How The Straits Times covered past pandemics

Fake news, forum letters and strippers – some articles have echoes today, while others are very much of their time.

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"Singapore Flu Scare", proclaimed the headline of the May 7, 1917 edition of The Straits Times.

But that was not the worst ever outbreak – that dubious honour belongs to the 1918 so-called Spanish flu pandemic.

News coverage of outbreaks across a century gives not only historical context but also an insight into the evolution of local media.

In 1917, when the front page was typically devoted to advertisements, influenza news was usually relegated to page one or right. Reporting from World War I, the British government would not have had much time for the ravages of the outbreak upon its far-flung colonies, and information on the period from the perspective of one of its colonial subjects remains sparse.

In contrast, the 1917 pandemic hijacked the headlines, taking place as if it did amid the political turmoil of Singapore moving towards independence.

Reports show how the disease struck Singaporeans from all walks of life, from the Singapore Telephone Board’s female operators, known as “hello girls”, to the groups of Rome’s influenza stage show, 20, of which contracted it in one day when the Singaporeans surrounded them at a lavish ball held in the city’s Public Hall.

Being on the front lines of disease reporting had its own toll. On May 9, 1917, ST reported that 180 of its employees had contracted the virus over the past few days.

Glasgow studies researcher Liew Kai Khim observes that despite a similar difference in the flow of information – the population in 1917 was considerably less large than the population today and would have received more news not from their families or friends than print news – some things do not change.

Fake news, for instance, proliferated then as it does now. In 1918, rumours that the flu could be prevented by eating boiled pumpkin, potatoes andccd charcoal caused the prices of these items to rise. In 1919, gossip spread across China and Europe that the pandemic had been caused by “a German bomb test from Russia”.

"The Straits Times" (ST) featured a 1917 front page on May 9, 1917, with its story on the influenza outbreak. ST’s front page from May 9, 1917, featured the headline "Singapore Flu Scare" and a story about the outbreak.

Top and above: Readers’ letters to The Straits Times in October 1917 about family visits and school closure amid the Spanish flu pandemic. PHOTO: ST FILE

Left: The Straits Times front page on May 9, 1917, with its story on the influenza outbreak. ST’s front page from May 9, 1917, featured the headline "Singapore Flu Scare" and a story about the outbreak.

"It is important that these incidences are documented not just for current but also future generations to learn from these past practices and understand, in hindsight, why certain things were done in certain ways," he says.

"Obviously, every pandemic is going to be different. It’s really an adaptation exercise. But we can look at some of these successful measures and plan for the future."

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