

News in brief

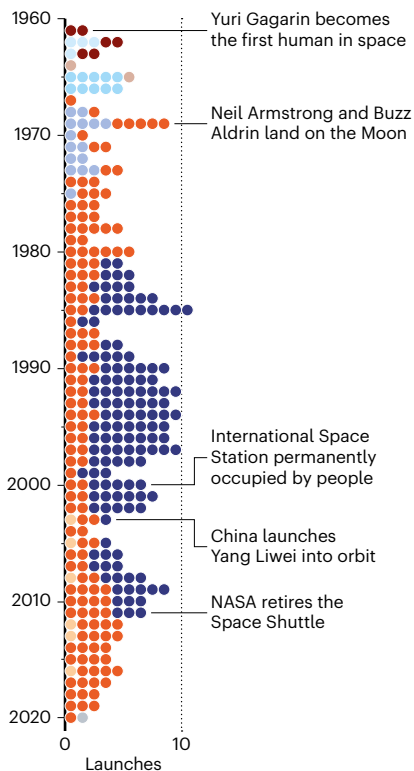
SPACEX LAUNCHES ASTRONAUTS — AND A NEW ERA OF HUMAN SPACE FLIGHT

Two NASA astronauts are the first people to travel to orbit in a spacecraft built by a private company. The Crew Dragon capsule, built by SpaceX of Hawthorne, California, is the first new spacecraft in 17 years to carry humans to orbit, and its launch on 30 May was the first to send a crew to space from US soil since NASA retired the Space Shuttle in 2011 (see ‘How humans have reached orbit’). “This is a whole new way of sending people to space,” says Robert Cabana, a former NASA astronaut who is director of the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Astronauts Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley left Florida’s space centre at 3.22 p.m. US Eastern Time in the 8.1-metre-long bullet-shaped capsule, and docked with the International Space Station (ISS) 19 hours later, joining three spacefarers who have been living there since

April. The pair will spend up to four months on the ISS. The flight is the culmination of NASA’s push to transition from using its own vehicles to ferry astronauts to the ISS to using spaceships provided by private companies. Since 2011, NASA and other space agencies have relied on Russian Soyuz craft to take people to orbit. The agency will now use the Crew Dragon. SpaceX has been taking cargo to and from the ISS since 2012, using spacecraft with the same basic design as the Crew Dragon. Its Falcon 9 rockets, which propel the capsules to orbit, have slashed the cost of such launches, in part because they reuse expensive components. NASA is thought to be paying about US\$60 million for each seat on the Crew Dragon, compared with the \$90 million it has been paying for seats on the Soyuz.

HOW HUMANS HAVE REACHED ORBIT

The Crew Dragon launch marks the ninth time humans have rocketed into orbit on a brand-new spaceship, following four US craft, three Soviet and one Chinese. The Crew Dragon, built by SpaceX for NASA, is the first privately developed spaceship to take people to orbit.



CORONAVIRUS DASHES ETHIOPIA’S GOAL OF HOSTING MAJOR AI MEETING

Computer scientists had planned to converge on Addis Ababa in April for the first major artificial-intelligence (AI) conference to be held in an African country. But, like most scientific gatherings this year, the conference ended up being virtual, depriving Ethiopia of a powerful opportunity to boost its research community.

Organizers had hoped that hosting the International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR) in Ethiopia would make it more accessible to researchers who can’t readily get visas for Western countries, where such meetings are often held. The conference, which focuses on the AI technique deep learning, would have also been important in making the field more diverse in terms of geography, race, gender and sexual orientation — while inspiring the region’s youth to pursue it.

The virtual venue had benefits: online workshops can be easier to join for people who can’t afford to travel, or for those with children or disabilities. But researchers hope that the ICLR can be held in Addis Ababa when the pandemic subsides. “Once big conferences are in-person again, we’ll push for 2022,” says Esube Bekele, a computer-vision architect who is part of Black in AI, a group that advocated holding the meeting in Africa.

US HALTS PIONEERING CORONAVIRUS-TESTING PROJECT

The research team that first uncovered COVID-19 spreading in US communities has been asked to stop testing for the disease. The decision by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to prevent the SCAN project in Seattle, Washington, from analysing nose swabs sent from people’s homes is likely to be temporary. But it has frustrated public-health initiatives across the country.

Working with the local public-health department, the programme processed 20,000 tests and helped to reveal which communities in Seattle were being hit hardest by COVID-19.

SCAN, which stands for the Seattle Coronavirus Assessment Network, also navigated a regulatory thicket and won key approvals from state authorities. It seemed to be in line with FDA guidelines for emergency use, but the agency then clarified its recommendations, saying that they did not cover tests for which samples need to be transported. The halt is a concern for other researchers developing diagnostics for use outside hospital settings.

SCAN was the first US group to roll out home-sampled tests and to partner effectively with health authorities. As businesses begin to reopen in the country, many argue that such an approach is needed more than ever.



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