

Immediate Reaction Plan: A Strategy For Dealing With A SETI Detection

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The “Declaration of Principles Concerning Activities Following the Detection of Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” an informal agreement among SETI researchers about procedures to be followed in case of the discovery of an extraterrestrial signal, provides guidance regarding what to do in the event of a SETI success. It does not, however, suggest a method for implementing those procedures.

Experience on four occasions since 1996 involving initially promising signals has shown that misinformation is easily generated about SETI results, and is difficult to dispel. The excitement and demand for information that would accompany a detection will almost certainly make the orderly sequence of events described in the “Declaration” impossible.

We present in this paper a so-called Immediate Reaction Plan, a pragmatic scheme for disseminating information about a SETI signal. The IRP involves outfitting the small number of scientists and other experts involved in SETI research with a plan for keeping one another abreast of developments surrounding a detection. Specifically, the IRP addresses the matter of (1) deciding the “trigger point” at which a signal appears sufficiently real to be announced (2) how experts can be rapidly appraised of the particulars of the detection, and (3) how the expected flood of inquiries from both the media and the public can be handled.

Such a plan will satisfy two important needs: (1) the dissemination of accurate, consistent information and (2) assurance that there is no hidden information being kept from the public.