

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

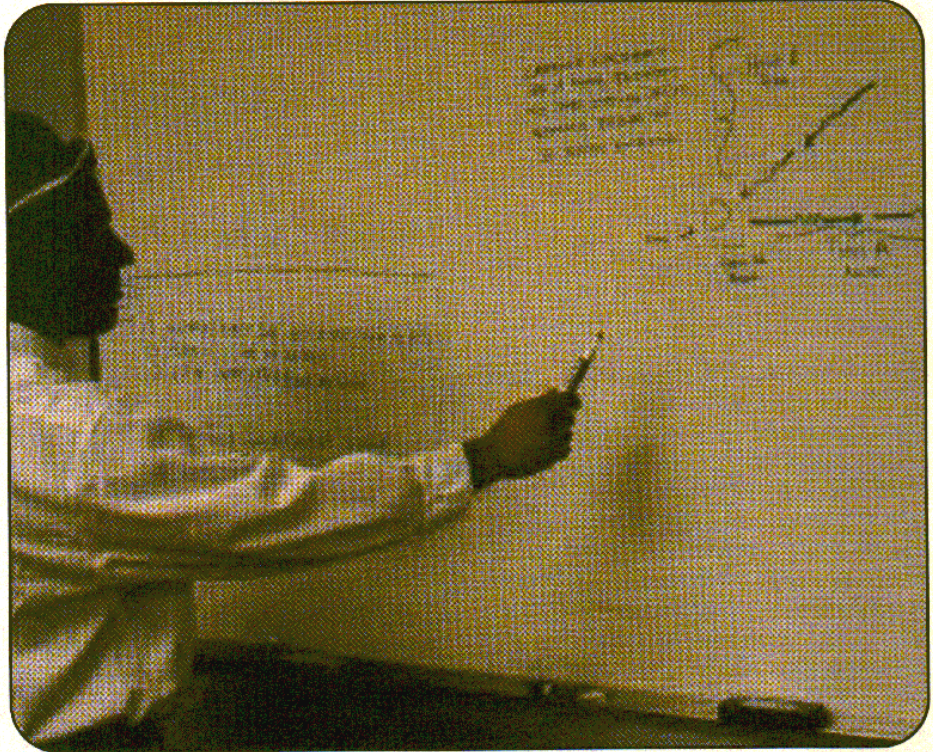
Searching For The Ultimate DX

Testing a Dubious Claim

Might extraterrestrial civilizations be so advanced that they have learned how to monitor our ham bands, or even our internet traffic? One innovative SETI experiment is betting on that premise. Through its highly publicized and widely indexed website <<http://ietl.org>>, *Invitation to ETI* invites contact between humanity and any beings of extraterrestrial origin finding themselves able to access it. The heart of the site is an invitation issued by 100 scholars from disparate disciplines, including a broad cross-section of the contemporary arts, physical sciences, and social sciences (and including a handful of hams). To date, the invitation has proved just as successful as traditional microwave SETI: It has yet to uncover any clear and convincing evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence!

This is not to say that we haven't heard from intelligent *terrestrials* trying to foil the system. Since the invitation was launched in 1996, it has attracted roughly 75 responses from correspondents claiming to be the beings we seek. Through simple and reliable methods, which we will not delineate here (lest we stack the deck in favor of the next prankster), we have been able quickly and conclusively to unmask those humans who have attempted to fool those issuing the invitation. There was, however, one claim that, though bizarre, was convincing and compelling enough to demand closer scrutiny before it was ultimately dismissed.

The episode in question began to unfold in October 2004, when a man left a voicemail message in which he stated that he had "what the Invitation to ETI group is looking for"—that is, evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. The claimant (let us call him "Adam Adamson" to protect the inept) then e-mailed an assertion that although he was most assuredly a human terrestrial, he was able to communicate with extraterrestrial beings via electromagnetic means and was prepared



"Adam Adamson" (his face disguised to protect his privacy) explains his claim of extraterrestrial contact.

to demonstrate this phenomenon under controlled conditions. A sustained dialog between Mr. Adamson and several amateur SETIzens convinced us that although his claims were unlikely, the individual appeared intelligent, lucid, cooperative, and sincere. Satisfied that he was probably not a raving lunatic, we proceeded to arrange for dispassionate scrutiny of his claim, which if verifiable could significantly alter our world view.

Among the members of the Invitation to ETI team is a lifelong ham who operates a successful electronics business in the U.S. His extensive commercial facilities include an electromagnetic interference (EMI) test chamber, a radiation-shielded room containing highly sensitive microwave monitoring instrumentation. The use of this facility was offered for the purposes of testing Mr. Adamson's claim. Any electromagnetic communications passing between Mr.

Adamson and his alleged extraterrestrial communications partners would be clearly discernible on just such equipment. Mr. Adamson volunteered to present himself for such testing, and we readily agreed.

The tests took place in New Jersey. At noon, Adam Adamson presented and explained his claim (using a whiteboard) to the Invitation to ETI director, two microwave hams, and two journalists who were there to document the day's tests. We then gathered outside the large shielded room used for the actual tests. The subject's manner was amiable and cooperative; after all, our goal was to help Mr. Adamson prove his claim, not to make him nervous.

Mr. Adamson asserted that radio signals (somewhere in the range of 1 MHz to 1 GHz) were being emitted by a "probe" controlled by alien intelligence that was somehow associated with his person. While the claims were unusual to

*Executive Director, The SETI League, Inc.,
<www.setileague.org>
e-mail: <n6tx@setileague.org>

say the least, our host, an associate of the Invitation to ETI project and an active SETI League member, volunteered to conduct what tests he was able to with an open mind. He expressed concerns prior to the test that he would only be able to determine whether a signal was being emitted, and had no expertise whatsoever in determining whether it might be alien, fortuitous, fraudulent, or what. We agreed that it was worth performing the tests as a first step, in any event.

Our test subject appeared intelligent, coherent, and cooperative. He explained prior to the shield-room tests that extraterrestrial intelligence had chosen to disguise its communications signals so as to look like noise. In fact, during several different tests, nothing was observed that bore any statistical difference from thermal background plus internal equipment noise. During the alleged transmissions, nothing substantive was observed on an EMI test system or on a highly sensitive spectrum analyzer. The subject's explanation was that the transmissions did indeed look like noise, just as he had promised, which is a bit reminiscent of the old joke about the Invisible Man: "of course you can't see him. He's invisible, and that proves it!"

The subject indicated that extensive further study and testing, lasting perhaps several months, would be required to "verify and analyze the signals." Considering the cost (several hundreds of dollars per hour) of renting and operating a commercial EMI test facility, such testing is beyond the resources of most SETI organizations. We are unwilling to commit *Invitation to ETI* or SETI League resources to further testing of this claimed phenomenon. Based upon the initial null result, we do not recommend that any other organizations pursue this claim, but of course we realize this decision is up to them.

For whatever reason, an apparently intelligent and reasonably convincing individual had come to believe that he was a conduit for communications with extraterrestrial intelligence. As both serious radio amateurs and SETI scientists, it would have been easy for us to dismiss these claims out of hand. UFOlogy is generally acknowledged to be tainted by pseudoscience and the lack of sophisticated skepticism. The SETI community goes to great pains to disassociate itself from UFOlogy, in the interest of preserving the scientific credibility it has earned for itself over the past half-century. It is only because the claimant alleged

electromagnetic radiation, an easily measured phenomenon with which we hams possess expertise, that we decided to test the claim at all. Given the time, effort, and expense involved in achieving this null result, I for one am unlikely to explore any further unconventional claims in the future.

The danger is that in so restricting ourselves, we risk closing our minds to contact. Like all SETI projects, we must create a scientific methodology that avoids being too open-minded—too friendly to

unsubstantiated claims. However, by erring in the direction of rigor and respectability, we could be closing our eyes and our doors to a genuine manifestation of extraterrestrial intelligence. Given the likelihood that ETI will turn out to be quite different from our preconceptions, it would be foolish to dismiss the possibility that it could someday be discovered by a radio amateur, carefully checking out some anomalous phenomenon.

73, Paul, N6TX

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