

IAA-04-IAA.1.1.2.04

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN CLOSE-UP CONTACT

Allen Tough

University of Toronto
Fax: 1 416 913 1257
Email: allentough@ietl.org

The first contact between extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) and human society could be remote, occurring across several light-years of space as radio and optical SETI expect. But first contact could just as easily be close-up. If an alien society is at least 1000 years ahead of ours, it could easily send a small smart probe to study our society. If we detect such a probe on or near our planet, we will immediately face several questions concerning public communication and dissemination in close-up contact. This paper focuses on five aspects of this situation. (1) AUTHENTICITY. A team of experts may be needed to seek unassailable methods and evidence for confirming the probe's authenticity. Otherwise most people will not pay much attention to the probe's messages because each year many messages in our society claim to be of extraterrestrial origin. (2) SECURITY. It is important to ensure that the researchers and the probe (and their ongoing internal and public communications) are safe from attack, sabotage, and interference. (3) ETI'S ROLE. What role will ETI itself play in communication and dissemination? In the remote scenario, all public communication is handled by humans, but the close-up scenario is quite different. A probe that is smarter than any human being may well interact directly with the public. (4) MEDIA. Public dissemination might use the World Wide Web, radio, television, and print. These media could also be used to collect questions and other responses for the probe from a wide range of people. A committee of experts in public communication and learning might oversee this dialogue. (5) PROFOUND SURPRISES. Because the characteristics of ETI are totally unknown by us at this stage, because the probe will likely be much older and wiser than us, and because we may find its thinking patterns and values deeply alien, we should expect profound surprises. An extremely smart and knowledgeable probe will likely have its own ideas about proving its authenticity and interacting with the public.