

Learning from Mr. Spock: Researcher examines sci-fi as social commentary

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What if science fiction like the Star Trek series could teach us how to better understand and engage with the real world around us?

That is the premise of a collection of scholarly articles written by five cultural researchers from around the country, including UT's Hannah Gunderman, a [doctoral student](#) in the Department of Geography.

The papers apply a variety of social theories and geographic concepts to the legendary science fiction franchise. They also show how Star Trek has made relevant social and political commentary about each generation since its launch in the 1960s.

The collection appears in a special issue of the *Geographical Bulletin*, the official journal of international geographical honor society Gamma Theta Upsilon.

Gunderman—who also co-edited the special issue, titled "The Geographies of Star Trek"—noted that people often use their science fiction fandom as a way to grapple with the political climate in which they find themselves. It may also serve to increase their empathy for others.

In Gunderman's paper, she examines how the entirety of the Star Trek franchise often blurs the boundaries between protagonists and antagonists.

"When you look at any episode of Star Trek, there will be someone who is seen as the bad guy," she said. "But that starts to get less clear as the episode goes on. Is it a bad guy, or are there external influences that are causing them to act in this way?"

That outlook could extend into our lives as we watch the news or hear about conflict in a different region of the world, Gunderman said. It challenges people to not be quick to judge others and instead try to look at what is happening in their lives and see how that is affecting their actions.

"We are so used to categorizing people," she said. "But if you're able to watch an episode of Star Trek and can empathize with whom the antagonist might be—recognizing that what they're doing isn't good but you understand why—if you're able to do that with the [media](#) you're watching, it may influence you in your real life to not be so black and white."

The impact [science fiction](#) makes on its fans is a commentary about the powerful effect popular media has in forming, shaping, maintaining, or changing people's opinions, Gunderman said.

"Popular media can make a lot of strong commentary on race, geopolitics, historic preservation, and history in general," she said. "I want people to be very aware that the media and television and films they're watching are definitely influencing them more than they realize—even if they think it is a passive action.

"I want people to ask questions such as 'What is this trying to tell me?' and 'How am I receiving this message right now?' I want people to be more hands-on with media they're watching."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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