

Review

Newspaper space for science

Marta Kanashiro

In recent years, courses, events and incentive programs for scientific journalism and the divulgation of science have proliferated in Brazil. Part of this context is “Sunday is science day, history of a supplement from the post-war years”, a book published this year that is based on the Master’s degree research of Bernardo Esteves, a journalist specialized in science.

The author recovers and recounts the history of the supplement “Science for everyone”, published between the years of 1948 and 1953 by the Brazilian newspaper “A manhã” (Rio de Janeiro), and relates this initiative with a period of transition that was experienced in the country. In the realm of scientific research and the teaching of science, Brazil was experiencing the institutionalization of science, and in the area of journalism, the country was transitioning from a period of artisan journalism to industrial journalism.

Divided into two parts, the book brings out these transformations in the first fifty pages, presenting what the author has called an “historic panorama of the setting in which the supplement was launched”. The one hundred and ten pages that follow have been reserved for the essential part of the research – the evaluation of “Science for everyone.”

In addition to the supplement’s numbers, the research was based on statements made by the editorial team and its collaborators, and on archives of Rio de Janeiro teaching and research institutions. The author highlights that, in spite of divulgation experiences that came before or were parallel to “Science for everyone”, the supplement was a groundbreaker in terms of the space (twelve pages) and the duration (five years) that it offered to the country’s approach to science. The pioneer spirit of the publication is also highlighted by Fernando de Sousa Reis, one of the supplement’s former editors who wrote the book’s preface.

With regard to data, the book is quite detailed, bringing measures and evaluations of the structure of the publication, responding to the initial research questions posed about the supplement in a precise manner, and equating the data and Brazil’s history of science, of the communication of science, and of journalism in a succinct but interesting way.

There is a certain taste of nostalgia that lingers with the reader in the first pages that are found in the preface and, further on into the book, in the description of the supplement’s sections and activities that were modified throughout its five years of existence. It is interesting to note that, in addition to these various sections, there were yet other activities sponsored by the publication that sought to stimulate the reader, such as excursions and seedling collecting in the Botanical Gardens and in the Tijuca Forest, educational movie showings, and contests which distributed books and trips for those who were able to answer scientific questions correctly.

But the book’s importance for a reflection on the present day ends up distancing any sense of nostalgia. After all, more than just simply valuing past experiences, what is important is the understanding and analysis of how these experiences happened or what they meant. This includes relating them to the present day. On the inner leaf of the book, Carla Almeida, a researcher from the Osvaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz – Rio de Janeiro), emphasizes the “space” which science should occupy in the press “in times of discoveries and technologies of impact which are ever greater on nature and on man”.¹ Understanding that this space also deals with the ways in which the content of science is expressed, it can be said that the author outlines this reflection on the postwar period by noting the supplement’s editorial orientation and the governmental characteristic of a newspaper which openly reflected the opinions of the last period of the Vargas dictatorship. It is worth noting that, in spite of its financial difficulties, the supplement survived past the end of the Vargas regime.

According to Esteves, the editorial line of the supplement corroborated with the advancement of science in Brazil, stimulated the institutionalization of science and research activities in the country, left

a didactic imprint on the divulgation of science, and portrayed a positive vision of science and the scientist, thus clearly echoing the discourse of scientists, of academia, and of research institutions that were being created in the country. As is typical of periods of divulgation of science with this profile, the author notes an almost absence of critical content in relation to science and highlights rare occasions in which polemics appeared on nuclear physics and the war.

At this point, the reader of “Sunday is science day” has some questions, for example, about the relationship between the didactic nature in scientific journalism or in the divulgation of science and the advancement of science in the country, or about how interests were articulated in this setting. In this sense, in spite of not going into depth about the association among the elements of the editorial orientation of the publication, nor directly presenting possible directions in order to understand the relationships of power associated with such elements and the history of science in Brazil, Esteves’ text points out items that end up provoking important questions, not only for the period under research, but also that are crucial for the present day.

In interviews given in Brazil about his book, the author affirms that there was an effervescence of scientific divulgation in the country during the postwar period. This is something which, in his opinion, can be compared with what is happening today. On this occasion, Esteves ended up pointing out another very interesting line of research – a comparative study could tackle the elements of rupture and continuity between one period and the other and stimulate reflection about the present day in a more direct way.

Anchored in Martin Bauer’s² four waves of scientific divulgation and in the work of Massarani and Moreira,³ which argues the similarity of these cycles (which occur with a certain delay in Brazil), Esteves identifies in “Science for everyone” one of these increased peaks in the newspaper space occupied by science and adds to this broader panorama the local and institutional concern of popularizing science in search of recognition and support in the struggle for resources. The sensation of *déjà vu* in reverse which comes from the relationship between the search for support, recognition, and resources and incentive for scientific divulgation is perhaps the heart of the matter of an entanglement that is beginning to be unraveled and that can return to questions such as the one mentioned above with regard to the didactic characteristic in scientific journalism.

Translated by Robert C. Garner

Notes and references

¹ However, by stressing this importance, Carla Almeida ends up slipping on another quite polemical question when she says that “the *well-informed* population can participate in decisions in this field”. A debate of this type is not found in the book and does not seem to be an aim of the research of Bernardo Esteves.

² Bauer, Martin. “La longue durée” of popular science, 1830 – present. In: Devèze-Bethet, D. (Ed) *La promotion de la culture scientifique: ses acteurs e leurs logiques*. Paris: Publications de l’Université – Paris VII, 1998.

³ Moreira, Ildeu de Castro. *Ondas históricas na divulgação científica no Brasil*. Congresso Luso-Brasileiro de História da Ciência e da Técnica I, 2000, Évora, Avieiro.

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