

The New Wild West: Law, Regulation, and the Future of Space

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Commercial space launches to low Earth orbit now outnumber launches by governments, indicating a new era in space exploration. As it follows the arc of civil aviation, an activity that is hazardous and only for the wealthy will become safe and within reach potentially large audiences for tourism and recreation. Visionary space entrepreneurs are planning for habitats on the Moon and Mars, and other investors see the prospect of mining asteroids and mineral resources on the Moon. All this activity is taking place in an environment with very weak regulation and little established space law. This benign neglect is allowing the problem of space debris to grow to a level where it could threaten all low Earth orbit activity. Ethical issues raised by corporate space activity are the rights and safety of workers, obligations to stewardship of the off-Earth environment, and the duty to pay taxes. The only two United Nations treaties to deal with space do not address private or commercial ownership of real estate in space. A working group at the United Nations is discussing some of these issues, but it is moving very slowly. Meanwhile, new countries are developing their space capabilities, and commercial actors are essentially unconstrained. In this new “Wild West,” judicious regulation and law can help mitigate some of the worst outcomes of exploration and exploitation of the new off-Earth frontier.

Type:

Individual paper proposal, a summary or overview of several space topics.

Topics:

Space Exploration, Space Law and Policy, Environmental Considerations in Space, Space Tourism.