

The sensationalist press and science

Assis Chateaubriand's evening newspaper highlighted technology as part of an agenda to overcome Brazilian "backwardness"

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PUBLISHED IN MAY 2013

In the 1950s, when the term "UFO" had just entered the vernacular, flying saucers were reported to be seen soaring over Praça da Sé, the main public square in downtown São Paulo. The arrival of a radium bomb "for the first time in South America, containing ten grams of the metal," was presented with a bigger headline than that for an article about a civil servant strike against the eight-hour work day. Residents of the state of São Paulo were warned that "blood boils at an altitude of 63,000 feet," a frightening prospect that would delay "the battle to conquer a new world." In a country devoid of magazines specializing in science communication and where the radio was the leading means of mass communication, science enjoyed free run in the pages of *Diário da Noite*, a São Paulo evening newspaper that was one of the key publications of Diários Associados, Assis Chateaubriand's powerful media empire.

"Like many others back then, Chateaubriand's agenda was to achieve national union through the modernization of Brazil. He believed that this necessarily demanded an end to the 'ignorance' of the masses, whether this might entail attacking spiritism and African-based religions – which he referred to as 'voodoo' – or whether it would involve using science to overcome Brazilian 'backwardness,'" explains historian Mariza Romero of the Pontifical Catholic University in São Paulo (PUC/SP). "*Diário da Noite* started featuring scientific information for lay readers who had no familiarity whatsoever with technology. What's interesting is that the paper didn't have a set page or supplement devoted to the topic but inserted

science in the middle of the police, political, and sports sections, and oftentimes pasted it in the headlines, too," says Romero.

Romero, who first studied this sensationalist newspaper's role in religious, social, and police matters in her book *Inúteis e perigosos* ("Useless and Dangerous"; Educ/FAPESP), has now analyzed the paper's scientific agenda in *Divulgação científica e imprensa popular* ("Science Communication and the Popular Press"). "From 1950 to 1960, *Diário da Noite* managed to engage in science communication aimed at educating the public that was more comprehensive than many of the more formal, specialized supplements and sections that were appearing in the Brazilian press but reached only a very limited audience."

Chateaubriand's evening paper was tinged with sensationalism right from its start, in 1925. Financed by businessmen, captains of industry, and ranchers from São Paulo, by the 1950s the paper boasted state-of-the-art printing presses, experienced professionals, and international writers. It published heavy-hitting stories and first-hand news, but the police pages and tales of scandal got the spotlight. With a print run of 70,000 and two editions, its circulation vied with that of São Paulo's top papers.

Romero explains, "*Diário da Noite* forged strong bonds with the poorer classes. Because of redemocratization and the growth of consumption, these sectors began to be seen as playing a leading role in political engagement on the one hand, and as classes that needed the guardianship of the government on the other."

Accordingly, she points out that, while the paper declared itself to be the "people's

Announcing the arrival of a radium bomb to staff at a hospital in São Paulo, and Brazilian scientists' discussions about the hydrogen bomb





defender” through its support of popular demands, it also maintained ties with upper-class sectors, who were worried about the emergence of the lowest classes. “Because of its alleged ties to the common people, *Diário da Noite* did not position itself openly against the struggle of the masses. But the paper regularly made it clear just who would have no place in the new day then dawning and who would be left out of modernity, even though they had been invited to join in.”

From the developmentalist perspective adopted by Brazil’s federal administration after the demise of the dictatorial *Estado Novo*, science was presented to society as a vital tool in the process of leading the country toward economic progress and the longed-for modernity. Furthermore, in 1950s Brazil, innovations such as home appliances, cars, and agricultural machinery were increasingly accessible to a budding national consumer market. Science was at the service of humanity, as some advertisements said. “One thousand, nine-hundred highly skilled technicians have created the aerodynamic Vigorelli ‘super machine’ just for you,” boasted a sewing-machine ad that ran in *Diário da Noite*. In another ad, a new type of paint was hailed as a “thrilling discovery in chemistry,” and the reader was invited to “verify the new product’s remarkable features.”

“Under the Juscelino Kubitschek administration, Brazil was excited about developmentalist thinking, and this

Science was seen as playing a vital role in leading Brazil toward progress and modernity

broader ideological basis provided the underpinnings for the idea that technological development would make it possible to open the only path to true economic independence for Brazil,” observes Luisa Massarani, of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation’s Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, in her book *Um gesto ameno para acordar o país: a ciência no Jornal do Commercio (1958-1962)* (“A Gentle Gesture to Wake up the Country: Science in the *Jornal do Commercio*,” 1958-1962), published by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation. Walter Oswaldo Cruz, coordinator of the *Jornal do Commercio*’s science section, stated in the first edition: “Brazil will not achieve development without technical personnel, and technical personnel are the human product of science.”

“Brazilian science communication has its singularities. The government never invested heavily in science and technology or in science education, which left to the media the task of introducing science to a public whose level of technological literacy was low,” explains Ana Maria Ribeiro de Andrade, researcher at the Museum of Astronomy and Related Sciences (Mast) in Rio de Janeiro and author of *A dinâmica da ciência na sociedade* (“The Dynamics of Science Within Society,” Hucitec/Mast). “So, some individual efforts notwithstanding, sensationalism is the prime feature of this science communication: the construction of scientific facts always comes wrapped in mystery, every discovery involves an act of genius, and history is almost always invisible.”

Romero points out that, in the case of Chateaubriand’s newspapers, there was a peculiar blend of sensationalism and valid science communication, as in the following front-page headline: “See the young man through the eyes of the dead priest.” As printed in huge letters – much like the headlines for the reports of miracles that were commonplace in the paper – it suggested that the article would be sensational. However, the actual content of the story – which was told over the course of three days – revealed that the reporter had done his research and produced a well-written article containing precise information. What at first glance appeared to be the headline for a



Diário da Noite discussed how man might reach the moon and featured science even in its ads



frivolous story proved to be a good strategy for drawing in the reader.

CHILDREN

Another headline announced that Brazilian scientists were going to discuss the effects of the hydrogen bomb. “Oddly enough,” Romero points out, “the headline was located right above a lead that said ‘children will suffer without milk,’ and back then the first story most certainly drew more attention than the local issue of mothers furious about the milk policy.”

The case of the hydrogen bomb also illustrates the paper’s ambivalent attitude toward science, which it viewed as both a magic bullet for solving the country’s troubles and a potential source of myriad dangers. The headline “A document by the astute Americans resonates among researchers” alerted readers to the possibility that nuclear energy might have adverse effects, a concern that led the paper’s staff to speak with professors at the University of São Paulo (USP). Finding himself in an awkward position, the physicist Marcelo Damy stated, “The subject lies outside my field of expertise” and, further, that he was “on the whole against the use of atomic weapons for the purposes of war.” According to the article, “José Goldemberg, of the São Paulo School of Philosophy spoke ‘briefly’ to reporters about the damaging effects of radioactivity.” Romero explains, “Many scientists

didn’t like to see themselves associated with papers like *Diário da Noite* because they didn’t want to tarnish their reputations.” Because of this fragile relationship between the scientific community and the paper, articles on such burning issues as developmentalism and the Cold War could take flights of fancy.

At times, the subject was literally a fanciful flight, as in the stories related to flying saucers that often made the front page of Chateaubriand’s evening paper. “The Brazilian press failed to offer their readers enough information to recognize heavenly phenomena and routine flying objects. Lacking any background in science, many of them were susceptible to the speculations offered up by sensationalist papers,” observes historian Rodolpho Gauthier Cardoso dos Santos, who researched the topic for his book *A invenção dos discos voadores: Guerra Fria, imprensa e ciência no Brasil (1947-1958)* (“The Invention of Flying Saucers: The Cold War, the Press, and Science in Brazil, 1947-1958”). As a result, the morning papers – including *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha da Manhã*, which were basically aimed at the middle and upper classes – did not devote as much space to such subjects because the editors of those papers were more aware that matters of war might be involved.

Most papers usually conveyed the idea that science was something grandiose and inaccessible to the man on the street; it came cloaked in myths, with scientists isolated

by the complexity of their subject matter. “A huge wall stood between science and the reader, built by myths about scientific work, which, combined with the idealized image of scientists, did nothing to encourage Brazilians to study science,” Andrade says.

Romero says, “It is my belief that *Diário da Noite*, quite to the contrary, made science more accessible to the reader, precisely because it used more popular journalistic techniques. Unlike other means of science communication, it also gave voice to contemporary fears and anxiety about scientific development. It thus helped demystify science, which I believe is one of the distinguishing features of my research.”

In Romero’s opinion, because *Diário da Noite* defined itself as a voice for the lower classes, it intended to use science communication to raise the members of those classes out of their ignorance and to promote the ideals of comfort, well-being, and happiness that were so dear to Brazil in the 1950s, with science representing one of the portals to modernity. “At the same time,” she notes, “when the paper denounced its risks and dangers, science was demystified, and the paper also entertained the collective imagination when it addressed subjects like flying saucers in an ambiguous way.” ■

Project

Spreading scientific knowledge and the popular press. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s (2011/13246-2); Grant Mechanism Scholarship abroad; Coordinator Mariza Romero – PUC/SP; Investment R\$22,266.26 (FAPESP).