



NEW MEDIA STUDIES

Submission Form

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A look at Comparing and contrasting journalism coverage of the Spanish Flu and COVID-19 with the focus on War Rhetoric:

War rhetoric has permeated the journalism coverage of Covid-19 since the beginning, from small inferences such as regularly calling those who are dealing with the infected as working on the ‘frontline’¹ to the testimonies of those infected describing their journey to recovery as a fight or combat against the disease.² To the terminology of war rising once again to describe the efforts to reduce the infection rate and find a cure for the disease. All of these terms and their association can have negative consequences to our discourse. These old traps of naming³ that humanity chooses to hide behind impede a more useful discourse of our role in the diseases spread and our lack of preparedness despite warnings of the eventuality of a pandemic. Elena N. Naumova explores these rhetoric’s in her impressive article ‘*The Traps of Naming*’. She’s most alarmed by the term most commonly used in my experience referring to the pandemic as an ‘invisible enemy’, even as recent as the 2nd of December 2020 Boris Johnson was using this rhetoric when speaking about the current pandemic.⁴ He’s not the first mind you Governor Cuomo also used similar rhetoric back in March “This is an invisible beast, it is an insidious beast,”.⁵

¹Colman O'Sullivan, "Frontline Workers Honoured For 'Quiet Heroism'", *RTE.ie*, 2020 <<https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0905/1163384-national-services-day-ireland/>> [Accessed 1 December 2020].)

² (Donohue, 2020)

³ Elena N. Naumova, "The Traps Of Calling The Public Health Response To COVID-19 “An Unexpected War Against An Invisible Enemy”", *Journal Of Public Health Policy*, 2020, 233-237 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-020-00237-y>>.

⁴ (Boris Johnson, "Prime Minister's Statement On Coronavirus (COVID-19): 2 December 2020", *GOV.UK*, 2020 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-2-december-2020>> [Accessed 3 December 2020].

⁵Mark Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century* (London: WH Allen, 2020), p. 277.

Elena N. Naumova responded to this rhetoric by stating ‘By instilling that a cause of infection is invisible, we are implicitly rejecting the science. By presenting an virus as an enemy we impede responsibility humans bear for driving patterns of disease.’⁶ By treating the focus of our discussion on a so called war against the virus and denoting it with malicious descriptors, and acting like it came without any warning is humanity shirking its responsibilities. ‘By insisting the pandemic was not expected, we deny the warning signs and the facts that limited preparedness efforts had transformed initial outbreaks into a massive pandemic’ We are responsible, using war rhetoric to describe this pandemic is not a good tradition to maintain be it nurses in Queens and Brooklyn back in March likening the hospital wards to “war zones”⁷ or The Drogheda Independent back in October 1918 referring to the Spanish Flu spread as ‘incursions’ and calling the disease a pest. ⁸Elena N. Naumova’s take on this war rhetoric is the following ‘The war-inspired rhetoric distracts public attention from the issues of critical importance at a very high price due to denial and ignorance.’ And ‘we deemphasize the role of evolution – and our role in shaping the evolution-inspired tolerance to infection.’⁹

⁶ (N. Naumova, 2020)

⁷ (Honigsbaum, 2020) p.276

⁸ Drogheda Independent, "The Flu In Meath", 1918, p. 2

<<https://archive.irishnewsarchive.com/Olive/APA/INA/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=DIN%2F1918%2F10%2F26&id=Ar00229&sk=22735919>> [Accessed 2 December 2020].

⁹ (N. Naumova, 2020)

As can be seen so far in a lot of ways the coverage of the Spanish Flu and Covid-19 can be seen as pretty similar. The coverage of how both diseases spread uses war rhetoric to describe the ‘combat’¹⁰ against the disease, both use terminology that denotes the disease as something ‘malicious’ as if it has its own agenda or wishes harm against us, rather than focusing on our role in its spread. We describe those who treat those infected as working on ‘The frontlines’.

¹¹ Though at the time of the Spanish Flu this rhetoric could be more excused as World War 1 was still going on in 1918 but it is less excusable to see it so commonly used with Covid-19.

Concentrating on coverage of the Spanish Flu in Ireland we see familiar though perhaps at the time less insidious coverage of that epidemic, as unlike when President Donald Trump downplays our current pandemic many weeks and months into its spread ¹², the journalist at this time wouldn’t have known how bad this epidemic was going to be so early in its spread. On the 10th of June 1918 a journalist at the *Belfast Newsletter* reported on the first wave of the Spanish Flu reaching Belfast. He has as Ida Milne puts it produced a ‘self-contradictory headline’ by writing the headline as ‘An epidemic in Belfast – no cause for alarm’.¹³ Familiar topics were discussed in Ireland during the Spanish Flu epidemic including discussions regarding should schools be closed to reduce the spread. ‘We are of the opinion that the Commissioners should order the general closing down of the schools until the end of the month.’¹⁴ The lack/shortage of nurses is also described as an issue during the Spanish Flu an issue that Ireland suffers from today as well ‘There was a shortage of nurses anyhow’.¹⁵

¹⁰ Evening Herald, "To Combat Flu", 1919, p. 3
<<https://archive.irishnewsarchive.com/Olive/APA/INA/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=EHD%2F1919%2F02%2F25&id=Ar00320&sk=F33F4F7D>> [Accessed 2 December 2020].

¹¹ (O'Sullivan, 2020)

¹² Juana Summers, "Timeline: How Trump Has Downplayed The Coronavirus Pandemic", *Npr.Org*, 2020 <<https://www.npr.org/sections/latest-updates-trump-covid-19-results/2020/10/02/919432383/how-trump-has-downplayed-the-coronavirus-pandemic?t=1607004197834>> [Accessed 3 December 2020].

¹³ Ida Milne, *Stacking The Coffins* ([S.I.]: MANCHESTER UNIV PRESS, 2020), p. 21..

¹⁴ (Milne, 2020)

¹⁵ (Milne, 2020)

One interesting contrast at the time of the Spanish Flu was detailed in the leading article of the *Herald* on the 21st of October 1918, In this article Ireland is scolded for its response to the epidemic while America is praised by the writer. ‘public health authorities in the United States had systematically organised a campaign for dealing with the scourge, closing theatres, picture-houses and schools, and giving the public a warning of the dangers of infection posed by large gatherings.’ ‘The *Herald* writer scolded the authorities in Ireland for not behaving in a similarly responsible way;’¹⁶In the current time Ireland is doing concededly better than the United States in terms of managing the spread of covid-19, In fact the US according to WHO (World Health Organization) currently has the lead in deaths (cumulative total) and cases (cumulative total.)¹⁷

The kind of associations of connecting the Spanish Flu, Covid-19 or really any disease’s spread to a rhetoric of which it is an amoral existence that somehow itself is at fault for its spread in a weird way reminds me of Susan Sontag’s ‘*Illness as Metaphor*’. In this text Susan Sontag explores how several illnesses are used as metaphors or figures. For example, cancer is often used as a metaphor for one’s inevitable demise in many literary works and in the past and arguably possible the present still carries some of that metaphorical weight in our own reality to the point that some patients keep a cancer diagnosis secret. ‘“the very word ‘cancer’ is said to kill some patients who would not have succumbed (so quickly) to the malignancy from which they suffer.”’¹⁸ The solution to a conception such as this would not be to merely not tell patients they have cancer, no similarly to the need to stop using war based rhetoric to describe the work we do to stop a disease spreading like with our current pandemic (Covid-

¹⁶ (Milne, 2020)

¹⁷ "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard", *Covid19.Who.Int*, 2020 <<https://covid19.who.int/table>> [Accessed 3 December 2020].

¹⁸Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd, 1978), p. 6..

19). The associations or metaphors around cancer need to similarly be severed from this conception or as Sontag would put it ‘The solution is hardly to stop telling cancer patients the truth, but to rectify the conception of the disease, to de-mythicize it.’¹⁹

The problem you see with cancer is that unlike other causes of death such as a heart attack is it is carrying a legacy of its original meaning ‘ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses’. ²⁰Cancer is seen as shameful Sontag explains some of the thought behind this connotation of cancer by explaining that when someone dies of cardiac disease it implies a weakness, a failure that is mechanical in nature; Cancer is a slow disease that works in stages, it is a disease that can appear all over the body not isolated to just one organ or system. Cancer like TB was described as the body being consumed though unlike TB which was described as quick ‘gallops’ Cancer is slow and under these connotations inevitably terminal. We also need to stop using ‘cancerous or cancer’ as a descriptor or insult pertaining evil characters and acts portrayed in fiction or our own discourse of events. A disease has no bearing on one’s morality, or the shape of ones character so using it as a descriptor of ones malice or heartlessness does not seem that appropriate or that helpful. ‘The people who have the real disease are also hardly helped by hearing their disease's name constantly dropped as the epitome of evil.’²¹

¹⁹ (Sontag 1978)

²⁰ (Sontag 1978)

²¹ (Sontag p.85.)

It's the same way we stopped associating one getting ill with their morality as that itself was a dreadful discriminatory practice. Groddeck wrote "'The sick man himself creates his disease," "he is the cause of the disease and we need seek none other"'²². As this kind of logic was harmful to the ill and to society as it pushed people away from getting proper medical treatments and encouraged more holistic or unscientific methods of curing ones illness, such as with TB where travelling or moving to certain places in the world were believed to be good for curing the illness. 'There were special places thought to be good for tuberculars: in the early nineteenth century, Italy; then, islands in the Mediterranean or the South Pacific; in the twentieth century, the mountains, the desert—all landscapes that had themselves been successively romanticized.'²³

A pandemic was inevitable to occur in our world scientists have been stating we were due one as early as the 1990's²⁴. The state of the world the pandemic was to occur in was not certain only it's inevitability was certain. With the Spanish Flu it had the unique benefit of beginning during 'World War 1' as though scientists have agreed it would have happened regardless of the war happening²⁵, it would not have been the same scale as it came to be. 'the war contributed to its exceptional virulence, while at the same time helping to spread the virus around the world.' By 'the demobilisation of large numbers of troops in the thick of the autumn wave, who then travelled to the four corners of the globe where they were greeted by ecstatic homecoming parties.' In the case of Covid-19 it has occurred in a more interconnected world than ever before, a world of cheap flights and people being willing to travel more than ever before. Covid-19 just as the Spanish Flu did has benefited from the

²² (Sontag p.48)

²³ (Sontag p. 33)

²⁴Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider* (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 171.

²⁵ (Spinney 2018)

world it occurred in. Covid-19 has been shaped by the way the world is in the 21st century, it would've been a very different story if it had occurred in a less interconnected world. 'What the Spanish flu taught us, in essence, is that another flu pandemic is inevitable, but whether it kills 10 million or 100 million will be determined by the world in which it emerges.'²⁶

In conclusion the current pandemic would not have been on the same scale if we had been more prepared for this inevitability. An inevitability frankly scientists have been trying to inform us of at least as far back as the 1990's. It's not just the fact that we could have prepared more in the past for this inevitability it is also that when it really came time to react to the spread, to take hard actions, to mitigate it, some leaders failed to meet the demand²⁷ and it was the public that suffered as a result. If individuals in power had taken different actions less people would have died from Covid-19. As well as this the press and those in power have continued using the same naming conventions and rhetoric's of the past that would look more at home in 1918 than our present day. We need to acknowledge that war rhetoric is not going to help anyone, the fear and fight against the 'other' is not a responsible rhetoric to use in our modern discourse. We need to change the way we speak about pandemics as just like before once Covid-19 has passed there will be surely a new pandemic sometime in our future.

²⁶ (Spinney 2018)

²⁷ David E. Sanger and others, "He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump's Failure On The Virus", *Nytimes.Com*, 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html>> [Accessed 3 December 2020].

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