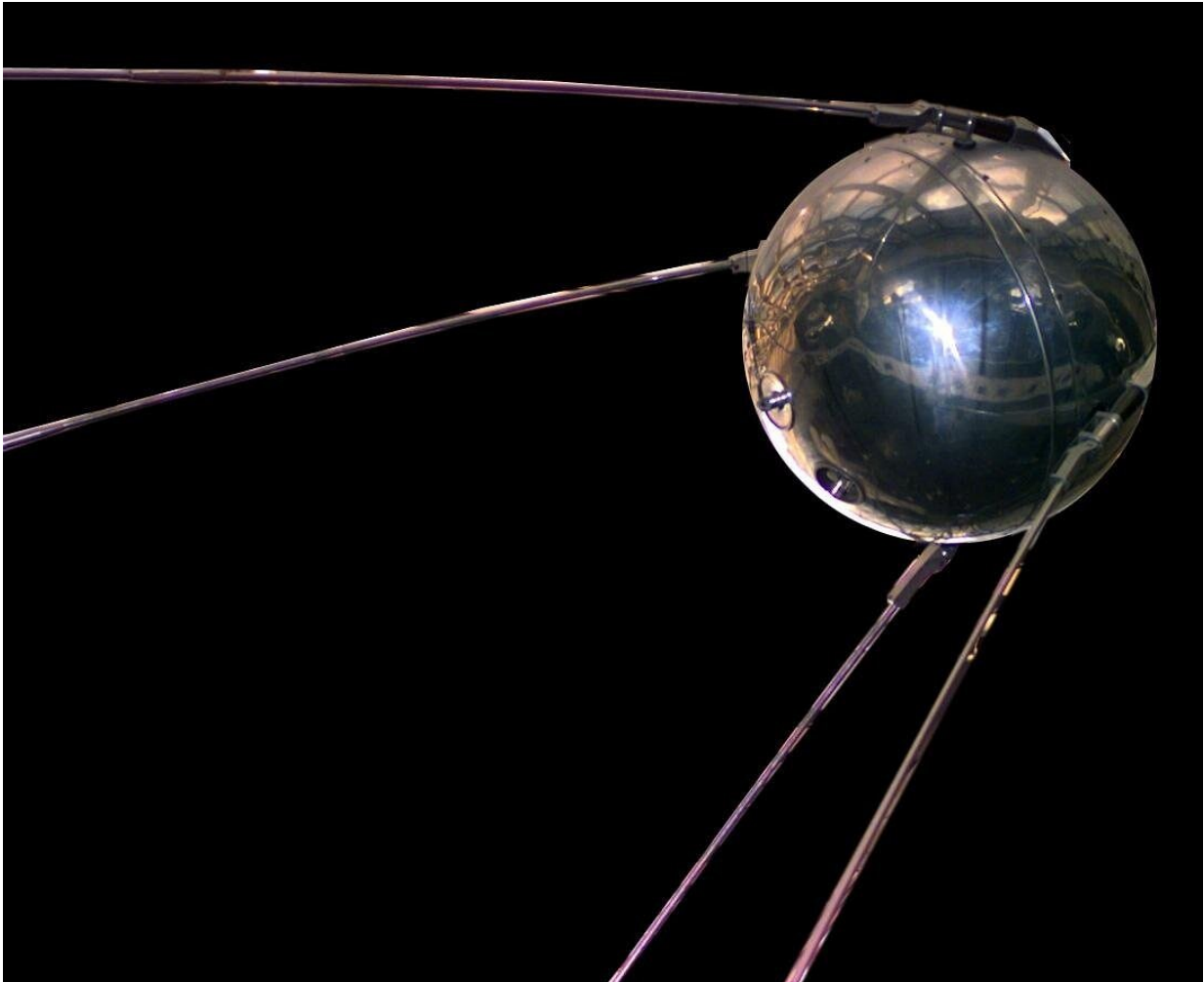


# Projecting favorable perceptions of space

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For anthropologists and other social scientists, the space race in the

1950s served as a period of cultural and technological transformation as well as an opportunity to advance the public good. Space exploration marked a distinct point in history—a time where humanity knew change was imminent and it could record societal impacts as they occurred. Recognizing the moment's anthropological significance, social psychologist Donald Michael stressed the importance of capturing public opinion before humans ventured into space and cultural attitudes were permanently altered.

In order to do so, Dr. Michael initiated Project Man in Space in 1955. Project Man in Space was a program—comprised of academics from anthropology, psychology, and [political science](#)—that sought to analyze perceptions of [space exploration](#) among the American public.

While assessing Americans' attitudes toward space was presented as the program's primary objective, David Price, in the article "'Project Man in Space': Applied Anthropology's Cold War Space Oddity," published in the *Journal of Anthropological Research*, asserts Project Man in Space affected [public opinion](#) in addition to measuring it. Price examines how ideas posed by program contributors encouraged fantastical perceptions of space travel which, in turn, bolstered public support for new initiatives and influenced policy.

Spurred by the news of Sputnik, Margaret Mead—a Project Man in Space contributor—reached out to colleagues at universities across America, asking them to survey the public about their feelings toward Sputnik, satellites, and advancements in space. Responses revealed strong interest in Sputnik, and an analysis of the attitudinal data suggested that Americans were in the process of formulating their views on space exploration.

Despite emphasizing its role in documenting opinion, Project Man in Space was able to shape public conceptualizations of space through

technical reports, conference papers, and press coverage. An article discussing Project Man in Space reiterated the cultural significance of the moment and included a questionnaire that readers could fill out and send to the researchers. Elements from science fiction and colonialism were interwoven in the abstractions and hypothetical arguments posed by those working in the program. These ideas likewise infiltrated popular culture. Magazine articles featured futuristic illustrations and fascinating descriptions of utopian space colonies.

The Brookings Report in 1960 presented speculative arguments on how interaction with extraterrestrial societies could impact our values and how humanity may resist some changes rather than adapting to them. The report likewise discussed the potential for space research to drive advancements in weather predictions, navigation, and communication networks.

Price critiques the report's optimistic viewpoint and argues the analysis perpetuates the notion of space as a new frontier where persistent societal problems, such as exploitation and inequity, wouldn't exist. Price also describes how space travel was actually an expansion of increasing Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. Instead of a futuristic dream, space offered a new domain to conquer and weaponize.

While Project Man in Space hypothesized ways in which space research could improve technology and advance humanitarian efforts, Price argues the program's concentration on space's peaceful and idealistic potential obscured military applications propelling the [project](#).

Despite their lack of awareness, the public's embrace of these utopian narratives enabled efforts to militarize space, and today, grand ideas of space travel persist amid more overt militarization efforts and concerns about the privatization of [space](#).

**More information:** David Price. "Project Man in Space": Applied Anthropology's Cold War Space Oddity, *Journal of Anthropological Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/709802](https://doi.org/10.1086/709802)

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