

Portugal's Reaction to the Launch of Sputnik -What the Papers Said-

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Abstract

On the 4th October 1957 the world witnessed an event that would change our perception of everything around us. The Sputnik was launched. The political impact, the advancement of science and the endless possibilities that were now available provoked surprise, fear and illusion.

The most famous “beep” that has ever reached all corners of the globe in various ways. The press in reporting the launch of the Sputnik speculated about the intention of the launch, what it meant for the world and the possibilities of going into space.

Portugal was no exception. The day after the launch, the main newspapers in the country gave notice that the Russians reached space. In the weeks that followed, Portuguese newspapers followed closely the scientific, technological and political developments arising from such an event.

The paper that I propose to present will focus on the reaction of the Portuguese press about the launch of the Sputnik. It will analyse the debate that occurred in the weeks that followed, demonstrating the importance given to this event and also the interpretation made of the launch of the Sputnik from a scientific, technological and political point of view, by doing a tour of the newspapers of the time.

• Introduction

Without a doubt, the launch of the first satellite had a tremendous impact around the world. For the first time man could put something orbiting the Earth. The first step was taken to enter a world of new experiences, of immense discoveries and access to a strategic power without precedent.

The whole world witnessed through the media the soviet achievement. Some more gullible than others, all the countries in the world were on the one hand congratulating themselves with the success of the

USSR others were demonstrating their concerns about what would be the future of science and above all the international politics in the years to come.

Portugal, under the dictatorship of António Oliveira Salazar at the time, was not indifferent to this event. The Portuguese daily papers, from the first hour, followed the developments of the international events around the satellite. Day after day, the front pages of the newspapers reported soviet developments, the concerns of the Americans and forecasted what would happen in the future from the space explosion.



Figure 1: First page of Jornal de Noticias, 5/10/1957

- **Launch of Sputnik**

On the 4th of October 1957, USSR launched the Sputnik into space, but only the following day did the Portuguese press, report the Soviet achievement. In spite of the importance that the event had in the days that followed, it was only front page news in the “Jornal de Noticias”. The other two major newspapers in Portugal at the time, the “Diário de Noticias” and “Século” reported that USSR had launched the first satellite and that it had a transmitter, describing the trajectory orbiting the Earth.

In the days that followed, the Sputnik was described in the major Portuguese newspapers as being “a form of sphere with 58 centimetres in diameter and weighing 83.6 kilos”¹. The satellite was being followed by the rocket that launched it into space

according to the Diário de Noticias of the 8/10/1957. According to this daily newspaper, “the satellite was being followed, in its trajectory, by the last part of the three part rocket that launched it into space”. When observing the satellite it was possible to see a trail which could be the rest of the rocket. The rest of the rocket, which presumably should have been attached to the satellite, must have detached itself from it, but continued to follow the trajectory of the satellite. This fact, according to the same newspaper, explained that what some people saw was the rest of the rocket and thought that it was the Sputnik.

The front pages on the 7th of October left no doubts. As more information was being made available on this matter, the newspapers went into detail on the subject. It was front page news in both the Diário de Noticias and the Jornal de Noticias that Lisbon was the first city in the world to have pick up the signal from the Sputnik.

The radio station of the “CTT” (Correios, Telegrafos e Telefones) (Mail, Telegraphs and Telephones) were the first in the world to register the signal sent by the Sputnik “at the frequency of 40 “megaciclos”, at 08 hours and 17 TMG”². The CTT described the signal as being similar to sending a facsimille.

The satellite was visible with ordinary binoculars and there were reported cases of sightings by naked eye in Holland. On the 7th of October, the Sputnik was seen in the city of Lourenço Marques (now Maputo, Mozambique) and both the Campos Rodrigues Observatory and the transmissions department of the Jornal de Noticias were able to pick up the signal from the Sputnik. The Jornal de Noticias reported cases stating that the

¹ “Os russos lançaram o primeiro satélite artificial do mundo”, Jornal de Noticias, 5/10/1957, p. 1

² “Foi Inaçado no espaço – O primeiro satélite artificial da Terra”, Diário de Noticias, 7/10/1957, p.1

Sputnik was seen from Oporto for 3-5 minutes.

On the 8th of October the Jornal de Noticias reported one of the radio messages presumed to have been transmitted by the satellite. “In the radio station “KRXX”, according to chief engineer Merrill Andrus, the satellite sends its messages in international morse code, as yesterday evening between 21:15 hours and 21:42 hours we picked up a number of messages including the following message: “3411, 3411, 5530, 8110337, 55689, 43811033 air” the last code meaning “end of message”³.

On the 9th of October the front pages of the newspapers began to report the possible fall of the satellite. In spite of this news, the papers continue to follow the developments surrounding the satellite and started to speculate about the true intention of the launch.

On the 13th of October, the Século reported in its front page that “the forecast on the fall of the soviet device which is in orbit at variable altitudes and continue to transmit information did not come to pass”⁴.

In the following weeks, there were various reports about the survival of the Sputnik in space. The silence, even if temporarily, of the signal transmitted by the Sputnik prompted the Século to report on the 27th of October that after three weeks of mysterious messages” the satellite transmitters must have run out of energy completely.

- **International Reactions**

In the first few days after the launch of the Sputnik there were few official reaction from the international community. However, with the growing enthusiasm of public opinion and the assertion by the soviets as world leaders in the space race, the Portuguese press devoted particular attention to the reaction of the international community to the launch of the first satellite.



Figure 2: First Page Diário de Notícias, 12/10/1957

³ “O lançamento do satélite terá repercussões políticas e militares ainda por calcular”, Jornal de Notícias, 8/10/1957, última página.

⁴“Subiu mais de 3.200kms”, O Século, 13/10/1957, p. 6



Figure 3: First page Jornal Noticias, 12/10/1957

The USA tried to give little importance to the soviet achievement describing it as “from the international viewpoint, the important fact is that a satellite was launched. The Russians were only the first.”⁵

On the 7th of October, the White House issued an official communiqué stating that “for the United States it is no surprise the Russian’s advancement and that there has never been a race with the USSR to be the first to launch a satellite”⁶.

Even though initially the USA showed a certain indifference about it, in a matter of days, the press reflected the concern of the Americans in relation to the launch of the Sputnik. On the 16th day, the *Século* wrote “the Americans are worried about the progress made by the Russians to conquer the space. Moscow admits that the Sputnik could

send to earth highly important military information.”⁷

In a meeting between the American President Eisenhower and the British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, which took place in the days following the launch of the Sputnik, it was noted that the main subject of discussion would have been the Soviet achievement. This meeting gave rise to speculation about the possibility of the USA and Great Britain entering into a co-operation agreement between the two countries in the areas of nuclear science and missiles⁸.

On the 8th of October, the *Século* reported the political reaction that was beginning to immerge from the international community. England as well as France were worried about the military and political consequences of launching objects into space. The British Government considered that “the question of inspection of the satellite could be discussed in the UN during the discussions about disarmament”⁹. On the other hand the British Foreign Office announced that the super powers would adopt the model put forward by the Frenchman Jules Moch for the disarmament, which proposes the creation of a technical commission empowered to develop a system of inspection that would permit obtaining a warranty that devices launched into space would have only pacific and scientific ends.¹⁰

⁷ “Ganha vulto a tendência dos soviéticos para apresentar o satélite artificial como um engenho ao serviço da guerra”, *O Século*, 16/10/1957, p 6

⁸ “Vai correr perigo durante alguns dias o satélite artificial de chocar no espaço com fragmentos de meteoros”, *O Século*, 12/10/1957p. 2

⁹ “Travam-se polémicas em todo o mundo sobre a duração provável do giro sideral do satélite russo”, *O Século*, 8/10/1957, p. 1

¹⁰ *Ibid*, *O Século*, 8/10/1957, p.1

⁵ *Ibid*, *Diário de Notícias*, 5/10/1957, p. 5

⁶ “A velocidade alucinante de 28.000kms por hora, o satélite artificial lançado pelos russos”, *O Século*, 7/10/1957, p 8



Figure 4: Diário de Notícias, pag. 5, 12/10/1957

The Launch of the Sputnik at the time of the Cold War, when the USA and the USSR were trying to assert themselves as a superpower, arouse a certain solidarity necessary between the countries of the Atlantic Pact.¹¹ The international community were mobilized to try and understand the level the threat that the first satellite could bring and were organizing themselves to develop possible responses to a soviet threat.

- **Forecast of the Space Exploration**

From the first moment that the press was speculating on the future of space exploration. The international community, the public opinion and the press perceived that the launch of the Sputnik opened a door to the unknown

¹¹ “Despertou o satellite artificial dos russos a solidariedade necessária entre os países membros do Pacto Atlântico”, O Século, 14/10/1957, p.1

and that as any other important invention in the history of the world, it was going to change to daily lives of everyone.



Figure 5: First page O Século, 15/10/1957

Various accounts were reported about the Americans who were clearly being seen as defeated in this race for the space. In the weeks that followed, the press wrote various articles about what could be the future of the American space program. While some reported that the Americans would only launch the first satellite into space in March the following year¹², others reported that the Americans were preparing to launch thirteen (13) satellites¹³.

Although the reports in the press were sometimes contradictory, there were some common themes, such as the

¹² “O satélite americano a lançar em Março de 1958 fornecerá mais informações do que a Lua bebé dos russos”, Jornal de Notícias, 10/10/1957p. 1

¹³ “Treze satélites artificiais preparam-se os americanos para lançar no espaço”, O Século, 11/10/1957, p 4

Americans landing on the moon. The front page of the *Jornal de Noticias*, of the 25th of October, was clear in this regard: “The USA could send a rocket to the moon within a year”.¹⁴

The current and future projects of the Americans were always seen as an attempt to respond to the Soviet success and regain its leadership place in the areas of science, military and politics.

The papers also reflected on what would be the next soviet achievements. On the 14th of October it was reported in the press that the Sputnik would soon disappear, but that the USSR was preparing to launch more satellites which would last for a century.¹⁵ Three days later, the news were that the soviets were preparing to launch a “moon” that would transport dogs.¹⁶

However, the forecasts about space exploration were not limited to the two super powers. Italy was also reported to have been preparing to enter the space race and that it was developing a “missile driven by rocket and jet airplane”.¹⁷ This project, described as “revolutionary”, was referred to in the press as something of great interest to the American scientists, having already started production although without all the characteristics that they wanted to develop.

• **Curiosities**

Around this event of great magnitude, such as the consequences deriving from the same, there were always some curious and amusing aspect, sometimes quite revealing,

arising from the ignorance about the subject matter or even from the fertile imagination of some people.

The launch of the Sputnik had also an amusing side, beyond the scientific, military and political aspects of the launch.

By the end of the first two weeks in the life of the Sputnik, the expectation of the press surrounding the satellite was such that it was front page news in the press that “trips to the moon will be possible in big rockets within ten (10) years”. So far nothing extraordinary, except for the small print underneath the headlines announcing the sale of tickets for trips to the moon lasting 2 days at 500 thousand francs return “with a brief stop over on the satellite”.¹⁸ The first ticket was offered to Maria Cândida a female singer.

An Italian sales agent, who survived just about a public lynch, sold to various farmers a special suit to protect them for the radiation emitted by the soviet satellite. Still in Italy, another Italian door to door salesman was selling raincoats to protect against the satellite radiation.

In London the world of fashion presented in a fashion show a “satellite hat”. It was a hat “decorated and plain with four antennas in satin”.¹⁹

Also in London, a company took out an insurance policy of £8,000.00 (eight thousand pounds) from Lloyds to protect its employees, installations and clients against “death by accident caused by the satellite orbiting the Earth”.²⁰

¹⁴ “Os EUA poderão mandar um foguetão à Lua no próximo ano”, *Jornal de Noticias*, 25/10/1957, p1

¹⁵ “O satellite artificial desaparecerá em breve”, *Jornal de Noticias*, 14/10/1957

¹⁶ *Jornal de Noticias*, 17/10/1957p. 1

¹⁷ “Entra a Itália na corrida à conquista do espaço”, *O Século*, 20/10/1957p. 2

¹⁸ “Vendem-se bilhetes para a Lua”, *Jornal de Noticias*, 23/10/1957, p 1; “Já há bilhetes para a primeira excursão à Lua”, *O Século* 23/10/1957, p 1

¹⁹ “O satellite voltou a emitir sinais”, *Diário de Noticias*, 10/10/1957, p. 1

²⁰ *Ibid*, *Jornal de Noticias*, 10/10/1957



Figure 5: O Século, pag. 8, 7/10/1957

In Australia, a woman asserted publicly that she was receiving messages from the satellite through her mattress. This housewife from Sydney said to the press that one night when she went to bed, she heard a faint ‘beep, beep’ coming from underneath her pillow. “She said also that her husband, professor of physics, believed that such phenomenon was possible, but improbable.”²¹

• Conclusion

Despite Portugal then living in an era of austerity, being technologically underdeveloped and under a dictatorship where the information was controlled rigorously, the Portuguese press played an important role in divulging the Russian scientific and technological advancement.

The preoccupation of the daily newspapers in reporting, daily, the most

important international news items on the subject, on the reaction of the international community and on the possible consequences derived from the launch of the Sputnik, shows the important role the press had in making the magnitude of the event reach the common people.

Without a doubt that the impact of the launch of the Sputnik was evident in the numerous lines that were written in the Portuguese newspapers in the weeks that followed.

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