

Report

Propaganda and Public Health: Impact of Wartime Propaganda on U.S. Public Perception of the Spanish Flu

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Abstract: Millions of people worldwide were affected by the Spanish flu, often known as the 1918 influenza pandemic, which was a major global health emergency. The epidemic in the United States happened during World War I, and the fighting significantly impacted how the government handled the pandemic. The U.S. administration employed propaganda to downplay the epidemic's seriousness and encourage the population to carry on with their regular routines to maintain morale and support for the war effort. There were other messages urging people to keep working, supporting the war, and spreading the illusion that the flu was no worse than the ordinary cold. This strategy for dealing with the epidemic significantly impacted the public's image of the sickness. The spread of the virus was aided by the fact that many individuals did not take the threat of the flu seriously. Furthermore, the people's anxieties and worries were made worse by the propaganda that was used to minimize the severity of the epidemic. This undermined popular confidence in the government's ability to manage the issue. In the end, propaganda employed by the U.S. government during the Spanish flu epidemic significantly influenced how the public viewed the sickness. The government was able to preserve morale and support for the war effort by downplaying the severity of the epidemic. Still, this strategy also aided in the spread of the illness and damaged public confidence in the administration's response to the crisis.

Keywords: US Government, Spanish Flu, Pandemic, Wartime Propaganda

1. Introduction

"There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the telegraph, the cable, the wireless, the poster, the sign-board," American journalist and government official George Creel recalled in his book, *How We Advertised America* [1]. While all combatant nations in World War I invested significant efforts into wartime propaganda, the United States established a distinctive form of it through the Committee on Public Information (CPI), an official government agency that regulated the media and created a new level of professional propaganda [2]. The CPI, founded by President Woodrow Wilson and led by chairman George Creel, galvanized public support of the war by creating their own advertisements and limiting the public access to information through censorship [3]. Unlike other countries, whose main form of censorship

was the censoring of mainstream media, President Wilson and the CPI advocated for cooperation with prominent journalists to control the information being circulated through various platforms. This regulation of the press focused on any news "likely to cause anxiety or distress," and in the list of forbidden publications were "reports concerning outbreaks of epidemics in training camps." As such, in 1918, when the Spanish Flu broke out, the U.S. government left its people unaware of its dangers and possible impacts with the limited and inaccurate coverage in the media [4]. This purposeful underplay of the Spanish Flu during the war also had long-lasting impacts on its remembrance in decades to come. The United States' wartime propaganda and hyper-patriotic media bias during World War I, though targeted towards the insubordinate minority of its citizens, had a wider impact in blinding the majority of the U.S. from the true implications of the Spanish Flu during and after the War.

A watershed moment in the history of using patriotic media

to stifle dissent came when, a few months after entering World War I, Wilson implemented policies that violated the American citizens' rights. After declaring war on Germany on April 6th of 1917, on June 15th of that year, President Woodrow Wilson passed the Espionage Act, a law limiting the free speech of the people in a multitude of ways [5]. Primarily, since the U.S. had just recently declared war, many people still felt strong anti-war sentiments; this act established that anyone dissenting to American participation in the war would be deemed a criminal [6]. Furthermore, it punished any attempts to incite "insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty" and any opposition to the military draft for the war. To enforce this authoritarian policy, the government even allowed mail distribution facilities to review letters and report any possibly suspicious content [7]. In addition, the CPI oversaw communications through telegraphs and telephones, enabling the government to have more control over what people discussed in private [8]. To this end, they deprived the freedom of speech of the people, even reading personal communications to regulate public opinion. In punishment for any "suspicious" opinions, the Americans could be sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment, fined, or both. As spelled out in the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." However, with the Espionage Act, the government went against this Constitutional duty, limiting the freedom of speech of any individuals who dissented. Though first created to limit public disapproval and uplift national morale during war, this oppressive policy inevitably set a precedent for more government intervention and broad surveillance later during the pandemic.

2. Espionage Act

When a part of the Espionage Act was struck down in Congress for its constitutional violation, Wilson implemented the Sedition Act in May of 1918, depriving the people of their freedom of the press and censoring the media even further. This act broadened the Espionage Act and made it illegal to "utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the government." Even after Congress had disapproved of Wilson's previous Espionage Act, deeming it an unconstitutional policy, rather than modifying it to grant the people more freedom, Wilson limited it even more. Through this policy, Wilson further silenced the public and prevented skeptics; nearly two thousand people nationwide were convicted, causing publicity and intimidating others from speaking out [9]. However, the extent of the government's power did not end there; their propaganda consisted of fourteen different departments, including artists, graphic designers, novelists, and essayists who worked with "18,000 newspapers, 11,000 national advertisers and advertising agencies, 10,000 chambers of commerce ... 30,000 manufacturers' associations, 22,000 labor unions," enabling their grip over the public. This general societal dynamic of patriotic frenzy and excessive enforcement of nationalistic ideas later fueled the public's trivialization of the

detrimental Spanish Flu.

3. Media

The media dynamics established by Wilson's propaganda and policies enabled newspapers to easily disregard factual information about the Spanish Flu and underplay its impacts. The flu had dramatic impacts on many Americans, especially military personnel, affecting 26 percent of US Army soldiers and causing 5027 deaths in the US Navy [10]. However, the media deliberately minimized its coverage, leaving civilians ignorant of the extent of the damage. At this point, censorship was an established part of society, and many newspapers self-censored information even when the government did not intervene. From the titles of articles to the placement of them in a paper, influential newspapers carefully downplayed any information about the pandemic [11]. With titles with hopeful spins like "Health authorities are encouraged that the increase is but a small one," many newspapers tried to write with optimistic, vague language that would seem positive. Meanwhile, some newspapers blatantly twisted facts and wrote misleading lines like "Cases Show Decrease" when in reality, deaths from the Spanish Flu had been increasing virtually every day since its rise in mid-September. Charts with statistics revealed the underlying truth but were buried in small columns of the newspaper in places where readers would not notice. Though some newspapers still tried to publish accurate information that would inform the public, such attempts were immediately punished and discouraged. When a Wisconsin newspaper, *Jefferson County Union*, reported factually about the flu, it was deemed a depressant to morale, and the editor faced criminal prosecution under the Sedition Act [12]. By doing so, the government instilled fear in other newspaper companies as well, hindering them from reporting information that reflected the truth.

Despite the government's desire to hide all negative information regarding the Spanish Flu, the fact that some mainstream newspapers did cover this news is noteworthy and can be interpreted as a degree of nonconformity towards government regulations. As such, defenders of Wilson's wartime propaganda argue that while his regulation of the media caused limited coverage in the media, essential information was still covered, and newspapers still had the freedom to publish their perspectives on the issue. Newspapers with the most circulation, like *Times* and the *New York Evening World*, published information on the Spanish Flu. However, in most cases, these articles were hidden at the back of the paper, away from the view of the people and behind the dramatic and nationalistic war stories. For instance, the *Times* put information about the epidemic on the last page, page twenty-four, of their paper. Similarly, the *New York Evening World* placed articles about the pandemic on page fifteen, and next to it was an advertisement for Kellogg's Toasted Corn Flakes in which they had a huge picture of a smiling baby alongside the headline, "it is a blessing that American children are so well-fed and cared for in these troublous times." By associating the pandemic with such

positive, wholesome imagery and misleading descriptions like “well-fed” and “cared for”, the Committee of Public Information prompted the people to interpret the adjacent articles in a rather optimistic manner. Therefore, though the media did cover the flu, rather than truly informing the people, it gave them a false sense of security and encouraged them to focus on the war rather than the deadly pandemic.

Furthermore, by using media to scapegoat foreign countries and minorities for the pandemic, the U.S. government deflected potential criticism of its censorship. While the U.S. and other participant nations in the war minimized coverage of the flu, the pandemic became headline news in non-participant nations like Spain, where the media portrayed it in a more accurate way [13]. As a result, countries, including the U.S., started to call the pandemic “Spanish Flu,” scapegoating the Spanish and dismissing their own responsibility [14]. In addition to this common misnomer, the American media also used various other names with a cultural stigma, like “Spanish Lady,” “Naples Soldier,” “German Plague,” “Bolshevik Disease,” and “Turco-Germanic bacterium criminal enterprise.” By referring to foreign countries in these names, the media stigmatized the pandemic as one of foreign origin. In instances where the American media discussed the reasons the pandemic quickly spread in the U.S., they often blamed minorities such as black people, referring to the flu as the “Black Man’s Disease.” This prejudice was especially evident in the *Chicago Tribune*, which published articles with titles like “Rush of Negroes to City Starts Health Inquiry.” In another article by the *Chicago Tribune*, reporter Henry Hyde claimed that the Black immigrants lived in “dark and unsanitary rooms” and attributed the Spanish Flu to their uncleanness. In doing so, the media characterized the pandemic as being caused by minorities whom they viewed as innately inferior, perpetuating racial prejudice and using it as an opportunity to shift the blame from themselves. This enabled the government to minimize discussion on their negligence and irresponsibility in responding to the rapid spread of the Spanish Flu.

The power of the media also prompted public health officials to contribute to the propaganda by underplaying the impacts of the Spanish Flu and encouraging normal day-to-day activity. Many public officials denied the evident threat of the flu as they feared backlash from the hyper-patriotic media [16]. One of them was William Krusen, director of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and Charities, who assured the public that the military deaths occurring were just old-fashioned influenza rather than a deadly epidemic. In September of 1918, Philadelphia had planned the Liberty Loan Parade, aiming to promote the Liberty Loans, government bonds that were used to help finance World War I [17]. The government constantly pressured local officials to meet bond quotas as they considered it a measure of American patriotism. Thus, while the number of cases in Philadelphia continued to rise, Krusen refused to cancel the parade and ignored the warnings, fearing that it would interfere with the war effort [18]. More than 200,000 Philadelphians poured out onto the streets for the

parade on September 28th, exacerbating the rise of cases. Within the next three days, over 600 new cases occurred in Philadelphia, and within six weeks, approximately 47,000 cases were reported, with 12,000 of them dying.

Though it was evident that the Liberty Loan Parade caused this spike in cases, it was not covered in the media. None of the national or local newspapers reported this rise in cases, and when some reporters did question Krusen or the Board of Health about the necessity and danger of proceeding with the parade, none of the questions or responses appeared in print [19]. Blinded by the false image of the flu portrayed in the media, people simply joked about it and said it “exists only in newspapers,” when in reality, what was portrayed in the newspapers was nothing close to the true scope of the pandemic. This public sentiment fostered by the media prevented Krusen from taking further action as well. Even as thousands of citizens died, he did not impose a quarantine since it would arouse panic [20]. When the Philadelphia city officials finally closed down public gatherings to prevent a further rise in cases, many newspapers rebuked this decision. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* argued that the officials should focus on cheerful, positive things rather than the disease, and framed the quarantine as an unnecessary protocol; they questioned, “What are [the officials] trying to do, scare everybody to death?” Though the public health officials had more insight into the medical ongoing, the newspapers’ excessive adherence to the government’s regulations prompted them to undermine their authority and question blatant facts.

Efforts to trivialize cases of the Spanish Flu continued even after the war, as the media hid that President Wilson had contracted the Spanish Flu. Though the war had ended, diplomatic negotiations continued, and President Wilson visited Paris to discuss his wish to make Germany pay the consequences for waging war [21]. During this heated debate, Wilson fell sick and had to pause the discussion. He immediately passed out, and many speculated that he had contracted the Spanish Flu, which had still been prevalent in Paris. He showed evident symptoms and coughed so severely that his doctor, Cary T. Grayson, initially mistook it as him being poisoned in an assassination attempt [22]. Concerned for Wilson’s health, Grayson wrote to his friend that “the president was suddenly taken violently sick with the influenza” and that “from your side of the water you can not realize on what thin ice European civilization has been skating ... Someday perhaps I may be able to tell the world what a close call we had.” However, rather than taking Wilson home to be cured and postponing the discussion to a later time, Grayson reported to the media that Wilson had gotten a mild cold and would recover sufficiently to resume the conversation. Since neither social media nor televisions existed at the time, and the newspapers were on their side, hiding such information from the public was relatively easy. The media made it seem like Wilson quickly recovered sufficiently to resume the discussions, but he was clearly weak. Surrounded by powerful, assertive politicians like French Prime Minister Clemenceau, Wilson seemed clearly enfeebled mentally and physically. As

a result, Wilson inevitably “ended up caving in and abandoning basically all the principles that supposedly the U.S. had gone to war for.” [23] This incident demonstrated that the government was even willing to risk undesirable results in diplomacy with France to continue to convince the citizens that the Spanish Flu was not a deadly pandemic but rather the typical flu. After months of downplaying the impacts of influenza, President Wilson himself had ironically contracted it, yet could not report it truthfully to his people as it would contradict the way he had portrayed the flu in the media during the war.

The censorship and media bias in the coverage of the Spanish Flu during and after World War I had profound impacts on the way it was perceived in the following decades, causing it to become a forgotten pandemic. In the following years, the media constantly discussed and commemorated the war since the Allies’ victory demonstrated the U.S.’s military strength and power in the world. In contrast, the pandemic exposed their weakness. However, medical advancements had been made and the public health care system had progressed to some extent, the 1918 flu revealed that even with the recent developments, the U.S. was not capable of dealing with the deadly disease in an effective way and protecting its people. As a result, there were also very few monuments, rituals, archives, or narratives on the Spanish flu as a whole, causing it to be forgotten by the people. In December of 1918, the *Times* commented, “Never since the Black Death [had] such a plague swept over the face of the world ... [and] never, perhaps, [had] a plague been more stoically accepted.” [24] Though reasons like wartime morale were no longer relevant, the U.S. did not make efforts to widely publicize the Spanish Flu despite the great impacts it had on such a large demographic of people, as it would stray away from the American narrative of nationalism and success in the war [25].

Decades later, in 1976, environmental historian Alfred Crosby was one of the first to argue for the significant impacts of the flu. Unfortunately, his book, *Epidemic and Peace*, initially did not receive much attention and had barely caught anyone’s attention until 1989, during the rise of the AIDS pandemic. As the public interest in pandemics spiked, Crosby republished his book under the title, “America’s Forgotten Pandemic.” This book had a great impact, inducing a spur of discussion on the Spanish Flu and causing historians to recall its significance. However, when this was finally brought to the historians’ attention, decades had passed since the Spanish Flu ended. Though Wilson’s efforts to censor the Spanish Flu during World War I lasted merely a few months, its impacts were substantial, causing the public and historians to remain apathetic to the pandemic until more than half a century later.

4. Conclusion

In an era without social media or the internet, what the government and the newspapers told the people was how the public perceived the world. This limited access to information, alongside the pressure to conform during a time of war,

exacerbated the impacts of the government’s propaganda in 1918. However, even today, in the early twenty-first century, when a wide range of information lies at our disposal, many people still fall into echo chambers, only listening to a certain point of view and being blinded by biased images of reality created by certain media outlets or politicians. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States, it ravaged the country, causing over 99 million cases and 1 million deaths. During this deadly pandemic, the ways President Donald Trump and his administration responded were similar to the ways Wilson’s administration responded to the influenza pandemic of 1918. Trump downplayed the threat of COVID-19, spreading false information about drugs and even refusing to wear a mask, interfering with the public health officials and CDC’s efforts to ameliorate the spread of the pandemic. But in the end, like Wilson, who contracted the Spanish Flu, Trump was infected with the coronavirus, disproving his efforts to convince the people that the pandemic was not a big deal. Due to its prevalence during wartime, the idea of “propaganda” is often associated with vivid images like army recruitment posters from World War I. In reality, propaganda takes a variety of forms and is still prevalent today, shaping the ways we view pandemics like COVID-19 and, in the long run, the way we understand the world around us.

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