains.⁵⁷ On October 21, an article published that little football would be played in the District of Columbia or elsewhere in the country until the Spanish influenza epidemic abates, and fear of the “flu” spreading was the reason for the cancellation of many contests.⁵⁸ An article that was published on October 26 revealed that the flu was on the decrease in Easton and vicinity, and there were no new cases reported. The article also published that the ban on churches, theaters, moving picture shows, and all business places that were closed had been removed. The article also focused on precaution and revealed that all places of business and pleasure must be well ventilated and avoid overcrowding.⁵⁹ An article that was published on October 30 was as an announcement that the local health department made that the order closing theaters, churches, schools, barber shops, pool rooms, and public meetings of any character would be raised again, and all public school pupils must undergo examination by physicians.⁶⁰

An article was published on October 18 which revealed that the football game that was between the University of Michigan and the Michigan Agricultural College scheduled for Saturday during that week was canceled at the request of the State board of health, because of the Spanish influenza epidemic as reported.⁶¹

4.5 November 1918

The month of November 1918 was the second month in terms of the exclusive coverage of the Spanish Flu after October. Thirty-four articles related to the Spanish Flu were monitored and tracked in the Washington Post, while there was only one article published by the New York Times related to influenza in the same month. It was a very detailed article which revealed that the emergency schedule was abolished after the Tuesday evening of the first week of November 1918. The article moved further to depict that the situation became less dangerous and the pandemic was no longer too serious, and life should return to normal, according to Health Commissioner Copeland.⁶²

Regarding the Washington Post's coverage of the Spanish Flu during November 1918, thirty-four articles related to the pandemic were reported. A brief article that was published on November 3 depicted that many cases developed into deadly pneumonia, ignoring the fact of the Spanish Flu during that period of time. The same article went further to highlight that many people failed to take the simple ordinary precautions necessary to avoid infection, saying that it is easier to prevent than cure.⁶³ Another short article was published on November 4 to just announce to owners of companies to prevent their employees from catching the Spanish Flu by having a good atmosphere.⁶⁴

Most of the articles that were published in November were brief and short articles which just informed owners of companies to prevent their employees from catching the Spanish Flu by having a good atmosphere,⁶⁵ revealed new deaths in the District of Columbia,⁶⁶ discussed symptoms of the Spanish flu,⁶⁷ and directed people to take the precautions. One article was published on November 17th that recorded a decrease of about one-third the number of the Spanish Flu cases for the week ending November 1, as compared with the previous week, and how the Spanish Flu became an epidemic in army camps.

4.6 December 1918

There is no article published by the New York Times in the month of December 1918 related to the Spanish Flu. However, only one article was published by the Washington Post in the same month. The article shared by the Washington Post was directly related to the Spanish Flu, and it was as educational and awareness-raising announcement concerning citizens' power of resistance to the Spanish Flu. The article went further to detail the health symptoms that might harm elders. Moreover, the article also encouraged readers not to be careless, and to take heed from the experience of Mrs. P. S. Skinner whose experience was revealed in the article and how she highlighted the need for having PE-RU-NA (a well-known patent medicine sold curing relieving coughs, colds, catarrh and catarrhal conditions in the head, throat, stomach, bowels or other organs) in the house all the time for coughs, colds and pains in the chest.⁶⁸

4.7 Discussion

The significance and uniqueness of this historical study stem from the fact that looking back at how the media dealt with and delivered information about a pandemic in the past could provide new insight into the theoretical concept of media coverage in terms of the underestimation of a deadly global disaster. It should also aid in comprehending the complicated roles that the

media may play in delivering a causal relationship between foreign populations and the development of the disease, as well as the possible propagation of irrational fear and stigma. Not only do American media outlets and corporations downplay the disease's growth, but there is also an alarming lack of academics at the university level studying it.

Throughout the vigorous follow-up to the Washington Post and the New York Times coverage of the 1918 influenza, three roles are manifestly seen and observed. Perhaps, the first role is that the U.S. media throughout its coverage of the 1918 epidemic went to great lengths in order to reassure Americans first, and the global audience secondly, that they were safe, and the epidemic would bring no serious consequences. Perhaps, due to the returning American soldiers who had been infected with the virus and the rapid spread of the virus all over the country, the media outlets switched to play another role that is deliberately stigmatizing Spain in the name of the 1918 pandemic as a result of Spain's neutral stance throughout World War I. When things got out of control, the U.S. media relied on the third role they played to improve their position and restore their audience's trust. This third role is that the U.S. media outlets finally considered people's lives and slightly raised the public's awareness of the precautions that should be taken in order to stop the spread of the pandemic.

The huge U.S. media corporations and newspapers sugarcoated the truth that 1918 influenza was a deadly worldwide catastrophe. Therefore, any news article or headline that depicted more than minimal risk and concern about the epidemic would be vulnerable to attack in order to not distract the audience from the news of World War I. Only in October 1918 when nearly 195,000 Americans died from the 1918 influenza did the media begin to cover it. What officials and the press revealed regarding the 1918 influenza bore no relationship to what people lived and endured. Consequently, a quarter of the American population caught the virus, 675,000 died, and life expectancy dropped by 12 years. With no vaccine to prevent against the virus, Americans were slightly urged to isolate, quarantine, practice good personal hygiene, and limit social interaction.

One might bet that history repeats itself and governments' trends towards serious and global epidemics persist alike over time. Like the Covid-19 global crisis, the rapid spread of the 1918 influenza disrupted life in uncommon ways. It overwhelmed global health care systems, closed public spaces, and locked down workplaces and social events. Like former U.S. President Donald Trump, President Woodrow Wilson's administration downplayed the 1918 pandemic. John M. Barry, author of *The Great Influenza*, through an interview with CNN, mentioned that in order for the U.S. government to keep morale up during World War I, the government lied and underestimated the seriousness of the 1918 pandemic, and President Wilson never delivered a public statement about the pandemic.⁶⁹ In addition, like Trump, who also announced that he has coronavirus, Wilson also got infected with the 1918 flu. A hundred and three years ago, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 broke out while World War I was still raging. At the beginning of Covid-19, President Trump went to blame China for causing and spreading the virus all over the world and ignored the idea that America might be infected too, while President Woodrow Wilson 103 years ago completely ignored the seriousness of the epidemic and made no public references to it.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this historical research is to vigorously follow up on the U.S. media coverage of the global health crisis that was stigmatized as the Spanish Flu, which led to 50,000,000 deaths all over the world. The researcher selected the period between August 1918 to December 1918 to be examined because the second wave of the 1918 pandemic, which was between September and November 1918, was the more deadly wave. This research argues that perhaps the American news media underestimated the catastrophe of the 1918 pandemic in order to not distract Americans from the news of the First World War, while also deliberately stigmatizing Spain in the name of the 1918 pandemic and associating the epidemic with Spain as a result of Spain's neutral participation throughout the First World War. The news media used Spain as a scapegoat to further distract the American public.

Despite substantial record of the disease and its destruction at the National Archives and elsewhere, the 1918 outbreak was largely disregarded. The 100-year-old photos from the 1918 influenza epidemic, which were quaint and archaic only a few months ago, now seem eerily predictive. We are making these recordings more readily available in the hopes that they will contain lessons about what to expect in the future months, as well as suggestions on how to avoid a repeat and prepare for what might come next.

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Author Contributions

Manasar Alharethi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft, Writing—Review & Editing.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study. The research analyses newspaper material published in 1918 and held in the public archives of the New York Times and the Washington Post, and it involves no human or animal participants.

Data Availability Statement

All primary material analysed in this study consists of articles published in the New York Times and the Washington Post between August and December 1918, which are available through the digital archives of both newspapers. The list of articles consulted appears in the references below.

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