

The Power of Print

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When Philae phoned home to Earth a couple of weeks ago, the world cheered. The European Space Agency (ESA) had achieved an amazing first in space exploration – landing a robotic lander on a comet! A comet! However, the cheers became somewhat subdued within hours of the landing, all because of a shirt. The print of a shirt, to be exact.

London native Dr. Matt Taylor, ESA Project Scientist, sparked a social media storm with his apparel during a media briefing on that historic 12th of November.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR5nee3FSis&ytsession=QnAhQplrXZtwr60y4Vo2r3VKXgzVjZUge8ZQmWIBbSdhYmEAobswDqPwP5OzLVEXoFH0JuZkffae8dw1h6fJa0oIZUoFHS28O1hgUyL66Xt1SczBXNWN8Oiqu7t4Bv_7t_t2SibBNCQei5tsqtrX1oHsppXo-4JbfEr_VxQEYPwOccdPbVvkNbYhhITVL3dryJwXDJulhwDw_4TFIAwG_AFqLN_rKYJOG4HI5BgJSOtxRs-AqT2iZiW5SLYxJvKjQtHZUjhvxvSSZdT_Fywf_7TmkkrcDA2NAquiBQGOZFxtBe39liddhhf9G0nc-7tAeiWiKDAONrxg

Women, and men, from all backgrounds and professions took to Twitter in outrage at Taylor's shirt, citing the shirt as sexist and perpetuating the glass ceiling for women in STEM fields. By the morning after Philae's landing, media throughout the world had taken on the subject of "the Matt Taylor shirt". Alice Bell wrote in [The Guardian](#), "ESA can land their robot on a comet. But they still can't see misogyny under their noses". From the [Washington Post](#) to the [Japan Times](#), journalists around the world have since commented on the scientist's shirt.

As a researcher interested in space exploration I was, of course, watching the live ESA briefing during the landing. I was taken aback when I checked the news and my Twitter feed the following morning. There was an ESA scientist wearing a shirt with scantily-clad women on it? Had I been watching the wrong briefing? Confused, I went back to the videos online, which had since been uploaded on YouTube in a clearer version than the live broadcast. I skipped to Taylor's interview and zoomed in. Sure enough, what had previously been a blur of pixelated colors the night before was now a clear image of a shirt covered with cartoon women in PVC-wear.

The criticisms and defenses of Matt Taylor's choice in clothing continued to flood the press and social media for days, even weeks, following the landing despite a seemingly sincere apology from Taylor made during an ESA Hangout the day after the landing. The outrage, and subsequent outpour of support, has earned official Twitter hashtags of #shirtgate and #shirtstorm, the latter of which has become the title of a section in [Taylor's Wikipedia bio](#). Even though the conversation has

apparently died down, the impact of this phenomenon intrigues me as an anthropologist. What would Bourdieu say about Taylor's social capital after wearing the shirt? What was the symbolic meaning of the print, in Geertzian terms?

There has been much speculation about why Taylor wore that particular shirt on that particular day, with comments in the media ranging from his family to the designer of the shirt. There has been at least as much speculation about the impact of the shirt on women in STEM fields. The question I raise is one of material, was it the print of the shirt or the print of the dialogue that had the influence?

Is it “just a shirt”?

Philomena Keet's post on [“What Makes a Piece of Clothing ‘Fashion’?”](#) reminds us that fashion is paradoxical, “...simultaneously anchoring the wearer into a group whilst representing the desire to be individual”. A female laser technician, the wife of the man who did all of Taylor's tattoos, presented the shirt to the scientist as a gift. The tattoos and the shirt are perhaps a product of the rockabilly, rock star quality Taylor has been embraced for having, a characteristic typically lacking, or suppressed, within the scientific community. Unexpected images of belonging within and apart from the typical lab-coat-wearing scientific community are often applauded, such as Bobak Ferdowsi's mohawk during the landing of the Mars rover Curiosity that received national attention and a special mention from U.S. President Barack Obama - a fashion statement that received little, if any, ridicule from the media despite the racially-charged notion of the haircut.



Curiosity Mohawk Guy.

Creative Commons, www.sciencefriday.com

Nevertheless, if the print of the shirt is symbolic of the sexism within STEM professions, then the iconic white shirt and ties of Apollo-era NASA scientists and engineers are just as telling. Fashion

aside, the images from NASA's 1960's Mission Control in Houston and ESA's Philae briefing are strikingly similar – mostly, or all, white men. Though it appears women have become more included in the boys-only science club since the 1960s, the populations remain predominately white, a fact that has not gained as much media attention as the shirt.



Apollo-era Mission Control. Open Access, www.nasa.jsc.gov

ESA Philae Briefing, 12 November 2014.
www.youtube.com

So why has Matt Taylor's shirt received so much attention? Would people be talking about it as much if it was a more cartoonist representation, such as a classic 1930's Betty Boop?

Is it the print of the shirt, or the print of the dialogue?

It is hard to imagine Taylor receiving the same amount of criticism if the shirt was a typical Hawaiian print. The popularity of the Aloha Shirt, even those without grass-skirted hula girls,

is regarded by some Native Hawaiians as objectifying of their culture, though it is deemed socially acceptable apparel for a scientific community as evident in a 2003 salute by [NASA mission controllers to Hawaiian Astronaut Ed Lu](#) on his birthday. Would NASA engineers have faced the same ridicule if there had been social media during the 1969 moon landing or if it was made known that there were men wearing Aloha Shirts with scantily-clad hula girls in the picture from NASA's Mission Control Center?



Aloha Shirt Day at NASA JSC.
Open Access, www.nasa.jsc.gov

The controversy surrounding Matt Taylor's shirt is impossible to think about in terms of impact without acknowledging the role digital and social media have played in the phenomena. The #shirtstorm case exemplifies the complexities of contemporary material culture, what is print and how it is transformed.