

53rd IAA SYMPOSIUM ON THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE (SETI) –
The Next Steps (A4)
SETI 2: SETI and Society (2)

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KEYNOTE: "BILLINGHAM CUTTING-EDGE LECTURE" - GLOBAL OUTREACH AND
CULTURAL IMPACT OF A SIGN IN SPACE, AN INTERDISCIPLINARY SIMULATION OF A FIRST
CONTACT SCENARIO

Abstract

On 24 May 2023, a simulated extraterrestrial message was transmitted towards Earth by the Trace Gas Orbiter, a Mars orbiter of the European Space Agency. The signal was received by the Green Bank Telescope and the Allen Telescope Array in the USA and by the Medicina Radio Antenna in Italy. The event was part of the interdisciplinary project A Sign in Space and was streamed live by the SETI Institute, with thousands of people watching in real time. A Sign in Space started in late 2018 and was developed in collaboration with researchers at the Green Bank Observatory, the Italian National Institute for Astrophysics (INAF), the SETI Institute, and the European Space Agency over a period of four years. The project simulates one of the possible scenarios following the reception of a confirmed radio signal from an extraterrestrial civilization. In the scenario envisioned in the project, scientists release the data of the signal in the public domain, asking people from around the world to decode and interpret its content. A Sign in Space stages one of the possibly most radical events, in which humankind attempts to create meanings around a message crafted by an extraterrestrial intelligence. Since the release of the signal data in the public domain on 25 May 2023, an international community of enthusiasts has been attempting to decode and assign meanings to the message designed for the project. Over the past months, hundreds of interpretations have been proposed and thousands of social media posts have been created in the ongoing decoding effort. The global outreach of the project has been supported by workshops facilitated by the SETI Institute, and featuring various perspectives on SETI research from around the world, including those from aboriginal communities, from the Arab countries, from China and South America. A Sign in Space reached millions of people from 175 countries, through a global media coverage and various social media channels. After one year since its public launch, Daniela de Paulis, the project's founder and director, is assessing the preliminary media and cultural impact of the work and its potential benefits for SETI research.