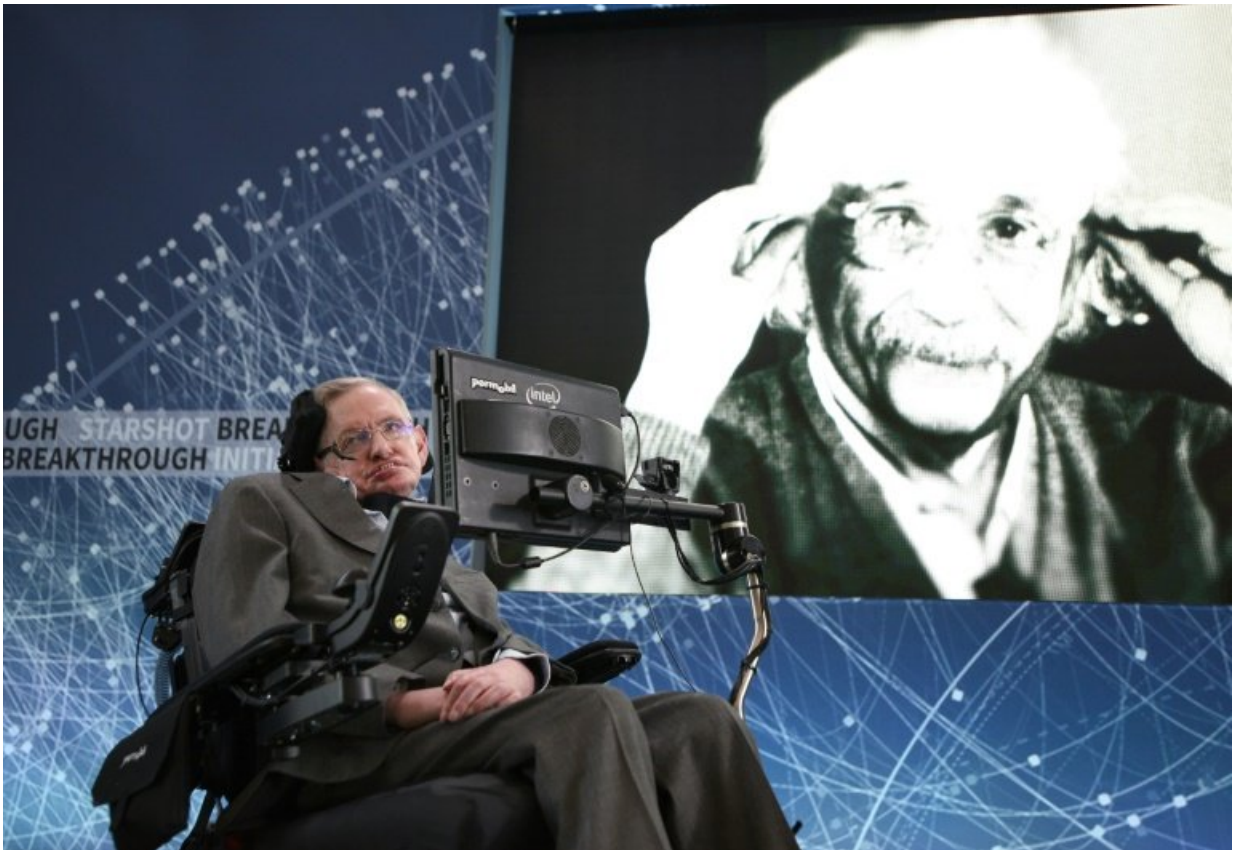


Stephen Hawking, the 'superhuman' pop culture star

March 15 2018, by Fiachra Gibbons, Laurence Thomann



Like Einstein, Stephen Hawking knew that the key to scientific evangelism was not to take yourself too seriously—in public

Very few people may have read and understood "A Brief History of Time", but the physicist Stephen Hawking carved himself out a place in

pop culture equalled only by Albert Einstein.

While the brilliant mind behind the theory of relativity was instantly recognisable by Einstein's unruly "mad scientist" hair, Hawking's wheelchair and his synthesised voice made him every bit as iconic.

Both knew how to play to the gallery, and that the key to scientific evangelism was not to take yourself too seriously—in public.

Einstein famously stuck out his tongue out for a picture in 1951 and Hawking never passed up a chance to show his rapier wit.

Within months of his 1988 bestseller—dubbed "the greatest unread book in history"—entering the Guinness Book of Records, the British cosmologist had become a star of the television chat show circuit and a pop cultural fixture.

He appeared as himself in everything from "Star Trek: The Next Generation"—playing poker with a hologram of Einstein—to "The Simpsons" where he conceded that Homer's "theory of a donut-shaped universe is intriguing".

In fact, he appeared five times in the cartoon series as "the world's smartest man", and became such a running gag that he had his own Simpsons figurine.

In his 1999 debut, "They Saved Lisa's Brain", he even started a brawl by punching Principal Skinner.

He was usually called on to deliver pearls of gnomonic self-deprecating wisdom such as: "Sometimes even the smartest of us can be the most childish. But not me, never..."

'Imprisoned mind' roaming cosmos

The Simpsons' creator Matt Groening also used Hawking's severed head as a recurring trope in his sci-fi series "Futurama". The scientist was a regular too on another US show, "The Big Bang Theory".

Artists even found his TV adverts inspiring.

Pink Floyd's David Gilmour sampled his voice from a 1994 British telephone ad for his song, "Keep Talking", after Hawking channelled "E.T." to declare: "Mankind's greatest achievements have come about by talking and its greatest failures by not talking. It doesn't have to be like this."

Hawking's colleague at Cambridge University, the Astronomer Royal Professor Lord Martin Rees, said the key to his appeal was that his brilliant brain had been imprisoned in a wheelchair and that he had been robbed of his own voice.

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