

# On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



[Home](#) [About us](#) [Research Communications Staff](#)

## Fifteen minutes of fame . . .

Posted on October 22nd, 2009 by earleholland

What's more believable?

The announcement at a gala, premier event of a new primate fossil, touted as a "missing link" connected to human evolution, and acclaimed by its media-savvy, showmen-scientists . . .



Or . . .

The publishing in a formal, staid science journal that the fossil, along with a distant relative, is more akin to nocturnal lemurs and basically unrelated to humans. . .

Sadly, that's the kind of dilemma faced by those who follow science in the media. It's the unsettling challenge that modern research scientists now seem to be facing: Choosing between the newer broad, short-term public interest in the research, or remaining with the plodding, glacial pace of traditional science publication.

Most researchers will quickly say that they'd never sacrifice accuracy and fact for fame and the potential of fortune, but the episode of the *Darwinius* fossil earlier this spring, as well as other so-called "discoveries," shows that the answers aren't always so simple.

Comparing the news media coverage of the two aforementioned events seems to suggest where the public comes down in the battle between flash and fact.

The announcement of the *Darwinius* fossil, fueled by the opening of a new museum exhibit, the airing of a national documentary and the sale of a popular book, generated nearly 800 stories in the news media within two days.

But [this week's publication](#) in the respected science journal *Nature* reported that a new early primate fossil, *Afradapis longicristatus*, and the earlier *Darwinius* fossil, belonged on a branch of the evolutionary tree far removed from humans. While the published paper basically disproved the claims that were so broadly hyped earlier this year, the research only garnered one-fifth as much news coverage.

### NAVIGATION

- \* [Home](#)
- \* [About us](#)
- \* [Research Communications Staff](#)

### RECENT POSTS

- \* [A graphic misrepresentation . . .](#)
- \* [Of ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasts . . .](#)
- \* [A cascade of lemmings . . .](#)
- \* [Not what Ben meant . . .](#)
- \* [Of science, baseball, and cricket . . .](#)

### SOCIAL MEDIA

- \* [OSU Research News on the Web](#)
- \* [Research News on Facebook](#)
- \* [Research News on YouTube](#)
- \* [StumbleUpon](#)

### WHAT WE READ

- \* [Dot Earth — Andrew Revkin/New York Times](#)
- \* [Framing Science](#)
- \* [Health News Review](#)
- \* [Knight Science Journalism Tracker](#)
- \* [Real Climate](#)
- \* [Science News](#)
- \* [Speaking of Research](#)
- \* [The Great Beyond](#)
- \* [The Panda's Thumb](#)
- \* [The Plainspoken Scientist](#)
- \* [TierneyLab](#)
- \* [WiredScience](#)

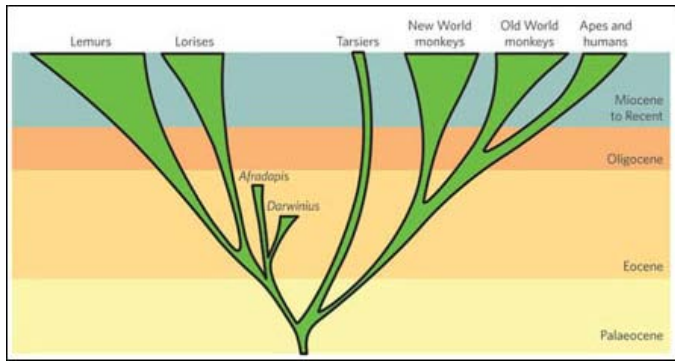


### CATEGORIES

- \* [Climate change](#)
- \* [Environment](#)
- \* [Physics](#)
- \* [Researchers](#)
- \* [Science](#)
- \* [Communication](#)
- \* [Science policy](#)
- \* [Space](#)
- \* [Uncategorized](#)

### ARCHIVES

- \* [February 2012](#)
- \* [January 2012](#)
- \* [October 2011](#)
- \* [September 2011](#)
- \* [August 2011](#)
- \* [July 2011](#)
- \* [May 2011](#)
- \* [April 2011](#)
- \* [March 2011](#)
- \* [December 2010](#)
- \* [October 2010](#)
- \* [September 2010](#)
- \* [August 2010](#)
- \* [July 2010](#)
- \* [June 2010](#)
- \* [May 2010](#)
- \* [April 2010](#)
- \* [March 2010](#)
- \* [February 2010](#)
- \* [January 2010](#)
- \* [December 2009](#)
- \* [November 2009](#)
- \* [October 2009](#)
- \* [September 2009](#)
- \* [August 2009](#)
- \* [July 2009](#)
- \* [June 2009](#)
- \* [May 2009](#)



Nature's representation of the primate family tree. Credit: E. R. Seifert, Stony Brook University

Marketing folks have long-known that being first with new information can often be more useful than being right. But that kind of mindset has usually been absent in science where the validity of the information has been paramount. Ironically, the nature of science is that the early “discoveries” are often proved less-than-right, if not outright wrong. But that’s as it should be – science is inherently self-correcting and our knowledge shifts as we gain more data.

But seldom do scientists ever use this evolution in our understanding to capitalize on the opportunities to mislead. So when it does happen, seemingly intentionally, as in the *Darwinius* episode, it suggests a new question:

What’s wrong with promoting findings quickly since other scientists will eventually correct whatever errors are made?

Plenty!

The public’s faith in the competency of researchers hangs in the balance in cases like this. And the fact that the public’s memory for detail is short is no excuse for “gaming” the system. Surveys continue to rank scientists high on the lists of those held in esteem but at the same time, the complexity of science in virtually every discipline is constantly doubling, making it harder for the citizenry to even begin to “understand” most science.

Instead, they’re left with a simple faith in the honesty of science, and of those who do it.

That’s way too valuable to risk on just a few minutes of fame. \_\_Earle Holland

 More »

Powered by [Bookmarkify™](#)

Tags: [Researchers](#), [Science Communication](#), [Science policy](#) // [Add Comment](#) »

### Discussion Area - Leave a Comment

Name (required)

Mail (will not be

published) (required)

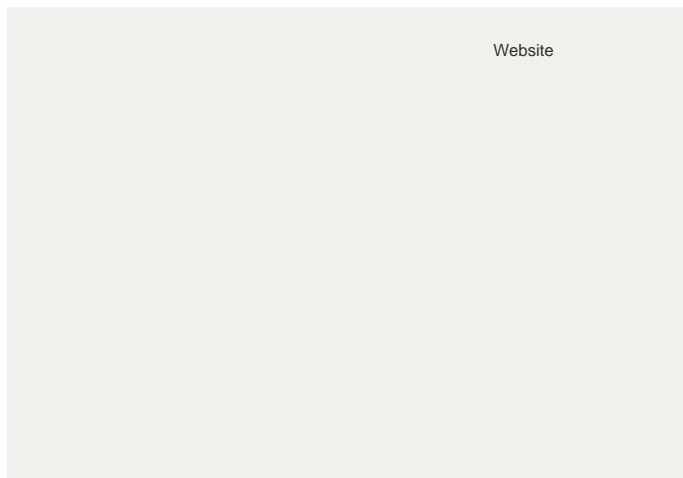
- \* [April 2009](#)
- \* [March 2009](#)
- \* [February 2009](#)
- \* [January 2009](#)
- \* [December 2008](#)
- \* [November 2008](#)
- \* [October 2008](#)
- \* [September 2008](#)
- \* [August 2008](#)
- \* [July 2008](#)
- \* [June 2008](#)
- \* [May 2008](#)

#### META

- \* [Log in](#)
- \* [Entries RSS](#)
- \* [Comments RSS](#)
- \* [WordPress.org](#)

#### RESEARCH NEWS WEBSITE





« [How it's 'sposed to be . . . Like a Phoenix . . .](#) »

**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY** ■ [WWW.OSU.EDU](http://WWW.OSU.EDU)

© 2006, The Ohio State University | Enarson Hall 154 W 12th Avenue | Columbus, Ohio 43210 | 614-292-OHIO

This page is maintained by: [University Relations](#). [About this site](#).

[Contact](#)

If you have trouble accessing this page and need to request an alternate format, contact [webmaster@osu.edu](mailto:webmaster@osu.edu).