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Building a national approach to space

The Australian space sector faces a choice in 2024. Next year, in 2025, we will be hosting the International Astronautical Congress (IAC), the world’s largest gathering of space professionals, and it will only be eight years since we hosted it in 2017. It is rare that a country is selected to host the IAC twice in such a short period of time, and the Australian space sector—private, government and academia—has an opportunity to put its best foot forward. We, therefore, must make a choice about who we are as a space nation—and all of us in the sector have a responsibility in this choice.

The last few years have arguably been dominated by a competition

between Australian states and territories as to which place is the best “space” to be. Bipartisan politics at the federal level and voices from the private sector are decrying that the government has underfunded or not sufficiently supported a fledgling industry. The focus has been on building an industry for the sake of a space economy, and not on the societal benefits of space technologies, nor the ways in which Australia and Australians depend on these technologies.

As we prepare to welcome the world’s space sector to our shores, we need to move away from a splintered, internally competitive approach, and towards a

coherent “Team Australia” approach as to why we invest in and develop space technologies, and what we have to offer our international partners.

We must demonstrate to the world that we have come a long way since 2017. The establishment of our Australian Space Agency in 2018 and the Defence Space Command in 2022 are institutional achievements, but their existence alone is not enough. Australia must be able to show that it is a valuable partner in space programs, a trusted partner in the Asia-Pacific region, and a contributor to the space technologies that are making a difference to the biggest issues of the 21st century.

A national narrative

What we need is a clear national narrative about ourselves as a space nation. And this is not necessarily the sole responsibility of government institutions. It is something that all stakeholders in the space sector contribute to and communicate.

A narrative is a storyline of connected events that gives meaning to those events. A national narrative is one that connects our enduring values and identities as a nation, to big events. Events like bushfires and floods, or sporting achievements, or farewelling a recognised national Indigenous leader. In countries like the US, Canada and Japan, space policies are designed around strong national narratives which endure across changes in government. The space agencies, Defence space divisions, and private sectors in those countries draw on these enduring national narratives to ensure consistent investment and public support in space technologies. This includes emphasising the societal benefits of space technologies.

From this coherent national approach, it becomes clear that space activities form part of their strengths as a nation. Sharing the benefits of sovereign and commercial space technologies is part of their geopolitical interactions with other nations. The importance of space technologies for various domestic sectors like mining, agriculture, fisheries, trade and IT are expressed in policies and investment decisions within those sectors. And societal benefits of space technologies for responding to climate change, wildfires, communication and education needs are communicated consistently.

In Australia, it may be challenging to identify enduring national values or identities as we find ourselves dealing with big questions around Indigenous representation, access to housing and education, the challenges faced by remote, rural and regional Australians, and our diverse ethnic demographic. But there are ways to communicate how space technologies can contribute to solving these issues, and this is the opportunity for our sector moving forward.

Understanding values

The Australian Centre for Space Governance (ACSG) was established in 2022, in part to respond to this very need. The ACSG is a national knowledge capability made up of space humanities experts from across six universities. We aim to advance Australia’s interests in space and to advocate for responsible space governance.

The ACSG recently undertook the most comprehensive public opinion poll ever in Australia, to understand how much Australian residents know about the benefits of space activities to life on Earth, and about what Australia does in space. We also wanted to know which space activities Australians think we should prioritise.

The data from this survey is informative. Public understanding and support are necessary for major investment into space activities and for knowing where there are gaps that can help us adjust the messages we are putting out as a sector. This data also helps us understand where there might already be a national narrative.

What we learned is that 20% of Australian residents have never heard of the Australian Space Agency. We also learned that launch and astronauts are not part of a national identity or narrative—at least not yet. Most respondents (84%) had never heard of WRESAT [Weapons Research Establishment Satellite], which was launched from Woomera in 1967, making us the third nation in the world to launch a satellite. Most respondents (63.3%) had not heard of Australian born astronauts Andrew Thomas and Paul Scully-Power. On the other hand, respondents generally think space is important for national security, and that Earth observation is important for climate change, agriculture, mapping, weather prediction, and Indigenous land and water management. Developing satellite capabilities was ranked the highest priority.

The strongest association that respondents had with Australian space activities was the 2001 movie *The Dish*. A story that demonstrates a typical Australian narrative of the underdog. And a story that we can build on as we prepare to host the

2025 IAC. Our institutions may be young, but we are an innovative nation with a rich and diverse population full of talent and a wide range of skills, and we are ready to contribute to solving the world’s challenges through space partnerships.

Societal benefits, critical infrastructure and national priorities

The focus for the space sector moving forward must be on messages about the societal benefits of space technologies and space data, and the ways in which space technology can help secure the things we care about and need in Australia. This will help inform decision making. It will also ensure those decisions align with what the public wants and values.

This includes the ability to respond to climate change and contribute to a thriving economy, from food security and a competitive agricultural sector to sustainable management of land and waters, and from national security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region to the ability to respond to bushfires and floods. If this becomes our national narrative, it will be clear to our own citizens and government why space matters, and to our international partners why they should engage with us, and what we have to offer.

Space is not a choice. We already depend upon space-based technologies for our daily lives and our national needs. The choice is what we focus on. Do we try to outdo each other or lift each other up?

The sector has a responsibility to lead this national narrative. The ACSG is here to help. We host workshops for government and together with industry, we provide training and education, and advocacy for advancing Australia’s interests in space in the 21st century through our policy papers and podcast. Reach out to us if you want to become part of this national narrative. ●



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