

Going where no researcher has gone before

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Research based at The University of Queensland is taking journalism where it hasn't gone before by asking the question: how will people stay in touch in outer space?

Dr John Cokley, from UQ's School of Journalism and Communication, is working with a multi-disciplinary, international team of researchers looking at how people will communicate with each other in space, and especially how they will send and receive news.

Dr Cokley said the idea of researching news communications for space communities, or “Astronauts as Audiences” as he has dubbed it, might sound a bit far fetched in Australia, but this type of innovative research was taken very seriously in Europe and America where space agencies command billions of dollars in annual budgets.

“As humans expand into space, communities will form,” Dr Cokley said.

“These have already begun to form in small ways, such as long-duration missions on the International Space Station, the space shuttle and small-scale tourist excursions into space now being planned by Sir Richard Brandon's Virgin Galactic corporation.

“The US, Russia, Europe, China and Japan are all rushing to form space communities and at least one will succeed within about 10 years.

“This makes it essential that these communities be properly theorised and planned by social scientists like ourselves, so that haphazard

development does not occur.

“It's not pie in the sky – it's future town planning, which includes media and communications planning.”

Dr Cokley said one of the biggest problems facing space communities is the dominance of men.

“This could lead to a wild-west mentality, similar to places like Alaska and Australia of the 19th Century where towns were full of task-orientated men just there to do a job.

“Is that really how we want space to be colonised?”

He said this lack of gender equity made it all the more important people in space communities had “news from home” and “stayed in touch” with family members and friends.

Dr Cokley's previous research into other remote communities, such as Antarctica, had shown even the simple act of having local newspapers faxed to isolated workers can make a huge difference.

“Astronauts have ‘ham’ radio and even a version of the internet now that is going some way to meeting these needs,” he said.

The second of these collaborative studies – including Dr Cokley, with UQ's Dr Eric Louw, Dr Sally Babidge and James Cook University's Dr Frances Gordon – is entitled Making media work in space: an interdisciplinary perspective on media and communication requirements for current and future space communities, and has just been published in the UK-based International Journal of Astrobiology.

Source: University of Queensland

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