Send aliens modern messages of Earth's equality and diversity, say scientists

The UK entrants to a competition agree on one thing: any missive to extraterrestrials must be an up-to-date portrayal of humankind

David Barnett

The Guardian, Thursday 10 September 2015 16.22 BST

Messages sent into space to tell extraterrestrials about the nature of humankind should be updated to reflect gender equality and the diversity of life on Earth, scientists say.

At a conference in Leeds this week, a group of British astronomers and philosophers who form the UK research network for SETI - the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence - agreed to enter a competition organised by the Breakthrough Initiative to devise a message to send out to space on behalf of the world to whoever might be listening.

However, discussing the likely content of the message at the British Science Festival in Bradford on Thursday, the need to revise our previous portrayals of life on Earth was raised.

Jill Stuart, an expert in space policy at the London School of Economics, pointed to the plaque that was placed on the Pioneer 10 spacecraft, launched in 1972. Intended to convey the origin of the craft and to impart information about the inhabitants of Earth, Stuart observed that to modern eyes the pictorial message presents some issues.

“The plaque shows a man raising his hand in a very manly fashion while a woman stands behind him, appearing all meek and submissive,” she said. “We really need to rethink that with any messages we are sending out now. Attitudes have changed so much in just 40 years.”

The plaque also clearly portrays the human figures as white, and Stuart added: “I would be uncomfortable with sending out any images or messages that include Western-dominated material.”

The Breakthrough Initiative, organised by Russian entrepreneur Yuri Milner, is a $100m project to utilise the best radio telescopes to listen out for alien communications - and he is offering a $1m prize for the best idea for a message to broadcast to whoever is out there.
Anders Sandberg of the Future of Humanity Institute at the University of Oxford, was in Bradford representing the SETI group, and said the decision to enter the competition was hard-won, with half of the scientists on the group opposed to sending out a message at all.

The dissenting scientists, said Sandberg, were concerned that we might be drawing attention to ourselves from the wrong sort of aliens. “The cliche of being invaded by aliens was not really on our minds. But the thinking was that the silence in the skies might be because alien civilisations are hiding from us, and that it might be stupid to attract attention,” he said.

The message, which would be beamed out on a powerful but currently unused frequency, could take the form of text, sounds, mathematical formulae or pictures. “But what we don’t know is if any aliens out there have eyes, so pictures might not work,” Sandberg said.

If the UK SETI group wins the competition they will invest the prize money in extraterrestrial research in the UK.

The nearest star that could potentially hold life, Sandberg said, is ten light years away, so even in the best-case scenario it would take 20 years - and more likely 200 - for an answer to arrive from the area of our galaxy where most Earth-like planets might be situated.

There’s also the possibility that rather than an advanced alien race, our messages might find a civilisation slightly behind us. Sandberg said: “If we got a message from aliens in the 1930s it might have freaked us out a bit, but would it have crushed us? No. Unless we had received transmissions of Big Brother, perhaps.”