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BACK TO THE BASICS

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For more than 40 years, humans have been scanning the celestial sphere's electromagnetic spectrum for clear signs of extraterrestrial intelligence. The quest has now moved into the optical range of the spectrum and new efforts are also being planned for searches in the traditional radio spectrum. Yet, to date, there has never been a verifiable detection.

As a science journalist and an interested observer, I believe that in general SETI professionals do a credible job of communicating their goals to the public at large. But I also believe that the SETI scientists need to rethink their priorities while communicating to the media. Too often, it seems, the SETI community are cheerleaders for their own view that intelligent life must be ubiquitous in our galaxy, if not the universe. Instead, I believe the SETI community should use the media's bully-pulpit to convince the public of the need for SETI no matter what the result. Just as radio astronomers search for the signatures of heretofore undetected molecular species in the interstellar medium, SETI searchers are also carrying out a decades-long "experiment" to place parameters on our place in this small region of our galaxy. The public needs to be lectured on the importance of this search regardless of the outcome. Instead of dangling the prospect of detecting ETI at every turn, I believe the SETI community needs to reaffirm SETI's inherent link to astronomy as a whole. I will outline a few ways in which the SETI community might reintegrate their outreach messages into a larger astronomical context.