

COLONIALISM AND PLACE CREATION IN *MARS PATHFINDER* MEDIA COVERAGE

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the representation of the planet Mars during the 1997 *Mars Pathfinder* mission through a content analysis of major U.S. newspapers as well as transcripts of television and radio news shows. Content analysis identified three threads of representation: scientific advance and the search for life, the naming of Martian places, and the Earth analogy. Together these converge in a language of colonialism that both advances the economic goals of the media and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and represents Mars as a space fit for human colonization. This article focuses on how the *Sojourner* rover technology simulated human activity on the surface of Mars and led to the constitution of Mars as a place of social activity, thereby enabling the language of colonialism. *Keywords:* colonialism, Mars, media, place creation, space exploration.

The Earth's invading Mars next week, and we aren't talking about science fiction but about science fact.

—Joie Chen, 1997

Events within the past decade have enabled a tremendous expansion of the geographical realm. Unremarked on by any human geographers—except for one passing reference (DeFilippis and Smith 1997, 505), the amount of material territory that can be described geographically has nearly doubled with the successful landing of human-scaled explorers on the surface of Mars.¹ In this article I outline the process by which Mars has become constituted as a place within the sphere of human activity, beginning with a history of scientific interest in Mars and culminating in the 1997 media event that is my primary concern: the successful *Mars Pathfinder* mission. I demonstrate that media coverage constructed Mars as a place to be colonized, largely as a result of the coincidence of the economic interests of the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the mass media, embodied in their anthropomorphic treatment of the *Sojourner* rover.

In 1997 NASA launched the first successful mission to Mars that involved a rover capable of moving about the surface and making observations, known as *Mars Pathfinder*. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), a federally funded research center at the California Institute of Technology, managed the project on behalf of NASA. The purpose of *Pathfinder*'s mission, officially, was to ground truth some of the abundant remote sensing data that had been gathered from Earth as well as from satellite-based platforms. Unofficially, the mission received authorization to provide a public relations boost to the beleaguered government agency (Markley 2005). On both counts, the mission proved incredibly successful, with NASA reaping reams of scientific data as well as tremendous amounts of public interest via an effective mar-

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