

Hello World: Harnessing social media for the Rosetta mission

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Abstract

The European Space Agency's (ESA) comet-chasing Rosetta mission was launched in 2004, before social media became a popular tool for mainstream communication. By harnessing a range of platforms for communicating the key messages of this unprecedented space adventure as the spacecraft reached its destination ten years later, a wide range of new audiences were reached and could follow this once-in-a-lifetime mission.

1. Introduction

Rosetta-specific social media accounts – @ESA_Rosetta on Twitter, the Rosetta Mission Facebook page and the rosettamission Instagram account – were developed during 2013/14 and used alongside the traditional reporting line of the main ESA website and the Rosetta blog to build awareness about the mission. Coordinated with ESA's existing social media channels (Flickr, YouTube, G+, Twitter, Facebook and Livestream) and with the support of ESA's country desks and Rosetta partner agency accounts (including @philae2014), information could be shared in a number of European languages about the key mission milestones in 2014: waking up from deep space hibernation (January), arriving at Comet 67P/Churyumov-Gerasimenko (August) and landing on a comet (November). This ensured a wide reach across Europe – and the world.

2. Rosetta social media channels

2.1 Facebook

The Rosetta Mission Facebook page was set up in late 2013, and launched on 10 December as the central point for the "Wake up, Rosetta!" video competition. The Woobox competition tool was implemented to support entries to the competition; the same approach was also used for the "Rosetta, are we there yet?" photo contest in July/August. The

Facebook page is also used to share content from other platforms.

2.2 Instagram

Rosettamission Instagram was set up in late 2013 but not actively used until the launch of the "Rosetta, are we there yet" contest, to allow an additional way to enter the contest. It is also used to share new images of the comet.

2.3 Twitter

The @ESA_Rosetta twitter account is the first occasion where ESA has employed a first person twitter account for spacecraft, following as realistically as possible the actions of the real Rosetta spacecraft. The key moment for the account was the wake-up in January 2014, with the "Hello, world!" tweet sent in the 22 languages of the ESA member and cooperating states at that time.

In addition to sharing general status updates, images and science results, @ESA_Rosetta describes how it is feeling, allowing followers to share the same emotions. The human-like exchanges between @ESA_Rosetta and its lander @philae2014 (managed by DLR) play a key role in sharing their adventure at the comet.



Figure 1: "Hello, world!" – the @ESA_Rosetta twitter account woke up once the real Rosetta spacecraft woke up from 31 months in deep space hibernation.

3. The anthropomorphic characters of Rosetta and Philae

Besides their personification through the twitter accounts, the Rosetta orbiter and the Philae lander were also turned into anthropomorphic characters that were featured in a short series of web cartoons with a fairy-tale flair. The cartoon series, named “Once upon a time”, tells the adventures of Rosetta and Philae, depicted as two brave and friendly explorers on a pioneering journey across the Solar System. Making the mission's goals more accessible via the use of visual storytelling allowed the audience to share both its excitement and risks. Together with their twitter personas, the cartoon characters of Rosetta and Philae contributed to the personal feel of the mission, with members of the public caring for their well-being.

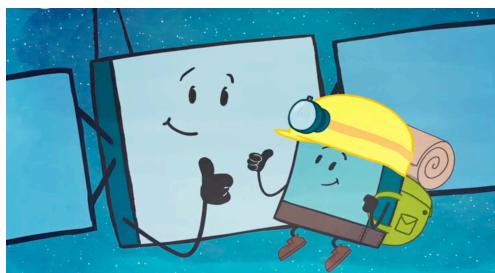


Figure 2: The anthropomorphic characters of Rosetta and Philae were created in collaboration with Design & Data.

4. Summary and Conclusions

By using a variety of social media platforms to target different audiences with specific content, we have been able to increase awareness about the mission, and share the key moments live with our audience. In particular, by focusing on the human angle, we have been able to further engage people in joining the adventure of this historic mission. In many cases Rosetta has allowed people to also discover ESA for the first time.

Results and insights will be shared in a full paper, currently in preparation.