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Choate

The Anatomy of an Article: Spanish Flu News and Modern Parallels

The Spanish flu was a pandemic that broke out around 1918, lasting until 1920. Over its course, it infected hundreds of millions of people while killing roughly 50 million. It is easily among the deadliest pandemics ever, and history certainly shows this. Whether it ranges from primary to secondary sources, or newspapers to books, we have a lot of media texts to scavenge through that tell us countless pieces of one massive story, all while showcasing distinct news telling practices.

The particular article I have presented here, a fragment of *The Atlanta Constitution* (specifically the copy published on October 6th, 1918), details the story of a Georgian drug store, namely its whole workforce, having fallen ill with the virus. The article continues, mentioning how the entire town had been put under quarantine, and that despite the numerous severe cases, there had thankfully been no deaths yet. Is this a very brief article? Undoubtedly. But is it to-the-point and informative? Absolutely. The overall structure and pacing of this article is honestly not far off from the types of articles we see today, especially when it comes to those that describe the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis. In order

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The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945); Oct 6, 1918; ProQuest
pg. B10

BARWICK QUARANTINED; SPANISH "FLU" RAGING

A Spanish influenza epidemic has developed at Barwick, Ga., and the doctor, druggist and drug store clerks are all ill with this disease, according to a report received at The Constitution office last night. The stores have been closed and the entire town placed under quarantine.

Various towns in the vicinity were appealed to and finally a druggist from Quitman, Ga., went to the rescue. Thirty severe cases have developed, but as yet there have been no deaths.

An appeal was finally sent to Atlanta for doctors and nurses. Dr. Abercrombie has not as yet received word, but says that the machinery is complete to take care of any emergency of this kind even to help from Washington if necessary.

—Buy Liberty Bonds.—

to analyze what this article sets out to do and affirm how exactly it equates to modern news, the article should be broken down section by section to comprehend its full structure.

To begin, we immediately witness the powerful title practically screaming at us with its “Spanish ‘Flu’ Raging”. The title is utterly key to draw in viewers, as it leads readers in with its precise summation of events with the “Barwick Quarantined” part, and continues with the more impactful and perhaps even tense title phrasing. When we start reading more, we see that the first paragraph is clearly meant to present the main event that has occurred. As seen with this article, the drug store incident is concisely stated with a minimal scale intact. But as we progress further, we start to see a broadened sense of scope. The middle section of the article is the direct follow-up to the primary event, giving readers the “big picture” details. As such, it talks about other towns and areas, as well as bringing up the aforementioned point about no current deaths. Finally, the third paragraph is framed with its “what now?” type of response, naming options to help out with any potential emergencies. Once again, the article has branched out while still adhering to its main point and story. But what is the intent behind this careful layout?

As we can see, through the meticulous structure of this article, it’s clear that the overall objective of this newspaper piece is simply to inform the people about current events, while giving any and all relevant information. And this objective is exactly what we see across perhaps every newspaper article, past or present. When it comes to COVID-19 news, we can recognize similar patterns and intent. The news is widespread and influential, and will let us hear about anything akin to what the above article talked about. If a drug store has a virus problem, we’ll hear about it. If a large corporation has a virus problem, we’ll hear about that too. If a celebrity gets infected, you best believe people will soon be informed about that as well. The news, specifically its composition and purpose, hasn’t changed much at all, and it likely never will.