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One last, fossilized point . . .

Posted on June 24th, 2009 by earlehilland

One would hope that the last two postings here dealing with the media extravaganza surrounding the *Darwinius* fossil hoopla would have been sufficient to quench one's interest.



Shoulder of Darwinius fossil

But alas, a bit more must be offered . . .

What made this whole debacle somewhat distasteful wasn't the science, such as it was. The depressing aspect was the seemingly endless hype centered more on a [commercial book](#) and [network documentary](#) applauding the discovery. Serious scientists seldom proclaim their discoveries as "missing links," as did participants in this episode.

And even though the researchers themselves might not have actually touted the discovery as such, clearly their publishing and broadcasting partners reveled in doing so as part of an elaborate plan to heighten viewership of the documentary and perhaps purchase of the accompanying book. Various quotes from the science team, both during and after their epic press conference, discussed the partnership intent on garnering visibility.

Researchers self-aggrandizing in the name of supposedly promoting science, while uncommon, may seem inappropriate but it really doesn't break any of the "rules" of modern research. But, as we pointed out in our second commentary on this topic, the researchers actually did break the rules when it came to disclosing their connections and potential conflicts.

Their [paper](#), published in the online journal *PLOS One*, was bound by the publication's rules for authors, including a [clause](#) covering "competing interests." It reads:

"A competing interest for a scholarly journal is anything that interferes with, or could reasonably be perceived as interfering with, the full and objective presentation, review, or publication of research findings, or of articles that comment on or review research findings. Competing interests can be financial, professional, or personal; hidden or declared; actual or perceived.

"Competing interests can be held by authors, their employer (whether academic institution, commercial company, or other), sponsors of the work, reviewers, and editors. They can arise in a relationship with an organization or another person."

When queried about this rule earlier this month, and the claim in the paper

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that “The authors have declared that no competing interests exist,” managing editor Peter Binfield agreed that the concerns were “very valid” and that he would be “following up with the authors on this issue.” One assumed that, knowing our interest, Binfield would have reported back on the authors’ reply.

That didn’t happen, but he did, apparently, report the response to [Discover magazine](#) writer Carl Zimmer for his blog, [The Loom](#). Binfield pointed Zimmer to a [comment](#) on the original paper that was posted on June 10 that read:

“The authors wish to declare, for the avoidance of any misunderstanding concerning competing interests, that a production company (Atlantic Productions), several television channels (History Channel, BBC1, ZDF, NRK) and a book publisher (Little Brown and co) were involved in discussions regarding this paper in advance of publication. However, to clarify, none of the authors received any financial benefit from any of these associations and these organizations had no influence over the publication of this paper or the science contained within it. The Natural History museum in Oslo will receive some royalty from sales of the book, but no revenue accrues to any of the scientists. In addition, the Natural History Museum of Oslo purchased the fossil that is examined in this paper, however, this purchase in no way influenced the publication of this paper or the science contained within it, and in no way benefited the individual authors.”

In essence, the authors’ message said that none of them profited financially from the hype, so that made it all okay. But PLOS’ policy on competing interests – like most reputable journals – doesn’t limit conflicts to whether authors make money on the deal. Situations like this offer researchers numerous opportunities to benefit in other ways during the process.

And that’s not necessarily bad.

But when submitting the paper itself, the authors claimed no conflict existed, actual or perceived. That was clearly false. Moreover, the revised disclosure that Binfield posted on behalf of the authors on June 10th is still stuck on the comments section of the journal, while their original claim of no conflict remains a part of the formal paper, and therefore part of the official record.

One could argue that a change takes some time but surely for an online journal, the correction to the false disclaimer should have occurred by now, two weeks later.

People whose interest in Darwinius – or in science, for that matter – is fleeting will have little concern over the hype, hoopla and conflict in this case. But for researchers and science students, it’s a cautionary tale worth noting. *Earle Holland*



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4 Responses to “One last, fossilized point . . .”

[Health Insurance Quotes](#) // Jul 9, 2009 at 10:25 am

I will say that with the amount of new discoveries we are inundated with as a society, we usually pay more attention to those that are controversial.

Take the super collider for instance – we’re curious because it might create a black hole and swallow us up whole.

Perhaps their motive was to create controversy to keep this fossil more relevant than it might ordinarily be.

[Spanish Fork Mechanic](#) // Jul 9, 2009 at 12:17 pm

Earle, I love to read your blog. Kind of a closet science junky...anyway, I wanted your take on something I saw on politcal wire today:

“A new Pew Research report on American attitudes toward science finds that 55% of scientists identify as Democrats, while 32% identify as independents and just 6% say they are Republicans. When the leanings of independents are considered, fully 81% identify as Democrats or lean to the Democratic Party, compared with 12% who either identify as Republicans or lean toward the GOP.”

Will this affect the type of research being done? ie: too much research on climate change simply to make a political point? Not enough scientific innovation into oil exploration as Democrats are politically against new drilling mostly? This could make for an interesting blog post.

[MySpace Friends](#) // Aug 14, 2009 at 9:09 am

always a pleasure to read – keep on blogging

[Ivy](#) // Aug 16, 2009 at 2:49 am

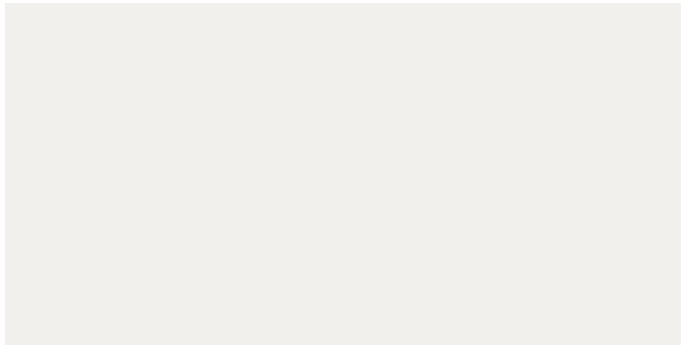
I thought it was a very important discovery but kind of put off by all the hype.

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« [Darwinius exaggeratus, part 2 . . . We are what we read . . .](#) »

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