

Challenging the Myths: How Media Normalizes Space Colonization

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of space technology has sparked excitement from the public about space travel. Revisiting the moon, colonizing mars, and even taking casual trips to the upper atmosphere of Earth have gained traction. Despite the rise in scientific skepticism and overall public mistrust, space tourism is largely accepted as a norm, with little discussion on ethics or sustainability. Awareness of the negative aspects of space travel is well-studied, and change starts from mass mobilization but glorification of space in media prevents such action. Sci-fi movies and books contain a constant theme that the Earth is dying, and outer space is the only option. Repeated exposure to media ultimately normalizes the audience to such concepts. To shift audience's perspectives on space travel to sustainability, storytellers can romanticize Earth as a worthy cause of saving.

KEYWORDS: Astrotourism, Astroethics, Science-fiction, Extinction, Normalization

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The commercialization, industrialization and colonization of space introduce ethical dilemmas and takes the focus away from the current problems we face on Earth. The space industry has been growing at an exponential rate since the 20th century, and the next phase is to bring more humans to space. In May 2019, NASA, along with the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), announced their plan to return to the moon under the Artemis campaign to understand the moon's geology [1]. The campaign launched its first rover in 2022 and will launch its second rover in April 2026, while the third aircraft is being prepared to carry astronauts in 2027 [2]. The regolith of the moon contains rare earth elements that will become useful in industrializing space [3]. Additionally, NASA is interested in collaborating with SpaceX to establish a small colony on Mars by early 2030 [4] whereas billionaire CEOs such as Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson are expanding space tourism to Low-Earth Orbit (LEO) to those who can afford it [5, 6].

The Outer Space Treaty, signed in 1967, was a preventative measure against nations with developed space agencies from colonization [7]. However, private citizens are not bound to this treaty and diminish confidence that corporations will be discouraged from claiming territories on other planetary bodies [8]. Additionally, the treaty does not address the ethics around space tourism or who benefits from space industrialization. Lessons on the long-lasting effects of colonization act as a cautionary tale to what exploitation can do to landscape and local communities. The privatization of space has left the public and the academics questioning the ethics around cosmic settlements [9].

One way to mitigate exploitation of outer space is demanding stricter policies from governments which requires collective action and mass mobilization, but divisive views halt such action. Research shows that 72% of Americans support the US

government being a leader in the space industry, while 33% of the population believe private space companies, like SpaceX, Blue Orion or Virgin Galactic, do not need the support of NASA to achieve their goals [10]. At a time when science skepticism is increasing, there is a large population that supports denationalizing space industries, further preventing any governance [11].

A prime example is the people of Brownsville, Texas. Some residents have filed a lawsuit against SpaceX for destroying the habitat of wildlife species from their failed test launches while others disagree with the lawsuit and think it is a small price to pay for innovation [12]. After their move from Florida in 2014, SpaceX started practicing launches on the beaches of Brownsville which not only shakes the nearby infrastructure but also creates noise pollution and disrupts the lives of the residents and local species [13, 14]. Yet, a lot of the residents are hesitant to criticize the company and are even willing to tolerate the negative impacts to witness these rocket launches [13, 15]. Technology to make Mars travel feasible is still in development and even when it does happen, the people who will be sent are professional astronauts that go through extensive physical and science training [16]. Although these residents recognize that they will not reap the benefits of these accomplishments, they retain their steadfast loyalty to the company under the guise that it is the greater good for humanity [14].

This unwavering allegiance is driven by the fear that Earth may not be a viable home one day and treat space colonization as humanity's only saving grace [17] which are stereotypes reinforced in most sci-fi media. This notion is perpetuated in book series such as the Martian Chronicles, as well as popular movies like Interstellar, Passengers, and Don't Look Up. Although some of these media pieces explore various ethical and moral issues surrounding space travel, they don't offer a different solution to humanity's existential crisis [18].

People's views are shaped from consuming media. In an interview with Vanity Fair, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, the creator of

the series *Bojack Horseman* on Netflix, argued that anything portrayed in media is inherently normalized to the audience even if the creator is depicting negative aspects of such ideas [19]. For instance, sociologists have argued that the consumption of true crime podcasts desensitize and romanticise people to violence and crime [20]. Normalization occurs from the repeated consumption of media that shifts people's views over time and blurs the lines between acceptable and familiarity [21]. If media familiarizes their audience with ideas, then those same mediums can also be used to shift perspectives on colonization and inspire mobilization for better space governance.

Stories around space travel can still be written without romanticising it. A piece of fiction that portrays this well is the Pixar movie, *Wall-E*. It is another movie about the Earth becoming an inhabitable place but does not glorify space travel. Aesthetics in media are a deliberate tool used to shape audience's experiences and influence their attitudes towards the subject [22]. Similarly, anti-aesthetics are successful in disrupting passive consumption by invoking jarring experiences [23]. The creators of *Wall-E* show that the spaceship humans are living on is far from utopian by visually showing that they are suffering from over-consumption and passive living. This further emphasizes the movie's message that rather than escaping problems, the focus should pivot to rehabilitating Earth.

Space exploration and utilization are inevitable, but stricter policies are needed, even for private citizens. Perspectives around space colonization need to change to motivate action and bring the focus from space back to Earth. Climate change is a concern, but we are far from becoming inhabitable and desolate, so the focal point should be making Earth sustainable rather than escaping it. There are many organizations and companies looking to build sustainable societies on Earth and even Mother Earth is fighting back by adapting bacteria to consume micro-plastics [24]. Media can be used to disrupt problematic narratives in sci-fi and inspire calls to action. In attempts to decenter ideas around space colonization, media

and literature can normalize and romanticize Earth as a habitable place.

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