

Daredevils, entrepreneurs and social media make space sexy again

Wilson da Silva



Space is hip again. Whether it's a Felix Baumgartner skydiving his way past the sound barrier – setting Twitter and YouTube on fire – or the space shuttle Endeavour pulling big crowds in the streets of Los Angeles, the final frontier is back in vogue.

Just as families the world over gathered around the box and wireless for the 1969 moon landing, Baumgartner's 38.6-kilometre freefall from the edge of space had us staring in jaw-dropping awe at screens, setting social media alight. More than 8 million watched the livestream as the Austrian daredevil, perched on a bal-

loon capsule surrounded by the black of space, lunged into the void and tumbled to the blue Earth below. During the jump, half of Twitter's global trending topics discussed the jump, and the first photo of his triumphant air punch landing posted on Facebook was shared 29,000 times and liked 216,000 times in 40 minutes.

On the same day in Los Angeles, thousands of people lined the streets to cheer the crawl of the retired shuttle's final 20-kilometre journey from the airport to the California Science Centre, where it will go on display. A constellation of eager spectators had camped out the night before.

The space trend has been growing since August – coincidentally, the same month astronaut Neil Armstrong died – when the SUV-sized Curiosity rover made a “death plunge” to the surface of Mars, slowing from 21,600 km/h to zero in seven minutes. The hair-raising landing appeared live on the twin screens at Times Square in

New York, and was streamed to Xbox 360 dashboards worldwide.

The blogosphere promptly erupted, the ensuing coverage making a minor celebrity of flight director Bobak Ferdowski, 32. His multicoloured Mohawk haircut, created especially for the landing, scored him 54,000 new Twitter followers – some making marriage proposals. A parody music video, *We're NASA and We Know It* (set to the tune of American electropop duo LMFAO's hit song) was out within days, and has so far had 2.5 million views.

Social media is now what television was to the early days of the space race; but it's also a more personal way for the closet space fan in all of us to connect directly with the exploration of the cosmos. Take Curiosity: it has 1.2 million followers on Twitter, to whom it tweets its daily routine as well as links to pictures and video: “A scoopful of Mars helps the science go down. Ready to ‘rinse & spit’ regolith to clean my sampling system.”

NASA astronaut Mike Massimino, whose Twitter handle is @Astro_Mike, has 1.3 million followers, many of whom watched live as he became the first person to tweet from space. And shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* (23.5 million fans on Facebook) – whose characters banter about Mars rovers and physics non-stop – have helped make rocket science a lot cooler than it used to be.

Soon, space won't be just a vicarious pursuit: it'll be a place people will visit in their thousands. Cashed-up space entrepreneurs are popping up everywhere: Jeff Bezos (of Amazon.com fame) with his company Blue Origin; Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic; and Elon Musk – of PayPal and Tesla Motors fame – with SpaceX.

In fact more than 30 companies have crew and cargo launch vehicles under development, aimed at everything from space tourism to commercial flights. In February 2010, the US President, Barack Obama, kicked

things along by directing NASA to retire the shuttles and outsource trips to the International Space Station to private industry.

Three companies have progressed to the third round, sharing a \$US1.1 billion bounty. Best placed is Musk's SpaceX, whose Dragon unmanned capsule successfully delivered 450 kilograms of fresh supplies to the space station last week – a first for commercial spacecraft, putting it into the box seat to eventually take the contract to carry US astronauts into orbit.

On the space tourism front, Branson's company is in the lead, with 15 unpowered flights of its seven-passenger SpaceShipTwo, and a powered test flight into space due before the end of the year. It offers passengers a taste of space, with a suborbital flight that will give them 10 minutes in zero gravity. So far, 529 budding astronauts have put down hefty deposits – more than the total number of people who have

been into space to date. Last week English singer Sarah Brightman was named as the next paying tourist to visit the space station aboard a Russian rocket, shelling out a reported \$US51 million for a 10-day stay – and becoming the first soprano in space.

Business has woken to the promise of space, and there's a rush to bring entrepreneurship to bear. On the drawing boards: suborbital flights from London to Sydney taking only three hours, and hotels in space for honeymooners keen to try a zero-g version of the (100) mile-high club.

The days of square-jawed pioneers like Armstrong might be fading, but the passion and inspiration of a new generation of Baumgartner-like daredevils and Branson-like entrepreneurs is paving the way for the rest of us.

Wilson da Silva is the editor-in-chief of science magazine *Cosmos*, and will be among the first 100 passengers to fly on Virgin Galactic in 2013.