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Space Expectations: Involving the Public in Space Activities (2)

Author: Dr. Linda Billings  
George Washington University, United States

EMPOWERING SCIENTISTS AND CITIZENS THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN SPACE  
EXPLORATION

**Abstract**

In a participatory democracy, citizens may take part in public policy making, and taxpayers may have a say in public spending decisions. Participation requires communication, and a participatory model of communication is a model well suited to democracy. Public engagement and public involvement, terms employed by U.S. government agencies to convey the intent of broader communication with the public toward improving public understanding of science, describe approaches to facilitating public participation. These approaches are meant to engage the public in dialogue with officials and experts. But they are often not distinguishable from conventional public affairs operations, based on the one-way transmission model of communication. While giving lip service to opening doors for broader communication, U.S. government agencies often appear to have difficulties with putting participatory communication into practice, likely due to the requirement of power sharing imposed by a participatory approach.

Public participation in space science and exploration policy and planning is a way of empowering citizens to help articulate a 21st century purpose for this government-funded activity. One way to expand public participation in space science and exploration is to broaden opportunities for citizens to experience, directly and immediately, encounters with other worlds and preparations for those encounters in Earth analogue environments. At the same time, expanding public participation could broaden opportunities for space scientists to establish their credibility and authority as experts, their value as cultural resources, and their purpose as contributors to the public good. First steps toward enabling public participation are to inform citizens about publicly funded research, explaining “who, what, when,” and “where.” A broader challenge is to engender and sustain ongoing dialogue among policy makers and other government officials, scientists, and citizens on the purposes of space science and exploration – that is, “why.”

U.S. President Barack Obama’s first Executive Order, signed in January 2009, established that government under his leadership would be transparent, open, and participatory. Thus the time is right for the space science and exploration community to take on this challenge. Working with experts in media and communication, experts in science and exploration can work on developing mediums, methods and meeting points to enable public participation. This paper will examine whether and how President Obama’s directive has affected space policy making and space program planning and operations.