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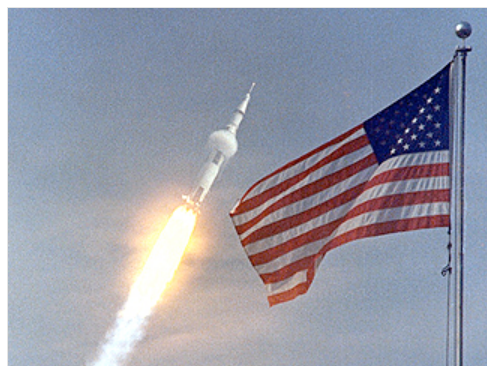
How Would a Modern Moon Landing Play Today?

Monday, July 20, 2009



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By Andrew Chaikin



Forty years after the first manned moon landing on July 20, 1969, SPACE.com asked Apollo astronauts and leaders of the space community to ponder the past, present and future. The Apollo 11 mission launched toward the moon 40 years ago today, and noted Apollo author and historian Andrew Chaikin — co-author of the new book "Voices from the Moon" — wonders how Americans might view the historic flight if it was happening right now:

Here's a question: If Apollo 11 were happening right now, how long would we pay attention? Forty years ago, the TV networks — all three of them — followed every phase of the mission.

A Saturn V rocket launches the Apollo 11 crew on the first moon landing mission on July 16, 1969 in this image framed by an American flag. On July 20, 1969 they went on the air with 30 straight hours of uninterrupted coverage of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin's "giant leap for mankind."

For a 13-year-old space nut like me, it was nirvana: I spent most of that 30 hours parked in front of the TV with my maps of the moon, models of the spacecraft, and articles about the mission, my own little "mission control" in the den. But I had the sense that the whole country, even the world, was sharing the excitement of witnessing a turning point in human history.

That feeling didn't last long. In November 1969, on the day after Apollo 12 astronauts Pete Conrad and Alan Bean made their own lunar touchdown, the New York Times ran a story entitled, "Second Moon Visit Stirs Less Public Excitement."

In the article, one of the quotes from man-on-the-street interviews around the country brought home just how fickle Americans can be: "It's old hat; it's not like the first time." Looking at that clipping now, I can hardly believe it: You were already bored?! And that **trend** continued even as the Apollo missions got more ambitious, and the live TV pictures from the lunar surface got better and better with each new landing. By the time of the final Apollo moonwalks, on the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972, the networks no longer covered the moonwalks in their entirety. We had already stopped watching.

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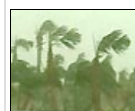
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Today, we are submerged in a 24/7 onslaught of information in which everything is interrupted by something else, when "breaking news" banners fill our screens with mind-scrambling frequency. In the midst of this deluge, would even the words "live from the moon" be able to rise above the noise for very long? I'm not so sure.

In any case, I'm much more aware of how strange it feels to look back at Apollo from where we are today. Who would have predicted that in 2009 we would have to go back 40 years to find the most futuristic thing humans have ever done? Apollo 17 commander Gene Cernan has said that it is as

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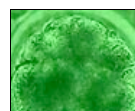
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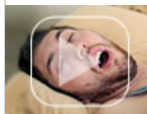
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if John Kennedy reached into the 21st century, grabbed a decade of time, and spliced it neatly into the 1960s and 70s. Ever since then, I've been waiting to see us get back to where we were in 1972.

Now, in the midst of the real 21st century, none of us can say when humans will go back to the moon — or what language they will speak when they get there. If Chinese taikonauts become the next lunar explorers, will we be spurred to action, or shrug it off? Or will we have somehow risen above our differences and found a way to go back to the moon together?

Call me naïve, call me just another aging Baby Boomer who can't let go of the past. But I firmly believe that Apollo was just the first chapter in a story of exploration that has no end, and will continue as long as humans are alive. And I still want to believe that when humans do return to the moon to follow in the Apollo astronauts' lunar footsteps, it will have more of an impact than many people now realize.

At last we'll be able to leave behind the cacophony of our TVs, [cell phones](#), and Blackberrys and stand in stillness under a clear night sky, looking up at the moon and knowing that we are seeing humanity's farthest outpost. We'll gaze on that bright neighbor world and know that people are living and working there, seeing what no one has ever seen and discovering what no one has ever known, and solving the enormous challenges of making us a truly spacefaring species. And we'll wonder what took us so long.

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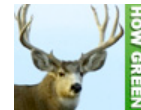
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