

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The prophet business: Arthur C. Clarke, Sri Lanka and the making of a global space persona

David Skogerboe  and David Baneke

Freudenthal Institute, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: David Skogerboe; Email: d.s.skogerboe@uu.nl

Abstract

This article analyses the development of Arthur C. Clarke's (1918–2008) persona as the 'prophet of the Space Age', focusing on its relation with his adopted homeland, Sri Lanka. Unlike many space personas, Clarke was not an astronaut or a political leader, but a writer and advocate for space technology who developed a global reputation as an authority on the future. In 1956, Clarke relocated from his native England to the former British colony of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). This article examines how both Clarke himself and a wide range of organizations, nations and individuals, including many from Sri Lanka, contributed to the creation of a global 'prophet' persona. This includes Clarke's public life in Sri Lanka, which came to embody the earthbound, satellite-focused space future he promoted. This persona was in turn used to project commercial and moral justifications for space technologies, especially through Western lenses and for Western audiences, but in numerous ways gave Sri Lanka an active role in the global Space Age.

Before one attempts to set up in the business of being a prophet, it is instructive to see what success others have made of this dangerous occupation.¹

In 1998, the Sri Lankan government released a stamp featuring writer, futurist, and space advocate Arthur C. Clarke ([Figure 1](#)). In 1956, Clarke relocated from his native England to the former British colony of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he lived until his death in 2008.² Clarke has often been hailed as the 'father of satellites' on account of his 1945 introduction of the concept of geostationary communication satellites in *Wireless World* magazine – the first of numerous 'predictions' that helped define his persona as the 'prophet of the Space Age'.³ The stamp includes references to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the 1968 film Stanley Kubrick based on Clarke's writings, and to the 'Clarke orbit' – a title later colloquially assigned to the geostationary orbit.⁴ Most notably, it depicts him as a global citizen. Born and raised in Britain, and active in Hollywood as well as on Capitol Hill in the USA, he is shown wearing

¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 1.

² For ease of reading, we will use the name Sri Lanka throughout this article, even though the country was called Ceylon until 1972.

³ Arthur C. Clarke, 'Extra-terrestrial relays: can rocket stations give world-wide radio coverage?', *Wireless World*, October 1945, pp. 305–8.

⁴ *2001* is based on Clarke's 1951 short story 'The sentinel'; see Robert Poole, 'The myth of progress: *2001 – A Space Odyssey*', in Alexander C.T. Geppert (ed.), *Limiting Outer Space: Astroculture after Apollo*, London: Palgrave Macmillan,



Figure 1. 1998 Sri Lankan stamp commemorating Clarke. Authors' personal collection.

both Sri Lankan and Western garments, overlooking the Earth, alongside writing in both English and Sinhala. The stamp's text includes the honorary British title 'Sir' as well as the Sri Lankan distinction Vidya Jyothi ('Luminary of Science'). And central on the stamp is an artistic representation of instant communication on a global scale, a recurring theme in Clarke's long career.

Postage stamps can be seen as examples of persona-making at the national level. The images they carry represent state-approved messages that 'illustrate how it wishes to be seen by its own citizens and those beyond its boundaries'.⁵ In issuing this stamp, Sri Lanka claimed Clarke as one of their own, contributing to his uniquely global space persona while, via proxy, affiliating itself with Space Age developments.

The stamp is but one example of how Clarke came to be portrayed as the visionary of the satellite-borne 'global village'. As discussed in the introduction to this special issue, persona can be understood as the 'production of a public self', tailored to affiliate an individual with the values of a specific audience.⁶ Clarke's globalized, prophetic persona was strategically built and cultivated over many decades by numerous contributors – from Clarke himself to space professionals and political leadership across the planet – all seeking to appeal to a diversity of audiences. This persona served the main mission of Clarke's self-proclaimed 'prophet business': to highlight the potential benefits of space technologies, and to stimulate governments, private organizations and the general public to support the investments necessary to see them realized.

In this article, we explore the production of Clarke's persona as an authority on the future exploration and exploitation of space, focusing on the role Sri Lanka played in making his public image globally oriented and centred on an Earth-focused satellite future. In

2018, pp. 103–29. For the 'Clarke orbit' see Arthur C. Clarke, *Ascent to Orbit: A Scientific Autobiography. The Technical Writings of Arthur C. Clarke*, Hoboken: John Wiley, 1984, pp. 223–4.

⁵ Stanley D. Brunn, 'Stamps as iconography: celebrating the independence of new European and Central Asian states', *GeoJournal* (2000) 52(4), pp. 315–23, 315.

⁶ P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore and Kim Barbour, *Persona Studies: An Introduction*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, pp. 1–3, 238; Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'Rocket stars, space personas and the global Space Age', *BJHS*, this issue.

what ways did Clarke's connection to Sri Lanka contribute to his persona as the pre-eminent global space prophet? Who engaged in the creation of his persona? On what audiences did they focus? And for what purposes? And how did his persona relate to the postcolonial nature of Sri Lanka, and to the Cold War context of space flight?

Existing literature on Clarke is often biographical in nature, otherwise centring on his expansive *oeuvre*, with the role of Sri Lanka often more of a side note. There are, however, several notable exceptions. Oliver Dunnett has argued that Sri Lanka became central to how Clarke understood space exploration, science and society.⁷ He signals a tension in Clarke's understanding of Sri Lanka, 'both romanticizing its pre-colonial past and cosmological sense of place, and also characterizing Sri Lanka's future in terms of western technological determinism and associated cultures of empire'.⁸ In this paper, we argue that Clarke's persona combined these romantic, exotic and futuristic threads to convey a techno-optimistic narrative of space for development that found great appeal among those seeking to portray a benevolent ideal of Western technological expansion.

De Witt Douglas Kilgore also discussed Sri Lanka in his analysis of Clarke's views on British imperialism. Kilgore argues that, ideologically, Clarke was an anti-imperialist, condemning empire as an 'extreme form of nationalism' incapable of achieving space travel.⁹ But at the same time, he contends that Clarke's views were shaped by imperialist history, viewing internationalism as 'the next step after empire' and believing that 'the people formerly subordinated to the imperial ideal can be raised through technology into a commonwealth that will make the joint conquest of space possible'.¹⁰ Along similar lines, Robert Poole analysed how Clarke's views on development and civilization were inspired by historian Arnold J. Toynbee's ideas about the rise and fall of civilizations.¹¹ Based on a grand overview of human history, Clarke believed that embracing modern technology to venture into space would enable the next major leap in human history, especially for developing countries. In another important paper focused on Clarke's ocean-related writing and activities, Helen Rozwadowski argued that space gradually replaced the ocean as the primary 'frontier' for exploration and exploitation.¹² Rozwadowski's work highlights how Clarke's voice was embedded in wider discourse about resource exploitation and human expansion, both in space and across the planet. In all these papers, it is clear that Clarke's persona appealed to Western expansionary sensibilities. However, we argue that numerous players in the developing global South also leveraged Clarke's space-for-development message, to facilitate the transfer of space technologies and engage in international debates related to their usage.

While engaging with similar themes related to Clarke's unique position between West and global South, between imperial and international, and between ocean and space, Dunnett, Kilgore, Poole and Rozwadowski all focus on Clarke's personal views and works. Following the main aim of this special issue, we will shift the focus from Clarke's person to

⁷ Oliver Dunnett, 'Imperialism, technology, and tropicity in Arthur C. Clarke's geopolitics of outer space', *Geopolitics* (2021) 26(3), pp. 770–90, 771.

⁸ Dunnett, *op. cit.* (7), p. 782.

⁹ De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2003, p. 118.

¹⁰ Kilgore, *op. cit.* (9), p. 121. On the interconnectivity of space flight and colonialism see Peter Redfield, 'The half-life of empire in outer space', *Social Studies of Science* (2002) 32(5–6), pp. 791–825; and Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹¹ Robert Poole, 'The challenge of the spaceship: Arthur C. Clarke and the history of the future, 1930–1970', *History and Technology* (2012) 28(3), pp. 255–80.

¹² Helen Rozwadowski, 'Arthur C. Clarke and the limitations of the ocean as a frontier', *Environmental History* (2012) 17(3), pp. 578–602.

his persona.¹³ We will not analyse how Sri Lanka shaped Clarke, but how Sri Lanka shaped the way Clarke was presented to, and understood by, his audiences, and the function this presentation held. We do this by analysing how global portrayals of him evolved in articles, interviews, books, (auto)biographical works, television broadcasts and images, and how these relate to the context in which they were produced. We also trace the high level of public recognition, or celebrity, which his persona developed and how the public platform this granted was used as a tool for garnering attention and encouraging engagement with the various futures he presented.¹⁴

We begin this paper with a brief characterization of Clarke's persona in comparison with the other 'space personas' discussed in this issue. We then discuss the pedigree and production of Clarke's 'prophetic' persona in his early career, up to his relocation to Sri Lanka in 1956. Next, we analyse the rationales behind the move and the role that postcolonial tourism, scuba diving, regional development and the 'exotic' played in publicly linking Clarke to Sri Lanka through the 1960s. Thereafter, we address how Sri Lanka and neighbouring India became increasingly important in creating a globalized sheen for Clarke's Western-oriented persona in the 1970s, particularly through the lens of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), an American-Indian project in which Clarke's persona was promotionally involved. We also connect Clarke to Indian space father Vikram Sarabhai's 'leapfrogging' ideals, which are examined in Haitian Ma's contribution to this special issue.¹⁵ Finally, we discuss how his legacy was negotiated transnationally in the final decades of his life.

Overall, Clarke's persona took root and evolved within and across numerous contexts in the Western world, the Eastern bloc and the global South, revealing the innumerable global networks underlying the Space Age. Not only was Clarke's persona a global production, but it also functioned as an argument for the global. It offers a powerful case for the 'global Space Age', a perspective highlighted by this special issue as an alternative to the traditionally binary Cold War narratives of space.

Clarke's persona

Among the prominent 'space personas', including those discussed in this issue, Clarke's case stands out for several reasons. Most notably, he was not an engineer, scientist, astronaut or space programme manager. Rather, he was a writer and advocate for space technologies who had his futures promoted via numerous media channels and partnerships with a wide variety of organizations. He was not a just space professional who became famous; his entire career was explicitly founded on a carefully constructed 'prophetic' persona which affirmed his authority. His persona was his career.

A key aspect of Clarke's persona was his common designation as a 'prophet of the Space Age', although he was not the first to obtain this title. Wernher von Braun was described as such in the 1950s, for example.¹⁶ The genealogy of ascribing the moniker 'prophet' to

¹³ For a useful discussion about the relation between biography and (scientific) persona see Oliver Marsh, 'Life cycle of a star: Carl Sagan and the circulation of reputation', *BJHS* (2019) 52(3), pp. 467–86.

¹⁴ Declan Fahy, *The New Celebrity Scientists: Out of the Lab and into the Limelight*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 3.

¹⁵ Haitian Ma, 'Leapfrogging India: Vikram Sarabhai and the developmental promise of geocentric space flight', *BJHS*, this issue.

¹⁶ George Barrett, 'Visit with a prophet of the Space Age', *New York Times*, 20 October 1957, pp. 86–7. Space popularizer Willy Ley was also given this title; see Jared S. Buss, *Willy Ley: Prophet of the Space Age*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017.

scientists was explored by Lynda Walsh, who argues that ‘the prophetic ethos is a role that a polity – a group of people who must work together to stay together – authorizes to manufacture certainty for them’.¹⁷ Considering the challenge of promoting space travel when it was still largely imaginary, the certainty produced by popularizers like Braun and Clarke (that such imaginings were actually possible) was of great value to communities of like-minded individuals, such as members of the national rocket societies in which both started their careers. Walsh further suggests that the ‘prophetic ethos’ is granted to individuals who can ‘demonstrate privileged access to knowledge beyond the public ken’.¹⁸ Clarke’s ‘prophetic’ persona was indeed founded on his reputation for having a privileged personal connection to space technology, particularly satellites.

In many respects the foundation for Clarke’s reputation as a ‘prophet’ can be found in his parallel title as the ‘father of satellites’, which was based on his 1945 publication on geostationary communication satellites. While this article received little attention at first, the years following the launch of Sputnik saw it become a prominent form of evidence for his prophetic persona.¹⁹ An analysis of Clarke’s career advocating for satellite technologies shows that he actively encouraged his frequent introductions as the ‘father’ or ‘inventor’ of communication satellites, later even self-fashioning the supposedly more modest title ‘Godfather’ (because he did not actually design or build anything).²⁰

In fact, Clarke is unique in that he achieved a role as prophet, or ambassador, for space, without being himself involved in any space programme or scientific endeavour: even Carl Sagan combined his public role with an academic career. There are equivalents in other fields, however, such as Jacques Cousteau or David Attenborough. Through his many documentaries, Cousteau became an authority on the ocean, without claiming to be a scientific oceanographer. Like Clarke, he also promoted a techno-optimistic view of our relation to the oceans, combining it with visions of exploration, exploitation and (later) environmentalism. And Cousteau’s authority, like Clarke’s, was founded on an early technological insight that proved crucial to opening a new frontier for human exploration: his co-invention of the aqualung.²¹ In turn, as Gouyon argues, Attenborough’s credibility was based not on scientific authority, but on his ‘telenaturalist’ persona, an on-screen performance of personal intimacy with the natural world.²² Similarly, Clarke’s trustworthiness was based on his perceived up-close-and-personal connection to the future, particularly in the ways in which space flight would change life on Earth. In these cases, the lack of formal scientific credentials or leadership positions did not negatively impact their authority.

Another notable difference between Clarke and other space personas was that he was not directly connected to any specific space programme or nation. As exemplified by the other ‘fathers’ discussed in this issue (Vikram Sarabhai of India, Arnaldo Tamayo of Cuba, Qian Xuesen of China, Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold of East and West Germany respectively),

¹⁷ Lynda C. Walsh, *Scientists as Prophets: A Rhetorical Genealogy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 2–3.

¹⁸ Walsh, op. cit. (17), p. 3.

¹⁹ When *Wireless World* reprinted the article in 1991, stating that it had ‘created a sensation’ at the time of its release, Clarke informed the editors that he did not ‘recall any reaction whatsoever to the appearance of the piece!’; see ‘Letter to *Wireless World* editor from Clarke’, 31 December 1991, Arthur C. Clarke Collection of Sri Lanka (Acc. No. 2015–0010), Archives Department, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (subsequently Clarkives), Folder 5, Box 13.

²⁰ David Skogerboe, ‘The godfather of satellites: Arthur C. Clarke and the battle for narrative space in the popular culture of space flight, 1945–1995’, master’s thesis, Utrecht University, 2020, at <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/36868>, p. 7.

²¹ Jon Crylen, ‘Living in a world without sun: Jacques Cousteau, *homo aquaticus*, and the dream of dwelling undersea’, *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (2018) 58(1), pp. 1–23.

²² Jean-Baptiste Gouyon, *BBC Wildlife Documentaries in the Age of Attenborough*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 8, 221.

space personas are most often created in national contexts.²³ Clarke was a lifelong British citizen, but the space programmes with which he was most closely involved were in the US and India. The only nation he ever officially represented was Sri Lanka, which had no space programme. We will investigate how this national ambiguity enabled his persona to become a global production, receiving inputs from and addressing audiences across national, ideological, economic and linguistic barriers.

While Clarke did play an active role in the making of his own persona, there was a broad range of global organizations, from NASA to the Indian Space Programme, INTERKOSMOS, INTELSAT, AT&T, CBS, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and the BBC, who were all involved in shaping his public presentation. As we show, Clarke lent his voice to those in power. Politicians, space programme leaders and commercial companies, among others, utilized his global fame and the authority of his words for their own ends, in turn contributing to the acceptance of its authenticity. This multitude of actors makes his persona a rich focal point to investigate global space politics and astroculture. Finally, this richness is reinforced by the fact that Clarke's career spans the entire traditional Space Age. He played a public role in space promotion from the 1940s until his death in 2008, and his image and name are still in circulation today. Thus, as an object of study, Clarke's persona offers a novel lens for reassessing the scope and scale of the Space Age, due to its enduring presence and uniquely global interconnectivity.

A prophet of the space age

Clarke's ascension to Space Age prophet can be traced back to his involvement in the British Interplanetary Society (BIS) in the years preceding the dawn of the space race. The BIS was a group of rocket and space enthusiasts who embraced an optimistic, almost utopian, view of space technology, inspired by interwar techno-optimists such as H.G. Wells.²⁴ It became a platform for popular-science writers in which Clarke thrived. He joined the BIS in 1936, at the age of nineteen, shortly before serving in the Second World War, during which he gained experience in radar and communication technologies.²⁵

Towards the end of the war, he and his fellow BIS members began to discuss how they could legitimize rocket development. As he later recalled of this time,

We 'space cadets' were trying to think of ways of getting space travel on the move and were trying to persuade people to pay for exploration of the moon and planets. Was there any commercial pay-off for space technology? ... It occurred to me that if we could put a television transmitter in a satellite, we could, if it were high enough, broadcast to half of the world at one time.²⁶

This public-relations effort to demilitarize rockets led to the now famous article in *Wireless World*, wherein Clarke suggested that the V-2 rocket could be used to launch three 'artificial

²³ Gloria Maritza Gómez Revuelta, 'Black in space: Arnaldo Tamayo and the Cuban cosmic revolution', *BJHS*, this issue; Alexander C.T. Geppert and Lu Liu, 'The celebrification of Qian Xuesen', *BJHS*, this issue; Tilmann Siebeneichner, 'Showcasing Germany in space: the lives and afterlives of Cold War rocket stars Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold', *BJHS*, this issue.

²⁴ Charlotte Sleight, 'Science as heterotopia: the British Interplanetary Society before the Second World War', in Don Leggett and Charlotte Sleight (eds.), *Scientific Governance in Britain, 1914–79*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, pp. 217–33; Peter J. Bowler, *A History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H.G. Wells to Isaac Asimov*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

²⁵ Neil McAleer, *Sir Arthur C. Clarke: Odyssey of a Visionary*, New York: Rosetta Books, 2013, Chapter 5.

²⁶ Arthur C. Clarke, 'Imagineering in space', speech delivered at Chris Evans Memorial Lecture Hall, 10 September 1980, Clarkives, Box 143, Folder 3.

satellites' which together could relay television signals to any location on Earth. From the very beginning of his career, Clarke was in the business of selling space, particularly for the benefit of those on Earth. Following the war, he began publishing popular-science books as well as science fiction, while studying physics and astronomy at King's College (he would complete a bachelor's degree and one year of graduate studies). By 1949, writing became his full-time vocation.²⁷ Clarke became deeply affiliated with space in the British imagination, serving as the chairman of the BIS from 1946 to 1947 and from 1950 to 1953. According to Dunnett, Clarke's early science fiction was an expression of the scientific narratives of the BIS, contributing to the creation of a national culture of 'British outer space' which saw space as the ultimate destiny of humanity.²⁸

The intention of Clarke's public and literary endeavours, in partnership with the BIS, was to shape public attitudes on the viability of space travel by focusing on futures that were in reach within a generation.²⁹ Obtaining collective buy-in to this vision required a fairly high degree of scientific prowess and credibility, which the BIS helped grant Clarke. In his first examination of 'space personae', Geppert identified the formation of a 'space international' persona within early rocket societies like the BIS, predicated upon a cultivated image of scientific credibility and connectivity to an international community of experts.³⁰ Clarke was a contributor to and recipient of this credibility.

In 1951, his popular-science book *The Exploration of Space* was selected by the Book of the Month Club in the US, receiving a number of glowing reviews on the front pages of prominent newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*.³¹ This marked his expansion into the American market, a significant boon to his promotional efforts and public recognition as a space authority. As a result, the US government allowed Clarke to write a popular insider account of Project Vanguard, the American effort to launch their first satellite.³² The massive expansion of his popularity and the global reach of his audiences, however, did not occur until the years following his relocation from Britain to Sri Lanka in 1956.

From sea to space in Sri Lanka

Initially, Clarke's shift was not related to space, but rather to scuba diving, which according to him offered an experience of 'weightlessness' akin to space flight.³³ It was also entrepreneurial. In 1954, during a pit stop in Sri Lanka en route to dive in Australia, Clarke and his friend, aspiring (underwater) film-maker Mike Wilson, met Sinhalese diver Rodney Jonklaas, who took them diving in the local waters.³⁴ This experience inspired Clarke and Wilson to relocate to Sri Lanka to explore the pristine waters and build a business around these ventures – focusing on underwater surveying, film-making and, most notably, tourism.³⁵

²⁷ Rozwadowski, op. cit. (12), p. 583.

²⁸ Oliver Dunnett, 'Patrick Moore, Arthur C. Clarke and "British outer space" in the mid-20th century', *Cultural Geographies* (2012) 19(4), pp. 505–22, 518.

²⁹ Skogerboe, op. cit. (20), p. 117.

³⁰ Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'Space personae: cosmopolitan networks of peripheral knowledge, 1927–1957', *Journal of Modern European History* (2008) 6(2), pp. 262–8.

³¹ McAleer, op. cit. (25), ch. 7.

³² Arthur C. Clarke, *The Making of a Moon: The Story of the Earth Satellite Program*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957.

³³ Quoted in Thore Bjørnvig, 'Transcendence of gravity: Arthur C. Clarke and the apocalypse of weightlessness', in Alexander C.T. Geppert (ed.), *Imagining Outer Space: European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd edn, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 141–62, 149.

³⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *The View from Serendip*, New York: Random House, 1977, p. 6.

³⁵ McAleer, op. cit. (25), Chapter 10.

In 1948, after a century and a half of British colonial rule, Sri Lanka gained independence as a dominion within the British Commonwealth.³⁶ Many vestiges of colonial rule remained intact, however, including the use of English.³⁷ The combination of Sri Lanka's exotic tropical locales, affordable lifestyle and postcolonial infrastructure allowed Wilson and Clarke to quickly establish themselves financially – largely on account of the income stream made available by the growth of tourism within the Commonwealth.³⁸ As Malcolm Crick argues in his account of international tourism in Sri Lanka, 'tourism can so often seem like the return of their erstwhile rulers, only this time on vacation'.³⁹ Furthermore, in postcolonial Sri Lanka, 'tourism was a collaboration between the local ruling elite and overseas capitalists who required local partners to set up their enterprises'.⁴⁰ Clarke followed this pattern, while – due to strict double-taxation laws – residing in the country for only six out of every twelve months.⁴¹ The rest of the time was spent lecturing around the world, especially in the United States and Europe, but also India, wherein his experiences in Sri Lanka became material for reference.⁴² Importantly, this semi-exile facilitated an expansion and cross-pollination of Clarke's global audiences and raised their awareness of his presence on the island.

Drawing attention in this way was a core goal of Clarke's prophet business, and he utilized an assortment of media channels to boost his businesses, commodify his image and promote his ideas. Such media exploits often required sponsors with their own specific audiences and goals in mind. For example, Clarke and Wilson's 1958 diving documentary, *Beneath the Seas of Ceylon*, was sponsored by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, an organization that sought to stimulate trade within the Commonwealth.⁴³ Very soon after his move, Clarke became an important cog in an economic, and later scientific, network between Britain and its former colony.

Over the next few years, Clarke and Wilson made more films, and Clarke wrote both fiction and non-fiction books centred in Sri Lanka, each portraying the island as an exotic paradise and an exciting tourist destination.⁴⁴ *The Treasure of the Great Reef* (1964) and *Indian Ocean Treasure* (1964) discussed their discovery of a shipwreck, filled with silver coins dated to 1702.⁴⁵ Several historians have shown how these ocean-focused publications, particularly *The Deep Range*, combined colonial-style fantasies of adventure and exploration with

³⁶ Patrick Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006, pp. 97–100.

³⁷ D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, 'The interface of language, literature, and politics in Sri Lanka: a paradigm for ex-colonies of Britain', in Christian Mair (ed.), *The Politics of English as a World Language: New Horizons in Postcolonial Cultural Studies*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, pp. 337–58, 342.

³⁸ As Clarke noted, 'One of the factors that adds immeasurably to the convenience of visiting Westerners is that – in contrast to many exotic countries – English is spoken everywhere, and practically all street signs are in Roman characters (as well as in Sinhalese and Tamil)'. Clarke, op. cit. (34), p. 119.

³⁹ Malcolm Crick, *Resplendent Sites, Discordant Voices: Sri Lankans and International Tourism*, Chur: Harwood Academic, 1994, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Crick, op. cit. (39), p. 114.

⁴¹ Clarke, op. cit. (34), p. 183.

⁴² For example in his speech 'The world of the communications satellite' at a UNESCO conference in 1963. See Arthur C. Clarke, *Voices from the Sky: Previews of the Coming Space Age*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, pp. 126–35.

⁴³ William Gynn, 'The art of national projection: Basil Wright's song of Ceylon', in B. Nichols, J. Sloniowski and B.K. Grant (eds.), *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 64–80, 76.

⁴⁴ Beyond those mentioned in the text, Clarke's other publications on diving in Sri Lanka were *The Coast of Coral* (1956); *The Reefs of Taprobane* (1957); *Voices across the Sea* (1958); *Boy beneath the Sea* (1958), with a preface written by Cousteau; and *The First Five Fathoms: A Guide to Underwater Adventure* (1960).

⁴⁵ 'Letter of thanks to Arthur C. Clarke regarding donation of a cluster rupees from Frank A. Taylor', 13 December 1961, Correspondence 1961, Clarkives, Box 1, Folder 8.



Figure 2. Clarke diving, taken by Mike Wilson. Arthur C. Clarke, *Indian Ocean Adventure*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961, p. 38.

visions of future, technology-driven internationalism, based on coordinated exploitation of the vast resources offered by the world's oceans.⁴⁶

Diving footage from this period also helped to shape Clarke's public image. Where previous visual representations of Clarke portrayed a classic, well-dressed, spectacled British authority figure, the diving images presented him as an adventurer like Cousteau. Dressed in a space-suit-like scuba suit, Clarke appeared just one rocket ship away from navigating the stars himself (Figure 2). Several Western media outlets explicitly highlighted this connection between sea and space exploration. In 1963, British magazine *Men Only* interviewed him in a piece titled *Prophet of the Space Age*, claiming that he 'turned to the sea because he was born too soon for space'.⁴⁷

While the majority of Clarke's audience was still in the West, he also engaged with local Sinhalese audiences. In 1962, he co-founded a film production company alongside Wilson and Sri Lankan artist Shesha Palihakkara. They produced *Ran Muthu Duwa*, or *Island of Treasure*, the first full-length colour film in Sinhala. The film was a massive success, seen by over a million Sri Lankans in just a few months.⁴⁸ Overall, Clarke's literary and media efforts played a key role in endearing him to the Sri Lankan government. The chairman of the Ceylon Tourist Board, A.C.H. de Soysa, wrote in 1967 that Clarke's works 'involve Ceylon in the most appealing manner and without doubt would influence any reader to yearn to visit our shores'.⁴⁹

Beyond diving, film and tourism, Clarke was also involved in several grass-roots space popularization projects in Sri Lanka, which immediately after independence lacked a national scientific research culture.⁵⁰ In 1959, he co-founded the Ceylon Astronomical Society, together with Herschel Gunawardena, and began publishing articles on space and

⁴⁶ Dunnett, op. cit. (7), p. 778; Rozwadowski, op. cit. (12), p. 591.

⁴⁷ Cedric French, 'Prophet of the space age', *Men Only* (April 1963) 82, pp. 19–22; sourced from David N. Samuelson, *Arthur C. Clarke: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984, p. 135.

⁴⁸ McAleer, op. cit. (25), Chapter 14.

⁴⁹ 'Letter from A.C.H. de Soysa to Clarke', 17 June 1967, Correspondence 1967, Clarkives, Box 4, Folder 6.

⁵⁰ R.M.W. Amaradasa and M.A.T. de Silva, 'The evolution and structure of science and technology in Sri Lanka', *Science, Technology and Society* (2001) 6(1), pp. 179–201.

science in local English newspapers.⁵¹ A translation of his novel about a rescue attempt of Moon tourists, *A Fall of Moondust* (1961), became one of the first science fiction novels published in Sinhala.⁵² A medical student named Buddhadasa Bodhinayake and Clarke co-authored the first Sinhala book on space in 1961, translated as *Someone Like You Will Go to the Moon*. In 1965, Clarke, Bodhinayake and engineer and artist H.R. Premaratne published a Sinhala book on the virtues of satellite technology.⁵³ Premaratne would shortly thereafter join forces with Clarke and Kubrick in designing the iconic space station featured in 2001.⁵⁴ For Bodhinayake, this was the start of a career in science communication. He became the editor of *Vidya* magazine, one of the first science magazines in the country, putting Clarke on the cover of the first issue in 1966, portraying him as *the* local authority on space (Figure 3).⁵⁵

Gradually, Clarke's reputation within and public association with Sri Lanka began expanding. Perhaps facilitated by his presence in the region, he was awarded the UNESCO–Kalinga Prize in 1961. The award, endowed by Indian statesman Biju Patnaik, was granted for communicating the international importance of science and technology, and its contributions to the improvement of public welfare.⁵⁶ Such accolades illustrate Clarke's increasing fame, the appeal of his messaging, and his growing association with development via space technology. By this time, he was sufficiently famous that international organizations began enlisting him as an ambassador for their own missions. For example, the International Astronautical Federation (IAF) invited him to speak at its annual meeting in 1961. Clarke's speech described the globalized future that satellite technology would create, arguing that Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels would have been ineffective in an interconnected world where satellites 'can expose lies and spread the truth'.⁵⁷ As the IAF was founded in 1951 'to ensure a constant dialogue between the space nations, regardless of political turmoil', the appeal of Clarke's rhetoric is understandable.⁵⁸

In the meantime, the Sri Lankan government, while welcoming Clarke's international promotion of the island, did not share his sense of urgency to invest in space. In 1956, the year Clarke relocated to the island, a new socialist-leaning government was elected, led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike.⁵⁹ Its nationalist policies, which included making Sinhala the official national language, fuelled the beginning of ethnic tensions with the Tamil, Hindu minority that would plague the country for decades. Following a number of ethnic riots, Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959, and the ensuing years were marked by instability in the nation's political and economic systems.⁶⁰ In this context of political turmoil, the use of space technologies for development was clearly more important to Western actors than to Sri Lankan officials. For example, the Sri Lankan government approached Clarke in 1963 to

⁵¹ Nalaka Gunawardene, 'From Trincomalee to Mars', *Society for History of Astronomy News* (2009) 19, pp. 37–42. For examples of Clarke's Sri Lankan publications during this period see Samuelson, op. cit. (47), p. 89, p. 93.

⁵² Sandun Sameera Siribandu, 'සිංහල Sci-fi පොත් එකතුව' (Sinhala sci-fi book collection), *Vidusrara*, at <https://scifibooklist.grantha.lk> (accessed 11 November 2022).

⁵³ 'Architect behind the Sinhala', *Sunday Times (Sri Lanka)*, 15 March 2018, at www.pressreader.com/sri-lanka/Sunday-times-sri-lanka/20150315/282999693315995 (accessed 9 September 2022).

⁵⁴ Nalaka Gunawardene, 'H.R. Premaratne: the artist who built a space station for 2001', *Sunday Observer (Sri Lanka)*, 11 May 2008, at <https://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2008/05/11/plus01.asp> (accessed 11 August 2022).

⁵⁵ Nalaka Gunawardene, 'විද්‍යා සන්නිවේදන ජාතා – වෛද්‍ය බුද්ධදාස බෝධිනායක' (Dr. Buddhadasa Bodhinayake: science communication trailblazer in Sri Lanka), *Ravaya* (March 2015) 22. Originally published in Sinhala, the article was re-published in English on the author's blog. See <https://nalakagunawardene.com/2015/03/22/සිවුමංසල-කොලාහලයා-212-විද්> (accessed 8 July 2022).

⁵⁶ Surya Narayan Misra, 'Biju Patnaik and UNESCO-Kalinga prize', *Odisha Review*, January 2012, pp. 24–5.

⁵⁷ Clarke, op. cit. (42), p. 120.

⁵⁸ 'International Astronautical Federation: history and missions', *International Astronautical Federation*, at www.iafastro.org/about/history-and-missions.html (accessed 10 October 2022).

⁵⁹ Peebles, op. cit. (36), p. 106.

⁶⁰ Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 167.



Figure 3. Clarke adorning the cover of the inaugural issue of *Vidya*, June 1966. Personal collection of Nalaka Gunawardene, who served as Arthur C. Clarke's personal research assistant for twenty-one years.

compile a report on the feasibility of using the island as a site for a satellite tracking station. Clarke's report emphasized the value of Sri Lanka's equatorial location and the advantages the equipment and (especially) the training of locals would bring. Despite the government's request (which speaks to their perception of Clarke's reputation), and the encouraging response, the government turned down an offer from the Smithsonian to build a satellite tracking station in the country in 1967.⁶¹ Sri Lanka also did not participate in the 1968 UN

⁶¹ 'Letter to president of the Ceylon Association for the Advancement of Science from Clarke', 23 August 1967, Correspondence 1967, Clarkives, Box 4, Folder 6.

Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UNISPACE) in Vienna, failing even to respond to the invitation.⁶² This is all the more surprising considering that the conference chairman, Vikram Sarabhai of India, expressed a shared belief amongst conference participants that outer-space technologies could 'be of immense benefit to developing nations wishing to advance economically and socially'.⁶³

By the end of the 1960s, recognition of Clarke as a 'space prophet' had become widely established among Western audiences. In his own telling, he became the go-to spokesman for the future, being asked by Western media outlets to 'write factual forecasts, rather than science fiction'.⁶⁴ No events did more to entrench this prophetic persona, however, than the release of *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968, followed a year later by the Apollo 11 Moon landing. Invited by CBS to sit alongside Apollo 7 astronaut Wally Schirra and anchorman Walter Cronkite – 'the most trusted man in America' – for the live broadcast of the Moon landing on 20 July 1969, Clarke engaged in a dialogue about humanity's future in space in front of a global audience numbering in the hundreds of millions.⁶⁵ As Fahy argues, 'the height of a celebrity's stardom comes when their personality intersects with history'.⁶⁶ Through these media spectacles, Clarke became a bona fide space celebrity, known far beyond networks of space specialists.

To this point, much of Clarke's persona remained an embodiment of Western ideals of expansion and technological supremacy. Images of Clarke's Sri Lankan diving mainly promoted the island's exotic beauty to Western audiences. Within Sri Lanka and neighbouring India, Clarke's reputation became known and was respected among pockets of political leadership and scientific communities, yet much of this work remained regionally siloed. In the decade to come, Clarke's international, yet Western-focused, space persona and his Sri Lankan work gradually integrated into one overarching space-for-development narrative, adjusted to the realities of post-Apollo space flight, and finding appeal among a growing number of global audiences grappling with globalization.

Fabricating a global persona

In the post-Apollo period, robotic space exploration and satellite technology became the primary forms of space flight, with a heightened interest in utilizing space technologies for earthly needs.⁶⁷ Clarke's rhetoric, focusing on near-future goals and satellites, was highly suitable for this new context, with the global South obtaining a central role in these rhetorical adaptations. The combination of Clarke and Sri Lanka became an ideal image for repositioning the public debate surrounding space flight toward earth-bound realities. Ideas about satellite-driven national development, 'edsats' (education satellites), the emergence of the proverbial 'global village' and an embrace of Sarabhai's narrative of 'leapfrogging' technologies became the central messages represented and projected by Clarke's persona, to the point where he came to personally embody these ideas.

⁶² 'Letter to Clarke from Nandasiri Jasentuliyana of the UN Outer Space Affairs', 25 March 1968, Correspondence January–June 1968, Clarkives, Box 5, Folder 2.

⁶³ United Nations, *Report of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space*, New York: United Nations, 1968, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Clarke, op. cit. (34), pp. 59–60.

⁶⁵ Richard Salant, 10:56:20 PM EST 7/20/69: *The Historic Conquest of the Moon as Reported to the American People by CBS News over the CBS Television Network* (ed. Robert Wussler), Diane Publishing Company, 1970, p. 107; see also Douglas Brinkley, *Cronkite*, New York: Harper, 2012.

⁶⁶ Fahy, op. cit. (14), p. 7.

⁶⁷ Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'The post-Apollo paradox: envisioning limits during the planetized 1970s', in Geppert, op. cit. (4), pp. 3–26.

Reference to Clarke's physical presence in Sri Lanka was often used to underline his authority to speak on regional issues – specifically on the developmental benefits of satellite technology for what was then known as the 'Third World', and by extension on the power of communications technology in the dynamics of Cold War geopolitics. An early example can be seen in 1958, shortly after the founding of NASA, when the United States Select Committee on Astronautics and Space Exploration invited fifty of 'the most knowledgeable of today's space authorities' to elucidate 'what discoveries and advances may be ahead in the new space age'.⁶⁸ Explicitly introduced as a resident of Ceylon who offered 'a very high degree of assurance', Clarke's testimony was the only one to explore Asia:

Living as I do in the Far East, I am constantly reminded of the struggle between the Western World and the USSR for the uncommitted millions of Asia ... But when line-of-sight TV transmission becomes possible through satellites directly overhead, the propaganda effect may be decisive ... the impact upon the peoples of Asia and Africa may be overwhelming. It may well determine whether Russian or English is the main language of the future. The TV satellite is mightier than the ICBM.⁶⁹

This message clearly puts Clarke's space-for-development rhetoric in a Cold War context, using Western technology to win the 'battle for the hearts and minds' of Asia and Africa. Clarke's connection to Sri Lanka offered him an authoritative position as a spokesman for this perspective, which NASA and its supporters in Congress used to help justify their new space programme.

The television satellite future that Clarke projected in his 1958 testimony became achievable just a decade later in yet another example of how his authority on the future was continually reaffirmed. In the late 1960s, he was enlisted as a prominent lobbyist for a project to use NASA's planned Applications Technology Satellite F (ATS-6) to broadcast educational television programmes directly to some five thousand Indian villages. This became the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), a joint American–Indian project.⁷⁰ Even though it was not his idea, and he was not involved in its actual execution, Clarke became so strongly associated with the project that the ATS-6 satellite itself was later nicknamed 'Arthur C. Clarke's Star' by NASA.⁷¹ Previous communication satellites had been used in low-earth orbits, from which only about three per cent of the globe could be reached. In contrast, the ATS satellites would be placed into the geostationary 'Clarke orbit', allowing 45 percent coverage of the planet.⁷² ATS-6 was a realization of the very technology which Clarke had long advocated, offering the ability to provide direct television broadcasting into the homes of the developing world. NASA's utilization of Clarke as its cheerleader was a mutually beneficial arrangement.

On 27 January 1972, Representative William R. Anderson (D-TN) read Clarke's promotional essay on SITE, 'Satellites and saris' (later reprinted as 'Schoolmaster satellite') into the US Congressional Record as a moral justification for the post-Apollo space programme. In the essay, Clarke both positioned himself as an expert on the region, and connected his

⁶⁸ United States, *Next Ten Years in Space, 1959–1969, Staff Report of the Select Committee on Astronautics and Space Exploration* (House document No. 115, 86th Congress, 1st session), Washington DC: GPO, 1959, p. iv.

⁶⁹ United States, op. cit. (68), pp. 19, 32; Dunnett, op. cit. (7), p. 784.

⁷⁰ Ashok Maharaj, 'Satellite broadcasting in rural India: the SITE project', in John Krige, Angelina Long Callahan and Ashok Maharaj (eds.), *NASA in the World: Fifty Years of International Collaboration in Space*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 235–48, 238–9.

⁷¹ W. Moore and W. Prenskey (eds.), *Applications Technology Satellite ATS-6 Experiment Check-Out and Continuing Spacecraft Evaluation Report* (NASA-TM-X-70812), Washington, DC: Technical Information Division, Goddard Space Flight Center, 1974, p. xii.

⁷² Moore and Prenskey, op. cit. (71), pp. 1–3.

message directly to Cold War rhetoric: 'The emerging countries of what is called the Third World may need rockets and satellites much more desperately than the advanced nations which built them. Swords into ploughshares is an obsolete metaphor: we can now turn missiles into blackboards.'⁷³ In his accompanying statement, Rep. Anderson made clear why he chose to highlight Clarke's message:

It must be noted that the satellite discussed [ATS-6] was built in the United States by American labor, paying American taxes in an industry now undergoing the severe stress of unemployment. Foreign aid of the sort described in the article which serves the needs of the impoverished and the emerging nations of the world has the beneficial by-product of continuing America's ability to advance the technology of tomorrow as it serves man today.⁷⁴

SITE was the brainchild of Vikram Sarabhai, who sought to use the project to showcase how satellite technologies can help developing countries 'leapfrog' their way into modernity.⁷⁵ Clarke met Sarabhai several times, including while filming in India for the documentary *The Promise of Space* in early 1971.⁷⁶ Although their personal relationship was cut short by Sarabhai's untimely death later that year, Clarke adopted Sarabhai's 'leapfrogging' rhetoric as the primary articulation for promoting Third World development through (Western) space technology.

In the same year, the US State Department invited Clarke to speak at the signing of the INTELSAT agreement, which had been formed to encourage the development of a single global commercial telecommunications satellite system.⁷⁷ While touted by US officials as a means to facilitate peaceful global interconnectivity, recent scholarship has shown that the production and promotion of INTELSAT intentionally catered to Western expansionary ambitions.⁷⁸ Clarke's speech, which connected INTELSAT's mission with Sarabhai's leapfrogging rhetoric, fed directly into that agenda: 'We are now about to witness an interesting situation in which many countries – particularly in Asia and Africa – are going to leapfrog a whole era of communications technology and go straight into the Space Age'.⁷⁹

NASA's final report on ATS-6 featured a reprint of 'Satellites and saris', and included a cartoon featuring Indian villagers viewing a SITE broadcast outside a seemingly run-down building equipped with a satellite dish. Underneath the drawing is a quote taken from Clarke's essay: 'but a new generation of APUS will be watching, wide-eyed when the science of a later age draws down pictures from the sky – and opens up for all ... a window on the world'. 'APUS' is a reference to a little boy named Apu from Satyajit Ray's 1955 film *Pather Panchali*, who first hears music from newly installed telegraph wires.⁸⁰ The borrowing of an Indian cultural reference by Clarke, and through him by NASA, is representative of his interconnected position as a propagator of developmental ideals. It also emphasizes

⁷³ US Congress, *Congressional Record*, 'Promise of Space', 92nd Congress, 2nd session, vol. 118, pt. 2, p. 1604.

⁷⁴ US Congress, op. cit. (73), p. 1604.

⁷⁵ Ma, op. cit. (15).

⁷⁶ Clarke, op. cit. (34), pp. 112–13.

⁷⁷ United Nations, *Agreement Relating to the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization 'INTELSAT'* (United Nations Treaty Series, No. 19677), New York: United Nations, 1981, p. 24.

⁷⁸ Christine E. Evans and Lars Lundgren, *No Heavenly Bodies: A History of Satellite Communications Infrastructure*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, p. 120.

⁷⁹ Arthur C. Clarke, *How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village*, New York: Bantam, 1992, p. 212.

⁸⁰ Arthur C. Clarke, 'Satellites and saris: 25 years later', *Frontline*, 28 April 2001, at <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30250378.ece> (accessed 12 July 2022). See also Marcia Landy, 'The Apu trilogy: Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2010) 27(5), pp. 408–10.

another Western formulation of Sarabhai's leapfrogging rhetoric, centring on the technology rather than the state, with Clarke being used by NASA as a medium for making a moral case for Western technological expansion.

Embodying the global village

SITE marked a turning point in Clarke's 'prophet' persona, changing his image from someone who envisioned the globally interconnected satellite future to someone who embodied it. During the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan had coined the term 'global village' to represent the interconnectedness to come from communication technologies.⁸¹ Similar to the embrace of 'leapfrogging', the 'global village' became Clarke's rhetorical characterization for the interconnected globalized world that satellite technology would support, and which he himself was living.

In 1974, Clarke's long-time friend Wernher von Braun, who at the time worked at Fairchild Industries (the company that built ATS-6), suggested obtaining for Clarke a private satellite Earth receiving station so he could tune into the SITE programming. In a letter to Clarke, Braun claimed, 'I think they [India] will agree with us that they could not possibly deprive the inventor of the geosynchronous satellite of the fruits of his own labors!'⁸² Braun reached out to Dr. Satish Dhawan, the head of the Indian Space Programme, and by April 1975, several months before SITE began, the government of India gifted Clarke a full Earth station for 'demonstration purposes'.⁸³ While the gift was framed as a mark of appreciation for his imaginings, NASA, the Indian Space Programme and Fairchild Industries were likely well aware of the positive global publicity Clarke would generate. Moreover, Evans and Lundgren have argued that the emergence of INTELSAT (and INTERSPUTNIK in the USSR) in the 1970s saw the construction of new Earth stations, particularly in the developing world, as a proxy Cold War battleground for global network supremacy, and thus as something that needed to be actively promoted to national governments and telecom companies.⁸⁴ In this sense, images of Clarke's Earth station in Sri Lanka soon became a piece of that promotional material.

The installation of the Earth station at his Colombo home meant that Clarke possessed the world's first private receiving station, and the first receiving station of any kind in Sri Lanka. This strongly reinforced Clarke's public association with satellite technology and its globalizing nature, as well as elevating his reputation with Sri Lankan leadership. He hosted public displays of the technology for high-ranking Sri Lankan officials, including Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene and President William Gopallawa.⁸⁵ Clarke also actively used the Earth station in his self-fashioning abroad. He shared images of the station during testimony he provided to the US House of Representatives Space Committee on 24 July 1975, as well as during his participation in the Nobel Institute Space Symposium that took place in Norway later that year.⁸⁶ Within Sri Lanka and abroad, newspapers reported on Clarke's Earth station with articles that emphasized his role in making connections with foreign

⁸¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message*, New York: Random House, 1967, p. 63.

⁸² 'Wernher von Braun to Arthur C. Clarke', 5 August 1974, Correspondence January–March 1974, Clarkives, Box 13, Folder 2.

⁸³ McAleer, op. cit. (25), Chapter 24.

⁸⁴ Evans and Lundgren, op. cit. (78), p. 17.

⁸⁵ 'Letter to Dr. Yash Pal from Clarke', 25 June 1975, Correspondence July–September 1975, Clarkives, Box 14, Folder 1; 'Letter of thanks from Sri Lankan secretary to the president to Clarke', 14 August 1975, Correspondence July–September 1975, Clarkives, Box 14, Folder 1.

⁸⁶ 'Letter to Dr. Yash Pal communicating ground station PR plans from Clarke', 11 August 1975, Correspondence July–September 1975, Clarkives, Box 14, Folder 1.

space endeavours.⁸⁷ On 5 May 1976, Sri Lanka became officially connected to the INTELSAT network through the installation of the Padukka Station outside Colombo.⁸⁸ Asked to comment at the station's opening, Clarke reiterated that 'the opening of Padukka is of particular satisfaction to me because I hope to spend the rest of my life here – and now there will be no problem maintaining contact with all my friends, throughout the world, without ever leaving Sri Lanka'.⁸⁹ He was thus able himself to embody the way in which satellite technology enabled comfortable living in a globally interconnected world.

By the mid-1970s, Clarke's space persona was commercially valuable, particularly in the realm of global telecommunications, and his connection to Sri Lanka had become a key component of its value. In commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the telephone, American telecommunications giant AT&T featured him in a series of six prime-time television commercials first aired on 17 January 1977. In the first commercial, Clarke was introduced as 'the man who predicted telecommunications via satellite', showing him standing in his own backyard in Colombo with his private Earth station in view. In the subsequent commercials, he is depicted emphasizing the virtues of communication, information and education for the global future, all while standing in Sri Lankan vistas. The commercials were viewed in over 25 million American homes.⁹⁰ Such exposure not only quite explicitly globalized Clarke's public image, but also served to portray AT&T as an active participant in the project of 'modernizing' the 'developing world'. At this time, AT&T remained a communications monopoly in the US (it would be broken up in 1982), and was building subsidiary companies around the world while investing heavily in commercializing satellite telecommunications.⁹¹ Featuring Clarke was good press for AT&T, allowing them to focus attention on the benevolent components of their endeavours, while simultaneously reinforcing Clarke's role at the forefront of globalizing Western technological leadership.

Claiming Clarke

After 1979, Clarke seldom left Sri Lanka. He was in his sixties at this point and in poor health due to complications from post-polio syndrome. He had also become the first recipient of the 'resident guest' status in Sri Lanka, allowing permanent residence through what was popularly known as the 'Clarke Act'.⁹² In the last three decades of his life, portrayals of Clarke showed him almost exclusively living in exotic Sri Lanka, often wearing locale attire, while still able to actively communicate with the rest of the world via the satellite infrastructure at his home. Media outlets caught on to this component of his

⁸⁷ 'Lanka's link with unique TV venture', *Ceylon Daily News*, 12 August 1975, quoted in 'Letter to Clarke from T. Indralingam regarding recent headlines in local newspapers', 13 August 1975, Correspondence July–September 1975, Clarkives, Box 14, Folder 1. See also 'Abroad: Author Clarke honored', in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 August 1975, Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA Headquarters Historical Reference Collection, Washington, DC (subsequently NASA HQ).

⁸⁸ Irvin Weekackody, 'The social and cultural impact of satellite broadcasting in Sri Lanka', in *AMIC Seminar on the Social and Cultural Impact of Satellite Broadcasting in Asia, Singapore, Feb 1–3, 1993*, Singapore, Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 1993.

⁸⁹ 'Message From Arthur C. Clarke provided for Padukka Earth Station opening', 6 May 1976, Clarkives, Box 142, Folder 4.

⁹⁰ McAleer, op. cit. (25), Chapter 25.

⁹¹ Martin J. Collins, *A Telephone for the World: Iridium, Motorola, and the Making of a Global Age*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018, p. 84. See also Martin J. Plevel, Sandy Nellis, Fred Lane and Randall S. Schuler, 'AT&T global business communications systems: linking HR with business strategy', *Organizational Dynamics* (1994) 22(3), pp. 59–72.

⁹² Clarke, op. cit. (34), pp. 183–4.

persona, with one newspaper labelling him in 1985 the 'authentic citizen of the global village'.⁹³

The cultural and political context of the global Space Age kept changing, however, with the late Cold War seeing the realities of space flight increasingly militarized and commercialized, alongside growing tensions in Sri Lanka. Considering that Clarke's prophet business was in effect a promotional tool for space flight, the values and ideas underlying his persona had to change with the times. Clarke's optimistic visions of space technology were used to counter growing narratives of space warfare, recasting 'leapfrogging' satellites as 'weapons of peace', reconnaissance satellites as 'peacesats', and arguing not for Reagan's 'Star Wars', but for 'Star Peace'.⁹⁴ In the meantime, however, the situation in Sri Lanka was far from peaceful. Political instability and ethnic conflict had continued throughout the 1970s, culminating in an expansion of military and police powers to combat several insurgent Tamil separatist groups.⁹⁵ By 1983, a civil war had erupted between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (commonly referred to as the Tamil Tigers), which would not end until the year after Clarke's death. It is under these conditions that the Sri Lankan government began to more actively project an official affiliation with Clarke, both domestically and on the global stage.

In 1979, the year in which Clarke's novel *The Fountains of Paradise* imagined a space elevator being built in Sri Lanka, he was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Moratuwa in recognition of his 'achievements and services' to the country. President Jayewardene also made him chancellor of this university, the leading institute of technical training in the country.⁹⁶ Around this same time, the Sri Lankan government and the University of Moratuwa proposed founding a 'Sri Lanka Centre in honour of Mr. Arthur C. Clarke for the Study of Communication, Energy, and Space technologies with special reference to their applications to the developing world'.⁹⁷ Clarke agreed to lend his name to what became the Arthur C. Clarke Centre for Modern Technologies, demonstrating his commitment by donating the \$35,000 prize money from the Marconi Award he received in 1982.⁹⁸ Shortly after its founding, the satellite receiving station at the institute was the first to receive television news broadcasts from outside the country.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the institute took a leading role in designing an inexpensive satellite dish antenna for households – not unlike those developed in neighbouring India during SITE. Unfortunately, as time progressed, the institute became obsolete. Clarke privately expressed disappointment in the failures of the institute, but avoided public criticism in favour of an approach of 'benign neglect'.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, he valued an apolitical image.

Clarke also rarely publicly commented on the political situation in Sri Lanka. For example, in an extensive 1986 interview with *Playboy*, his comments on the civil war were confined to making this point:

⁹³ Dunnett, op. cit. (7), p. 785. The original quote can be found in 'Press cuttings from *The Island*', 19 December 1985 and 14 August 1986, Clarkives, Box 24.

⁹⁴ Clarke, op. cit. (79), p. 251–3.

⁹⁵ Wickramasinghe, op. cit. (60), pp. 265–6, 298.

⁹⁶ K.K.Y.W. Perera, 'Appreciation: Lankabhimanya Sir Arthur C. Clarke', *Journal of the National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka* (2008) 36(3), pp. 253–4.

⁹⁷ Department of Government Printing Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Centre Draft Project Document, December 1981, Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA HQ. Dunnett, op. cit. (7), pp. 14–16, also examines the context behind the Arthur C. Clarke Centre.

⁹⁸ Clarke, op. cit. (4), p. 6.

⁹⁹ Weekackody, op. cit. (88), p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Nalaka Gunawardene, 'Monument for Sir Arthur C. Clarke: time to ask some tough questions', *Montage*, April 2009, at <https://nalakagunawardene.com/2011/08/31/arthur-c-clarke-institute-in-sri-lanka-time-to-ask-some-tough-questions> (accessed 17 September 2022). *Montage* is no longer in print, but this article was reproduced on the website of its original author.

It's a war that in a few short years has virtually destroyed this country's tourist trade, which used to be the mainstay of the economy. If the Buddhists would all behave as Buddha did, and if the Hindus would stay true to the beliefs of Gandhi and Nehru, everybody would be a lot better off, I must say.¹⁰¹

In both cases – the underperforming institute bearing his name and the civil-warring nation where he lived – Clarke continued a long-standing trend of portraying Sri Lanka in a positive light. At the same time, this attitude also underlined his perceived position as still an outsider in Sri Lanka, physically present and possessing positions of authority, yet situated above everyday politics, and seemingly more attuned to affairs abroad. This is particularly evident in his rather paternalistic comments in *Playboy*. The Sri Lankan government clearly valued Clarke's position, awarding him the Vidya Jyothi, or 'Luminary of Science', in 1986, the highest national honour for science.¹⁰² Arguably, during this period, affixing Clarke's name to prominent universities and scientific honours became a means for the Sri Lankan government to utilize Clarke's celebrity to elevate its scientific reputability domestically and abroad, as an alternative perspective to the civil war.

Beyond its borders, the Sri Lankan government also began utilizing Clarke as its representative in the international space community. In 1981, he was sent to act as the Sri Lankan delegate to the UNESCO International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) Council Meeting in Paris.¹⁰³ This was the first time Clarke officially represented any nation. In his address, Clarke relayed familiar pro-space development messaging, though in a notably bleaker version than before, arguing that 'unless major investments are made in space, millions are going to die, or eke out brief and miserable lives ... in the Third World'.¹⁰⁴ As Dunnett reiterates in reference to this speech, Clarke's rhetoric unveils a 'desire to use "Third World development" as a moral hook to encourage investment in space technologies'.¹⁰⁵ Clarke was also sent as one of the Sri Lankan delegates to the Second UN Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UNISPACE 82) in Vienna, where the prevention of an arms race in space was discussed.¹⁰⁶ In his speech, Clarke reiterated the ills of extending national borders into space, explicitly presenting himself as a veteran space prophet: 'Back in 1948, in my first novel *Prelude to Space*, I coined a slogan that I'd like to leave with you tonight. Here it is – "We will take no frontiers into space"'.¹⁰⁷

While Clarke's rhetoric of 'space for peace and development' was widely sought after for its positive spin on Western Cold War interests, Clarke himself was becoming viewed and used as a peace advocate and diplomat. Unique for an individual so affiliated with American space endeavours during the Cold War, Clarke was invited to the Soviet Union in 1982 – as a Sri Lankan visitor. The visit was possible because of Clarke's connections with Ambassador Casie Chetty of the Sri Lankan embassy in Moscow and Vasilii Zakharchenko, editor of the Soviet science fiction magazine *Tekhnika-Molodezhi* (Technology for Youth).¹⁰⁸ The fact that the socialist-leaning Sri Lankan government was on good terms with the

¹⁰¹ Arthur C. Clarke, *Playboy* interview, July 1986, 'Arthur C. Clarke: a candid conversation about the future of space travel – and about sex, immortality and 2001 – with the witty dean of science-fiction writers', Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA HQ, p. 65.

¹⁰² Charles Gunawardena, *Encyclopedia of Sri Lanka*, 2nd edn, New Delhi: Sterling, 2018, p. 245.

¹⁰³ Arthur C. Clarke, 'New communications technologies and the developing world', June 1981, Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA HQ, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur C. Clarke, *1984 Spring: A Choice of Futures*, New York: Ballantine Books, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Dunnett, op. cit. (7), p. 783.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations, *Report of the Second United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space*, Vienna, 9–21 August 1982, p. 5; Clarke, op. cit. (103), pp. 42–4.

¹⁰⁷ Clarke, op. cit. (104), pp. 110–11.

¹⁰⁸ Clarke, op. cit. (104), p. 33.

Soviets likely helped, but perhaps Clarke's inclusion of Soviet space heroes in his newest novel, *2010: Odyssey Two*, also encouraged the visit.¹⁰⁹ For several days, Clarke's visit to the USSR was filmed by a Soviet television crew and broadcast nationwide. They captured meetings between Clarke and several prominent Soviet officials, including the original inventor of the space elevator, Yuri Arbutanov. He also met Apollo–Soyuz cosmonaut Alexei Leonov, and was filmed telling him that *2010* took place aboard the spaceship *Cosmonaut Alexei Leonov*. Notably, *2010* also featured the Chinese spaceship the *Tsien*, named after the 'father of Chinese space flight' Tsien Hsue-shen (Qian Xuesen). While Clarke's intention for including socialist heroes in *2010* was to highlight a future where space rivals become allies, the USSR seized an opportunity for positive optics.¹¹⁰

At this point in his career, associating Clarke with one's space activities was seen as a positive boon to public perceptions, and this visit appeared to be an effort to publicly affiliate Clarke's popular imaginings (particularly *2010* and the space elevator) as inspired by Soviet achievements. Throughout these official visits, aware of his position as a representative of Sri Lanka, Clarke was also able to request support for the proposed Arthur C. Clarke Centre.¹¹¹ Using this connection with Sri Lanka, Clarke's numerous public roles – space advocate, science fiction author, peace ambassador, Sri Lankan representative, sponsor of an academic institute – were increasingly intertwined on a global scale.

Additionally, as a high-profile representative of an idyllic space-globalized future, numerous nations were eager to claim his accolades. In 1989, Queen Elizabeth granted Clarke the ceremonial rank of Commander of the British Empire (CBE) for 'services to British cultural interests in Sri Lanka'.¹¹² The CBE is awarded to those who hold a 'leading role in regional affairs through achievement or service to the community'.¹¹³ Clearly, the Crown regarded him as British – or wanted to remind the world that he was one of their own. The imperialist title of the honour is also significant: not only was Clarke promoting a very Western form of globalism, but at this time the British were covertly backing the Sri Lankan government in the civil war, while trying to avoid both negative world opinion and a confrontation with India, who backed the Tamils.¹¹⁴ The United States also staked a claim to Clarke via NASA's Distinguished Public Service Medal – the highest award that a non-employee of NASA can receive – for his efforts educating the general public about the benefits of space technology.¹¹⁵ Despite his nationality and his residency, Clarke was most directly involved with the American space programme, a relation that dated back to his early years of space advocacy, even before the founding of NASA.¹¹⁶ The award ceremony featured a real-time demonstration of globalizing satellite technology, utilizing four satellites, seven Earth stations and a mix of fibre optic cables, microwave links, television studios and lecture theatres, all spanning fourteen time zones – again an example of how Clarke could embody global satellite interconnectivity (Figure 4).

In the final years before his death on 19 March 2008 at ninety years old, Sri Lanka enshrined Clarke in the highest echelons of its national narrative, awarding him the Sri

¹⁰⁹ *Tekhnika-Molodezhi* began publishing *2010* in instalments shortly after the visit. See Lewis Siegelbaum, 'Sputnik goes to Brussels: the exhibition of a Soviet technological wonder', *Journal of Contemporary History* (2012) 47(1), pp. 120–36, 128.

¹¹⁰ Clarke, op. cit. (104), p. 111.

¹¹¹ Clarke, op. cit. (104), p. 38.

¹¹² McAleer, op. cit. (25), ch. 33.

¹¹³ 'The honours system of the United Kingdom', at <https://honours.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about/orders-and-medals> (accessed 9 September 2022).

¹¹⁴ Phil Miller, *Keenie Meenie: The British Mercenaries Who Got Away with War Crimes*, London: Pluto Press, 2020.

¹¹⁵ Kenneth W. Gatland, 'Honours for satellite visionary from world space community', *Space flight* (October 1995) 37(10), Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA HQ, p. 329.

¹¹⁶ Clarke, op. cit. (42), pp. 152–4.

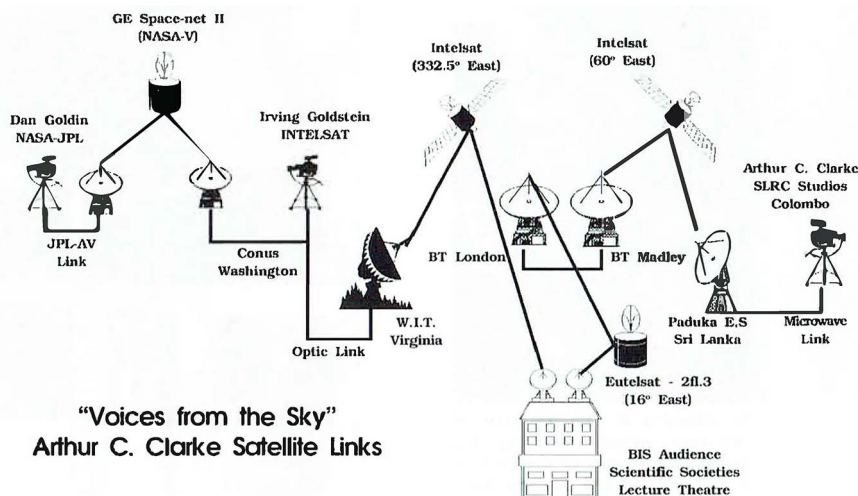


Figure 4. A visual representation of the network used for Clarke's award ceremony. British Interplanetary Society, *Space flight* (October 1995) 37(10), p. 329.

Lankabhimanya, or the Pride of Lanka, in 2005, the highest civilian honour in the country.¹¹⁷ A final, and somewhat controversial, honour was bestowed posthumously. A year after Clarke's death, President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced plans to launch the first Sri Lankan satellite, and to name it after 'space prophet Sir Arthur C. Clarke'.¹¹⁸ The controversial plan never came to fruition because of its high cost and its impractical nature, but the gesture was noteworthy.¹¹⁹

The prophet business

Opening his 1962 collection of essays *Profiles of the Future*, Clarke wrote, 'Before one attempts to set up in the business of being a prophet, it is instructive to see what success others have made of this dangerous occupation – and it is even more instructive to see where they have failed.'¹²⁰ From the beginning, Clarke was quite literally in the business of building a persona as an authority on the future. His 1945 *Wireless World* paper provided the first building block for this prophetic persona, and Sri Lanka globalized it.

Decades later, Clarke highlighted one component of what made this prophetic persona so alluring: 'No one can predict the future ... The best we can hope for, to quote [poet Robert] Bridges, is "the masterful administration of the unforeseen." Ride the whirlwind. That's the most we can do. I think one should be optimistic. Then one has a better chance of self-fulfilling prophecy'.¹²¹ This optimistic style, shaped by his background in the British Interplanetary Society, was packaged in a diverse array of media formats, and adapted with the times, by design. Its apparent success depended on the fact that a wide range of actors

¹¹⁷ McAleer, op. cit. (25), Chapter 37.

¹¹⁸ Dilshani Samaraweera, 'Lanka going into orbit', *Sunday Times (Sri Lanka)*, 1 February 2009 at www.sundaytimes.lk/090201/News/sundaytimesnews_03.html (accessed 11 October 2022).

¹¹⁹ Nalaka Gunawardene, 'Sri Lanka's satellite: lost in space?' *The Sunday Times (Sri Lanka)*, 13 June 2010, at www.sundaytimes.lk/100613/BusinessTimes/bt10.html (accessed 11 October 2022).

¹²⁰ Clarke, op. cit. (1), p. 1.

¹²¹ Steve Coll, 'Arthur C. Clarke's red thumb', *Washington Post*, 9 March 1992, Clarke, Arthur C. (1972 to 1996), Record Number 330, NASA HQ.

could use Clarke's messaging for their own ends – from politicians and space managers to commercial companies and science fiction lovers around the globe.

Clarke often argued that he was not actually a 'prophet', but more like an 'extrapolator', seeking to communicate realistic possibilities that the public could strive toward within their lifetime.¹²² Of course, countless others have embarked on similar endeavours. From Willy Ley and Isaac Asimov to Carl Sagan and Neil deGrasse Tyson, space personas utilized to promote space activities have been, and will continue to be, common astrocultural entities. What made Clarke's persona unique was its deeply interconnected and long-standing association with both Sri Lanka and globalizing satellite technology, which strongly fed into one another. This facilitated a global facade, allowing for his persona's underlying messaging to find relevance across geopolitical boundaries.

Clarke's move to Sri Lanka marked a turn in his persona, globalizing it in a decidedly postcolonial way. His position as a 'resident guest' in a developing nation, calling it home while retaining his Western identity and perspective, could be regarded as a key ingredient in what became a status as the pre-eminent space celebrity of the Space Age. Initially, the connection to Sri Lanka complemented his intellectual reputation as an authority on space with a more direct image as an explorer and adventurer himself. It made him a big fish in a small pond, inviting engagement with the highest levels of government and encouraging an expansion of his networks. In the words of Poole, he became 'a prophet in his own future'.¹²³ Moreover, his physical connection to the region provided powerful rhetorical avenues for others to connect his advocacy to Cold War and Third World development narratives, which were often interconnected. Sri Lanka's exotic image and status as a developing nation served to underline projected narratives of the practical, yet utopian, potential of space technology.

Particularly in the post-Apollo 1970s, socio-economic development via satellite was central to astrocultural debates, and Clarke's Sri Lankan connection strengthened his authority to advocate this development. This authority found real-world appeal with NASA and the Indian Space Programme, who leveraged his image to promote their projects, and later the Sri Lankan government, who utilized him as their national representative. He became a rhetorical and visual tool and trusted figurehead for those trying to project a positive, peaceful and believable spin on the usage of and future for space technologies, with an adaptive narrative that often proactively changed alongside shifting geopolitical contexts.

At the same time, his persona remained Western-centric, despite allusions to the contrary. This 'global-but-Western' ambiguity made him a relatable spokesman for space organizations or companies with global ambitions, wooing Western audiences while also encouraging foreign engagement. Within Sri Lanka, Clarke was portrayed as an imported public intellectual, involved in tourism, film and scientific initiatives. He was hailed by the government as a great ambassador of the island, which by all measures he was, but his efforts to stimulate Sri Lankan space endeavours were hindered by the turbulent politics of the country, in which he did not publicly engage. Clarke's failed attempts to get Sri Lanka involved in space further illustrates that perhaps the projection of urgency for space investment in developing nations was somewhat naive, or simply opportunistic.

As both Kilgore and Dunnett argued, and this article has shown, Clarke believed that Sri Lanka's future was best determined by Western technology. In many respects, the values underlying his persona were no different. Clarke's persona was largely curated by and for Western audiences to find commercial and moral justifications for space initiatives, with those in the global South serving as token beneficiaries. Sri Lanka's exotic image served

¹²² Clarke, op. cit. (34), p. 59; 'Arthur Clarke looks at our technical future', 14 November 1977, 95th Congress, 1st session, Congressional Record 123, pt. 29, pp. 37446–7.

¹²³ Poole, op. cit. (11), p. 258.

to reinforce rather than contradict this technocratic notion, underlining the necessity of spreading Western technology around the entire globe. That said, even if Sri Lanka did not develop its own space programme, Clarke's persona helps show that the country and its culture were still engaged with and contributed to a global Space Age.

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