Apocalypse Two

Commentary

Hell hath no fury like an outraged scientist. (Michael Dougan for ABCNEWS.com)

Call me irresponsible.

Oh, yeah — you already did. You also called me an idiot and a fearmonger and some less printable things. And then things really got nasty.

This latest contretemps began two weeks ago when I relayed a friend’s concern about an upcoming Brookhaven National Laboratory experiment. After discovering that other scientists, not to mention The Times of London, had expressed identical fears, I wrote a column about the human tendency to invite catastrophe through technological hubris.

I thought that for once I was on safe territory — territory previously trod by various Old Testament authors, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, William Faulkner, Stanley Kubrick and many others. But, alas, the mere suggestion that Brookhaven scientists, in their eagerness to recreate conditions that prevailed milliseconds after the Big Bang, might create a catastrophic black hole set off an e-mail conflagration of apocalyptic proportions.

Special to ABCNEWS.com

Better Cynical than Stupid

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SUMMARY

The readers have spoken — shouted, actually — in response to the column on Brookhaven’s Big Bang experiment.

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Fred Moody: The Big Bang, Part 2

“I find it quite objectionable that you alarm the public about an allegedly dangerous experiment being conducted at Brookhaven to sell your news,” wrote one aggrieved reader.
Chimed in another, “I am very disappointed in ABCNEWS.com for using this forum to spread false information and for trying to stir up unfounded public fears. Fred Moody should spend some time learning about and applying the scientific process before he attacks scientists with little more than conclusions drawn from literature, media and millennial fears in the Bible.”

I have to say that I was somewhat gratified by the second writer’s rants — however unintentionally, he turned the first insult into a backhanded compliment. It’s much more pleasant to be labeled cynical than stupid — or, as another angry reader put it, as “also an idiot.”

I should also note that many of the most outraged responses came from people with lots of letters after their names, particularly Ph.D. Since when did America’s scientists lose their senses of humor? I have long experience in readers misinterpreting my prose, motives and morals, but I’m consistently surprised at being taken far more seriously than I take myself. Thus, “Shame on you for fearmongering! You have needlessly frightened many thousands of people with your writing,” has me succumbing to grandiose fantasies about the size of my audience.

And what chronic underachiever can resist the thrill of being called “overambitious,” as in, “Although the hubris of scientists may indeed cause problems here on Earth, it may be that the overambition of reporters to make headline shockers may be the true downfall of civilization.” Call me egomaniacal if you will, but if someone out there thinks I have the power, through the sheer force of my ambition, to destroy civilization as we know it, I want more of his fan mail.

End-of-the-World Party

The accusations that I was “frightening people and confusing people in ABC’s name” kept pouring in. But then I noticed two other strains of messages. Writers who lived in Brookhaven’s neighborhood had learned, they said, never to trust the lab’s reassurances. Here’s a typical example: “Fred Moody’s
Here’s a typical example: Fred Moody’s report on ‘a lab-created black hole’ is scary but even more scary is the mad-scientist image of Brookhaven Laboratory scientists. Moody and readers would be even more scared if they knew how many times this laboratory has issued public assurances of safety that turned out to be entirely wrong.”

I’m unfamiliar with local politics back on Long Island, but if the lab’s neighbors say its behavior is “more scary” than the end of the world, then something mighty alarming must be going on back there.

Then there were messages that were both intentionally supportive and … I don’t know … a little unsettling. “How can we stop the Brookhaven thing? Petition, injunction?” Others writers were concerned about their social schedules: “What day in November will the experiment be? Macabre as it may be, I thought it would be fun to have a party the night before (with an ‘end-of-the-world’ or ‘hubris’ theme). Of course, it would be best if the world did NOT end the next day, so that we could talk about the party later.”

Indeed.

Beam Me Out

More than a week after the column ran, there finally arrived a letter from a philosophical reader.

“Would we, the doomed, have time to understand (and thus curse) what is about to happen?” he asked. “What last fleeting sensations might we see before the end? Personally, I am not optimistic.” Not for our civilization, perhaps, but he did hold out hope for succeeding ones. “Your reports are great,” he concluded. “They are worth beaming into space as a warning to emerging civilizations. Cosmologically valuable journalism.”

Now there’s what I want on my epitaph: “Here lies” (or, if the Brookhaven alarmists are right, “Here lay”) “a writer of ‘cosmologically valuable journalism.’”

And here’s hoping my editors take this guy’s advice and beam my columns into interstellar space. It’s my only hope for immortality.
Fred Moody is the author of *I Sing the Body Electronic: A Year with Microsoft on the Multimedia Frontier* and *The Visionary Position: The Inside Story of the Digital Dreamers Who Made Virtual Reality a Reality.* His column appears on alternate Wednesdays.