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A Comedic Response to the World’s First Artificial Satellite

by Jon Scherer

(English 103)

The Assignment: After selecting an article from the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, students research what “really” happened and compare it to the “fake” news story, ultimately answering the question, “What is *The Onion*’s argument or commentary on this issue?”

During the heat of the Cold War, no pun intended, an article entitled, “Bleeping Two-Foot Tin Ball Threatens Free World” was published in *The Onion* on Friday October 4, 1957. The first line of the article seems to sum up the event the best by suggesting, “American metal-bauble superiority was cast into grave doubt Thursday when the Russians launched a two-foot ball of tin into orbit around the Earth.” In a comedic way, *The Onion* takes a unique approach into what was, back in 1957, a great threat to the United States and the whole free world. This event was the launch of the world’s first artificial satellite, developed by the Russians, called Sputnik. The United States, at that particular point in time, was just playing around with the idea of actually sending objects into space. There wasn’t an actual organization set up, like the modern day National Aeronautical Space Association (NASA), which was dedicated to the space program like there is today. Freedom as the country knew it was directly affected by this discovery of rocket science. At the time, the nation was about twelve years out of World War II and into the Cold War, which was between the United States and Russia. The threat was simple, that if people could send a one-hundred-eighty-four pound piece of metal up in a rocket with enough force to get it into space, then why couldn’t they send a nuclear weapon propelled by a rocket over to a neighboring country and destroy it? The general point that *The Onion* was trying to make was that this two-foot wide piece of tin was nothing to be worried about, because at the time it was technologically insignificant. This was a discovery and should have been considered a positive mark in the record books of history, but it was not seen in that light when news first broke. After all, it didn’t do anything to anyone except emit various beeps and bleeps via radio waves as it passed over the areas in its orbiting path, and if anything it gave way for modern satellites which most people say they just couldn’t live without nowadays.

The actual article published in *The Onion* is written in a very satirical manner. *The Onion* is a satirical newspaper that pokes fun at mostly political events throughout history. In a nutshell, it basically poked fun at the whole situation that the United States and Russia were in at the time. The author of the article starts off talking about how the United States has been beaten in something for once in history. How our “…metal superiority was cast into grave doubt…” (*The Onion* 93) This quote refers to how the U.S. had superiority over the Russians, but lost it due to Sputnik’s launch. At the time, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was in office. He is said to be a “do nothing” president by many. His reaction, reflected his “do nothing” attitude, did not have the response that America wanted to hear, so accordingly *The Onion* made comments about him numerous times throughout the article. By saying that he actually shut down schools in the around the country and told the children of America to pray for the safety of the free world. No one seemed to know what this meant for the rest of society. Just because Russia had launched essentially a tin beach ball with a radio transmitter attached to it into space, it didn’t mean that the world was necessarily going to end the next day. After poking fun at the fact that Sputnik was nothing more than a piece of orbiting tin, *The Onion* makes fun of the way it beeps and how it does nothing else. In the article a man named A. Crandall Dewitt of Harvard University was interviewed and said, “The bleep is also cause for concern. If they can make it bleep today, they can make it squawk tomorrow. By this time next year they could have a ball that honks.” (*The Onion* 93) Lastly, *The Onion* says that President Eisenhower wishes to put our own piece of tin into space. According to *The Onion* President Eisenhower
guaranteed that, “...the American ball will have a handsome, tastefully, streamlined and tail finned casing
and up to three beep-level settings.” (The Onion 93) This quote shows how The Onion does not think this
situation is a threat at all, because the President would never say something like that. The Onion poked
more fun at the situation by saying that the nation was terrified of the Soviets creating an even larger
sphere or creating more spheres that would create a sort of “shadow of communism” over the whole
country. (The Onion 93)

The Onion’s take on the story reflects exactly how America responded to the launch of Sputnik.
People just did not know how to react to this event. Sputnik was launched the night of October 4, 1957
from a desert near Tyuratam in the Kazakh Republic located in the Soviet Union. The Satellite was
essentially a sphere no bigger than a beach ball with four spring-loaded antennae that trailed behind it. It
also carried with it a small radio beacon that transmitted a series of beeps to the people on the ground
below. This was impressive due to the fact that, at that same point in time, the American racers were
developing project Vanguard which was an even smaller satellite weighing in at a measly three and a half
pounds, whereas Sputnik weighed in at a beastly one-hundred-eighty-four-pounds. As soon as the news
hit in the states, Russians who were living in the U.S. at the time, went party-crazy creating a scene
outside the Russian embassy in Washington D.C. with drinking and rioting. They were very excited that
the Russians had actually done something right and that they had beaten the Americans to space.
According to the NASA source, this night of celebration became known as “Sputnik Night.” (Sputnik and
the Origins of the Space Age, NASA)

The decade in which these events were unfolding held some uncertainty for the nation. World
War II had just over and new social plans were beginning to take effect, no one knew what the future
would hold. During the 1950’s all the way up to the 1980’s the United States was in the midst of the Cold
War, which was essentially between the U.S. and Russia only. The war did not involve actual combat
fighting but instead just a war of words. The U.S. was basically worried that the Russians, under the
influence of communism at the time, had nuclear weapons program. It was essentially a cold stare across
the ocean which went on up until the fall of the Berlin Wall. The 1950’s was the time of rebirth for the
nation. With World War II over, the Civil Rights Movement just beginning and the crisis in Little Rock,
Arkansas, where the Arkansas National Guard helped a few black children attend an all white school, the
1950’s was also a time of growth for the nation. (Dickson, 4) The nation wanted to get everything back
together. Sputnik came as a shock to most of the nation, but the President did not make it seem like it
was anything to be worried about. Contrarily, in fact he congratulated the Russians on their success, but
at the same time discredited them on their triumph. The U.S. encountered a “Pearl Harbor effect” shortly
after the launch of Sputnik was reported. People worried greatly about there being a nuclear war in the
future. (Sputnik and the Origins of the Space Race, NASA) Little did the President know that the launch
of Sputnik would impact the lives of people all over the world in the not to distant future, but not in a
negative way.

The main issue that was focused on in this era, and not touched by The Onion, was to set up an
active space program and to eventually send a human being into orbit. Sputnik started the chain of
events, and the United States now had to come back and show that they are still the number one nation
and superpower in the world. Although President Eisenhower did not do much for our nation, there were
congressmen that did. For example, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson, who had heard over the
radio that the Russians had successfully launched a satellite into orbit, was furious at the situation and
knew something needed to be done. He and his committee found that there was serious under funding of
programs that related to space and the arms race between Russia and the United States. For this they
simply blamed the whole Republican Party and the president, since Johnson was a Democrat this
accusation did not matter. Another important person was John Hagen who headed the Vanguard project.
Vanguard was the United States counter attack to the Russian Sputnik. His attempt to catch up to the
Russians in the space race failed miserably when both of his rockets blew up shortly after take off. This
is important, because it set the base for competition and started the U.S. off into the space race. (Sputnik
and the Origins of the Space Race, NASA)

Aside from all that history, The Onion makes an excellent point about this sensitive issue.
Through making fun of the space race and how the Russian satellite just beeps and bleeps, there is an apparent threat to the America. Although this threat is not directed toward the whole American population it is important. The situation threatened the American society as the Russians had broken through the atmosphere and into the undefined and unexplored area of space with a rocket. This invention of rocketry combined with the fact that the United States and Russia were in a state of war and were continuing the development of nuclear arms, the threat became clear that they could essentially launch a nuclear weapon over the ocean and onto U.S. soil causing chaos. As demonstrated through history, bombing a country would result in repercussions from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in Japan that occurred earlier in World War II. The Onion basically says that there is nothing to be afraid of. It is simply just a bleeping annoying piece of metal shaped like a ball with antennae coming out of the sides. Although the Russians beat us at our own game, hats off to them, it doesn’t mean that the world is necessarily going to end tomorrow. They make the point that this piece of machinery is not particularly harmful; rather the technology that came out of this discovery could change the world, but not drastically enough to cause any significant harm or devastation.

During the launch of Sputnik there were many comments directed at President Eisenhower and how he handled the situation. Just to sit back and play golf and ignore this delicate situation was not a good way to calm a worried nation down. To express his disgust with the whole situation, G. Mennen Williams, who was the governor of Michigan, wrote a sarcastic poem about the whole event. The poem basically expresses his negative view of the president and the job that he is doing.

“Oh little Sputnik, flying high
With made-in-Moscow beep,
You tell the world it’s a Commie sky
and Uncle Sam's asleep.

You say on fairway and on rough
The Kremlin knows it all,
We hope our golfer knows enough
To get us on the ball.”

(Sputnik and the Origins of the Space Race, Launius)

He says that Uncle Sam, meaning the United States government, is asleep and is completely oblivious to what is going on around the world. Since the Russians were the first to launch the satellites, and they were in a communist state at the time, he says that it is a “Commie sky.” He compares the U.S. to as a golf ball that is stuck in the rough and compares the president to the golfer and says he hopes that president knows what to do to make the situation better and to get the nation back on track.

In this day and age satellites are going up on a regular basis, beaming vital data back and forth so life can continue. Back in 1957, sending a man or woman into space would be considered a fantasy simply because the technology was not ready. In fact the average person, in 1957, would probably worry about this situation considering that the quest for who had the best and biggest nuclear arms stock pile was just beginning. According to The World Book Encyclopedia, Sputnik marked the start of the space age, “The space age began on Oct. 4, 1957. On that day, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite to orbit the Earth.” (World Book Encyclopedia 694) This landmark in the record books leads to the next point as to how important this launch was to the space age in general. Also, according to the World Book Encyclopedia, the various unmanned satellites and space probes that were sent up into space after Sputnik greatly affected our knowledge of our surroundings and the universe. They allowed us to travel a vast amount of miles, to explore the planets, the moon and lead to the discovery of the radiation field that is located just above Earth’s atmosphere. (World Book Encyclopedia 694) Now in 2004 we would simply disregard the launch of any satellite unless it is considered a threat directly to us. Many of us take for granted just how important satellites are in our everyday lives. Sure they are just
some floating pieces of metal placed in space that relay data back and forth, but they control things that some people would consider vital for everyday life such as television, the internet, our cellular phones and they help us get vital information that is needed for daily affairs. The launch of the first satellite in 1957 would definitely be seen differently in the year 2004. The threat for nuclear war is greater now with the advanced technology in rocketry and advances in modern science and could literally happen at any time.

Times have certainly changed since that day in 1957; everyone seems to be oblivious to what is happening around them. They take what this tiny piece of metal did for their everyday lives and modern science for granted and just expect the technology that they have to work. They don’t care how it works or how it came to be invented; they just simply want it to work. At the time, the president didn’t have anything to say towards this event. The Onion was right. President Eisenhower was seen by many as a person who did absolutely nothing about various events at the time that affected the nation. I applaud the position that The Onion takes on this delicate issue. I agree on their stance that average person was probably worrying about the situation more than they should have. From expressing disgust for the presidents and important people of this country, to making fun of the most controversial topics that face the nation from decade to decade, The Onion will be there reporting on the topic in a satirical manor exactly as it did with the Sputnik story. No one knows how the world is going to end, but it didn’t end on the day when the satellite was invented.

Works Cited

Launius, Roger D. Sputnik and the Origins of the Space Age. NASA.