

Examining an old New York Times article explaining the New York City Health Commission's response to the "Spanish flu" influenza virus has been a surprisingly relevant and enlightening experience. Released on October 5th in 1918, this article contains many parallels to the modern moment; some expected, and others not.

The central newsworthy piece of information within this article is the release of new orders by the New York City Health Commission in response to a statement by the Surgeon General recommending actions to curtail the spread of influenza. In this central aspect of the story I found the first similarity between the pandemic of the past and today: although implementing most of the suggested actions, the city's Health Commission chooses to ignore the recommendations for closing churches and schools. Furthermore, the federal government outwardly states that it does not have the power to "close down" nationally or impose these regulations itself; it is left up to the states to secure themselves. Both of the factors are somewhat similar to today in terms the disconnect between federal and state. The federal government does not issue any national orders, but yet releases official recommendations to state governments and individuals. Additionally, there is a wide breath of discretion as to whether or not a state follows these recommendations. One would think that given the relative federal influence during this era (I'm thinking of the mobilization of our economy and society for WWI) and the supposed purposefully small oversight in federal government authority with today's Republican party that the national response to a pandemic would look drastically different. However, in a lot of ways it looks the same.

Thinking much smaller scale, the article later talks about forbidden individual behavior within certain high-risk environments (notably theaters and churches). It talks about the Health Commission prioritization the elimination of “sneezers, coughers, and spitters”, and their willingness to “back up” businesses that forcibly remove offenders from their premises. In an obvious way, this reminds me of the seemingly 100 or so videos one can see of an individual freaking out (and often being removed) when they refuse to wear a mask within a business that requires one.

Although there are a number of other similarities within the article, even these two allow me to reflect on the current moment. The main feeling I have when doing so is one of disappointment; one would think our contemporary response to a pandemic would be unrecognizable from how we responded 100 years in the past. In fact, before this recent example, I thought us somehow beyond even having any pandemic at all. In considering that both of these are far from the truth, I’ve come realize that pandemics are a modern problem that the world is (at least in part) unequipped to handle. We have a lot of work to do to deal with this type of issue and I’ve come to realize that this work doesn’t get done simply via the distance of time.