Many of the stories about the film industry during the COVID-19 crisis have concentrated on the closure of movie theaters and possibly the end of theatrical distribution. Other stories have also focused on celebrities in lock down, particularly what seems to be the never-ending paparazzi photos of Ben Affleck and Ana de Armas walking their dogs and shopping in masks. While reading this coverage, my first thought, as someone who works regularly with historical digitized periodicals, is how did newspapers and the trade press cover the shuttering of movie theaters during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918? I also wondered about the coverage of film stars during this time. With access to the Media Digital History Library and Newspapers.com, I began to survey stories on movie theaters and film stars during the Spanish Flu pandemic in order to draw a historical comparison to the current media coverage of the COVID 19 crisis.

From this survey, I found several articles starting in the fall of 1918 about what was termed as the “flu ban,” which had a large impact on the movie business in towns and cities across North America with intermittent bans on movie theaters occurring for years as the flu virus hit different communities. Most of the bans happened in the fall of 1918 and lasted for at least a couple of months in each location. As the flu came and went through each town and city, bans on social gatherings would be enacted, and I found mentions of periodic flu bans at theaters into the early 1920s.

As with today, it was not only exhibition but also production that was impacted. A story in The Moving Picture World in November 1918 outlined how the west coast studios were dealing with flu bans. The article reported that most studios were curtailing production and following the model adopted by Lasky studios, which was to layoff workers without pay for four weeks and
then rotate employees when their current productions were finished shooting, allowing for productions to be delayed for release.

Figure 1: Story on a flu ban at theaters in Topeka, Kansas in the winter of 1920. The Topeka State Journal, February 10, 1920, 1.

Many of the reports in trade journals noted that exhibitors were using the time to renovate their theaters, although many others were also faced with financial hardships due to the ban. It appears that many theaters across North America laid off their employees without pay. In Winnipeg Canada, exhibitors asked the city for $23,000 in compensation due to the closures and noted that several American cities had rebated tickets and taxes so exhibitors could pay their employees.

At first many exhibitors were on board with flu bans. In Toronto, Canada it was reported in *Motion Picture News* that exhibitors were consulted directly about the closures and were happy to comply. Although the Secretary of the Motion Picture Exhibitors Protective Association
of Ontario noted that he hoped that officials would also partially close stores and for some unknown reason facilitate the sale of stimulants to help treat the illness.

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After their initial acceptance, many theater owners tried to fight flu bans in court and even flaunted the regulations by remaining open. One theater manager in Butte, Montana fought against a second flu ban by arguing that all essential businesses not just theaters should be closed if officials were concerned about the epidemic, he also noted that the air in theaters was “better than the street” due to ventilation systems, and that the new flu cases in his city did not constitute an epidemic. Exhibitors also sought compensation from exchanges and in Los Angeles a petition was circulated requesting rental rebates during the flu ban, and it was reported in Motion Picture News that 50 percent of exchanges promised to rebate rents for
theaters in Los Angeles while 25 percent gave partial rebates, and the rest of the exchanges declined to take any action.

When the bans were lifted newspapers played an important role in advertizing reopening of theaters. *Motion Picture News* published a story on how newspapers and theaters were cooperating to effectively advertise re-openings (figure 4). Studios also helped theaters to market their reopenings with special advertising for exhibitors as seen in this advert in *The Moving Picture World* (figure 5). When theaters reopened drugstores advertized protective masks, and I found advertizements for nasal douches that were recommended for people attending theaters or social gatherings (figure 6).
Two Newspapers Show Cooperation with Theatres When the “Flu” Ban Is Lifted

Every week there come along new evidences that the theatres of the country are being more and more converted to advertising, and there are more evidences of the fact that progressive newspapers are trying to cooperate for the benefit of all concerned.

Within the past few weeks we have printed a number of evidences of advertising that houses in various sections of this country and Canada did during the time that they were closed. Now come along at least two cities where it is shown that the newspaper and the theatres cooperated in taking full advantage of lifting the “flu” ban. These are Denver and Topeka, Kan.

In Denver the Post grouped all of the motion picture advertising possible on one page and across this was run the line, "Hurrah! The Flu Ban Is Lifted." Directly under this followed a statement of the fact that all of the houses were to be opened Monday, and then mentioning some of the attractions. An especially good sentence used in this connection was: "Off with the bedroom slippers and on with your wraps, out of the world of death existence into the world of life—the world of music and wholesome entertainment."

This, of course, saved the individual theatres the necessity of making reference to the opening order in their displays and so they could use all of their customary space to covering the attractions themselves.

In Wichita the Daily Capital had drawn especially a seven-column display showing the curtain of closing being pulled back, revealing a lighted theatre. The greater part of the type is devoted to telling how willingly the theatres cooperated with the health authorities, and even announcing that if it was necessary the houses would be willing to close voluntarily for another four weeks.

Only a small portion of the space was used to give the names of the theatres and under these were the names of the stars and the titles of the pictures in which they would be seen. The fuller announcements of the pictures, vaudeville and legitimate offerings were carried in the usual section of the paper.

While we are without the details, we'd take a lot on the statement that the newspapers themselves are responsible for the insertion of these displays—that is, it was done on their initiative. It is an unfortunate fact that the exhibitors in most cities are so jealous of each other that they cannot get together on cooperating advertising of this sort, but an enterprising newspaper can get them in.

Such things as these seem rather local and unimportant in passing, but when one considers that more and more such things are being done all over the country week after week there is certainly a lesson there.

If the advertising managers of every newspaper in the country could see such items as this which are appearing in the Motion Picture News from time to time we believe that there would result a greater effort on their part. They would lay constructive plans for interest in the motion picture manager in advertising and they would provide the proper sort of cooperation so that all parties concerned would make money from the venture. More and more newspapers are coming to realize that the initiative rests with them.

The enforced closing of the theatres made the newspapers realize that the motion picture advertising meant something to them in the way of revenue. Most newspapers have taken this advertising as a matter of course, but when it was absent it hurt. And then, too, many managers took stock of themselves while their doors were shut and we expect the “flu” to have had one good result—the conversion of more exhibitors to the necessity of intelligent advertising.

If the Allies had been like the fellow who stops advertising when he does not get immediate results, where would they have been now?

Figure 4: Motion Picture News, Nov-Dec 1918, Volume 18, 3214.
Figure 5: The Moving Picture World November 23, 1918, 792.

Figure 6: Advertisement in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, January 17, 1919, 3.
Film stars were also impacted by the flu pandemic. Harold Lockwood was one of the first stars to die of the Spanish Flu and many other film stars were infected. One of the most publicized cases was that of Mary Pickford who contracted the flu in the winter of 1919 (figure 7).

Figure 7: Story on Mary Pickford’s illness from the Santa Cruz Evening News January 8, 1919, 1.
This is only a cursory glance of the digitized newspaper and trade press coverage surrounding movie-going and celebrity culture during the flu pandemic of 1918, and for further details on how it impacted the industry as a whole see Richard Koszarski’s article in *Film History*. After looking through these articles, it was interesting for me to see connections between the coverage of COVID 19 and the Spanish Flu. Like with today, there was first a level of acceptance of flu bans in many locations, but then many tried to fight the bans. It is also notable that many companies did not pay their laid off employees and there were not protections for workers. Also, we can see a connection between misinformation spread about transmission and treatment as well as people downplaying the seriousness of the disease as a mechanism to fight flu bans. What was most surprising to me was to see how long flu bans occurred throughout North America as there were resurgences after 1918 of both the Spanish Flu as well as different strains of deadly influenzas. After flu bans were lifted, the trade press reported that movie fans were “show hungry” and it was reported that patrons returned to movie theaters in droves. AMC is currently banking on *Tenet* and *Mulan* to bring people back into their theaters in July, but it remains to be seen if today’s audiences will be as interested in returning to theaters as moviegoers were after the flu pandemic of 1918.