

The moon landing – did Armstrong flub his famous line?

It was the Summer of '69, and I was living in Rhode Island, about to enter my freshman year of high school. On a warm July night, I sat in a living room with no air conditioning, watching on a black-and-white TV as Neil Armstrong came down the ladder of the lunar module and set foot on the moon.

The moon landing is on the short list of historic events that, if you were around at the time, you remember where you were and what you were doing. Now, 50 years on, here are my thoughts on some questions that remain about the Apollo 11 mission, shared by someone who grew up watching the race to the moon.

“That’s... one small step for man... one giant leap for mankind.”

Those words spoken by Neil Armstrong as he made the first footprints on the moon immediately became one of the most famous quotes ever uttered. But they also sparked a debate that continues to this day: Did Armstrong blow his line, or was he misquoted?

The controversy stems

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from the fact that the quote, as commonly rendered, is a tautology. Forgive the sexist language, but “man” without an article or modifier in front of it and “mankind” basically mean the same thing, i.e. all humanity. Clearly, Armstrong accidentally omitted the word “a” before “man.”

Upon his return to Earth, Armstrong, who wrote and rehearsed the line in advance, insisted that he had indeed said “a man.” He agreed that the recording made it sound like he left out the “a,” but suggested that this was due to static or some other glitch in transmission.

Years later, after hearing enhanced recordings of the transmission, Armstrong conceded that, in the heat of moment, he had inadvertently left out the “a.” But that didn’t settle the matter for good.

Some linguists now believe that Armstrong’s words were misheard because of his central Ohio accent. In that region, words like “for” and “a”

are often mashed together into one word, into something that, in this case, might sound like “fruh.”

Further, in 2006, an Australian computer programmer named Peter Ford used advanced software to analyze the recording and claimed to have found the missing “a,” in the form of a 35-millisecond bit of sound too brief for most humans to hear.

But, missing “a” or not, Armstrong’s meaning was clear, and the way he said those 11 (or 12) words – in a wavering and somewhat hesitant voice – perfectly captured the awe and majesty of what had just been accomplished.

I know what you might be thinking – “Neil Armstrong” was an actor on a soundstage who intentionally blew his line to help convince a worldwide audience that the faked “moon landing” they were watching was actually happening.

As I can attest, some were skeptical about the moon landing even as it unfolded, refusing to believe that such an impossible mission could be completed. A cottage industry

soon sprang up around the moon landing “hoax,” which became the subject of books, magazine articles and speeches.

Still, surveys showed that the percentage of Americans who didn’t believe that men walked on the moon remained in the single digits. But that number went up in 2001, following the airing of a Fox TV “documentary” titled “Conspiracy Theory: Did We Land on the Moon?”

The show came along at a time when access to the Internet was becoming more widespread, and not long before the introduction and rapid growth of social media, a portal that’s proven ideal for the rapid spread of “fake news.” As a result, surveys now show that about one-fifth of all Americans have serious doubts about the moon landing.

While the arguments that make up the moon landing hoax can be easily debunked, there is no convincing dedicated conspiracy theorists. I just hope they appreciate the irony of the fact that the handheld device they use to view the thousands of websites now attempting

to monetize the hoax was made possible, in part, by technology developed and refined during the Apollo mission.

Assuming we did actually make it to the moon, the question lingers: When, if ever, will we make it back?

A dozen men have walked on the moon, a number that might have been 14 if not for the ill-fated Apollo 13. Eugene Cernan, commander of Apollo 17, was the last person to feel the lunar surface beneath his feet.

Just before climbing up the ladder of the lunar module on December 14, 1972, Cernan said, “We leave as we came and, God willing, we shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind.”

Though more Apollo missions had originally been planned, funding and public support for further lunar exploration had run out. Now, well into the

21st century, a new rocket and module designed to send men – and, this time, women – to the moon, Mars and maybe beyond is in development. It’s possible that U.S. astronauts could leave Earth orbit again sometime in the next decade, this time perhaps to establish a base on the moon.

Space travel is far from routine, and remains extremely expensive, not to mention downright dangerous. But it retains the capacity to inspire us, uplift us, and show us what is possible when we work together toward a common goal.

Somewhere out there, an impressionable teen is streaming a 50th anniversary show on the moon landing onto a flat-screen, high-definition color TV, dreaming of the day when she too will take the same small step that Neil Armstrong took. God willing, I hope she makes it while I’m still here to see it.

