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THE ESA HISTORY PROJECT – LATEST DEVELOPMENTS, IN LIGHT OF RECENT TRENDS IN
SPACE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Abstract

Initiated by professional historians of Science and Technology in the late eighties, the ESA History Project greatly contributed to the understanding of how collaborating on the development of space projects was a key element in the process of bringing nations to work together for common peaceful objectives. Over half a century, Europe secured its autonomous access to space (Ariane, Vega), developed space applications (telecom, navigation, Earth observation) and embarked on human spaceflight, thus enlarging its initial portfolio (space science, inherited from ESRO, and space transportation, firstly within ELDO). From navigating great-power rivalry to building effective cooperation mechanisms, the Agency became a credible competitor to global players, while remaining a reliable partner in bilateral and multilateral undertakings. This required to build an industrial space capacity through georeturn – while adapting to evolving strategic goals, user needs and budgetary constraints. The ESA History Project, which scope extends far beyond the account of European space organisations' achievements, provides scholars with a framework where to conduct research work and publish their findings. They can also rely on the invaluable experience of major actors, to complement written sources. The legacy of the endeavour that led to the United Space in Europe was also preserved through the archive and oral history components of the Project. This paper intends to present an update on the third phase, kicked off on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the space age (i.e. report on the space history conference held in Padua, on 23-24 November 2017; presentation of the interdisciplinary study on Astronauts currently in progress). How forthcoming shifts in governance of space matters and latest developments, such as the so-called New Space, or entrepreneurial space, more socioeconomically-oriented, will potentially impact recent trends in space historiography and Space Law, leading to new interpretations of historical facts and space treaties respectively, will also be addressed. In conjunction with session E4.3 : “Can you believe they put a man on the Moon”, and as the memory of eyewitnesses involved in pioneering space projects is progressively fading away, how History Projects can support the preservation of tangible and intangible evidences of past events (what happened and what it meant), especially those which could not be actually watched will also be discussed. Would digitization and social media help in that respect or would they contribute to hyperbole, mystification or denial? It is probably premature to say anything conclusive, but the question warrants consideration.