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## THE ROLE OF ASTRONAUTS IN THE DIFFUSION OF SPACE CULTURE

### Abstract

The Italian Astronauts are invested with an important role, not only into the scientific, technological and educational fields, but also in communication: as a proof of that is their increasing popularity in social-media. The data that we collected show that the astronauts have reached an incredible exposure and influence in the Italian social-media environment, involving not only the scientific community, but the whole society. The work examines the four active Italian astronauts, with a special focus on Samantha Cristoforetti, ESA astronaut (Italian Air Force Captain), the last one to fly to the International Space Station. A lot of sources have been used to collect and analyze data, especially networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube not forgetting Google as Web Search Engine. The study presents a double comparison. The first one analyzes data within the space sector: among astronauts of different nationalities and other space Subjects, such as the Italian Space Agency. The study shows that articles regarding astronauts earn much more 'likes', 'sharings' and 'interactions' than scientific articles. Furthermore, we compared Italian astronauts to some of the most famous Italian personalities: scientists, politicians, journalists and managers. The results show a wide popularity of the Italian astronauts, how they affect trending conversation on social networks and the measure of their exposure. The results of our study are quite surprising; the paper helps to understand the fundamental role of astronauts in the communication of the value and importance of space research and activities, and in the diffusion of space culture. We think that the social network profiles of astronauts together with their interaction with followers could be considered as a kind of space web-museum.