

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

Journalistic Exuberance

Upon my arrival at a ham convention in Boston a couple of years ago, I encountered a SETI fiction far stranger than truth. It caused us all a momentary flurry of excitement, before fading into the noise level of SETI science. I refer to claims appearing in the reputable British journal *New Scientist* of a promising detection from the SETI@home distributed computing experiment, in which I know many of you are participants. Unfortunately, these claims proved to be a classic case of journalistic exuberance.

The story in question was actually rather cautiously penned. It made no

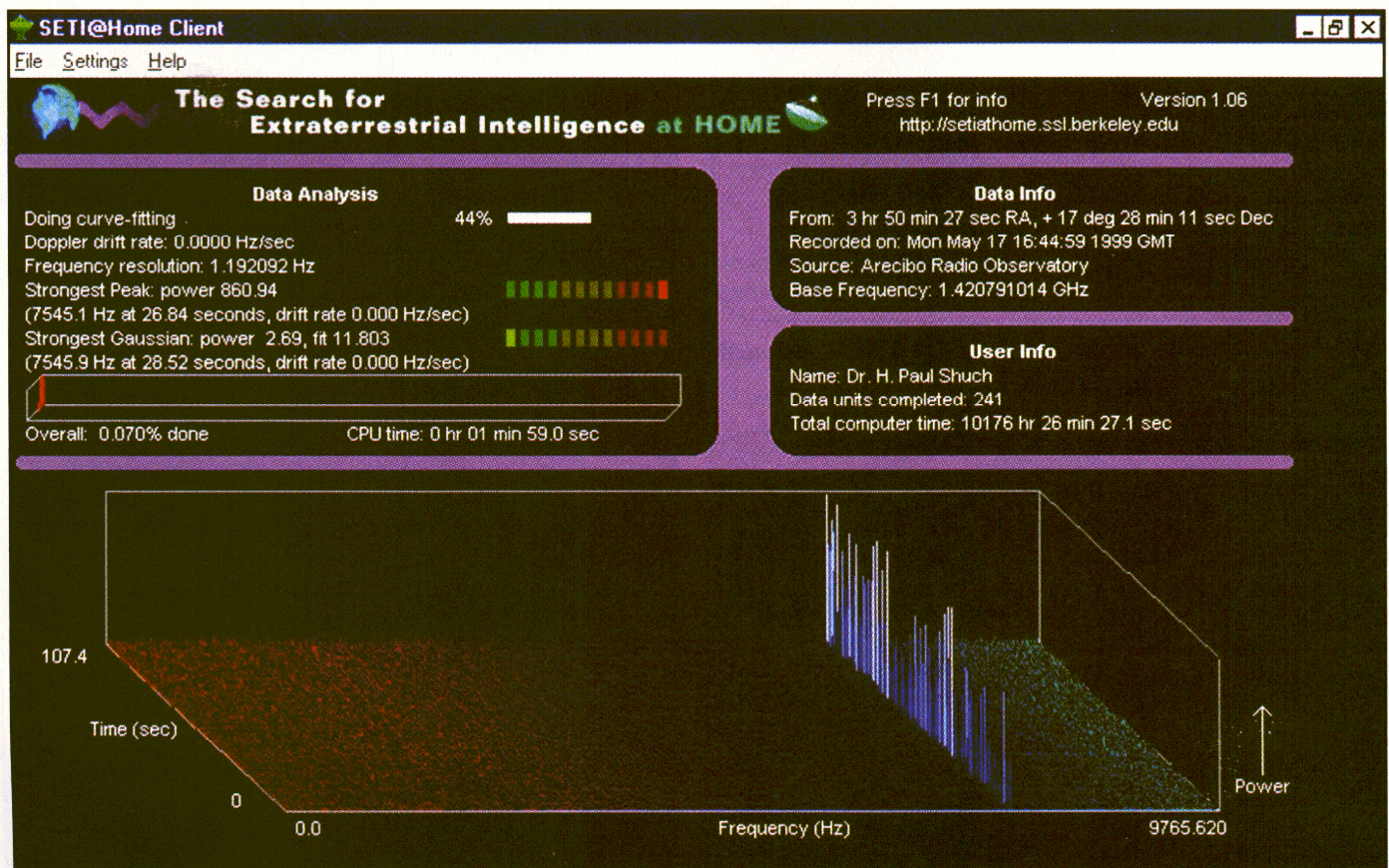
claims, beyond the assertion that at least one candidate SETI@home signal had reappeared upon follow-up examination, when SETI@home chief scientist Dan Werthimer and his team headed to the legendary Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico to re-examine the coordinates of a couple of hundred promising hits during the spring of 2004. The real excitement stemmed from an apparent disconnect between a responsible journalist and a headline writer who may not actually have read the story in question. The headline screamed, "Mysterious Signals from 1000 Light Years Away!"

Would that it were true! Unfortunately, the story itself reported something far more prosaic: "This radio signal, now seen on three separate occasions, is an

enigma. It could be generated by a previously unknown astronomical phenomenon. Or it could be something much more mundane, maybe an artifact of the telescope itself." This is, of course, the nature of most unconfirmed SETI signal candidates, and a familiar occurrence to those of us engaged in the ongoing Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. In sort, unless ET gives his callsign and grid square, you just can't claim the contact.

Thus, from whence comes the "1000 Light Years Away" pronouncement of the headline? Back to the article itself: "SHGb02+14a seems to be coming from a point between the constellations Pisces and Aries, where there is no obvious star or planetary system within 1000 light years." It's not hard to see how this state-

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



To be considered interesting, a SETI detection (whether from Arecibo or from your back-yard dish) needs to be clearly artificial, like this one. However, it also needs to be independently verified, or repeatable. The "detection" reported in 2004 by New Scientist was not.

ment, carelessly read, was transmogrified into a claim far more concrete.

The late physicist and science-fiction author Dr. Robert Forward espoused a philosophy which, over the years, has become codified as Forward's Law: "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story." I respectfully suggest that what we're seeing here is an example of this corollary: "Never let the story get in the way of a good headline."

But back to Boston. Upon arrival in my hotel room, I was greeted by an avalanche of incoming e-mails. (Do 100 e-mails constitute an avalanche? I guess it all depends upon your perspective.) Many SETI League members, several interested hams, and not a few journalists wanted to know more about this claim of SETI success. Therefore, I went directly to the source, my friend and colleague (and former grad-school classmate) Dan Werthimer himself. "What about your candidate signals?" I asked. Dan replied thus, from Arecibo, where he was at that very moment preparing to put a new multi-feed receiver system on the air:

None of our candidates are very interesting. They all are consistent with noise. We will continue to observe many of the candidates over the next few years, but there's nothing on the candidate lists we are particularly excited about.

A reporter from *New Scientist* read the SETI@home web pages. In particular there's a section on 'candidate signals' where we discuss how we score signals and we show the data from the 220 candidates we re-observed at Arecibo 1.5 years ago. These web pages are old, but the reporter made an exciting story about them by exaggerating their content and misquoting us and quoting us out of context, and making a press release about one of the candidates that has a bit higher score than the others.

I talked to a couple of reporters today, explaining we've seen stuff like this for the last 30 years, and it's always turned out to be RFI or noise, and that there's nothing to get excited about, and that when you look at 50-trillion bytes of data, occasionally you'll find patterns that look unusual just from noise....

I wish we had something in our data to get excited about.

So do I. Well, we SETIzens can't control the press, but we can be very careful not to disseminate misinformation without first checking in with the source. I only hope that when we do finally have a *real* SETI detection to announce, the press and public don't turn a deaf ear. Nobody listens to the boy who cried alien.

73, Paul, N6TX