

## 2 “Have We La Grippe?”: A Washington Case Study of Reporting the “Russian Influenza” (1889–1890)

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### “The New and Much Talked of Russian Influenza”

On December 18, 1889, an article in the *Evening Star* newspaper in Washington, DC, began with a question and then an observation: “Is the new and much talked of Russian influenza coming to Washington? This question has been troubling a great many people here the last few days.”<sup>1</sup> To explore this situation, a “STAR reporter” went to the city’s health office “to inquire if any cases had yet been reported there.” According to the Registrar of Vital Statistics, an appointed official responsible for maintaining birth and death records in the city, no cases had yet been reported, but it was likely that some would be soon, given that the disease had reached New York City. The registrar stated that the current outbreak of influenza was “nothing new,” as he recalled a similar disease that had swept America in 1841, during the so-called “‘Tyler grip,’ a term applied rather as a joke in honor of President Tyler.” A half-century earlier, America had experienced “a very general epidemic,” but the “effects were not serious although it was an exceedingly troublesome disease.” The registrar stated that the causes of the influenza were not well understood, although he offered some explanations: “It is probably caused by disease germs, microbes or bacillae, but I do not know that they have been thoroughly studied as yet.” After mentioning the most common symptoms, including a stiff neck and a sore throat, the registrar explained how the disease had become an epidemic: “Undoubtedly the rapid spread of the disease is largely caused by the great moisture in the atmosphere that has been so evident during the last few months.” This statement of recent conditions was then broadened to explain the current conditions and make a prediction for the future: “Moisture is the most active element necessary for the growth of microbes and I think that nothing would do so much good in checking the spread of the disease as a season of really dry weather.”

By the time this article was printed on December 18, 1889, the *Evening Star* had been publishing reports on the so-called Russian influenza for more than two weeks. On December 2, 1889, the newspaper had published a first

brief wire services report, which also appeared in many other American newspapers, about “the epidemic of influenza” in St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> In the following weeks, the newspaper reported on disease outbreaks in European cities, including London and Paris, and then on December 16, a front page article about the first American cases in New York city.<sup>3</sup> An *Evening Star* editorial published on December 17 confidently predicted that the disease would not have serious consequences, while two articles on December 18 provided more historical background on influenza as well as more details about the first cases in New York.<sup>4</sup>

The interview with the Registrar of Vital Statistics published on December 18 thus represents a convergence of two important trends in newspaper reporting in the late nineteenth century: first, reporting on important events elsewhere in the world, using wire reports, and second, first-hand reporting by journalists, which included interviews with officials, descriptions of events, and interpretive statements. These two functions could be categorized as reporting at a distance and reporting local knowledge. Both practices involved the construction of knowledge as a journalistic exercise, but the practices differed in important ways. Whereas the reporting of distant events relied on received information, with little opportunity to test the reliability of this news, reporting on the disease in Washington allowed journalists to confirm the information received from other sources, press for answers to questions, and compare multiple sources of authority to determine which were the most credible. Whereas many reports about the Russian influenza in Europe and then in other American cities represented the dissemination of distant news at the local level, which was itself a crucial function of newspapers, the article published on December 18 allowed the journalist to become part of the story—as an observer, an interviewer, and always an interpreter.

This chapter takes advantage of searchable digitized newspaper collections to identify articles about the influenza epidemic in ways that make it possible to trace the arc of reporting across time and space. Yet it is equally dependent on more traditional methods of close reading to explore the meaning of this reporting, the correspondents’ perspectives, and the relationships between stages of reporting. The Russian flu epidemic offers insights into the challenges of observing the everyday because it focuses attention on what distinguishes an epidemic from “everyday” influenza. The Russian influenza of 1889 to 1890 offers a unique opportunity to examine how journalists navigated the transition from a distant to a close event, as reporting on the influenza in the United States evolved from international coverage of a disease in Europe to national reporting of the first cases in the United States to local reporting based on first-hand observations, interviews with health officials and physicians, and even the personal narratives of patients. This transition across time and distance makes it possible to examine newspaper journalism as a form of knowledge discovery, affirmation, transmission, contestation, and dissemination, as journalists at each stage were involved in creating knowledge in the process of reporting it.

This chapter uses the interpretive framework of “outbreak narratives” identified by literary scholar Priscilla Wald, which “follows a formulaic plot” beginning with the identification of an emerging infection, discussion of global networks of transmission, and “chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment.”<sup>5</sup> Wald argues that outbreak narratives have consequences, as they “influence how both scientists and the lay public understand the nature and consequences of infection, how they imagine the threat, and why they react so fearfully to some disease outbreaks and not others at least as dangerous and pressing.” This framework is particularly insightful for a study of newspaper reporting on the Russian flu because the transmission of the disease could be anticipated in its movement from Europe to the United States. Influenza was a familiar disease yet this outbreak seemed potentially different, and the public was aware of contemporary research on diseases such as cholera.

Yet critical engagement with Wald’s analysis of outbreak narratives also calls attention to distinctive elements of the Russian influenza as a particular kind of outbreak: reporters and doctors had to distinguish between “normal” and “epidemic” outbreaks, the disease was not seen as particularly deadly, and influenza was similar to many other diseases in terms of symptoms, treatment, and experience. In this sense, influenza offers a different interpretive challenge than the diseases such as typhus and AIDS which serve as case studies for her analysis. In addition, this chapter examines only one type of media—daily newspapers—whereas Wald draws extensively on fiction, films, books, and newspapers to construct her argument about narratives of disease. Despite these differences, however, the concept of an “outbreak narrative” is very useful for analyzing the specific moment in journalistic practices where reporters first began to notice this unusual disease pattern. The Russian flu “outbreak” is especially well suited to this framework because the disease was known to American doctors, health officials, and even the public because of the frequent and detailed coverage of the spread across Europe.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the outbreak was predictable—yet its scope and severity remained unpredictable. In addition, the Russian flu outbreak was distinctive because it was simultaneously global, national, and local. This chapter focuses on the local reporting but, unlike a localized outbreak of a highly contagious disease, reporting on the Russian flu always recognized that the immediate patterns were mostly similar to patterns observed nationally.

Like most American cities in the late nineteenth century, Washington, DC had several daily newspapers, including the *Evening Star*, the *Washington Post*, and the *National Tribune*, as well as the weekly *Washington Bee*, an African-American newspaper.<sup>7</sup> The *Evening Star* has been selected for this case study because it was the city’s leading newspaper and also because the digitized version is most accessible to scholars researching this time period. Since its founding in 1852, the *Evening Star* had become the most important newspaper in Washington, DC, the capital of the United States, and one of

the most important in the nation.<sup>8</sup> The *Star* was committed to reporting on daily life in Washington, DC, "as a distinct local community," in the words of a later editor, writing retrospectively about this newspaper's first decades.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper recorded "with minuteness the minor personal happenings which constitute local news in the narrowest sense," including births, sicknesses, and deaths, as was the case of reporting on the Russian influenza. The *Evening Star*, according to this editor, "has been distinctively a home paper, a family paper, a sympathetic personal paper for Washingtonians."<sup>10</sup> In the last decades of the nineteenth century, at a time when many newspapers were introducing sensationalist features of "yellow" journalism, editor Crosby Noyes adhered to the principle: "Stick to the facts, and nothing but the facts."<sup>11</sup> Believing that the "modern, penny dreadful" could not compete with "clean, sane, reputable journals" such as the *Star*, editors believed that if the newspaper delivered "the facts," the readers would "have the intelligence to make sense out of them."<sup>12</sup> The editorial purpose of the *Star* was summed up in the phrase: "To be honest, fair and accurate and to fight for Washington."<sup>13</sup>

As was the convention in many American newspapers, individual correspondents were not named, even in the *Evening Star*, which earned a reputation as a "reporter's paper."<sup>14</sup> The phrase, "STAR reporter," often capitalized, appeared in most issues during the period covered in this analysis, December 1889 and January 1890. In some cases, the term would just appear at the start of the article, but in several cases, it reappeared frequently, illustrating how a correspondent became part of the event being reported. On December 5, 1889, for example, when a reporter interviewed merchants complaining about delays in freight shipments, the terms, "STAR reporter" or just "reporter," appeared six times in two columns.<sup>15</sup> One week later, on December 12, 1889, an article about detectives taking photographs of crime suspects included a first-hand account in which the "STAR reporter" described the actions of the police and the response of those arrested.<sup>16</sup> On January 29, 1890, when the *Evening Star* reported on the President's appointment of a new Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, the article included an account of how a "STAR reporter" found Perry Carson, another candidate for the position, at home sick with the flu, and interviewed him about the decision, with the added editorial comment that Carson's laudatory statement was spoken in "the manner of a man who meant precisely the opposite of what he said."<sup>17</sup>

This chapter does not compare reporting in this newspaper with other Washington or national papers, as it focuses on the process of knowledge creation, rather than evaluating the approaches of different journalists or newspapers.<sup>18</sup> Several Washington newspapers are available through digitized full text searchable databases, including the freely-available Library of Congress collection, Chronicling America, and subscription collections from Proquest Historical Newspapers and Readex America's Historical Newspapers. During the week that ended on January 11, 1890, for example, a

keyword search for “influenza” or “grippe” reveals 45 results in *Chronicling America*, 32 of which were from the *Evening Star*, an average use of the words on 5 pages each day, with only a dozen results from 3 other titles. The *Washington Post* reported on the disease at approximately the same rate, although search results from the Proquest Historical Newspaper database are reported by article, not by page, which makes comparisons difficult, so this analysis focuses on just the timing of articles in one newspaper.

A digital humanities approach, including full text search databases and data visualization tools, makes it possible to measure exactly when a local newspaper such as the *Evening Star* began to report on Russian influenza, when this reporting peaked, and when the interest seemed to diminish. As shown by a visualization of the number of pages in the *Evening Star* which included either “grippe” or “influenza” (Figure 2.1), reporting began slowly in early December, increased in the middle of the month, jumped significantly in late December, continued at this high rate through January, and then diminished steadily throughout February. These same tools make it possible to document when reporting about influenza shifted from “everyday” to a pattern distinctive to the conditions of a pandemic, and then back again. From July 1889 to June 1890, the keywords “influenza” or “grippe” appeared on 213 pages of the *Evening Star*. Of this total, 95% appeared in the three months from November 24, 1889 to March 1, 1890, and 55% appeared in the four weeks of peak reporting. The *Evening Star* was published six days a week, with weekday issues containing eight pages and the Saturday paper a full twelve pages. Using the technique of keyword searching reveals that the terms “influenza” or “grippe” appeared on more than one-quarter (28%) of all the pages published by the *Evening Star* during

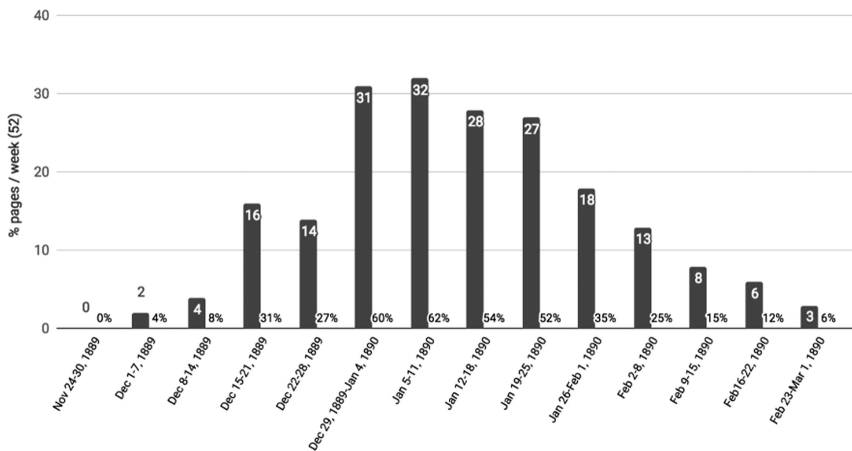


Figure 2.1 *Evening Star*, Washington, DC, keywords “influenza” or “grippe,” weekly results

those fourteen weeks. At the peak of the reporting period, from December 29, 1889 to January 25, 1890, one or other of these search terms appeared on more than half (57%) of the paper’s pages. This quantitative measure confirms what an attentive reader would have noticed, as this newspaper suddenly devoted more and more attention to the disease.

### “Have you got it?”

While this data provides a chronology of reporting on the disease, only a close reading of individual articles allows for a critical analysis of awareness, understanding, and impact. In December 1889 and January 1890, the *Evening Star* in Washington DC published a series of articles by local correspondents that provided a narrative of the influenza’s arrival in the United States’ capital city. These articles transformed the newspaper correspondents into active participants in making the news. By seeking authoritative answers to questions, comparing responses from multiple sources, and communicating their interpretation to readers, the *Evening Star* reporters became active, engaged, and knowledgeable observers of the everyday.

On December 24, 1889, less than a week after the first local report, the *Evening Star* published a short article in which “a STAR reporter” asked Clerk McGinn of the health office “if he had heard of any cases of the grip or influenza in the city.” McGinn responded that he had not, but under existing policies, the health office only heard about “zymotic diseases” when they were listed as an individual’s cause of death:

There may be ten cases of Russian influenza, or diphtheria, or scarlet fever, or any catching disease on a square, but the health department will know nothing about it until someone dies, and it is a matter which should be remedied at once. We should be allowed the authority of search, which might prevent such diseases.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, the reporter sought to connect reports about influenza elsewhere in the world, including the earliest evidence of cases from cities in the eastern United States, with some verification that similar cases had occurred in Washington.<sup>20</sup> In his response, McGinn clearly indicated that until a death was reported as the result of influenza, the health office had no authority to report on cases—a limitation that he clearly saw as an unnecessary constraint on his surveillance powers.

Substantive reporting on the influenza by the *Evening Star* increased on December 28, 1889, with a much longer article under the headline, “Have You Got It?” that began with a series of “burning” questions:

“Is life worth living?” “Is marriage a failure?” “Where did you get that hat?” have all been burning questions of the day, but their time has passed and a mightier holds the supremacy. Go where you will you hear

the question oft repeated: “Have you got it?” and there is no necessity to ask, “Got what?” You know that *la grippe* is referred to.<sup>21</sup>

After a colorful description of how an individual could descend to feeling “dull and heavy” in a matter of hours, the article offered a sub-heading that emphasized the active role of journalists in shaping news of this epidemic: “A Star Reporter at the Health Office.” In this case, however, the reporter employed a deliberate narrative device to trick the reader. This seemingly highly personal mode began with the reporter stating that he “felt the symptoms and considered it his duty to report himself at the health office and be quarantined.” Given the reports of a spreading epidemic, he “expected to find the office in wild confusion,” since, based on “his own personal observation there must be 50,000 cases in the city, and of course the health department would be scared to death.” Instead, he found the office in a state of “placid quietness,” leading to this odd form of reported self-dialogue: “‘It is the calmness of despair,’ murmured THE STAR man, ‘They have given up the ship.’” In fact, Chief Clerk McGinn was talking to a man about the burial of a child, which the reporter assumed was caused by “*la grippe*, of course,” which prompted this colorful response from the “sorrowing father”: “*Lar grip* be blowed: he was kicked by a mule.”

This tragic—or humorous—anecdote sets up the next section of the article, in which the reporter is surprised to discover that no deaths have been reported by McGinn, who echoed, although more emphatically, the statement published just a few days earlier:

Not a one. We know nothing officially of the disease. It has not even been reported as a primary cause of death by pneumonia. The disease is of the infectious order and not contagious, and so in case of a general spread the health department could only aid in a general way by advice and possibly by fumigation with sulphurous acid gas.

A similar response came from Health Officer Dr. Townshend, who told the reporter that he was not sure that the disease had appeared in the city. Although he was treating several patients with seasonal influenza, he expressed concern that “a great many people who really had only heavy colds were afraid it was the dreaded ‘*la grippe*.’” In fact, the 11 deaths from pneumonia recorded in the past week was very consistent with the number of deaths in the same week in previous years, which had ranged from a high of fifteen to a low of two.

Yet the same article provided evidence from numerous Washington physicians who asserted that the disease was prevalent throughout the city, and the reporter included numerous quotations from doctors about symptoms, transmission, sanitary measures, and the likely course of the disease for individuals as well as society. The reporter spoke with one physician who was himself sick, along with nearly every member of his family, with enough

complications to make it serious. The article recounted lengthy statements from four doctors describing symptoms, explaining transmission, and predicting the potential implications of the disease. Despite these detailed accounts of serious symptoms amid widespread cases, however, the article suggested that the disease was not a prevalent danger. In effect, the fear of Russian influenza spread by exaggerated newspaper accounts appeared as the real threat because it prompted individuals to attribute any symptom of illness to this single cause.

### **The power of imagination**

Two days later, on December 30, 1889, a second article, also by an unnamed reporter, pursued a similar question, expressed in the headline, which is used in the title of this chapter: "Have We La Grippe?"<sup>22</sup> In that article, the opening paragraph attributed "all this talk" about influenza to "an epidemic of bad colds," which itself resulted from the unusually wet and warm late December weather. Yet this opening also blamed the media for the city's condition:

Some say that there really is such a thing as the grip in our midst, while among more are the opinion [sic] that the victims are merely suffering from heavy colds and often hearing and reading so much about the fashionable malady have worried themselves half sick, while imagination has done the rest.

Once again, the reporter visited the health office, where he was told "that there was undoubtedly an epidemic of severe bronchial troubles," blamed on the recent unseasonable weather, but "they claimed to have no knowledge of anything more serious." When the reporter spoke with several doctors, however, they offered another explanation: newspapers. A statement from Dr. James Young began with an emphatic denial that any patients had the disease: "It is my opinion that a number of people with bad colds have worried themselves into belief in the popular disease by reading so much about it in the papers of late."<sup>23</sup>

Yet this article took a most interesting turn under the subheading: "The Power of Imagination," which included a long statement from "a gentleman talking with a STAR reporter":

I think that in 99 cases out of 100 there is nothing else the matter with the people who think they have the epidemic than a very natural and ordinary cold in the head. There is nothing unusual about such colds at this time of the year. In fact I don't know that I ever saw a year go by when two-thirds of my friends did not, at this season, suffer from such a cold. But the moment the newspapers call attention to the fact that there is a new disease prevalent in some corner of the world every man who



has the snuffles begins to believe that he has the symptoms of the epidemic. Of course there is undoubtedly some truth in the existence of this peculiar disease. The reports from the other half of the world prove that, but what I contend is that in a vast majority of cases there is nothing extraordinary the matter, but that the sufferers imagine that their cases correspond exactly with the genuine cases of 'La Grippe.' It all comes from the attention which is called to the epidemic in the newspapers. I would venture to say that where there is one genuine case of influenza in this city there are 99 imitations.

This statement, from an unidentified individual who was likely either a physician or a health officer, makes a remarkable connection between the individual and the global, and between the real and the imaginary. Even as this reporter sought to determine the veracity of reports about its prevalence, the article quoted accusations that newspapers themselves were responsible for an exaggerated perception of the scope and severity of the disease.

Four days later, on January 3, 1890, the *Evening Star* published an article, again under a headline framed in the form of a question: "Is It the Grip or Not?"<sup>24</sup> Once again, the report began with an almost philosophical statement of both significance and uncertainty:

With all the interest that has been taken in that impartial imported malady, the Russian influenza, there are many persons, some of them in a position to know whereof they speak, who say that there is no such thing in this city. The matter has come to a point where each one must be his own judge of the matter and decide for himself whether he will believe in its existence or not. Those who think they have or have had it are very sure of the matter, while there are any number of physicians who are of the opinion that such persons have had only ordinary everyday colds.

Even as the reporter, self-identified as "strong in this knowledge," went to the authorities "to see what could be learned there on the subject," the response was once again a denial of the danger of the disease by pointing to empirical data about deaths:

The health officials still seem to be of the impression that the whole matter has been greatly exaggerated; that if the disease really is epidemic in this city it has not yet developed into a single serious case. Deaths from throat and lung troubles during the past month so far from being more numerous than in the corresponding months of previous years have really been below the average, nor is the death rate from these causes apparently on the increase. If, however, there should be in the near future a particularly large number of deaths from pneumonia or

other pulmonary trouble following supposed cases of the grip then it would be safe to say that the grip had really been here. But until something of this sort does occur the health officers say they intend to be firm in refusing to lend their countenance to the new disease.

The report went on, however, to document an unusually high number of cases in specific institutions, including schools, the police force, and the post office, with names of individuals as well as summary counts. Finally, and in distinct contrast to reports from the previous week, the article finished with a more cautionary statement from Health Officer Townshend, under the suggestive heading “Dr. Townshend Yields at Last”:

Dr. Townshend, the health officer, stated this afternoon that the grip is upon us, but he has not yet heard of any serious cases. Notwithstanding the fact that it is said to naturally run into pneumonia, so far as he can hear there are fewer cases of pneumonia than we have had for twenty years at the corresponding season of the year.

Although Townshend’s willingness to consider that the disease had reached Washington, his optimism about pneumonia cases and especially deaths would prove seriously misplaced.

Over the next several days, the *Evening Star* published frequent reports about the growing number of sick residents as well as individual deaths. On January 6, 1890, a reporter turned to pharmacists to determine the number of patients, a topic introduced by the remarkably evocative metaphor:

Quinine, antipyrine, and physicians are in great demand in this city just at present. The doctors’ carriages roll about the streets night and day, and medicine of various kinds rolls just as constantly down the throats of the citizens of the District.<sup>25</sup>

A reporter spoke to “one of the leading druggists in the city,” who had noticed an increased number of prescriptions as well as more patients “dosing themselves,” resulting in a significantly increased demand for quinine and antipyrine, and leading to this assessment:

He thought that the newspaper publicity given to la grippe had the effect of causing people to treat seriously what they would consider at another time an ordinary cold. As soon as a person took a cold he became apprehensive that he was about to have the new disease and either called in a doctor or went to a drug store. The druggists he admitted were doing a big business, and like the doctors were kept busy.

As with the physicians and health officers quoted in earlier reports, this druggist saw the disease in terms of both an experienced condition and a

product of newspaper reporting. That article also concluded with a report of changing attitudes:

The officials at the health office are willing to allow that something is wrong. When a STAR reporter called there today he found a well-known citizen of Washington standing in the front office in a dejected attitude and something of the look of a man who had been hauled through a saw mill. He had just extricated himself from the grip of the la grippe after a siege of twelve days.

For the reporter, the health officers's concession about the seriousness of the situation was best illustrated by a graphic image of "a well-known citizen" barely recovered from a disease that had lasted almost two weeks—a period of time that extended almost precisely back to the first time a reporter had gone to the health office in search of information about the disease, only to be told that it was nothing serious.

Over the next several days, the *Evening Star* continued to report on numerous cases across the city. On January 10, a reporter quoted the health office as observing "no change in the grip situation," yet the details were somewhat contradictory: "It is here in force, with no signs of leaving, but there have been no deaths reported for several days from pneumonia or kindred diseases."<sup>26</sup> Yet just one day later, on January 11, after an even more extensive listing of absences in many schools and government agencies, the city health office reported "nothing new" about the disease.<sup>27</sup>

A significant change in the tone of reporting occurred just a few days later, however, under the dramatic headline:

Spread of the Grip. A Great Increase in the Number of Victims of the Disease. Its Effects Proving Fatal. A Blockade of Mail Matters at the City Post Office. Policemen on the Sick List. Effect of the Disease in Various Quarters.<sup>28</sup>

While the article began with reports from physicians of numerous cases of throat and lung diseases, with an itemized list of cases by cause from the "physicians to the poor," the tone changed abruptly with this statement from Health Office Chief Clerk McGinn:

I have just figured out the mortality from acute diseases of the respiratory organs (pneumonia, bronchitis, and congestion) for the weeks ending January 12 during the past ten years, and I find that the past week's record is more than double that of the highest of the corresponding weeks during that period. Forty burial permits were issued during the week for deaths from acute diseases of the respiratory organs, of which thirty-two were from pneumonia, seven from bronchitis, and one from congestion. In 1880 the deaths from diseases of this class aggregated 18; in 1881, 12; in

1882, 11; in 1883, 10; in 1884, 14; in 1885, 11; in 1886, 10; in 1887, 17, and in 1888, 16.

At that point, data about deaths became part of reporting about the impact of the Russian influenza, not only as a total number, but more importantly in comparison to data about the same time period going back almost ten years. Publishing this statement made it clear that what had been perceived as an unusually widespread and severe outbreak of disease could now be proven as something substantially different from the norm. Whereas earlier perceptions could be dismissed as exaggerations by the newspapers or patients, this data was seemingly proof that the disease was having an unprecedented effect in Washington, DC. While discerning the motives of journalists or editors is difficult, it would appear that listing actual numbers for each year accentuated the real toll of this disease as it was being experienced and observed in early 1890.

### “Fewer cases; more deaths”

One day later, on January 14, 1890, when the health office again reported “nothing new,” the newspaper offered this interpretation: “The number of cases of influenza reported today shows no decrease of the prevailing epidemic” and “There was the usual large number of deaths reported yesterday and today.”<sup>29</sup> The next day, January 15, the *Evening Star* reported: “It is believed by the health officials that the grip or influenza is now on the decrease,” even as the same authorities reported 32 deaths from pneumonia in the previous week: “Most of the cases were of six or seven days’ duration and the majority of them resulted from attacks of influenza.”<sup>30</sup> An even more optimistic statement appeared the next day, January 16:

Health Officer Townshend said this morning that from present indications the influenza was releasing its grip on Washington people. He thought the number of cases of the disease at present was decidedly fewer than the number last week. It is true, he said, that there have been a few more deaths from pneumonia this season than usual, but not near so many as in most of the other large cities. The number of cases he thought was considerably smaller than in any other city in proportion to its size.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas earlier reports had invoked disease patterns elsewhere to warn of potential dangers at the local level, this statement by Townshend served the purpose of emphasizing that Washington had experienced a less severe outbreak of the disease than elsewhere in the United States. Yet the numbers seemed to suggest the continued threat posed by this disease. Of the 15 deaths recorded on January 15, nine were due to respiratory diseases worsened by the epidemic: pneumonia, bronchitis, or consumption (tuberculosis).

The tension between the number of Russian flu cases and the number of deaths was clearly expressed in an *Evening Star* headline on January 17, 1890: "Fewer Cases; More Deaths: The Grip Does Not Seem to Be Increasing, but the Mortality from It Does."<sup>32</sup> Statements from two health officials and comparative data on deaths illustrated the same tension:

Dr. Pool, registrar of the health office, said to a STAR reporter this afternoon that he thought there was a decided decrease in the number of new cases of grip, although he had no official information on the subject. Chief Clerk McGinn said that he knew nothing about the number of cases of the disease, but he did know that the deaths resulting from the grip were not much on the decrease. The average number of deaths reported to the health office daily during the past few years has been about fourteen, but during the prevalence of the present epidemic the average has been more than doubled almost every day.

In other words, even as the health official was recording twice as many deaths each day than the average rates of previous years, the registrar was telling a correspondent that the number of new cases was decreasing—yet he also conceded that "he had no official information on the subject." Of the 21 deaths reported to the health office, only one was attributed to influenza, yet 16 more deaths, approximately 75% of the total, were due to pneumonia, lung congestion, and consumption: "Most of these deaths it is thought resulted from the grip." This article also included one of the first published statements from a physician asking for substantive change in health policy, under the heading "A Physician's Opinion":

There is no way of definitely ascertaining the exact extent of the grip because the physicians, except those who visit the poor, are not required to make a report of any sort, whether there is an epidemic prevailing or not. A physician, speaking to a STAR reporter this afternoon, said he thought the people of Washington were entitled to better treatment by the authorities than they now receive. He thought that in case of any sort of epidemic the physicians should be made to make reports to the health department of the cases they are called in to, of the prevailing disease, and also give the location of the disease. If such was required of them, the doctor said, the health officer would be prepared at all times to give definite information and take such action as might be deemed necessary to check the spread of the disease. While in the present epidemic there may be no particular means of checking the disease, yet at some future time an emergency may arise and then it will be too late to act. Some action should be taken without delay. Washington has the reputation of being a healthy city and there is no reason why the proper steps should not be taken to keep up that reputation.

In that case, the reporter, drawing on nearly a month of regular reporting about the disease, was making a more directly public appeal for better sources of information.

Three days later, on January 20, the *Evening Star* continued to report on seemingly contradictory trajectories, as expressed once again in the headline: “A Larger Death List. The Grip is Departing, but Leaves a Legacy of Fatal Lung Troubles.”<sup>33</sup> After referring to the decreasing, but still large, number of policemen off work due to illness, the article stated bluntly that the mortality rate was higher the week before than in the previous week, with 66 deaths from acute lung troubles, a 50% increase over seven days. Yet the next section cited this statement from the health office: “The grip is decidedly on the wane.” Evidence of this improvement included patients being on the mend as well as summary reports from physicians of the poor, city jails, and the post office. This trend continued in a report on the next day, January 21, in which the total number of deaths was given as having decreased by one-third, although more than half of these were due to lung diseases, including one death attributed to “la grippe-pneumonia.”<sup>34</sup> Although the number of deaths in the preceding forty-eight hours remained high, the number of people being reported as ill was definitely decreasing.

On January 23, under the subheading, “What the Health Officer Says,” the *Evening Star* offered this summary:

Speaking of the prevailing epidemic Health Officer Townshend said to a STAR reporter this morning that the grip was fast dying out, but was leaving visible consequences in the shape of deaths from pneumonia and other bronchial trouble. But the deaths, the doctor said, were on the decrease.<sup>35</sup>

On January 24, the *Evening Star*'s headline offered a clear statement of the disease's trajectory in Washington: “It Is Passing Away. The Grip Has Done Its Worst. The Death List Is Getting Shorter.”<sup>36</sup> It reported that the number of deaths reported daily to the health office had fallen by half, although acute lung disease still accounted for most of those deaths.

On January 25, one month after the first report by a local correspondent, the very same health official returned to the earlier theme of whether the influenza was real—or something created in the words and thoughts of people: “At the health office this morning Chief Clerk McGinn said that the grip seemed to be dying out or else the people were getting used to it and tired of talking of it.”<sup>37</sup> Whereas in late December, McGinn had suggested that no one actually had the influenza, that their symptoms had been inspired by the newspapers, now he seemed to suggest that even people with real symptoms were tired of talking about them.

On January 27, a report in the *Evening Star* continued to predict that the number of cases was decreasing even as health officials reported on persistently high death rates:

“The report of the physicians so far as received show a decided decrease in the number of cases of influenza,” said Health Officer Townshend to a STAR reporter this morning, “but the certificates of death from pneumonia, bronchitis, and other acute diseases of the respiratory organs continue to pour in.”<sup>38</sup>

This same article included the remarkable fact that, in the first three weeks of January, more deaths had been reported to the health office than in any other January on record—even though the numbers did not cover the full month in 1890. Lung diseases accounted for 175 deaths in those three weeks, almost double the highest number ever recorded in January from these same causes. In the prior week, Washington reported 68 deaths from lung diseases, compared to just 23 deaths in the same week two years earlier. Death reports published on January 29 confirmed the unprecedented toll of the disease: “The largest number of deaths ever reported here in a week. The report shows the largest death record for any week during the history of vital statistics in the District.”<sup>39</sup> Whereas the first published reports had emphasized the journalists’ role in discovering and transmitting new information, by that point the newspaper was fulfilling a different, but equally important, function of documenting a shared experience and thus confirming, with data, just how unusual the death rates had been during the epidemic.

### **Vital statistics**

The vital statistics reported every week by the *Evening Star* provide an alternative narrative for understanding the impact of the Russian influenza on Washington, DC.<sup>40</sup> A comparison of weekly tallies for all deaths, and specifically for deaths caused by pneumonia, clearly indicates a steady increase in total deaths during the first three weeks of January, with the peak total of more than 150 deaths, almost half higher than the total when the year began. The percentage of all deaths attributed to pneumonia more than doubled, from 13% at the start of the month to 30% during the peak week. Yet death totals and pneumonia rates fell even faster than they had risen, and by the end of that period, both had returned to the levels observed at the start of the year (Figure 2.2).

A comparison of reporting on the disease and the number of deaths reported is one way to address the issue identified by the health officer at the start of the outbreak: what was the relationship between the actual impact of the disease and the amount of newspaper reporting? (Figure 2.3)

A comparison of the number of pages with the keywords and the total number of deaths reveals a slight lag between reporting and the actual impact of influenza. Whereas reporting peaked during the week ending January 11, a steady and then sharp decline took place over the next several weeks. By contrast, the number of deaths increased steadily through the next two weeks, peaking during the week ending January 25, and then declined

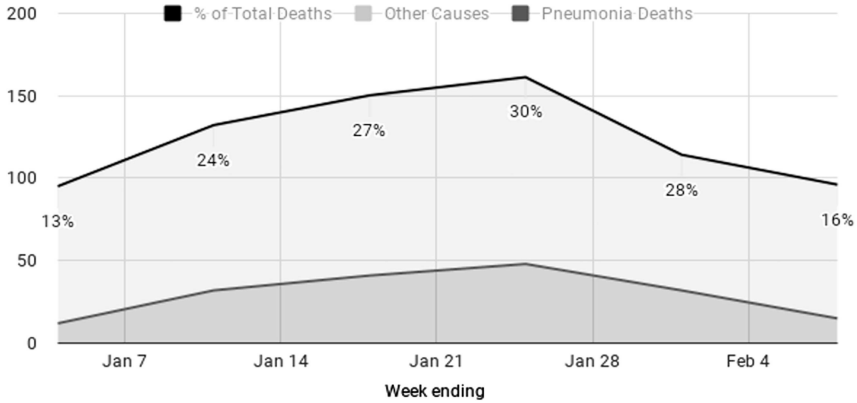


Figure 2.2 Washington, DC, pneumonia deaths as percentage of total, as reported weekly in the *Evening Star*, January–February 1890

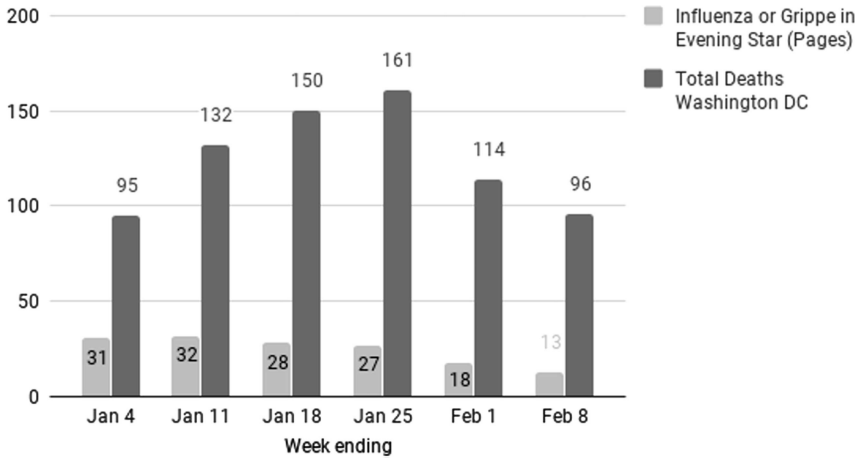


Figure 2.3 Reporting of the keywords “influenza” or “grippe” in the *Evening Star* compared to weekly deaths in Washington, DC

over the next two weeks, reaching the same level during the first week of February as had been reported the first week of 1890.

### Conclusion

This close examination of a series of reports by local correspondents reveals important aspects of reporting on everyday conditions in the context of an



emerging health crisis. Newspapers were instrumental in shaping people's understanding of the Russian flu epidemic by linking outbreaks in different locations, anticipating the spread of the disease, transmitting expert knowledge, and observing effects on society. Journalists shaped the flow of information, locally as well as globally, by telling stories about victims and communicating opinions from physicians. Expert knowledge about influenza moved between and among newspapers, health offices, statistics departments, physicians, and the public. The *Evening Star* contributed to an "outbreak narrative" of the Russian flu, yet this narrative had many layers of meaning, interpretation, and imagination. Everyday reporting on health was disrupted by the anticipated arrival of the disease from across the Atlantic, by the tension between familiar and observed experience and the expert and authoritative knowledge of the health office and physicians, and by the introduction of vital statistics as a way to measure the difference between ordinary diseases and an epidemic outbreak. Yet both the tone of the reports and the quantitative evidence of term frequency suggest that once the influenza outbreak was "contained," again using Wald's useful terminology, disease reporting reverted to the more normal practice of observing the everyday.

In 2020, the entire world seemingly experienced an "outbreak narrative" in response to COVID-19, as the first reports of a disease outbreak in Wuhan, China, rapidly escalated into a global pandemic, resulting in spiking numbers of cases and deaths in many regions. News reports tracked cases across countries, regions, and localities, while public health officials urged caution, recommended sanitary measures, and tried to prevent panic. As the number of positive cases and then deaths rose, the sense of alarm grew, scientists were called upon to provide expert guidance, and health officials increased their efforts to contain the spread of disease and reduce anxiety in the public. At each of these stages, responsible journalists explained symptoms, treatments, and recoveries, described the lives lost, examined public health policies, and questioned the language used by politicians.

The Russian influenza epidemic provides useful historical analogies for the outbreak narrative observed globally in 2020. In three important respects, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has, is, and likely will, follow a different trajectory. First, medical science has advanced significantly, and the accuracy, consistency, and detail of diagnosis is far more reliable now than in the late nineteenth century. Second, public health measures have been more extensive, persistent, and consistent in 2020 than was the case in 1889–1890. At the same time, however, the patterns of denial and defiance, especially in the United States, have also been more pervasive and persistent. Finally, whereas the most acute stages of the Russian influenza epidemic lasted only a few weeks in most regions of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many areas, already exceeded one and a half years—by the time of this writing, in fall 2021, with the potential of more surges in cases and deaths to come. Whereas readers of the *Evening Star* in early 1890 could

confidently determine that the epidemic, which had been intense for some weeks, was really over, we are unlikely to feel a restoration of normal life for months, if not years to come, as a result of COVID-19.

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## Notes

- 1 “Influenza in Washington,” *Evening Star*, December 18, 1889, 5. All citations for the *Evening Star* come from Chronicling America, the database of newspapers from the United States Library of Congress. More information about the *Evening Star* is available from this collection: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/>.
- 2 “Foreign Notes of Interest,” *Evening Star*, December 2, 1889, 6.
- 3 “Foreign Notes of Interest,” *Evening Star*, December 6, 1889, 7; “Foreign Notes of Interest,” *Evening Star*, December 10, 1889, 3; “Other Lands Than Ours. Influenza,” *Evening Star*, 5; “Foreign Notes of Interest,” *Evening Star*, December 12, 1889, 6; “It Is in New York,” *Evening Star*, December 16, 1889, 1.
- 4 “The Great European Influenza Is with Us,” *Evening Star*, December 17, 1889, 1; 4, *Evening Star*, December 17, 1889, 4; “Die Grippe Has Come. The European Sneeze Makes Its Appearance in New York,” *Evening Star*, December 17, 1889, 9; *Evening Star*, December 18, 1889, 4; “Historic Influenza. Epidemics of Sneezes in Other Lands and Years,” *Evening Star*, December 18, 1889, 6.
- 5 Wald, *Contagious*, 2–3.
- 6 Bresalier, ““A Most Protean Disease””; Honigsbaum, *History of Influenza Pandemics*; Mussell, “Pandemic in Print”; Ewing, Kimmerly and Ewing-Nelson, “Look Out”; Ewing, ““Will It Come Here?””
- 7 The Library of Congress has a convenient and detailed history of United States newspapers, searchable by location and title: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>.
- 8 A half-century retrospective was published in 1902, with extensive articles by current editors. Theodore W. Noyes, “A Half-Century Retrospect,” *Evening Star*, special issue, December 2, 1902, 2. For a general history of this newspaper, which includes some discussion of the nineteenth century, see Haskins, *The Evening Star*.
- 9 *Evening Star*, Fiftieth Anniversary Supplement, December 16, 1902, 2.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Similar statements were quoted in Fair, “Crosby S. Noyes,” 242; Kauffmann, *Evening Star*, 17.
- 12 Kauffmann, *Evening Star*, 18.

- 13 *Evening Star*, Fiftieth Anniversary Supplement, December 16, 1902, 2.
- 14 Haskins, *The Evening Star*.
- 15 "The Freight Blockade," *Evening Star*, December 5, 1889, 3.
- 16 "With a Detective Camera," *Evening Star*, December 12, 1889, 5.
- 17 "The New Recorder of Deeds," *Evening Star*, January 29, 1890, 5.
- 18 For comparisons between American newspapers, see Andie Tucher's contribution to this volume, Chapter 3.
- 19 "The Russian Influenza," *Evening Star*, December 24, 1889, 5.
- 20 This approach emphasizes the role of the reporters in confirming the truth of unverified information, which is quite different from the reporters' role in fabricating news, as discussed in Chapter 1 by Petra McGillen and Chapter 3 by Andie Tucher in this volume.
- 21 "Have You Got It?," *Evening Star*, December 28, 1889, 5.
- 22 "Have We La Grippe?," *Evening Star*, December 30, 1889, 5.
- 23 This statement was echoed just a few days later in a complaint from Health Officer Townshend: "no cases have been reported, although it is frequently talked of. There are many cases of influenza and severe colds in the District, and some persons think that because so much has been published as to the grip that they have it." "Dr. Townshend a Doubter," *Evening Star*, January 1, 1890, 5.
- 24 "Is It the Grip or Not?," *Evening Star*, January 3, 1890, 1.
- 25 "The Disease We Hate," *Evening Star*, January 6, 1890, 3.
- 26 "The Weather and the Grip," *Evening Star*, January 10, 1890, 5.
- 27 "Down with the Grip," *Evening Star*, January 11, 1890, 5.
- 28 "Spread of the Grip," *Evening Star*, January 13, 1890, 5.
- 29 "The All-Pervading Grip," *Evening Star*, January 14, 1890, 5.
- 30 "The Grip's Victims," *Evening Star*, January 15, 1890, 5.
- 31 "Decline of the Grip," *Evening Star*, January 16, 1890, 5. The newspaper continued to report on influenza victims elsewhere in the world and especially in the United States, as in an article published on this same day, entitled, "Malady La Mode," which described victims in England, Canada, Greece, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Maryland. "Malady La Mode," *Evening Star*, January 16, 1890, 6.
- 32 "Fewer Cases; More Deaths," *Evening Star*, January 17, 1890, 5.
- 33 "A Larger Death List," *Evening Star*, January 20, 1890, 2.
- 34 "The Grim Grip," *Evening Star*, January 21, 1890, 5.
- 35 "Men Who Have the Grip," *Evening Star*, January 23, 1890, 5.
- 36 "It Is Passing Away," *Evening Star*, January 24, 1890, 5.
- 37 "The Fatal Grip," *Evening Star*, January 25, 1890, 5.
- 38 "Less Grip; More Pneumonia," *Evening Star*, January 27, 1890, 5.
- 39 "The Grip Is Declining," *Evening Star*, January 29, 1890, 3.
- 40 "The Grip," *Evening Star*, January 8, 1890, 5; "Thirty-two Deaths from Pneumonia," *Evening Star*, January 15, 1890, 3; "Vital Statistics," *Evening Star*, January 22, 1890, 8; "The Grip Is Declining," 3; "Vital Statistics," *Evening Star*, February 5, 1890, 2; "Vital Statistics," *Evening Star*, February 13, 1890, 8.

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