

A Tragic of Humanity, Not written
A Review of the 1918 Flu Pandemic
Literature Research Process

Nathan Schultz

HIST 297

Prof. Ferrell and Mr. Bales

April 23, 2020

Abstract

This paper will cover the most efficient way to write about and understand the literature on a topic through my experience of conducting research on the 1918 flu pandemics literature. First, this paper will cover how to find sources. These sources will be found through digital means and using things such as subject headings and subject encyclopedias and by physical means by searching book stacks in libraries and by searching the bigger graphs in books. This is all followed by a description and list of examples on establishing the context of that content. This context includes author backgrounds, general information about the topic, and explanations around anniversary events. The section also discusses the importance of understanding that context with the guards to understand the literature and a holistic perspective. The actual process of reading and understanding and looking for themes is then discussed in detail, followed by a total description of what the process is and to what research methods need to be conducted to form an effective and efficient paper.

One of the deadliest plagues in human history that killed over 30-100 million people and infected over a billion people lacks the impact on literature that it should have.¹The 1918 influenza pandemic's scholarly literature is surprisingly small for being one of the most catastrophic events in the history of humanity. Most works are recent additions, published mostly in the 2000s and 2010s. The quest to find that literature has been an easy process, thanks to using proper research tools like subject encyclopedias and subject headings and proper research into the context of those works. **Following the current academic resources and conducting well-informed research methods makes it possible to find the sources to analyze the literature of the 1918 flu pandemic.**

The question, how to find sources, is answered by using academic resources to one's advantage. When writing a literature review, the finding of monographs or works written solely on the topic is key to the research. A researcher should use subject encyclopedias and subject headings to find the literature. Examples of a subject encyclopedia include *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History* edited by Mitchell Newton-Matza, a subject encyclopedia that tells the researcher what books he/she needs for finding a literature on a topic. These subject encyclopedias are foundations for finding literature. In addition to subject encyclopedias the use of subject heading in digital search also assists in finding sources. For example, I used the subject heading "influenza epidemic 1918 through 1919" with various modifications, such as "influenza history 20th century?" as well as "influenza epidemic 1918 through 1919 history." Using those different subject headings I was

¹Phillips, H., H. Killingray, Killingray, David, and NetLibrary, Inc. *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 New Perspectives*. Routledge Studies in the Social History of Medicine;(New York: Routledge, 2003.)

able to find various monographs that were hidden in my initial searches. One of those works I discovered was Laura Spinney's Book *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*. Published in 2017, it was the only work in the catalog with the subject heading "Influenza Pandemic, 1918 -1919 history". Searching through these databases and catalogs at the University of Mary Washington library shed some light on what the literature is on. When researching the 1918 pandemic, I found a handful of monographs on the pandemic itself, but my search into just the monographs was just scratching the surface of the literature. When I was searching through Quest and journals I found numerous medical journals and journal articles regarding the pandemic. This made me realize where most of the attention of the disease is. The majority of the literature written on the 1918 flu pandemic is medically focused and not and not focused on the social, economic and so on aspects of the disease. By conducting other research into other categories of literature can surface steps to a conclusion about the literature on a topic

Using the proper resources such as subject encyclopedias and subject heading in a digital database one can find the right sources such as I have.

Another way to find monographs and general subject books is to physically or virtually look at where the books are located in the library. While searching on the virtual shelf, I found the book *Epidemic and Peace, 1918* by Alfred W. Crosby published in 1976. The book was not in the same subject headings or found in a general search of the database. Another way to besides using academic resources is by reading the books themselves and looking at their bibliographies. Contained within those bibliographies might be common sources cited that can represent a seminal text on the topic. Finally, during my research on the topic I watched some documentaries to gain context and found a reference to John Barry's *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the*

Deadliest Plague in History published in 2004, verifying my use of the book. The process of seeking out those works is to review the literature on a topic that comes in different styles and methods are used to find the correct sources.

Context is also an important issue when conducting a literature review. To understand the surrounding events and the time itself is critical to understanding a topic. For example when understanding the 1918 flu pandemic one must also understand World War I and the suppression of the press during the war to be able to evaluate the sources for the literature. Such an example can provide evidence for why there is not a lot written about 1918 unlike World War I. I was able to understand the context of my literature by watching a series of documentaries provided through the library to understand the topic in its entirety. The context of the writing of literature itself also can aid in understanding it properly. With my research as an example, the 1918 flu pandemic research and literature has a gap in the late 1900s. When approaching the centennial event in 2019 more is written on the topic and in 2018, there's even a seminal piece that was published. *Pale Rider* was referenced as a fantastic source for the pandemic and is one of the one or more seminal pieces written in the past few years. So there is an increasing amount of literature when approaching Centennial events, and understanding that also adds to the understanding that literature itself. Because without understanding that context you have a situation where it would almost seem as if there is an unexplained gap within the writing on the topic, but instead it is approaching an important anniversary such as a centennial event.

Once the sources are found one needs to conduct background research on the authors to explain their conclusion and perspective. When it comes to the biographical information on authors of monographs of the 1918 flu pandemic, a large number have medical backgrounds. In

Pale *Rider*, the author Laura Spinney has a background of an undergraduate degree from Durham University and is a self-described scientific journalist.² These sources on biographical information can be found in the master genealogical index, as well as content on the author's own website or bios within their books. The difference between a trained historian with a Ph.D. versus a medical-focused author can demonstrate bias in the work and how it can be skewed in different ways. An example of this would be that a medical focused author would tell the story of medical professions and how the disease spread with medical data. While a social historian would tell a story focused on the effect of the plague on society as a whole using primary accounts. These two different views produce different interpretations on the same primary sources meaning there is a great effect in the literature. There is a book I discovered, *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 New perspectives* edited by David Killingray Ph. D published in 2003 that is a multi-pronged series of articles about the pandemic. This is the only monographic source that I found that contained a variety of non-medically focused authors. The articles contained in the book approach the pandemic differently since some articles focus on economics or societal changes and not the medical spread of the contagion.

When context is considered, the focus on the literature is from a medical perspective that tells me that what authors are writing about is how it affects the world in a medical way effectively offering an idea of what the literature is on. There are over a thousand medical Journal articles reviewing the spread, epidemiology, and deadliness of the 1918 flu pandemic and most of the authors have medical backgrounds tell research that the medical world is concerned with the disease, and not the social or economic. With the context of the topic one can

² Spinney, Laura. "About." Laura Spinney, www.lauraspinney.com/about/

also explain general themes and the author's approach to ideas. The 1918 pandemic, by the high estimates, killed more people than World War I and World War II combined, but its literature is drastically different from those wars. The 1918 pandemics focus on the medical world, and through conducting biographical research on the authors of the monographs one can arrive at a partial conclusion about the literature of the contagion.

The context about the date of the disaster and publication dates of the literature can also assist in the understanding of the literature as well. Such gaps in the literature can be explained with a time index in mind. The events surrounding the 1918 pandemic tell the reason why there is a lack of literature on such a catastrophic event in human history. The 1918 flu is overshadowed by other events such as World War 1 then the Great Depression, making it so the historic focus was on those events and not the pandemic. This can explain why the research is so medically focused since there were other events surrounding the pandemic that overshadowed it. With past examples of historical neglect the present has an effect to bring attention to topics. Such as modern pandemics can bring attention to ones of the past. The discussion on the SARS pandemic did increase interest and writing about the past pandemics. With the COVID-19 situation there has been an increase in articles written about the 1918 pandemic than before the current pandemic started. Through taking events around a topic as well as current events are granted an ability to be able to understand why more publications were different times or why a topic was not written on as much as others.

To read and to understand the sources is what makes the literature review important. For example in the Citno article that it was a holistic view of the literature of the time of its writing and described each piece with a little bit of research to attach to it. Citno does a review of

military history and offers his conclusion on what is written in his field. That method is exactly what an individual inspiring to accomplish a literature review should do. The individual should figure out each author's background to understand each one of their approaches on the subject matter. By reading the chapters of the book and book reviews on the selected books, conclusions about literature can be drawn by discovering the opinions of the authors.. For example if all authors write about the history of memory regarding the 1918 flu pandemic then a common theme about the literature is how it is viewed commonly as a forgotten plague. It is also critical to understand that a review of literature is mostly the view of monographs. That the collecting of monographs and understanding of those monographs is what makes the literature review important and relevant. **Once all the groundwork of finding the sources and understanding context is completed one must read the sources found and draw themes and conclusions from those works to enable a form of researched literature review.**

When writing a literature review it is necessary to conduct a deep search for literature like monographs. That consists of a sequential process that will end in the best result. Using resources such as subject encyclopedias and subject headings to be able to find the source. Additionally to find the sources that need to look into alternative ways of finding such as findings sources physical or virtual on the libraries shelves. The reading of books bibliographics can contain common sources that lead to a wider literature. This then followed by the searching of biographical information and understanding the context of the authors and the times of written in. Followed by the context of the topic the world that these books were written in to explain gaps or anomalies. By using procedures and the process, a well-informed, well-made, solid research paper about a topic can be conducted and proven effective.

Honor Pledge

“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.”- Nathan Schultz

Bibliography

- Barry, John M. *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*. New York: Viking, 2004.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976
- Davies, Pete. *The Devil's Flu: The World's Deadliest Influenza Epidemic and the Scientific Hunt for the Virus That Caused It*. 1st American ed. New York: Henry Holt &, 2000.
- Foley, Caitriona. *The Last Irish Plague the Great Flu Epidemic in Ireland 1918-19*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011.
- Great Events: 1900-2001*. Pasadena, California, 2002.
- Kolata, Gina Bari. *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.
- Nash, Jay Robert. *Darkest Horse: A Narrative Encyclopedia of Worldwide Disasters from Ancient Times to the Present*. Pocket Books, 1977.
- Newton-Matza, Mitchell. *Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2014.
- Pettit, Dorothy Ann, and Janice. Bailie. *A Cruel Wind: Pandemic Flu in America, 1918-1920*. Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Timberlane Books, 2008.
- Phillips, H., H. Killingray, Killingray, David, and NetLibrary, Inc. *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 New Perspectives*. Routledge Studies in the Social History of Medicine; 12. London; New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Spinney, Laura. "About." Laura Spinney, www.lauraspinney.com/about/
- Spinney, Laura. *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*. First US ed. 2017.