

‘Watching’ first person landing

Less than a year from now, on July 21, 2019, to be precise, it will be half a century since an earthling first landed on another heavenly body.

Neil Armstrong stepped off the lunar landing module onto the moon and made his famous “a small step...” declaration in 1969. He said the big step was for “mankind”, but I’ve avoided saying that in my first sentence. “Earthling” is, so far as I can tell, gender neutral. Who knows what Armstrong might have said if he was landing there now.

We’re still benefiting from scientific advances made by the US (and Russian) space programmes, although some of them may involve that modern miracle/plague, plastic. Language has evolved for other reasons.

None of those things involve a point I want to make about memory. I’ve probably mentioned this before so forgive the downside of reminiscing, but the first moon landing is one of three things from my lengthening lifetime of which I have clear recollection, about where I was and what I was doing when I heard about them (the other two were the assassination of US president Jack Kennedy in 1963 and Princess Di’s death in 1997).

The moon scene in my head goes like this: I’m a young reporter working on the *Taranaki Herald* (itself but a memory) and I’m standing beside the boss of Taranaki Newspapers Ltd, Neville Webber, in the subeditors’ room on the first storey of the old Currie St building.

We’re watching a black and white TV showing the moon landing live. For some reason, there are few other people there, just a subeditor who is ripping paper off the chattering NZ Press Association teleprinter as a step-by-step account of the event emerges.

Like similar “live” coverage of Muhammad Ali’s heavyweight boxing fights, each sentence of reporting comes as a separate message. Think of today’s live coverage of boxing on Stuff and you get the idea, except I swear the journo covering the “first man” is writing faster.

He (or she, but unlikely) matches the live footage we are seeing on the telly. That seems incredible to me, and may have been a factor in my later decision to eschew television and stick to the wonders of print journalism for the rest of my career.

Except, the above can’t be true. Nobody in New Zealand saw the moon landing live on television, not even the Prime Minister, Keith Holyoake. Despite the apparent certainty of my memory, Kiwis followed the progress of Armstrong and his fellow astronauts on public radio.

I know this now from doing a bit of research and coming across a gripping report of the whole business written in 2009 by another NZ journo of my era, Aucklander Jane Phare. She wrote that at 2.56pm on July 21 (we’re a day ahead of America, which presumably meant we were a day ahead of whatever time it was on the moon) New Zealanders throughout the country stopped and gathered around radios to listen to history being made.

Which shows how suspect our so-called perfect recall of momentous public events can be. However, I’m sticking to my version of what happened at the newspaper office in terms of the speed of press association coverage; it’s just the competition was sound rather than pictures.

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Phare wrote that TV footage from the moon didn't arrive on our screens until the evening news five hours later.

It got here from the US via satellite to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Sydney, and thence on a video tape that was flown across the Tasman by an RNZAF Canberra bomber to Wellington. The 40-minute tape was played by TVNZ three times that evening and broadcast the length of the country via temporary links. It was the beginning of our first national TV network.

What brought the memory back was a visit to the picture theatre to see the wonderful *First Man*, in my opinion the best movie since *Easy Rider*. It recounts in raw reality the tribulations faced by Armstrong and his colleagues. As the film records, many of them died along the way, including his best mate, Ed White, and two others when one of the spacecraft burned to a cinder on the launchpad.

The film weaves together the testing of technological breakthroughs (scarily crude by today's standards) and the endurance of private family stresses. Kennedy promised to beat the Russians to the moon, and he did (posthumously). But at great cost.