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Got Life? Hours of Boredom Followed by Moments of Sheer Terror
(and that's just with the Press)

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It may be hoped that an initial discovery of extraterrestrial life and its disclosure will be done by accident. An event of that kind would have its own dynamic, and while communications about the discovery might be strained at times, there would be less likelihood that lines of inquiry and discourse would have already been taken by the participants and the Press. In an ideal world (or worlds), the discovery would come ready-made with a picture or pictures that would be useful as an immediate verification of its reality.

But such is not the way of the real world (or worlds, apparently). Lessons learned from the publication of the ALH84001 results in *Science* magazine are indicative of what may be a more likely scenario. Nonetheless, even that publication was held in confidence for much of the time leading up to NASA's press conference, and the science team doing the work was accordingly insulated from press inquiry while the work was underway. Envisioning a Mars sample return mission, or other, similar sort of endeavor that may involve a dedicated team of scientists—working under continual public scrutiny—it is clear that the circumstances that surround any fundamental discovery about life in the sample would be quite different.

Planning for a communications strategy to support the operations of a Mars sample receiving facility (or facilities) must take those circumstances into account. An optimization of the time spent communicating the results of the facility's work should acknowledge the time and effort required, and make provisions for the work to proceed without extensive interruptions—and without being influenced by the expectations of the Press or the public. This paper will discuss some of the initial planning associated with the communications strategy surrounding such a facility.