Hyper-space

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There's a temptation in space science to bill every act of participation as a success, whatever the outcome. That has less to do with truth, more to do with eliciting support, says a sceptical Brian J Ford.

When America's first female astronaut Sally Ride blasted into space on 18 June 1983, I was a guest of NASA in that grandstand, facing the launchpad. The piercing brightness of the rocket exhaust was like exploding magnesium; and there was no roar, just a tectonic crackling that shook your chest and had the wax neatly removed from everybody's ears. The mission was a stunning success.

On 20 April 2023 the gigantic Starship rocket took off from the Starbase site in Texas. With twice the thrust of Apollo, it was 120m tall (compared to the Apollo at 111m), weighing 150 tons (Apollo weighed 10 tons less).

Enthusiasts claim that, because this was the world's biggest rocket, the very fact that it left the launchpad was a success. Really? When Cunard launched the Queen Mary II she was the world's largest passenger vessel, and she didn't sink on her maiden voyage. The Antonov AN-225 weighed 640 tons, compared to the aircraft next in line (the Lockheed C-5 Galaxy, at 417 tons) and that worked too.

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There was a brief shot of the tail end of the rocket as it launched, which I've examined – a quarter of the engines didn't even light. Rocket ignition was conquered 80 years ago, and this is embarrassing. No wonder the rocket rose so slowly from the gantry, hovering above the ground as it fought to rise against the downward clutch of gravity. Musk had dispensed with thrust deflectors on the launchpad, claiming they were unnecessary; so the rocket shredded the concrete, burned a crater, and threw hunks of debris in all directions (one lump of concrete landing on a car).

We sympathise with well-intentioned failure, but pretending it's a success is no way to gain support. Scientific progress was once objective and honest. It's been superseded by Nonscience – a contest for headlines fuelled by exaggeration and dishonesty. These days the slightest development is hailed as a 'breakthrough' – but when catastrophic failure is trumpeted as a success, we've sunk as far as we can.

Professor Brian J Ford is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Microscopical Society and the Linnean Society. His latest book is Nonscience Returns