

# On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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## Climate Lessons Learned

Posted on May 19th, 2008 by earleholland

An important story we released a couple of weeks ago slipped under most people's radar and, while that's unfortunate, it does offer two lessons about how research news gets to the public, or in this case, doesn't.

Geographer [David Bromwich](#) and colleagues published a new paper showing that major computer models used to define global climate change seem to do a lousy job when it comes to Antarctica. In this case, the models predicted temperatures 2.5 to 5 degrees higher than had actually occurred.

A year ago, [another story](#) on this same work, posted at [our website](#), was viewed nearly 130,000 times and was the third-most popular story on the [EurekaAlert](#) science news website. We later learned its popularity was linked to its adoption by those who deny the threat of climate change.

Importantly, neither study had suggested anything about climate change outside of the Antarctic.

Given that Bromwich firmly believes climate change is real, that notoriety was a burden, rather than the expected boon. So we girded for a repeat of that misinterpretation this time. Instead, two things happened:

First, the next day, the [National Center for Atmospheric Research \(NCAR\)](#) announced the [installation of a giant new supercomputer](#) to study both climate change and severe weather.

And second, journalists noticed that the journal *Nature*, a few days earlier, had published [a paper](#) suggesting that the surface temperature of the North Atlantic had dropped and that this change might slow global warming for a decade or so.

Coverage of both new reports smothered the Bromwich work.

This offers two lessons for researchers:

- What is major news at any point can be usurped unexpectedly by the next new thing – there are no foolproof predictions for the success of some science reporting;
- And the care researchers take to precisely explain their studies is no guarantee that the public will ultimately get the message that scientists want to send.



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For David Bromwich, however, the waning attention may simply mean that he'll have fewer calls to answer from folks who want to use his work to promote their own agendas. \_\_\_*Earle Holland*

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