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The Next Steps (A4)
SETI 2: SETI and Society (2)

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THE DETECTABILITY OF HUMANITY AND WHY IT MATTERS

Abstract

One notable feature of the activity of Messaging ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (METI) is that the messages sent into space cannot be taken back or revised. These signals are irreversible. Yet, insofar as irreversibility generates moral concern regarding METI, it generates similar concerns for our background radio leakage and for powerful, targeted signaling not related to searches for ETI. These too are irreversible. However, these activities lack other features possessed by METI—namely, the features of independence and intentionality. Because METI is independent of everyday human functioning, and because communication with ETI is an intended outcome of messaging, it has moral dimensions that are not shared by other searches or activities. At the same time, the shared feature of irreversibility raises moral issues concerning everyday human broadcasting that are not commonly analyzed. In this paper, we present current scientific data regarding trends in detectable human radio activity, we explore reasons to reduce our detectability regardless of the nature of the broadcast, and we question whether METI's distinct features make a moral difference when compared to similar broadcasting activities.