

Reading British creationism in the web archive

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The story of British creationism¹ has always been of a movement under the shadow of a much stronger and better established movement in the USA.² This relative lack of strength has been accompanied by a persistent perception that this weakness has been due to anti-evolutionist ideas being wilfully ignored by the scientific and media 'establishment'. As Ronald L. Numbers showed in his magisterial study of global creationism, this sense was already visible amongst British creationists in the years between the two World Wars. In the words of Douglas Dewar, one of the founders in 1932 of the Evolution Protest Movement, 'those who do not accept this creed are deemed unfit to hold scientific offices; their articles are rejected by newspapers or journals; their contributions are refused by scientific societies; and publishers decline to publish their books except at the author's expense.'³ In relation to the mainstream news media in particular, Numbers also identified a persistent discontent with the perceived marginalisation of the view by the BBC, which for much of the twentieth century had a stranglehold over broadcasting in a way unknown in the United States and elsewhere.⁴

In very recent years, there was been a marked upswing in concern amongst some that attempts were being made to have anti-evolutionary theories presented as part of science education in UK schools. In September 2006 a group named Truth in Science sent DVDs and other learning materials to school science teachers in the UK recommending their use in the classroom.⁵ The *Observer* reported on the group's activities in 2006, with some incredulity that such things were possible in the UK, and not confined to the US.⁶ In December of that year the Labour government stated that '[n]either intelligent design nor creationism are

1 The term 'creationism' has both inclusive and exclusive definitions, depending on the user. This paper uses it in its inclusive sense, and interchangeably with 'anti-evolutionist', to denote ideas and organisations in conscious opposition to evolution as held by mainstream science. It thus encompasses 'intelligent design', although ID's proponents avoid the term 'creationism'.

2 Mathew Guest, 'The plausibility of creationism: a sociological comment' in Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (eds), *Reading Genesis after Darwin* (Oxford, OUP, 2009), pp.217-36, at p.223.

3 Dewar, as quoted by Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists. The evolution of scientific creationism* (Berkeley, University of California Press) pp.149-50.

4 Numbers, *Creationists*, pp.329-30. On the history of the movement in the UK and USA, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), pp.177-208; George M. Marsden, *Understanding fundamentalism and evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991), pp.153-81.

5 'Who are Truth in Science', *Guardian* 27 November 2006.

6 Nick Cohen, 'I can barely Adam and Eve it, but creationism is catching on over here', *Observer*, 1 October 2006.

recognised scientific theories and they are not included in the science curriculum', and instructed schools not to use the materials.⁷ It was probably in the same year that the British Centre for Science Education was set up in response, 'with the primary purpose of stopping the teaching of Creationism in UK state schools'. Its website first appears in the Internet Archive in November 2006.⁸

Despite these periodic episodes of moral panic, the scholar wishing to understand the scale and strength of anti-evolutionist thinking in the UK is short on data. On the particular question of school science, a survey conducted in the USA in 2006 found that 58% of respondents favoured the teaching of creationism alongside evolution in schools; more or less precisely the demand being made by Truth in Science and others.⁹ Much to the surprise of many, and in apparent contradiction to the established historical narrative, a poll in the UK in 2009 asked much the same question and got a similar answer. Around 54% of those polled agreed that '[e]volutionary theories should be taught in science lessons in schools together with other possible perspectives, such as intelligent design and creationism.'¹⁰ Whilst this is not evidence of actual acceptance of a creationist view over an evolutionary one, many Britons clearly believed they knew enough of it to want creationist thinking to have an equal hearing.¹¹

This paper then explores whether this surprisingly high level of sympathy with the creationist viewpoint on one particular issue is reflected in solid support for creationist organisations in general. As is typical amongst campaigning organisations, there is little in the way of membership figures for the principal creationist organisations. Nor are there many public gatherings and demonstrations of creationist strength available for observation and analysis. Online, the scholar is hampered by the almost complete absence of traffic statistics with which to assess the usage of the creationist web estate. However, the archived UK web now allows a

7 'Ministers to ban creationist teaching aids in science lessons', *Guardian*, 7 December 2006

8 Instance of 7 November 2006, in which the organisation is described as 'newly formed':
<http://web.archive.org/web/20061107030803/http://www.bcseweb.org.uk/>

9 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press / The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues* (August 2006), p.26, online at <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/283.pdf>

10 'Teach both evolution and creationism say 54% of Britons', *Guardian*, 25 October 2009.

11 On the representation of the debate at large, see Joachim Allgaier and Richard Holliman, 'The emergence of the controversy around the theory of evolution and creationism in UK newspaper reports', *The Curriculum Journal* 17:3 (2006), 263-79.

new angle of view on the question.

If the sense of conscious exclusion voiced by Douglas Dewar and others corresponds to reality, then such an exclusion of creationist voices from key media and publication channels may well have acted as a brake on its progress. In contrast, the web (at least in theory) allows minority views to flourish in proportion with their intrinsic attractiveness and plausibility, no longer constrained by the high barriers to entry to traditional publishing. As the ownership and control of individual sites – the points of entry to the online conversation – has been widened, then any viewpoint, however marginal, may be disclosed, discovered, shared and linked to. And in the absence of usage statistics for the main sites, it is possible to analyse the volume and structure of inbound links to these sites as a proxy measure of attention.

Of course, the attention implied by a link can be positive, negative or indifferent in its sentiment. As far as the underlying HTML is concerned, a link from one creationist organisation referring its users to another appears the same as one from a critical newspaper column or a secularist blogger to the same content. As a first step in an ongoing enquiry into the shape of the creationist web in the UK, this paper takes a 'distant' look at data provided by the British Library, to begin to understand the high-level patterning of host-to-host linkage, of the full range of sentiment.

The British Library holds a dataset containing all the resources captured by the Internet Archive from hosts in the .uk top level domain, for the period from 1996 to 2013. Derived from this, and made available by the Library in the public domain, is the Host Link Graph (1996-2010).¹² The dataset contains over 2 billion lines in the form:

2007 | commentisfree.guardian.co.uk | truthinscience.org.uk | 2

which states that, amongst data crawled by the Internet Archive in 2007, there were on one particular host in the Guardian domain two individual resources which linked at least once to the Truth in Science domain.

¹² Available at <http://data.webarchive.org.uk/opendata/ukwa.ds.2/host-linkage/>, with DOI:10.5259/ukwa.ds.2/host.linkage/1

In electing to use this data, two key assumptions were necessary. Firstly, this analysis acknowledges that the Internet Archive can by no means be said to have captured all the content that appeared in the UK TLD in this period. However, it assumes that the Internet Archive was no more likely to miss hosts that linked to these sites than ones that did not. There is no reason to suppose that the gaps in the Internet Archive holdings systematically skew this particular analysis. So, while the analysis is cautious in its interpretation of absolute numbers of linking hosts (since some may be missing), it is more confident in its analysis of the composition and classification of those hosts that do appear.

Secondly, the analysis is based on the domain names that were in use by the organisations involved at the time of writing (late 2014), and does not relate these domains to any previous locations for this content. If a host linked to one of the organisations under discussion at a previous location, and that link was not subsequently updated, then that linkage will not be recorded in this data.

To begin with, I extracted all the unique hosts that are to be found in this dataset as linking to the Truth in Science domain (truthinscience.org.uk), finding 46 unique hosts that linked to the domain at any point between 2006 (when the domain appears) and 2010. Some hosts were disregarded which were unidentifiable either from the live web or the Internet Archive. For the purposes of this analysis, several others were classified as 'Other' and disregarded, including directories and listings, sites selling cheap flights and others where the main business of the domain was evidently not religious, educational or comment on public affairs. These exclusions brought the number down to 38.

As one might expect, there are some inbound links from two parts of the mainstream news media, the Guardian and the BBC. Eight more were secularist or humanist sites, either of long standing such as the British Humanist Association or set up specifically to counter creationism. Five more were other creationist sites. Amongst the remainder were Christian media outlets, several bloggers, two church congregations, one site within the academic second-level domain (.ac.uk) and a single London school. Even after acknowledging that caution is necessary regarding absolute numbers of hosts, the very low absolute number of

hosts and the composition of the sites do not suggest a major groundswell in interest in Truth and Science, despite the ambition of their 2006 campaign and the media coverage it attracted. It was also the case that both the number of hosts and the total number of linking resources were both *lower* in 2010 than in 2007, the first full crawl year after the schools campaign took place. Although Truth in Science has remained active, the 2006 campaign seems to have become old news.

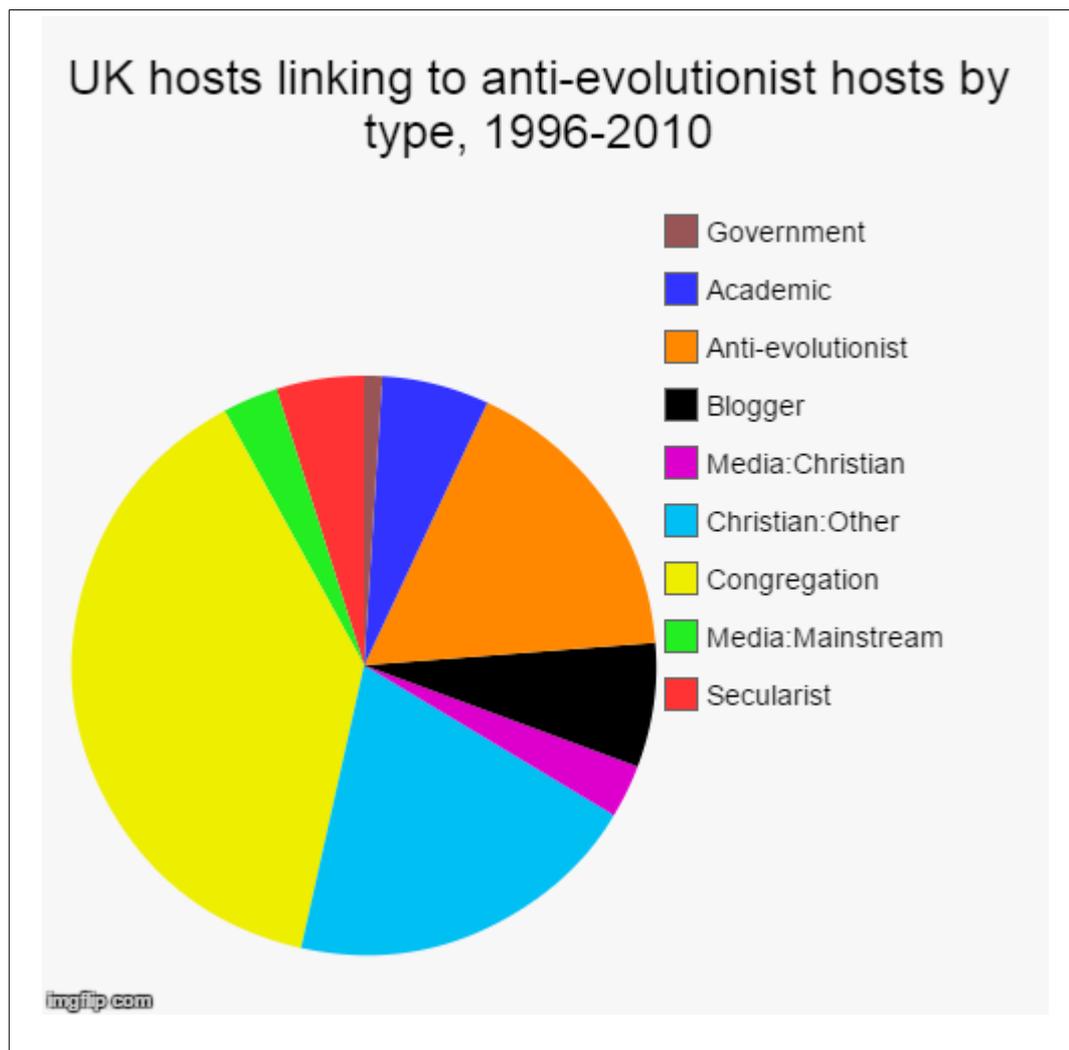
Is this picture any different when one considers the creationist web in the UK more broadly, away from the single issue of science teaching in schools? In order to investigate this, I extracted all the unique hosts that had been found linking to any one of four prominent anti-evolutionist sites at any point between 1996 and 2010. First to appear in the data in 1999 was the domain of the Creation Science Movement (csm.org.uk), as the Evolution Protest Movement had renamed itself in 1980. Second was the Biblical Creation Society (biblicalcreation.org.uk), founded in 1977 as a counterweight to the more scientifically-oriented CSM. This domain was the latest of the four to appear in the data, in 2003. The Creation Resources Trust traces its origins to a local organisation in Somerset, but adopted the more general name in 1989.¹³ Creation Research has a single international site (creationresearch.net) which serves its relatively small UK operation. Its precise origins are unclear, but leader and founder John Mackay has been active in Australian creationism since the 1980s and is a regular visitor to the UK;¹⁴ the domain name first appears in the data in 2001. Since this is a sample, my assumption is that it is reasonably representative on grounds of the longevity of the organisations involved. It is however possible that a different sample would reveal a different pattern.

Once again using both the live web and of the Internet Archive's interface at archive.org, I examined each host in order to categorise it, which I was able to do for 91% of the results. One immediate point to note is the large proportion of "false" results there are. A full third of the identifiable hosts are categorised as Other, most of which were links associated with search engines, other directory-type sites and passing references in unrelated sites, rather than from

13 'About us', at http://c-r-t.co.uk/about_us.html, accessed 28 April 2015.

14 Biography of Mackay at http://creationresearch.net/PDF_files/JM%20bio.pdf, accessed 28 April 2015.

any host representing an actor in the field. These exclusions leave only 101 unique hosts for analysis out of an initial 177. Much research remains to be done to establish the criteria by which it might be established what should constitute a large or small total of inbound linking hosts, which would depend much on the particular sector under discussion. Intuitively, just over one hundred seems a small total for organisations staking what they consider to be very significant claims of general and far-reaching interest. The analysis of these is shown below.



As might be expected, a significant proportion of the hosts linking to these sites are sites with a particular investment in the polemical confrontation between creationism and humanism. 17% are other anti-evolutionist sites, and a further 5% are sites either with a general humanist agenda, or a specifically anti-creationist one.

Some 39% were the sites of individual church congregations. A full analysis of these sites (39 in total) is yet to be done, but they include very few indeed from Anglican, Roman Catholic or Methodist congregations, which is in alignment with available survey data. A 2005 survey found that only 17% of the laity of the Church of England agreed that “God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh.”¹⁵ Given the close family relationship between evangelicalism and the kind of Biblical interpretation that gives rise to creationist thinking, one would hypothesise that, when analysed, the majority of these congregations would turn out to be evangelical in orientation. Preliminary investigation suggests that the bulk of these are indeed independent evangelical churches outside the mainline denominations, with a small number of Baptist congregations. However, given that at the time of writing the Evangelical Alliance, the main umbrella body for the constituency, declared a membership of 3,500 individual congregations, the magnitude of these numbers suggests that anti-evolutionism is a minority view even amongst evangelical churches.¹⁶ Further research may be able to establish an alternative hypothesis: that British churches look directly to, and link to, creationist sites outside the UK, and not to these older UK organisations.

Finally, does this data confirm the creationist suspicion that their views are largely ignored by the mainstream media and by the scientific establishment? By and large, it would seem so. Among the national media, only the BBC, with a constitutional duty of balance, linked to these sites. Both the proportion and absolute number of inbound links from academic domains are also very small. Excluding bibliographic services, there were inbound links from only three hosts in the academic second-level domain.

In sum, this data would suggest that between 1996 and 2010, British creationism's sense of its own marginalisation is largely borne out by the evidence of the archived web. Even if a majority of British people were prepared to tell opinion pollsters that creationism deserved an equal hearing in the classroom, this openness did not extend to any significant online attention being paid to the British creationist web estate, as judged by inbound links. Apart from the established polemical exchange between creationist and humanist, British creationism was

15 Guest, 'The plausibility of creationism', p.223.

16 <http://eauk.org/connect/about-us/> , accessed 29 April 2015.

Peter Webster, 'Reading British creationism in the web archive'
ReSAW conference, Aarhus, 8-10 June 2015
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mostly ignored by academia, the media and almost all of the churches. In the case of this minority view, the oxygen of publicity that the open web theoretically provided did not produce strong growth.

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1st May 2015