

Louis D. Friedman – 1 Dec 2014

Send Your Name to Mars – Not Really

Uwingu, a for-profit commercial company started by planetary scientist Alan Stern, has announced a project to send names to Mars. Not physically send names, but only virtually as bits of information in a one-way radio transmission that would intersect but not actually leave anything on Mars. This is far less tangible than the original sending of names to Mars done on a micro-etching on the Viking spacecraft in 1975, or the MAPEX project of The Planetary Society on Mars Pathfinder in 1997, or the Visions of Mars project also of the Society in 2008 on the Phoenix lander. Names have also been sent to Mars on the Mars Exploration Rovers and Mars Science Laboratory Rover by NASA and to other planets on CDs and microchips by The Planetary Society and NASA. The Japanese Hayabusa mission also included sending messages to the near-Earth asteroid Itokawa. (Hayabusa-2 is being launched this week).

More than names have been sent: the aforementioned MAPEX was the Micro-electronics And Photonics Experiment measuring radiation on the Martian surface, Visions of Mars was a CD anthology of science fiction literature creating the first Martian library for future explorers. These were serious educational projects, very much in the spirit of Carl Sagan and his colleagues sending the Pioneer Plaque and Voyager Record on planetary spacecraft leaving the solar system.

All of these earlier public engagement projects were figurative messages in a bottle, sent with the idea that someone in the future might find them and learn from them about who we were and why we explored. Uwingu's radio names to Mars will fall on empty space leaving nothing. In fact, there is some uncertainty how much of them would reach Mars since the transmitters and antennas they say will be used have never been used for planetary communications. Far worse than the ephemeral nature of the project, is that unlike the other send your names projects they are charging real money for people to participate – this is a commercial venture by a profit making company with only a vague promise to pus some of the profits back into research.

That seems to be Uwingu's business model. In a very similar manner they invite paying customers to name a Martian crater despite Uwingu owning no naming rights or any intellectual property connected with the craters. That enterprise is like the long-established but not highly regarded Star Registry which allows you to pay money to name a star, also without any rights. In the Martian crater scheme, Uwingu has associated with Mars One a not credible venture to conduct a one-way mission to Mars by amateurs. It was this association, and the for profit marketing

of meaningless crater-naming, that caused me to resign from the Uwingu Advisory Board. I had been an initial supporter (even financially) of Uwingu since they stated their aim was to raise private money through citizen involvement for worthy planetary projects. But they seem instead be focused on gimmickry for profit.

Uwingu's not first with this approach – the Star Registry has already been cited. A group of amateur SETI enthusiasts sent out untargeted radio signals from a Ukrainian radio telescope. At least they had a real deep space transmitter, unlike the Universal Space Network. And a non-credible solar sailing venture some years ago collected money and sold profit-making “kits” for people to send their DNA to the stars – when in fact they couldn't have made it out of Earth orbit, and didn't. Those disappeared, but the internet, social media and crowd-sourcing environment is much larger now; allowing multiplication by zero to still yield a finite number (for profit).

The Uwingu venture isn't that big a deal – at worst it is false advertising; at best it is fun. They may even make some small science contributions. But it gives a bad name to legitimate citizen-based fundraising and public participation efforts in space exploration. It will be counter-productive as worthy efforts become tarnished or lost amidst the gimmickry. I can take solace realizing that when the first humans reach Mars, they won't find a batch of old radio waves awaiting them, but they will find the Visions of Mars library, the MAPEX radiation and several real archives of many names inscribed on what will then be Martian artifacts. The radio waves are ephemeral as will be the phony Martian craters names – but the real will survive.