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UNPACKING THE GREAT TRANSMISSION DEBATE

Abstract

The debate about the wisdom of sending interstellar transmissions is well-known to those involved in SETI, and frustrating for many. Its tendency towards intractability is a result of multiple factors, including: different models of the scientist's role as citizen and/or leader; disparate ideas about society's readiness to cope with frontier science; variable political substrates, particularly ideas concerning individual freedom and state control; competing ideologies of globalization; and the perceived relative risks and benefits of contact. (Variations in the latter, i.e. assessments of the risks and benefits of contact, derive partly from different thinking styles, including tolerance for risk, and partly from inferences based upon episodes of biological and cultural contact on Earth.) Unpacking the debate into its components may be of use to those debating policy about SETI transmissions, or at the very least, help keep in focus what, precisely, the perennial arguments are really about.