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Darwinius exaggeratus, part 2 . . .

Posted on May 29th, 2009 by earle holland

In the future, scientists and science junkies alike will look back at the *Darwinius* discovery and recognize its place in contemporary science history. But their categorization isn't likely to match the hopes and plans held by the cohort that stage-managed its unveiling last week.

Already, commentators are drawing comparisons between this fossil find and the cold fusion debacle of the late 1980s. [See our first take on this episode [here](#).]

And while there is no question that the amount of coverage this ancient creature received was huge, the number of follow-up stories taking issue with how the news was released, and how accurate the researchers' claims actually were, is large as well. Couple that with the hyperbole reeking from the promos touting Monday night's airing of "[The Link](#)," the [History Channel](#) documentary extolling the saga of "Ida," as the fossil has been nicknamed.



The *Darwinius* authors have proclaimed that their coordinated publicity campaign, replete with the press conference at the [American Museum of Natural History](#), a [new book](#), a [website](#) and the TV show, were grand successes in efforts to increase the public's interest in science.

[Jorn Hurum](#), a co-author of the PLoS [paper on Darwinius](#), told reporters, "This specimen is like finding the Lost Ark for archeologists." And [David Attenborough](#), the BBC's famed naturalist, proclaimed, "The link they would have said up to now is missing – well it's no longer missing."

But now that most Americans have seen the images of the scraggly remains of this ancient creature, what they're hearing now is how the claims about its importance were severely overblown, and the interest that originated from the announcement is shifting towards skepticism. Sadly, that growing disbelief isn't limited to this episode alone, or even to paleontology. It is seeping into the public's perception of what science is, and how trustworthy scientists are.

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Prior to the press conference, only a handful of select reporters got an advance look at the scientific paper, and they were sworn to secrecy until the unveiling. Normally, scientific journals will share advance copies of such papers with science writers who will have enough time to accurately report the story, not just parrot back statements offered at a press briefing. This insures input from experts in the field who aren't a party to the research, providing balance to grand claims.

But in this case, the journal, [PLoS One](#), didn't release the paper in advance. The behind-the-scenes leaking of the paper to some select journalists was handled by [Atlantic Productions](#), the company that had produced the documentary for the History Channel.

PLoS One's managing editor, Peter Binfield, said in an email that the media "did not have access to the final paper," adding that he "had no idea what version they [the reporters] did look at, but clearly it could have been any of the prior versions that the authors would have had access to."

What's strange about this is that most journals strictly warn authors about releasing pre-published papers to the media – although PLoS apparently has no such restriction – and researchers are universally skittish about leaking such material, for fear it might jeopardize its publication.

What seems clear is that an early version of the journal paper was handed off to Atlantic Productions by someone on the research team, contrary to typical behavior among scientists, to help facilitate the media blitz. In a later email, Binfield concurred that the most obvious conclusion is that an author leaked the paper.

Then consider "[The Link](#)," the documentary that aired for two hours on Monday night. While reviewers reported that it garnered 2 million viewers – a healthy showing for History Channel programs – that viewership is far less than the normal viewership of [PBS' "NOVA](#)," the dean of television science programming.

What is, perhaps, most distressing was the overbilling of the program. Promos touted it, comparing it to other milestones in history, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of President John Kennedy, and the Apollo program's landing on the moon. The blustering was, quite frankly, far beyond the pale:

"A Global Event:" "Witness the most important find in 47 million years," and "This changes everything."

Such exaggeration doesn't help promote science. It hurts it! Surprisingly, there were no comparisons to earlier scientific discoveries.

But perhaps the most egregious act in this episode is hidden in the small type on the first page of journal article. It reads:



"Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist."

[PLoS' policy](#) on this reads:

"A competing interest for a scholarly journal is anything that interferes with, or could reasonably be perceived as interfering with, the full and

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It also says:

“If authors know that organizations or institutions that have provided support for the work or for authors’ salaries have received any grants from other institutions or companies that have been involved or have an interest in the work described, such information should be declared.”

That seems pretty clear. The affiliation with the television documentary, royalties from book sales, even the indirect benefit that Hurum expressed to one reporter that increased visibility for this work would likely lead to support for future efforts – amounts to a probable conflict of interests on the authors’ part, or at the very least, the perception of one.

It warranted disclosure and they didn’t.

Even assuming the most altruistic motives for all concerned with this, they should have known better. The potential damage to research that exaggerated claims can bring threatens all of science, and anyone looking at the story of *Darwinius* as a case study in science communications should really think again. *Earle Holland*



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4 Responses to “Darwinius exaggeratus, part 2 . . .”

[Dave Mosher](#) // May 29, 2009 at 1:29 pm

claps hands furiously

Very, very well said (regarding parts 1 + 2). I have never groaned and yet laughed so much about a single piece of science reporting/hoopla! This whole thing is... Ri. Dic. U. Lous.

[A Darwinius Carnival \(Plus Some History of “Missing Links”\) | The Loom | Discover Magazine](#) // Jun 2, 2009 at 1:49 pm

[...] think straight—has assembled a blog carnival just on this topic. In particular, check out the post that looks at a brief but questionable statement in the Darwinius paper: “The authors have [...]

[online casino](#) // Jun 4, 2009 at 1:30 am

That seems pretty clear. The affiliation with the television documentary, royalties from book sales, even the indirect benefit that Hurum expressed to one reporter that increased visibility for this work would likely lead to support for future efforts

[Health Insurance Quotes](#) // Jun 22, 2009 at 11:58 am

I guess this is the missing link until the next most important find comes along. While interesting, this does seem to be more about publicity.

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