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Why look back at Apollo 11, when we've done so much since?

If you think you'd have liked it in 1969, either you weren't there or you've forgotten what was invented since. Is it because we're unhappy with what we now have?



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Earthrise: View of the Earth rising over the surface of the moon taken during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. Photograph: Nasa

Are you excited by the Apollo moon landing – more precisely, the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the takeoff and successful landing and return of the Apollo 11 mission and its crew? There's been no shortage of places to watch and follow it, from [wechoosethemoon](#) (named after Kennedy's famous phrase from his speech in September 1962) to [CAPCOM](#) (the person talking to the astronauts from the Canaveral Space Centre) on Twitter. There's an astronauts' get-together (though it seems Neil Armstrong isn't prepared to take even one small step out of his house to go there.) It's complete immersion. And we're [certainly not immune here at the Guardian](#).

What more could you want? Yet I suspect that what many of the people oohing and aahing over the achievements of 40 years ago really want is something unachievable: to be able to be transported back to that time as we imagine it. To live once more in a world where we hadn't gone yet to the moon; where the rare beauty of the Earth wasn't so clear; where the environmental problems weren't piling up so quickly that we barely dared to look around; where our financial straits didn't seem to bind us endlessly; where the twin pressures of feeding the world and making its vehicles run didn't work against each other.

Well, tough. You can't go back to that time. And though it might sound cruel to say so, hankering for the lost days of moon-claiming is the nearest thing to crawling under the duvet and sticking your fingers in your ears that you can do while not actually doing that.

What have the past 40 years brought us? Yes, lots of problems. But perhaps that's partly because we can now see our problems more clearly.

And if you're really asking what those years have brought, let's detail a few:

- microminiaturisation that enables you to read this on a computer millions of times more powerful than was available in 1969;
- a communications network (call it the internet, whose first beginnings were October 1969) that gives us access instantly to more knowledge than individuals have ever been able to access ever before;
- the commonplace use of lasers and masers and the mass-production of fibre-optic cables, ensuring that making a phone call has become cheaper, in real terms, than ever before;
- the advent of mobile phones, for which there are now 4bn connections (compare that to roughly 6 billion people in the world) enabling you to make calls from nearly anywhere;
- space satellites that have mapped our world in more detail and shown us more about what we're doing to it than we ever knew before;
- a constellation of satellites, with atomic clocks so accurate that they have to account for the effects of relativity, which we can use to determine our position on the Earth to an accuracy of a few metres;

And in the field of medicine there's:

- magnetic resonance imaging (the idea wasn't even published until 1971, and the first not built until 1977);
- the CAT scan (computed axial tomography) not until 1972 (by a Briton), and
- cochlear implants (a subject close to my heart), which were barely functional in 1969.

Perhaps we don't like knowing so much about how extensively we've failed to grapple with the problems we're creating on this world; our self-knowledge, and capacity to enlarge that knowledge, runs far ahead of our ability to act sensibly on that knowledge. If we could see the world in the round, as those astronauts did, perhaps we would stop razing the rain forests, reduce our energy use, stop overfeeding ourselves while we overfish the seas. We know that if we really look at the distance from here to 1969, we'd suffer more existential angst than we do already. So we prefer just to look at that date, and what was done then. Fine: but what comes next? Reliving the succeeding missions? That will peter out. Reliving Richard Nixon's announcement – intended to mirror Kennedy's choosing of the moon as a grand target – that cancer would be conquered? That one didn't go so well. Not all grand schemes succeed. Apollo was the exception, not the rule.

The trouble with nostalgia is that it's never more comfortable to indulge in than when it's cold outside. I, for one, won't be following the Apollo celebrations. I've met Buzz Aldrin, and he's an excellent ambassador for astronauts; the problem is that space has better ambassadors than it deserves, since it's a big, empty, lonely, deadly place. I'll be thinking about the things we need to fix on the planet now.

Apart from anything, it's a lot more likely to make a difference ...

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