

INST 154

Apollo at 50

Discussion Questions

Session 24: Apollo 13: Abort

1. Apollo 13 has been hailed as one of NASA's greatest accomplishments, but even great accomplishments don't go perfectly. Considering only Mission Control (which includes the Mission Operations Control Room, the Staff Support Rooms, and the Simulation Control Room) and the Mission Evaluation Room, what lessons can be learned about what could have been better prepared for, or done better at the time?
2. Media interest in the Apollo program was waning at the time of Apollo 13. For example, none of the TV networks covered the TV broadcast from the Lunar Module that Apollo 13 sent just before the accident. But the accident generated intense media interest. That was in an era of mass media, but today's Internet (and to a lesser extent cable TV) provides a completely different media environment. What can we learn from the media coverage of Apollo that can help to inform the design of a public affairs outreach strategy today for the International Space Station? Note that this is not a comprehensive question about media strategy – the question is specifically about what can be learned from the Apollo experience (and not just from Apollo 13).
3. Apollo 13 was launched in the 13th minute of what was (in Houston) the 13th hour of the day, and the explosion occurred on the 13th day of the month. None of these 13's bothered NASA at the time. As Tom Hanks, playing Lovell, says in the Apollo 13 movie, it was called Apollo 13 because "it comes after 12." However, NASA went out of their way to avoid assigning the number 13 to any space shuttle mission (the first missions were numbered STS-1 to STS-9, then they changed the numbering scheme for the next 16 missions to a more complex system that produced STS 41-B through STS 61-B, and then they switched the mission numbering back to STS-26 through 135). Whether for this reason or not, they did manage to avoid disaster on STS-41-G (which would have been STS-13 under the original numbering system). Was NASA wise to do this renumbering? What might have been their true reasons for making the change? Were their goals in making the change accomplished?