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Darwinius exaggeratus . . .

Posted on May 21st, 2009 by earle holland

As it usually happens in anthropology, the actual scientific importance of the fossil "find" announced earlier this week won't be decided until years from now. But that fundamental unknown didn't stop the identification of *Darwinius masillae* from being the science story of the week, or perhaps the month.

Fueled by a public relations campaign worthy of the next Star Wars movie, a sextet of researchers on Tuesday announced a true rarity in paleontology – a skeleton that they said was "the most complete fossil primate ever found." Their lengthy paper in the journal *PLoS One*, an online offering from the [Public Library of Science](#), explained that the fossil clearly showed the animal's skeleton, an outline of its body and remnants of its last meal.



Discovered in 1983, divided between two private collectors and then sold over the years, the recent merging of the two halves allowed the research team to place the creature where it seems to belong on our species' family tree. More accurately, it's more an ancestor of tree-living, rain-forest primates than of the *anthropoids* that eventually walked across the prehistoric savannahs.

But that distinction was routinely lost in many of the abbreviated news stories touting the discovery. A [Google News](#) search produced more than 700 versions of stories a couple of days after the announcement, and Google itself joined the celebration offering its own Google logo depicting the fossil on its web search page for a day.

As interesting as fossil finds are to science geeks – and to much of the public as well – what sets this episode apart from the norm is the extent of machinations involved to hype this discovery before the public.



And also, there's the underlying question of whether such publicity-mongering is good or bad for science?

The research team partnered with the [History Channel](#), the [A&E Network](#), an independent filmmaker, [ABC News](#) and others to tout the discovery at a press conference held at the [American Museum of Natural History](#), as well

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as to hawk an upcoming film and book about the fossil find. Subsequent stories claimed the discovery as the “missing link” and one of the “most important finds in 47 million years,” the estimated age of the fossil.

A *New York Times* story reported that at Tuesday’s press conference, one researcher was asked about all the hoopla surrounding this announcement. His response:

“Any pop band is doing the same thing. Any athlete is doing the same thing. We have to start thinking the same way in science,” he argued.

No we don’t!

Rock music and athletics are poor models for scientists to emulate when thinking about how to raise public interest. Advocates of that approach forget the simple truth that the public recognizes the appeal in those realms is emotional, and that fans willingly embrace the sensationalism that accompanies them. It’s all part of the game.

But science should be different. The public needs to trust that scientists, when announcing discoveries, are basing their exuberance on the significance of their finds, both to science and to society. Raising rabid interest in announcements that are linked to book sales or TV viewership shouldn’t be part of their job.

The rush of cheerleading stories has died down following the press conference and coverage now focuses more on evaluating how important this research really is. That’s how it should be.

Discussion now centers on how significant the find actually is. **Clark Spencer Larsen**, head of [anthropology at Ohio State](#) and once a student in a graduate course given by one of the *Darwinius* discoverers said simply, “I think it is being overly hyped.”

Scott McGraw, a colleague in the same department, said, “The exciting element of this story is the completeness and preservation of the new specimen, not the information content of the fossil itself. By and large, the fossil offers little new information . . . So it is – at best – an old and distant cousin – but not a direct ancestor [to humans].”

Assuming that’s a fair statement, this episode seems more inclined towards a publicity stunt than it is an effort at the public understanding of this science.

John Noble Wilford, science writer at the *New York Times* and probably the most respected American journalist covering archaeology and paleontology, seems resigned about the whole affair. **His story** ran in Saturday’s issue of the *Times*, prior to the big Tuesday press conference but only after the **Wall Street Journal** had reported on the find.

He acknowledged that in fields like archeology and paleontology, where government support for research is scant, “promotion on a modest scale has long been important” for researchers to continue their work.

But, he said, “This exceeded just about anything I had come across in recent years. It was so blatant, and some of the promoters were using strong-armed tactics in negotiations.

“It seems that’s just part of getting science to the public in our modern media age.”

His recognizing that more researchers today seem willing to hype their

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science doesn't mean that he supports the practice. But his noting that these episodes are becoming more frequent is a serious warning to all who do research.

Once lost, the public's trust in science may be hard to regain. __Earle Holland



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25 Responses to “Darwinius exaggeratus . . .”

[Dentist in Las Vegas](#) // May 22, 2009 at 12:00 pm

I think it was overhyped because of the big social war going on right now. The issue of same-sex marriage is polarizing, and it seems to pit religious people against non-religious people in the public's mind.

Evolution is very similar. Most don't understand it, so it is divisive and polarizing. Anything one side gets to support their view is overhyped. A possible missing link that connects lemurs and primates gets overhyped because of the potential support for evolution it supplies. Just a way the “left” sticks it to the “right” so to speak.

Its the same “Science” that connects sexuality to biological factors. This gets overhyped as “proof” the sexuality isn't a choice or a behavior, but a trait. Any ammunition that either side can get in our modern culture war is going to be used, including this fossil. Pretty sad to see, but just the way it is I suppose...

[earleholland](#) // May 22, 2009 at 3:53 pm

I have to disagree, based on my conversation with others who follow science communications. This wasn't a pro-evolution effort — it was an effort largely motivated by the investment in the commercial book and television documentary that was produced about the fossil. That's why the release of information was so strictly held until the last moment to insure a big splash in the media, largely written by people who have no knowledge of science, much less paleontology. In this case, it appears that the researchers partnered with the book and documentary producers, and the TV channels, to coordinate a big publicity campaign. A detailed reading of the journal paper at the core of the topic shows that the wonder touted pertaining to the fossil is almost totally manufactured. The researchers specifically said in their article that the research didn't suggest any missing link related to humans and that they weren't arguing for one. But reports from the press conference clearly suggest that they hinted in that direction. __EH

[Weekly PLoS Blog and Media Round-up « everyONE – the PLoS ONE community blog](#) // May 22, 2009 at 7:48 pm

[...] Blog, Kevin Drum, Thoughts from Kansas, Dispatches from the Culture Wars, The Scientist, Sandwalk, On Research..., The Loom and [...]

Kate // May 25, 2009 at 11:22 am

Your last comment gave me pause, Earle. I wondered the exact same thing about the public's trust in science following all this hype. I would disagree, however, only because I would argue that science never had the public trust to begin with; this media sensationalism will make it much more difficult to convey the nature of science to the public, as well.

[Men's Ties](#) // May 28, 2009 at 8:44 am

Thanks for the interesting post

Jason // May 28, 2009 at 9:23 am

Not to be confrontational, but isn't it your current job to "promote" OSU research, including issuing press releases about "interesting" research that may or may not be really significant? For instance, your office recently promoted a study about Facebook and GPA, a study which was not peer-reviewed and which even the scant details in the write-up gave the reader serious reasons to question the validity of the conclusion. This press release was picked up by hundreds of news outlets and thousands of websites. It seems to me that the ratio of hype to significance was even greater in that instance than in the case of the fossil discovery.

As someone with very close ties to the research community at OSU, I truly appreciate the efforts to make sure that the public gets to hear about important and exciting work done here. On the other hand, perhaps you could take this opportunity to explain how this post is not the pot calling a kettle black?

Dale // May 28, 2009 at 9:32 am

To most of us science is boring. Whatever we don't fully understand is either scary, boring and therefore ignored, or railed against. Making it entertaining brings attention to it, and only when attention is brought to a topic does it get the support it deserves. Sad but true.

Bob Killoren // May 28, 2009 at 9:36 am

Another ill consequence is that this kind of reporting makes it so much harder to get broad media coverage for the next major research finding. Unfortunately, blogalim's standard for measuring reportability is degree-of-sensationalism and the potential for hyperbole. So after a story about

“the missing link”, what what will it take to get national coverage? Well, perhaps another in the long list of “cure for cancer found” stories might do the trick.

Sadly, Earle, people only seem to want the Fox or MSNBC style of reporting, not real news. On the bright side... no one will remember this story by the end of the week.

[Eugene](#) // May 28, 2009 at 9:49 am

Well stated, Earl...and Kate.

[earleholland](#) // May 28, 2009 at 10:02 am

Dale: There's no disagreement on our part that increasing the public's interest in science is generally a good thing. We support that! What we don't support is the misrepresenting of research, either through exaggeration, as seems to be happening in this case, or through inaccuracies. Our view is that there is no excuse for intentional inaccuracies in the reporting of research.

[Leslie](#) // May 28, 2009 at 11:41 am

Anyone watch the TV show about the little creature? Too much overblown music, too much faux suspense, way too much repetition. Just give me a good documentary on the subject — or on an aspect of the subject: what about all of that black market trading in fossil and artifacts?

[Lemur Femur](#) // May 28, 2009 at 8:46 pm

That little fellow (in the fossil) would be dismayed at how much his uncovering has sent his descendants into turmoil. He may not have known much about research (or it's promotion), and probably did not have Facebook, but he knew what was important...finding what he needed to survive so that he could provide a foundation to build upon that would lead to the curious group of primates that sits around and gets worked up about these things in blogs. By the way, I found one gross inaccuracy that disproves the whole find as it's represented; they say Lemur Boy is 47 million year old. How can that be if the world is only 6,000 years old? That's a biblical fact. CHECK and MATE!

[bagaol](#) // Jun 13, 2009 at 8:34 am

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[Shareef Defrawi](#) // Jul 9, 2009 at 1:09 am

Very interesting article. I like Google's tribute to little Darwinius.

[coupons for free groceries](#) // Jul 26, 2009 at 11:20 am

Thank you much for that awesome blog post.

[Emergency Dentist](#) // Nov 16, 2009 at 4:07 pm

This fossil, while spectacular, is being oversold. The hype is bad news, not because the Darwinius is unimportant, but because it detracts from the larger body of the fossil record — I doubt that the media will be able to muster as much excitement from whatever new fossil gets published in Nature or Science next week, no matter how significant it may be.

[sominjnode](#) // Jul 1, 2010 at 11:40 pm

Thanks for your information,
That little fellow (in the fossil) would be dismayed at how much his uncovering has sent his descendants into turmoil.
have a nice day.

[Math Tutor](#) // Oct 26, 2010 at 7:57 pm

here's no disagreement on our part that increasing the public's interest in science is generally a good thing. We support that! What we don't support is the misrepresenting of research, either through exaggeration, as seems to be happening in this case

[Minikleid](#) // Apr 20, 2011 at 10:31 am

The public has little interest in science anyway and cases like this don't really help to improve that.

[Discount Ceiling Fans](#) // Jul 31, 2011 at 2:33 pm

Not to be confrontational, but isn't it your current job to "promote" OSU research, including issuing press releases about "interesting" research that may or may not be really significant? For instance, your office recently promoted a study about Facebook and GPA, a study which was not peer-reviewed and which even the scant details in the write-up gave the reader serious reasons to question the validity of the conclusion. This press release was picked up by hundreds of news outlets and thousands of websites. It seems to me that the ratio of hype to significance was even greater in that instance than in the case of the fossil discovery.

[earleholland](#) // Jul 31, 2011 at 4:31 pm

To “discount ceiling fans’ (??), first off, having done my job here at OSU for nearly 35 years, I’ve got pretty good idea of what it should and should not be, and that includes keeping an eye on the broader scientific world instead of simply hawking our small slice of it.

As to the “Facebook study” you mentioned, it was a paper presented at a professional meeting reporting on a preliminary study finding a “correlation” — not “causation” — between Facebook use and student grades. The release, which can be found at <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/facebookusers.htm>, explicitly says that the study showed a link but that Facebook use doesn’t lead to lower grades. News media who didn’t understand that important distinction, misreported the story. We had no control over that.

For a more complete look at that episode, check out the report about it in the Columbia Journalism Review at http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/facebook_and_procrastination.php?page=all.

You’re certainly entitled to your opinion, regardless of how wrong it happens to be. __EH

[jason mraz](#) // Sep 4, 2011 at 7:51 am

thanks for the info about the fossils, they are amazing.

[Poptropica](#) // Sep 16, 2011 at 7:13 pm

There was definitely a lot of hype around this find. This is a simplistic view, but I think fossils are just so cool that it’s all good in the end. Any news coverage paleontologists can get in this day and age, especially given the public’s short attention span, is a good thing.

[Dentist](#) // Sep 23, 2011 at 1:15 pm

I think this is a big media hype. most of us don’t understand the details of the findings and the methods used to do the research. Evolution is always going to be mystic and to keep the funding going on they have to do some marketing to maintain its popularity.

[Ian Tease](#) // Oct 3, 2011 at 2:50 am

It’s somewhat ironic that the undermining of public confidence in science seems to be the result of non-science nonsense that is constantly being manufactured by marketers and media so they can sell more. Science gets the blame.

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