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How it's 'sposed to be . . .

Posted on October 11th, 2009 by earleholland

As far as anthropology goes, 2009 is becoming a banner year for the field. While the scientists themselves may point to a host of discoveries, the lay public will likely only remember two – “*Ida*” and “*Ardi*.”

The announcements surrounding the unveiling of each of these two ancient primates filled approximately 1,000 stories each in the news media and held the public’s interest for days. But while they’re similar in the “buzz” they inspired, the two episodes differ drastically in how their stories were told.

They were, quite frankly an example of the worst and the best of communicating science to the public.

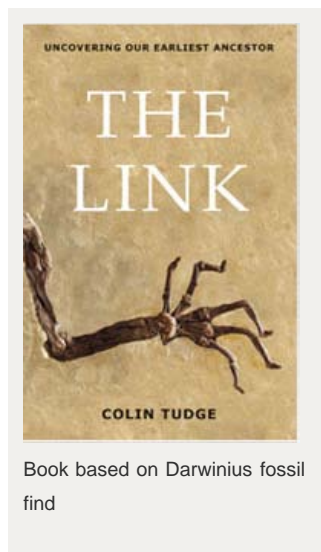
Ida’s story, spurred by its behind-the-scene marketing ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), filled the public eye late this past spring. “*Ida*”, a superbly preserved fossil of *Darwinius masillae*, dated back perhaps 47 million years and was unveiled at the Natural History Museum at the University of Oslo, Norway. Described first at a much-touted press conference, the fossil find was also the subject of a [two-hour documentary](#) on the [History Channel](#) and a [companion book](#) describing its finding and study.

Billed as a “missing link” in human evolution, television ads promoted the discovery with claims such as “the most important find in 47 million years” and “this changes everything,” in hopes of increasing the television documentary’s viewership.

Information about the discovery had been withheld from science writers until the last moment, resulting in much of the reporting being done by journalists who lacked the basic understanding of the field, and who therefore were unable to critically judge the importance of the announcement.

At the time, researchers involved in the *Darwinius* effort defended their strategy, explaining that “pop bands and athletes are doing the same thing” as they did in promoting the discovery. And when, after a few days, knowledgeable reporters found a myriad of falsehoods surrounding the announcement, the public had already moved along.

Marketers could look on the *Darwinius* example as a grand success, given the attention it garnered. But it was explicitly the worst-case scenario for



Book based on Darwinius fossil find

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- * [May 2010](#)
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- * [March 2010](#)
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- * [January 2010](#)
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- * [August 2009](#)
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explaining science to the public.

Last week's announcement of the fossil remains of *Ardipithecus ramidus*, however, was picture-perfect, an example of the best practices in science communications. Fifteen years after the first of "Ardi's" bones was unearthed in Ethiopia, a team of nearly four dozen researchers described their discovery through 11 scientific papers published in the journal *Science*. A handful of news stories, an editorial and the cover of that issue of the journal were devoted to the find.

As with all content in the major science journals, science journalists had been alerted in advance to the upcoming publication and spent the week before publication preparing their reports, questioning experts and affirming the discovery's importance. The release of the information to the public was flawless, thanks to the planning and partnership of communicators at the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#), *Science's* publisher, and members of the research team.



Issue of Science featuring Ardipithecus

According to [Scott Simpson](#), an associate professor of anatomy at [Case Western Reserve University](#) and a member of the Ardi team, the scientists had agreed in the beginning on a set of guidelines about discussing the fossil find and the project.

"It isn't like we were being spiteful by sitting on this information for 17 years,' he said. "It's just that we wanted to be right when we announced it."

Speaking after a lecture Friday at [Ohio State University](#), Simpson said, "Some people will pick up a fossil in the field and then run to the nearest city and have a press conference. Doing so can bite you in the ass!"

As for the Darwinius episode, he said, "There actually was an ulterior motive – self-promotion" on the part of the discoverers. "They went over the top and said that it (the fossil) rewrites human evolution. I don't think they were being very responsible," he said.

"I believe they tried to make it so extraordinary that they stretched the bounds of what they themselves knew to be true."

Historically, anthropology has been a somewhat contentious field. Experts within the discipline will disagree passionately over interpretations and significance of new finds, and that is how it should be.

But in the case of this year's two main discoveries, both offer insight – the latter as a model to emulate and the former as a strategy to avoid. [Earle Holland](#)

UPDATE: The Discovery Channel aired a new documentary within a week after *Science* published its reports on *Ardipithecus*, but the good news is that the program's trailers avoided grand statements and overblown hyperbole. Perhaps they learned something from the Darwinius experience. [__EH](#)

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- * [March 2009](#)
- * [February 2009](#)
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[Hernia symptoms](#) // Nov 14, 2009 at 4:06 pm

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