

From the **Committee for Skeptical Inquiry**
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Tips for Media in Covering UFO/UAP Claims

We are the [Committee for Skeptical Inquiry](#), a group of scientists and science communicators long involved in advancing sound science, supporting good science journalism, and helping the public tell the difference between science and pseudoscience. We have been concerned about some recent over-enthusiastic and uncritical coverage of UFO claims. The history of UFO reports and their coverage teaches us that these are topics that should be treated with great care. Pseudoscientific ideas about UFOs have repeatedly tripped up journalists over the decades.

Covering claims of sightings of UFOs (also sometimes called unidentified aerial phenomena [UAPs]) has always posed challenges. These stories may excite readers—but do they reflect any evidence that the only explanation of the incidents is an extraterrestrial highly advanced space or aerial device?

Fortunately, several excellent, explanatory articles and broadcast segments have appeared in the past few weeks that help explain, with good technical detail, the “UFO” videos that have been the topic of so much coverage. The link we provide here (bit.ly/ufoskeptic) and at the bottom shows how to access them. It also is a guide to other reliable resources.

Some in the media have asked for our help. So, in addition, we offer these—we hope constructive—suggestions.

1. Be aware of the notorious history of these enthusiasms. UFO claims arise, generate media and public interest, often get reported in highly credulous ways, and produce a flood of copycat stories. Scientists and science-minded investigators then examine and eventually explain the claims, often to the embarrassment of the early enthusiasts. Usually, the prosaic explanations get little coverage compared with the early hype. This dynamic distorts the public’s (*and* the media’s) perceptions. Soon the debunked claims are replaced by new claims, and the cycle starts anew.

2. Sources often conflate sightings of *something in the sky* with *extraterrestrials*. A UFO (or UAP) doesn’t necessarily mean aliens. Most UFOs are turned into IFOs

(identified flying objects) and turn out to be terrestrial craft, space junk, or celestial objects. Assuming that aerial phenomena must be alien ships is an illogical jump.

3. Many confuse the fact that astronomers believe, on a statistical basis, that life (even intelligent life) may exist elsewhere in the universe with the idea that such life has already been discovered by being glimpsed in our skies. It hasn't.

4. There are always going to be some unresolved sightings, often where very little is known or recorded. These few sightings are usually unresolved due to a lack of reliable information about their circumstances, not because they are inherently mysterious or unexplainable.

5. There are always going to be officials among the sprawling defense agencies (and their countless contractors) who have to take reports of UFOs or UAPs seriously. It is their job to ensure our skies are not being infiltrated by aircraft or drones from other countries. That doesn't mean they accept that such reports involve spaceships from other worlds.

6. In contrast, there are always going to be a few officials among the many defense agencies or a few politicians who, for their own personal reasons (sometimes they have an antiscience or pseudoscientific/mystical view of the world), are believers in or enthusiasts about UFOs or aliens. While they may take it upon themselves to evangelize on the subject and seek coverage, their personal beliefs do not reflect any scientific or official consensus.

7. When possible, it's best to seek out independent, knowledgeable scientific and technical sources (including astronomers, skeptics, and psychologists) for their perspective. One of the roles of CSI is to provide such sources for journalists.

8. Anecdotal statements such as, "It flew away at speeds unimaginable" or "turned in a way impossible for any aircraft today" are not reliable. Without knowing the distance of the supposed object (if it *is* an object) and whether the camera itself was moving, no meaningful statements can be made about velocity.

9. The U.S. Navy UFO videos reported in this latest round of news reports (some dating back to 2004) may sound impressive, but highly advanced imaging equipment has its own built-in susceptibility to errors and human misinterpretations of their output. Plausible, terrestrial explanations have been advanced for all the Navy videos that have caused so much fuss. These may not be the full, final explanations, but so far none of the videos require resorting to unknown, advanced aircraft or spacecraft, let alone ETs. (See the work of Mick West, for example.)

These are stories filled with many pitfalls and require greater than normal care. The public deserves the best, scientifically informed information and

judgments about a topic that too often is left mainly to those who care little about science or facts.

A brief one-page guide to skeptical resources on UFOs by astronomer Andrew Fraknoi, "Responding to Claims about Alien UFOs: A Brief List of Resources on the Web," can be found at <http://bit.ly/ufoskeptic>.

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The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry promotes scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims.

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) is a nonprofit educational, advocacy, and research organization headquartered in Amherst, New York, with executive offices in Washington, D.C. It is also home to the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and the Council for Secular Humanism. The Center for Inquiry strives to foster a secular society based on reason, science, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values. Visit CFI on the web at www.centerforinquiry.org.