

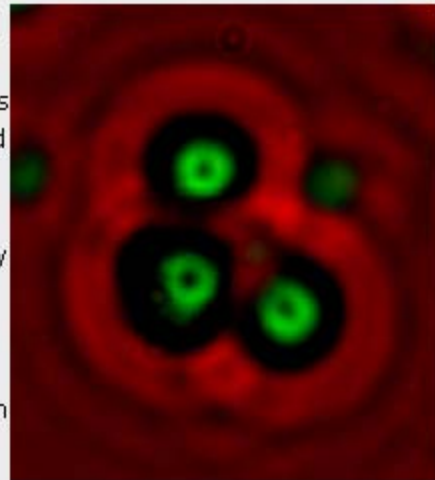


« LA Times: An archivist saves the Moon (tapes)

(Correction) Lots of Ink: An asteroidish rock falls from the sky and somebody sees it coming, goes for a look. »

Newsweek, Houston Chron, etc: In Salt Lake City, it's cold fusion - er, low-energy nuclear reactions - again

Were they right, or sort of right, all along? Could be, a little bit, very maybe. Twenty years ago Univ. of Utah electrochemist Stanley Pons and his British mentor, Martin Fleischmann, said they had found a tabletop form of nuclear fusion that hinted a new era of limitless cheap energy. The field burst wildly into enthusiastic support, mainly from fields other than nuclear physics, only to founder and fade amid accusations of sloppy technique and self-delusion. This week, new evidence is being reported of nuclear reactions in an electrolysis set-up that echoes the original. It's not the first such claim from the hardy band



of researchers still pursuing the Pons and Fleischmann effect. Adherents are steadily asserting results, steadily getting the cold shoulder from the scientific establishment. But this one is dramatic. While a session on low energy nuclear reactions, nee cold fusion, is common at meetings of the American Chemical Society, this year's gathering is in Salt Lake City. How appropriate.

The paper producing most of the news is from a team at the US Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center. It reported evidence of excess high energy neutrons in its device. The triple-headed tracks in a plastic detector are, says the researcher in charge, a compelling sign of nuclear fusion where standard text-book physics says it should not occur at these rates. It's not a big flow of neutrons - not enough to boil the pot of tea that longtime cold fusion skeptics such as Richard Garwin demanded of the original P&F episode's enthusiasts - but it's something.

Garwin demanded of the original P&F episode's enthusiasts - but it's something. Even if real, it would not vindicate the original claims of abundant excess energy. It's more like the teeny flow another cold fusion researcher, Steven Jones of Brigham Young University, asserted he saw 20 years ago. That would be something in itself.

An indirect indication of the tough row this finding has to hoe, before it garners wide conversion in the technical community, is to observe who does NOT cover the news. NYTimes, LATimes, AP, Reuters...? Nope. But it is getting circulation. A fine thoughtful review of the new results is at **Newsweek**. There **Sharon Begley** runs it under the hed 'Cold Fusion at 20: Hope Springs Eternal.' Smartly, she refers readers to a five-year-old story from the **Washington Post** by **Sharon Weinberger** (plug for my employer: she's now a fellow at the MIT Knight Sci. Journalism program). It intimately profiled some of the main people certain that cold fusion is real. Both women's pieces are stiffly skeptical, but don't quite repudiate the possibility *something* real is being ignored by the mainstream. Begley also links directly to several of the 30 papers on LENRs at the ACS meeting, including one paper co-authored by Fleischmann.

Other stories:

- **Houston Chronicle - Eric Berger** : Navy scientist announces possible cold fusion reactions / But evidence also could indicate another type of nuclear reaction, she cautions ; And one of Berger's sources says the work, while also published in a refereed journal, is still full of holes ;
- **Fox News**: Navy Chemist May Have Rediscovered 'Cold Fusion' ; Pretty much right off the press release ;
- **Wired DangerRoom - David Hambling**: Navy Scientists Zip Lips on Cold Fusion Tests ; Best part of this scoffing news analysis is its brilliant inclusion of a plot element in the sci-fi (ie, made up) movie Iron Man.

Grist for the Mill: American Chemical Soc'y **Press Release** (via EurekAlert);

Full Disclosure: The Tracker knows first hand the difficulty of revisiting cold fusion. I had a piece in the Mar. 14 **Science News** on the 20th anniversary of the P&F press conference. The difficulty is that if something walks like a duck and quacks like a duck it probably is a duck - but after all, it's not dead certain that it is a duck. Same with scientific blind alleys. Cold fusion and its offshoots look like a misstep. I'm no physicist or chemist. But so many very smart scientists say this line of research is a waste of time. Good enough for me. But that doesn't make it 100 percent positively so. To some people, conceding that *yes maybe* there is cold fusion, or even more extreme, UFOs flying in from distant civilizations or Yetis in Tibet, is as good as saying your guess is as good as mine.

This entry was posted on Thursday, March 26th, 2009 at 11:45 am and is filed under [Science Stories](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

5 Responses to "Newsweek, Houston Chron, etc: In Salt Lake City, it's cold fusion - er, low-energy nuclear reactions - again"

Don Monroe Says:

March 26th, 2009 at 1:04 pm

My favorite line from the press release was "A stalwart cadre of scientists persisted, however,..." Kind of spoils the illusion of objectivity, I think.

There was a [good story](#) on this in something called **The Ground Report**, which seems to invite anyone at all to submit stories. Also **New Scientist** and LiveScience (which largely repeated the press release, minus the "stalwart cadre" phrase).

Charlie Petit Says:

March 26th, 2009 at 2:03 pm

I saw that line too. It does evoke a trace of heroism. But stalwart doesn't necessarily mean wise or admirable. Just stubborn, brave, persistent, etc., and that's certainly true.

Michael Kenward Says:

March 27th, 2009 at 6:44 am

It is interesting to see this one arising yet again. It must surely be a coincidence that it is the 20th anniversary of the first time around.

You know you are in dangerous territory when there is a band of conspiracy theorists out there who believe that there is a government plot to suppress this area of science.

What surprised me was that the first newspaper to run the original story, the Financial Times, managed to "ignore" it this time around.

Michael Kenward Says:

March 27th, 2009 at 11:15 am

Now here's a surprise. The FT may not have covered the latest "bubble" in the paper, but Clive Cookson, the man who broke the original story 20 years ago, has blogged his account of how that original story came about.

Catch it here:

<http://blogs.ft.com/scienceblog/2009/03/24/a-sad-anniversary-for-cold-fusion/>

You may have to register.

Clive writes "regardless of the fact that it was bad science, what lessons can we learn from the episode about science journalism and communicating research?" He then offers three lessons.

Scientists will reel back in horror at this one:

"Although everyone agrees that it really is best for research not to be released in the mass media before it has appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, the media will have no compunction about reporting sensational findings that have not been peer reviewed, so long as the scientists in question come from reputable institutions and have respectable research backgrounds, as Professors Fleischmann and Pons did."

Journalists will see it as the blindingly obvious. It is not our job to peer review research.

Steven Krivit Says:

May 15th, 2009 at 10:58 pm

Many smart scientists sense that there is something wrong with the picture of "cold fusion." They have sensed this for 20 years. But they can't quite put their finger on what is amiss.

They are frustrated with the fact that "cold fusion" is so resilient as a topic of interest. They are puzzled as to why anybody gives low-energy nuclear reaction research (the more appropriate name, and no this is not mere semantics) a second glance and how there could possibly be any validity to the research.

In the media, the more experienced science journalists are puzzled as to why the less-experienced science journalists give "cold fusion" more than a shred of credibility. The frustration often comes out as pejorative characterizations and emotional rants.

Many smart scientists don't have the interest and patience to dig into "cold fusion" to find out what the problem is. Or maybe they've tried but they run into dead ends. Same for the more experienced science journalists.

I came into this field nine years ago as an agnostic. After my initial investigation, I came to accept much of the reported experimental phenomena was real. Soon after, I naively accepted the hypothesis that two positively-charged deuterium nuclei were magically overcoming the Coulomb barrier at room temperature and pressure.

In the next few years I dug in deep and I dug in hard. Three years ago I began to see what was amiss and I recognized the problem.

I "broke" this story first at a session at the American Chemical Society in August 2008. This presentation is available at New Energy Times.

<http://newenergytimes.com/v2//about/presentations-publications.shtml>

Steven B. Krivit
Editor, New Energy Times