

Public Abstract

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If you look at a rendering of planet Earth from a bird's eye view, you will see satellites orbiting the planet like electrons, each one a testament to humanity's expansion beyond Earth's atmosphere. It begs the question: what is this new humanized landscape? The dominant voice that has attempted to answer this question is the realist one, which has led the charge of academic inquiry into outer space since the fateful launch of the Sputnik in 1957. Though enlightening in some respects, the realist perspective oftentimes obscures the heterogeneous complexity of the actors, actions, limits and possibilities that have constructed this very humanized outer space.

This paper looks at the humanization of outer space through the lens of JASON-3, an internationally collaborative satellite designed primarily to measure the topography of the Earth's oceans. A vast number of actors collaborated to enact the network that created JASON-3, including bureaucratic agencies, academics, private contractors, political bodies, other satellites, the sun and even gravity. This paper will focus on these actors and the work that they did to form the network, showing a glimpse of the entangled connections that eventually produced JASON-3. Through telling this story, I argue: (1) outer space is more complex than state-level relations and (2) critical geography—with its insight into relational spaces and deconstructing power structures—has a unique place to fill in outer space literature.