

Are we ready for contact with extraterrestrial intelligence?

May 6 2014



The study suggests that mankind is still not ready for contact with a supposed extraterrestrial civilization. Credit: José Antonio Peñas/Sinc

The SETI project scientists are known for tracking possible extraterrestrial signals, but now they are also considering sending messages from Earth telling of our position. A researcher from the University of Cádiz (Spain) questions this idea in view of the results

from a survey taken by students, revealing the general level of ignorance about the cosmos and the influence of religion when tackling these matters.

The Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project is an initiative that began in the 70s with funding from NASA, but that has evolved towards the collaboration of millions of Internet users for the processing of data from the Arecibo Observatory (Puerto Rico), where space tracking is carried out.

Now the members of this controversial project are trying to go further and not only search for extraterrestrial signs, but also actively send messages from Earth (Active SETI) to detect possible extraterrestrial civilisations. Astrophysicists, such as Stephen Hawking, have already warned of the risk that this implies for humanity, since it could favour the arrival of beings with more advanced technology and dubious intentions.

The ethical and sociological implications of this proposal have been analysed by the neuro-psychologist Gabriel G. de la Torre, professor at the University of Cádiz and participant in previous projects such as Mars 500 or space psychology topical team project financed by the European Space Agency, who wonders: "Can such a decision be taken on behalf of the whole planet? What would happen if it was successful and 'someone' received our signal? Are we prepared for this type of contact?"

To answer these questions, the professor sent a questionnaire to 116 American, Italian and Spanish university students. The survey assessed their knowledge of astronomy, their level of perception of the physical environment, their opinion on the place that things occupy in the cosmos, as well as religious questions – for example, "do you believe that God created the universe?" – or on the likelihood of contact with extraterrestrials.

The results, published in the journal '*Acta Astronautica*', indicate that, as a species, humanity is still not ready for trying to actively contact a supposed extraterrestrial civilisation, since people lack knowledge and preparation. For this reason, SETI researchers are recommended in this study to look for alternative strategies.

"This pilot study demonstrates that the knowledge of the general public of a certain education level about the cosmos and our place within it is still poor. Therefore, a cosmic awareness must be further promoted – where our mind is increasingly conscious of the global reality that surrounds us – using the best tool available to us: education," De la Torre emphasised. "In this respect, we need a new Galileo to lead this journey".

It was deduced from the questionnaires, which will soon be available to everyone on line, that [university students](#) and the rest of society lack awareness on many astronomical aspects, despite the enormous progress of science and technology. It also revealed that the majority of people consider these subjects according to their religious belief and that they would rely on politicians in the event of a huge global-scale crisis having to be resolved.

"Regarding our relation with a possible intelligent extraterrestrial life, we should not rely on moral reference points of thought, since they are heavily influenced by religion. Why should some more intelligent beings be 'good'?", added the researcher, who believes that this matter should not be monopolized by a handful of scientists: "In fact, it is a global matter with a strong ethical component in which we must all participate".

More information: Gabriel G. De la Torre. "Toward a new cosmic consciousness: Psychoeducational aspects of contact with extraterrestrial civilizations". *Acta Astronautica* 94 (2): 577–583, 2014.

Provided by Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT)

Citation: Are we ready for contact with extraterrestrial intelligence? (2014, May 6) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-ready-contact-extraterrestrial-intelligence.html>

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