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USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE THE PROFILE OF SPACE MISSIONS

Abstract

Social media offers unique opportunities to reach and engage new audiences with space missions. This paper explores some of the most successful uses of social media to promote space activities ranging from robotic missions and satellites, to individual astronauts aboard the international space station. It explores what makes them work and which audiences they are reaching.

The changing media landscape means that a growing number of people, especially young people, rely on their social media networks for news. That fact, coupled with the lack of mainstream media attention for “everyday” space activities, such as life on the space station, means that relying solely on traditional news outlets to get messages out to the public is no longer enough.

In order to react to this change, space agencies must evolve their press activities to ensure that they continue to reach the largest number of people. Social media requires a different skill set, more in line with public outreach than formal press statements and space organisations need to understand this landscape in order to best get their messages across.

Social media is still met with some scepticism in places, but Commander Hadfield’s extraordinary success during his ISS mission is just one example of why it should not be dismissed. By connecting with people directly, rather than through official press channels, he was able to convey a special level of authenticity and personality - something that would not have been possible with a series of press statements.

There is a lot at stake when you have people representing your brand in real time, so this paper also discusses the need to ensure sufficient training and support is given to staff who are at the frontline responding to comments from the public. Things can develop extremely quickly online, so having a pre-agreed line of contact/strategy that can be used in case of an emergency is vital.

The paper will focus on three different uses of social media – that of Mars Science Laboratory, Curiosity, astronauts on the ISS (looking especially at what made Chris Hadfield so successful) and live events run by agencies such as NASA Social and ESA’s Social Space. It will conclude with some points to be considered for planning future activities.