



Personifying space: how the public learned to care for Rosetta and Philae

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One of the aspects in the communications campaign promoted by the European Space Agency (ESA) and its partner institutions throughout 2014 to raise awareness about the comet-chasing mission, Rosetta, was the development of two anthropomorphic characters depicting the Rosetta probe and the lander Philae. The two characters were featured in a series of short cartoons with a fairy-tale flair that were distributed on the internet with the aim of breaking into new audience groups.

The cartoon series, named “Once upon a time”, tells the adventures of Rosetta and Philae, depicted as two bold and friendly explorers on a pioneering journey across the Solar System. The episodes cover the mission milestones, from Rosetta’s wake-up from deep-space hibernation to its rendezvous with the comet and Philae’s landing. They were promoted through the mission’s dedicated social media accounts (mainly Twitter and Facebook) and through ESA’s existing social media channels as part of the broader Rosetta communications campaign.

We discuss how visual storytelling was used to make the mission’s scientific goals more accessible, allowing the audience to share both its excitement and risks. We describe the development of the cartoon series and the level of engagement it generated, using estimates based on the response received through our social media channels.

Other tools were also used to help the public identify with the two space probes. In particular, the Twitter accounts @ESA_Rosetta (managed by ESA) and @philae2014 (managed by DLR) were run in first person, as to give the impression that the probes were writing the tweets themselves, and even interacting with one another – as is often done in the case of spacecraft Twitter accounts.

All these elements added a personal feel to the comet landing, with members of the public empathising with the two space probes and caring for their well-being. This wave of interest culminated in the last few hours of Philae’s operations on the comet, before it entered hibernation. We also discuss issues that we encountered using this approach, including pitfalls and lessons learnt, and how the choice of anthropomorphising spacecraft was received by different publics.