

■ Take a trip to the stars tonight with a one-off special show called **THE ALL-NIGHT STAR PARTY** searching for life on Mars

T MAY not appear to be the most scintillating piece of television ever to light up a Saturday night schedule, but don't rule out a night of staring at the stars.

Tonight Sophie Raworth (right) and Rajesh Mirchandani introduce a live evening of star-gazing in The All-Night Star Party on BBC2 at 11.20pm, and whether you're a fan of astronomy or not, the show is well worth a look, if only to marvel at our universe.

You never know – tuning in could mean you are one of the first to learn if there really is life on Mars, as the programme will also be looking out for any signs of extraterrestrials.

The special Open University live programme is being filmed in Cheshire, and has been organised to coincide with National Astronomy Week, as well as taking place when Mars is at its closest proximity to Earth for 60,000 years.

Britain's Beagle 2 Mars lander, brainchild of Open University professor Colin Pillinger, is on its way to seek signs of life on the red planet.

Using a selection of Britain's biggest and most advanced telescopes, the All-Night Star Party team will introduce viewers to the galaxy. The idea is to make it the viewer feel as if they're personally steering a telescope thousands of miles away to see the icecaps of Mars, tracking dramatic gas clouds and impressive galaxies.

Producer Peter Brown explained: "Not only is Mars at its closest for thousands of years, but there are also spiral galaxies, exploding suns and spectacular, swirling gas clouds where stars are born, which can all be seen. We may even glimpse an approaching comet.

"The radio telescope will listen to 'tickling' pulsars and will even listen for signs of life as part of its work for the Searching for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project.

"The programme also hopes to make an exciting new discovery during the event. We'll be challenging amateur astronomers to find a hitherto-unknown asteroid while the programme is on air, which will serve as a chilling reminder that there are countless fragments of rock floating around out there.

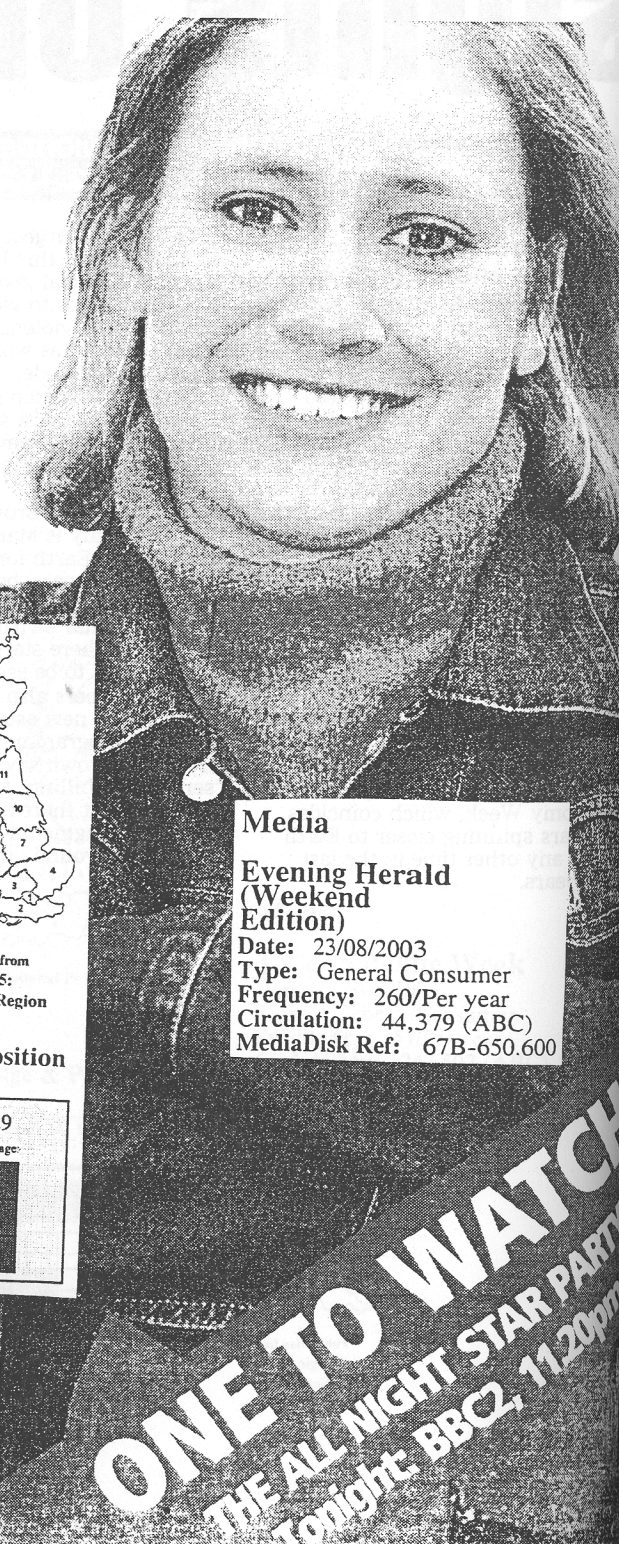
"We're sure the programme will bring home the passion of Britain's professional and amateur sky-watchers, and capture the elation of discovery in space science."

The venue for this space extravaganza is the Jodrell Bank Radio Observatory, home to the newly-refurbished 76-metre Lovell Radio Telescope, which can detect a mobile phone from 220 million miles away.

Meanwhile, 3,000 metres up a volcanic mountain in La Palma in the Canary Islands, astronomer Dr Chris Riley will hand over the giant Isaac Newton telescope to viewers to take a closer look at galaxies and planets. In a parallel observing event, viewers using the Internet will be able to target other research telescopes around the world at the same time.

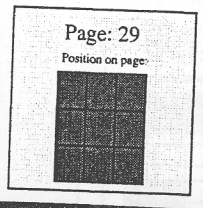
The programme has been funded by the Open University for the BBC.

For more details about the show, log on to the All Night Star Party website at www.open2.net.



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ONE TO WATCH
THE ALL NIGHT STAR PARTY
Tonight, BBC2, 11.20pm