

I'm on list to be a Mars One astronaut – but I won't see the red planet

Joseph Roche

The organisers' plan is ambitious but naive and unrealistic. It's time to admit this venture won't work and pour our energy into more viable space missions

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I am one of the final 100 candidates for the Mars One mission but it is unlikely that I will ever land on Mars. As much as I love to be one of the first interplanetary scientists, a potential mission to Mars remains, for the moment, beyond our reach.

I volunteered for the Mars One programme because my research areas include astrophysics and the role of science in society. I am passionate about pushing the boundaries of scientific endeavour and that is why the ambitiousness of the Mars One plan appealed to me.

Although Mars One was never likely to overcome the financial and technical barriers during the proposed timeline, it was refreshing to hear a new idea that challenges us to think about our own role in the future of space exploration. Being part of the subsequent public debate over the ethics and morality of future missions has been one of the most interesting and enjoyable aspects of my candidacy with Mars One.

If a one-way mission to Mars ever became possible then I would always volunteer. For an astrophysicist that is not a difficult decision to make, but it is also a moot point because I do not think we will see a one-way mission in my lifetime.

As part of my work I have spent many years promoting astrophysics and space exploration and thanks to the support of my university I have been given a lot of opportunities over the last year to speak about the challenges of potential missions to Mars. In those discussions, I concentrated on the technical, physical and psychological difficulties of such missions, as I think that is where the most captivating science is to be found.

In October 2014 scientists in MIT, led by Sydney Do, produced a fascinating assessment of the feasibility of the Mars One mission plan. These MIT research scientists are experts in space habitation and life support systems and their input should have led to a discussion and possibly even a collaboration with Mars One. The fact that Mars One did not engage with these scientists would suggest a certain naivety towards the obstacles that their ambitious plan faces.

I stopped speaking publicly about Mars One towards the end of 2014. After completing

the interview stage I felt that the selection process was not rigorous enough to reach the requisite standard of more traditional astronaut selection programmes. I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with several astronauts and if you spend any time with an astronaut you will soon see that they are as close to being superhuman as a person can be. To select such a person requires a comprehensive and exhaustive procedure.

Last month a list appeared with “the top 10 candidates” for the Mars One mission. This list was put together after “the organisers ranked the candidates by points”. These points are “Mars One supporter points” which “represent the degree of your support to Mars One’s mission”. These points serve only to show how much each supporter has donated to Mars One. I think that the shortcomings of the selection process, coupled with their unwillingness to engage and collaborate with the scientific community, means that the time might have come for Mars One to acknowledge the implausibility of this particular venture. They could then perhaps turn their efforts towards supporting other exciting and more viable space missions.

One thing that Mars One has taught us is that in order to get the public more involved and interested in space exploration, it needs to be relevant, inspirational and accessible to everyone. Later this month the US astronaut Scott Kelly and Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Kornienko will embark on a mission to the International Space Station that will see them become the first humans in history to spend an entire year off-planet. This will lead to an understanding of the challenges faced by astronauts during long-duration spaceflights and will be a significant step towards a future mission to Mars. As long as we continue to take small steps we will eventually reach our destination.

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