



The North Texas

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Web news

by John Blanton

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

Sorry, Skeptics. This installment of Web News is going to be wall-to-wall creationism.

Casey Luskin writes for the Evolution News blog. You might not guess it from the name, but it's all about creationism, and it's hosted by the Discovery Institute, this country's main proponent of the Intelligent Design form of creationism. Casey is an attorney and an excellent writer. If anybody can make good from a bad situation, he can.

Intelligent Design and creationism in general come in for harsh treatment by mainstream scientists and scholars—also mainline journalists as a casual scan of the major outlets would indicate. Their response is well-considered and laudable. “When you get lemons, make lemon aid.”

The DI folks in particular portray all this public scorn as rude and unjust, hopefully putting the onus back on their critics. The title of Luskin's recent submission is “Condescension, Sneers, and Outright Misrepresentations of Intelligent Design Pass For Scholarship in *Synthese*.”¹ From the publisher, Springer: “*Synthese* An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science.”

My first reaction to Luskin's title is, what do they expect? You lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas. If they want respect they need to get square with the public.

But then I remember that I am first and foremost a skeptic, so that's a reflex reaction. How does this matter come off under careful examination?

If there was any guess as to whether the NCSE was involved with this issue of *Synthese*, consider the fact that the introductory article is written by no other than Glenn Branch, Deputy Director of the NCSE. At worst, Branch's article stoops to making free association comparisons between Dar-

EVENTS CALENDAR

February Program

Program topic to be announced later. Please check our Web site for information about the presentation for February.

Saturday, February 19
2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Social Meeting

The social meeting this month will be held 6:00 pm, Feb 12 at:

Two Guys from Italy
11637 Webbs Chapel Rd.
Dallas, Texas

If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214.335.9248

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win-critics and geocentrists. Incredibly, however, he provides
 one accurate admission:

Owing to a dispute between the Discovery Institute and the
 Thomas More Law Center, which was representing the
 [Dover] school board, Dembski and Meyer withdrew from
 the [Dover] case.

That accurate statement contradicts a whole host of conspir-
 acy theories from his counterpart anti-ID activists who have
 claimed Dembski or Meyer withdrew because from testifying
 in the Dover trial because, as Barbara Forrest states: “armed
 with my work and that of the other witnesses for the plain-
 tiffs, halfway decent attorneys would make legal mincemeat
 of them.” Branch just contradicted Forrest—which is good
 because Forrest was wrong and Branch was right.

Luskin is making points here. If the DI is the nation’s leading propo-
 nent of Intelligent Design, then the NCSE is this country’s leading pro-
 ponent of teaching evolution in public schools, and conversely against
 teaching creationism. Like that’s a *bad* thing? For the record, the NTS
 Web site regularly reprints Branch’s weekly Evolution News Update
 column. Look for it.

One sentence is worth repeating: “At worst, Branch’s article stoops
 to making free association comparisons between Darwin-critics and
 geocentrists.” This is from the organization that seeks to popularize a
 supposed link between Darwinian evolution and Nazism and the Holo-
 caust. Luskin seems to be unaware that to the rational observer, the
 creationists (which is what these guys are) often make as much sense as
 the Earth centrists in their denial of a number of obvious facts.

Luskin cites Branch’s characterization of the reason William
 Dembski and Stephen C. Meyer withdrew from the *Dover* case and notes
 its accuracy. Barbara Forrest contends that Dembski and Meyer got cold
 feet and ducked out (my terminology). The crude facts are that the two
 insisted on having their own attorney’s at their pretrial depositions. The
 Thomas Moore Law Center would have none of that and dispensed with
 their services. Some may call me skeptical (or cynical), but I am think-
 ing that if somebody dreads public embarrassment in open court, there
 are a number of ways to avoid it, and making unreasonable demands is
 not one of them. Attorney Luskin does not delve into this detail.

Luskin critiques Forrest for fabricating reasons for Dembski’s and
 Meyers’ absence. He avoids mentioning the fate of creationist Michael
 Behe who did his duty and sat for having his published words read back
 to him in court.

The publisher of the *Synthese* journal has kindly made the text of
Evolution and Its Rivals available on-line. Have a look. ²

Luskin makes great use of this image of personal slight. Not count-
 ing the headline, Luskin uses variations on “sneer” three times and “con-
 descend” four times. He seems to be unaware that stronger language
 might have been appropriate owing to past performance of the Intelligent
 Design movement.

University of Kentucky settles

Other big news is that astronomer C. Martin Gaskell has settled a lawsuit against the University of Kentucky. Gaskell is a legitimate scientist and professor at the University of Texas at Austin. For a while he was considered the top candidate to head up an observatory at UK, but eventually that position went to somebody else. UK made the decision after it came to light that Gaskell disdained modern theories of biological evolution, preferring creationism, instead.³

Naturally, Gaskell sued. Who wouldn't? Curious thing is the suit was for religious discrimination. I am sure all you skeptics are like me and long ago decided that creationism vs. evolution was purely a matter of scientific debate. We have been proved wrong again. When will we ever learn?

Now we learn the good news that Professor Gaskell has settled with UK for \$125,000, if not \$125,000 and an apology. It really is all about the principle of the thing.

Wait, there's more. An interview with Jason Mick on the DailyTech blog reveals that Gaskell is really not a creationist after all.⁴

You believe in an old earth (in line with current scientific consensus) right?

Dr. Gaskell:

Yes. Very much so.

This makes me feel better already.

How do you believe life originated?

Dr. Gaskell:

I don't work in this area and those who do have wildly divergent opinions.

Oops. Maybe Gaskell is just being cagey.

When you say that [there] are problems with evolutionary theory, but that creationists' theories are poorly formed, did you mean that you think the current consensus on evolution is wrong?

Dr. Gaskell:

No.

[Note: I'm referring to a quote from the professor included in our prior piece, linked above, pointing out that evolutionary theory has "significant" unanswered issues.]

JM@DT

Or [did you mean] merely that certain aspects of it (e.g. natural selection v. cataclysmic events/random

drift) aren't fully understood at this time, due to lack of direct observation?

Dr. Gaskell:

Right. The debate over neutral evolution, for example, something that is has been a topic of heated in the field. The wide range of views on the origin of life is another example.

If this is not an intellect wander in the dark, it gives a good impression. My guess is UK got its money's worth.

Freshwater loses

Public school teacher John Freshwater did not fare as well. His Mount Vernon, Ohio, school put him "on unpaid leave and voted in 2008 to fire him, saying he taught creationism and intelligent design, failed to remove religious materials from the classroom and burned crosses on students' arms during science experiments."⁵

Eventually it was decided the cross-burning charges were either dubious or inconsequential, because ultimately teaching creationism decided the issue.

Before Ohio teachers can be fired, they are entitled to a hearing before a referee, who then makes a recommendation to the school board. Freshwater's hearing went on sporadically for nearly two years at a cost to taxpayers of at least \$700,000.

Also

Yet in December, a judge approved a \$450,000 settlement between Freshwater and the family of one of his former students who said he was one of those burned in class.

The judgment against Freshwater will be paid by the school district (insured). I wish I could say that the taxpayers got their money's worth here, but this sad situation begs a little sobriety.

Were Adam and Eve Real? ⁶

You have to tell me.

However, others have given it more serious thought.

Over at the Templeton-funded BioLogos website there has been a lot of discussion about the historicity of Adam and Eve. This is a problem because scripture claims these two were the progenitors of humanity, but genetics says otherwise. It's simply not true that all of humanity's DNA traces back to a

pair of individuals who lived no more than 10,000 years ago; indeed, the different bits of our DNA trace back to different ancestors who lived at different times. What's clear is that our ancestors were in a population of humans, some of whom left Africa around 60,000 years ago, and virtually all of modern human DNA comes from that population, which itself descended from African ancestors who split off about 6 million years ago from the ancestors of modern chimps.

Wow! A creationism-oriented club that feels science trumps belief.

Introducing Harrell's essay, "Adam and Eve: Literal or Literary?," BioLogos states its own position:

"As many of our readers know, the historicity of Adam and Eve is a critically important topic in the discussion of Christianity and human origins. Although BioLogos takes a firm stand on the fact that Adam and Eve could not have been the sole biological progenitors of all humans (see here), science does not rule out the possibility of a historical Adam and Eve, which opens this interesting discussion."

That's much better. "[S]cience does not rule out.." As often, where there's a word there's a weasel.

Ultimately the blogger (*Why Evolution is True*) spoils it all by getting down to reality:

BioLogos doesn't realize that this kind of desperate apologetics makes believers look pretty bad, at least to those who have any respect for truth. It's far simpler to just see Adam and Eve as metaphors, since there's not a scintilla of evidence that they ever existed. But of course if you start rejecting silly notions because there's no evidence for them, most of scripture goes down the drain.

Creationists create—alternative histories

Terry Hurlbut writes for the *Creationism Examiner*.

Evolutionists love to assert that, if creationism gains the ascendancy in education, then science will no longer advance and will even back-slide. To the contrary, creationism, far from being deleterious to science, would be beneficial.

Obviously it would be a much better world:

This hypothetical creation-oriented society would take scientific education, research, and investigation in a new direction. Astronomers would stop looking for "dark matter" and "dark energy," and instead develop a uniform cosmology with insights from the

Annals of Creation. It would find this model much simpler than the Big Bang model has now become.

And the answers to all the homework problems would be in the *front* of the book.

Zoology would become a much more exciting discipline than it is today. Zoologists would look on the woolly mammoth with new understanding. Expeditions to find live dinosaurs would be more than the stuff of science fiction (cf. *The Lost World*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) and would receive serious attention and funding. And this Examiner does not doubt that at least some would be successful.

And crypto zoologist Loren Coleman would finally be vindicated. We previously covered the creationists' infatuation with crypto-zoo.⁷

In short, creationism, far from retarding science, would free it to fulfill its proper role: knowledge and understanding of the true nature of man, and how to live as God intended him to live, rather than a prideful pursuit of "improvements" that turn out to be, quite simply, curses.

In short—life would be so much nicer if we did not have to deal with the real world.



References

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- 2 <http://www.springerlink.com/content/0039-7857/178/2/>
- 3 <http://www.kentucky.com/2011/01/09/1592164/uk-prepares-for-trial-on-religious.html>,
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-01-09.htm#uk> and other places in the Skeptical News pages.
- 4 <http://www.dailytech.com/Interview+With+Dr+Gaskell++Astronomer+and+Firm+Believer+in+Evolution/article20727.htm> and <http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-01-22.htm#interview>
- 5 http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2011/01/09/teachers-firing-over-religion-fair-referee-says.html and <http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-01-09.htm#teacher>
- 6 <http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2010/06/21/were-adam-and-eve-real/>
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-01-09.htm#were>
- 7 See Creation Science Education and elsewhere: <http://www.ntskeptics.org/1998/1998july/july1998.htm#education>

January elections

In January NTS members in good standing (paid up) met to elect new board members. The results are:

Roy Auerbach
 Erling Beck
 John Blanton
 John Brandt
 Prasad Golla
 Jamye Johnston
 Claudia Meek
 David Price
 Mike Selby

Board members voted for the officers to run the day-to-day operations of the NTS for 2011:

Jamye Johnston, President
 Mike Selby, Vice President
 John Brandt, Secretary
 David Price, Treasurer

Everybody should welcome these volunteers and contact them with your gripes and concerns. These are the go-to people of the NTS.

The officers also handed out the following work assignments to those who volunteered:

Keith Blanton, Newsletter Editor
 John Blanton, Web Master
 John Brandt, Meetings and Social Director

Also volunteering to work on NTS Web site maintenance are Ben Davis and Katy Lavallee. They work on Web site development in the Dallas area and can bring some innovation to our site.

On the same issue, board members also discussed improvements to the NTS Web site. This will be a good time for you to get in your suggestions and gripes. What don't you like, what would you like to see? Visit the site and send e-mail:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

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What's new

by Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.bobpark.org/>. Following are some clippings of interest.

Wireless: business is thriving on all sides of the issue.

There are today 7 billion humans living on this tiny planet. According to recent figures, 5 billion of them have a cell phone (a mobile outside the US). Few of them have any idea how these incredibly complex devices work, making this the most attractive market on Earth. There are several ways to tap this incredible market without selling cell phones. You might, for example, sell books warning about the dangers of cell phones. More than a dozen books have been published in the last few years warning that the population problem might be solved the hard way, as cell phone users begin to succumb to cancer. When will this be? Cell phones have been in widespread use for about 10 years. According to Devra Davis, author of "Disconnect," the latency period for cell-phone cancer can be decades. This has revived the EMF paranoia that was set off two decades ago when the New Yorker ran a scientifically illiterate series by writer Paul Brodeur linking power-line fields to childhood leukemia. Although books linking cell phones to cancer enjoy brisk sales it does not seem to have dampened public infatuation with the cell phone. People can't imagine giving them up. It has, however, created a new industry: cell phone protection technology, such as the Q-Link Diode For Cell Phone & EMF Protection. This is too depressing to continue.

Zicam: breakthrough! at last, a placebo with side effects.

Although marketed as a homeopathic cold remedy, Zicam is not quite homeopathic. The 18th century German inventor of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, believed in "vitalism," a spiritual essence that goes beyond physics or chemistry. This is by no means unusual; most people believe in spiritual or religious cures even today. "Medicine is most powerful," Hahnemann wrote, "when it communicates nothing material." Hahnemann's counter-intuitive solution was to eliminate the cure. This he did by sequential dilution. Alas, Loschmidt had not yet determined Avogadro's number. To be certain that "nothing material" remained, Hahnemann typically used a dilution of 30C. That is, the substance was diluted to one part in 100, shaken (not stirred) and then diluted one part in 100 again, 30 times. This would exceed the dilution limit of the entire Earth, which is to say it's a meaningless result. Not so Zicam; the dilution is given on the package as only 2X; i.e., the X means the active ingredient, zinc, is diluted one part in 10, shaken, and diluted one part in 10 again. Now it's one part in

100. Compare that to Oscillococinum, which is also marketed as a homeopathic cold remedy. The active ingredient is an extract of the liver of the Barbary duck at a ridiculous dilution of 200C. That would exceed the dilution limit of the entire visible universe and is thus totally meaningless. The average consumer is totally unaware that he's shelling out 10 bucks for a teaspoon of sugar.

Supreme comedy: enter now the nine justices.

The case before the Court involves a class-action suit against Matrixx, the makers of Zicam, for failing to inform investors of reports that its main product might have caused some users to lose their sense of smell, a condition known as anosmia. Perhaps, but anosmia has many causes and true homeopathic remedies have no side effects, or any other effects, since the active ingredient has been completely diluted away. But in Zicam the active ingredient, zinc, should be detectable by conventional means. In a brief explaining why Matrix did not feel obliged to report complaints of anosmia from users of Zicam, the company lawyer drew an analogy with old rumors that the Procter & Gamble logo had satanic links. The logo, consisted of a bearded man's face on the Crescent moon surrounded by 13 stars. It was said to be a satanic distortion of the heavenly symbol alluded to in Revelation 12:1. The flowing beard meets the surrounding circle with three curls that were said to be a mirror image of the number 666, the number of the beast. The foolish rumor damaged the P&G image and was withdrawn. Matrixx used the example to argue that there is no disclosure obligation on how "ignorant or paranoid people might react to false information." I would argue however that ignorant or paranoid is a reasonable description of anyone who buys a homeopathic product? The government position is that negative stories, even if they're based on superstitious nonsense, should be disclosed to investors. According to the *New York Times*, Justice Scalia disagreed, saying it would hold companies to irrational standards. Standards? We're talking about a company that is marketing fraudulent medicine to a gullible public. Inform the investors by all means, but first inform the public.

Autism: there is no vaccination against fraud.

In 1998, Dr. Andrew Wakefield, a British gastroenterologist and researcher, set off a worldwide panic with a *Lancet* article in which he identified the common MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccinations as a cause of autism. There was a precipitous drop in the number of parents electing to vaccinate their children, and a corresponding rise in measles cases. Once considered inevitable, measles is a serious disease. In 2009, however, Wakefield was found to have altered patients records to support his claim. The *Lancet* immediately retracted his 1998 publication. The British General Medical Council ruled that Wakefield had acted "dishonestly and irresponsibly." Investigative reporter Brian Deer has tracked Wakefield for years, turning up new "contributions" to support his "work." Lawyers,

smelling a possible "mass tort blitz that could make them very wealthy, were particularly generous. Class-action lawsuits in asbestos and tobacco, while justified, eventually benefited the lawyers far more than the victims. Wakefield was struck off the Medical Register and may no longer practice medicine in the UK. No matter, Wakefield now operates an autism clinic in Austin, Texas. Although he doesn't have a medical license in the US, that won't much matter in Texas.

Vaccination: public health may never fully recover.

An editorial in the *British Medical Journal* expressed the hope that the latest news will put an end to the anti-vaccine movement. We should be so lucky. Paul Offit, an infectious disease expert who wrote *Autism's False Prophets*, and donated all royalties to autism research, is not optimistic. Wakefield is clearly seeking to portray himself as a martyr, and even has his own celebrity activist pleading his case to the public on programs such as Oprah, former *Playboy* model Jenny McCarthy who has an autistic child. The scientific community must learn to speak up publicly on issues of integrity. accomplishment

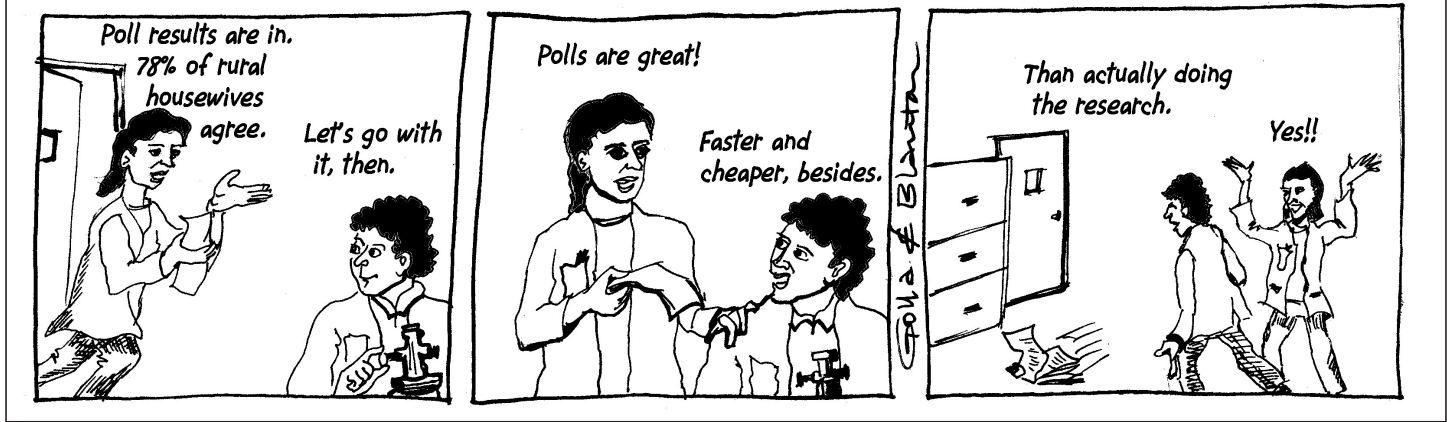
ESP: this is about the last thing science needed.

Four years ago when the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab (PEAR) closed its doors after 28 years, scientists saw the closing as a sign of progress. The public had lost interest in the make-believe science of ESP. Not a single accomplishment marks the existence of the world's most famous ESP laboratory. ESP today exists only in second-rate science fiction. That's where it belongs. However, according to an article by Benedict Carey on the front page of yesterday's *New York Times*, a respected psychology journal plans to publish a paper described by the author as "strong evidence for extrasensory perception." How strong? Extraordinary claims, it is often said, require extraordinary evidence. Any evidence of ESP would qualify as extraordinary today. I have not yet seen the paper, but I have gone through the exercise of trying to imagine evidence for ESP I would find persuasive. I couldn't even come close.

Photons: what Albert Einstein knew about cell-phone radiation.

Maybe I missed it, but I have seen nothing from major media sources refuting the preposterous claim that radiation from cell phones and other wireless devices is linked to human health problems. We are bathed in microwave radiation. Most of it is as natural as sunshine, but wireless communication, including cell phone radiation, is not. What do we know about the effect of this stuff on the human body, and how long ago did we know it? The starting point is 1905, sometimes called "Albert Einstein's miracle year." One of the four "miracle" papers he published that year dealt with the photoelectric effect. He treated

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the light striking an object as particles called quanta, having energy equal to the frequency times the Planck constant. This predicted a photoelectron threshold at the extreme blue end of the visible spectrum, below which there would be no photoemission. Almost nobody believed him, including Robert Millikan, perhaps the world's greatest experimentalist. The photoelectric effect had already been explained with Maxwell's wave theory, but experimental confirmation was lacking. Einstein wasn't bothered; he had other great things to do while waiting for confirmation. Millikan did the experiment in 1917; it agreed perfectly with Einstein's theory. The 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to Einstein for his theory of the photoelectric effect. Millikan won the Prize two years later. Their results show that microwaves are great for warming pizza and they don't cause cancer.

Disconnect: help! science is being zapped again.

One of the great mysteries of the Cold War was that throughout the 1960s the US Embassy on Tchaikovsky Street in Moscow was subjected to intense microwave bombardment from a building across the street. The rumor was that the radiation was meant to induce mental illness and injure the embassy staff. Scientists were dubious, but the staff was given hazardous-duty pay. This strange story was picked up by Paul Brodeur, a writer for the *New Yorker* covering the cold war. Despite his lack of scientific training, Brodeur shifted his attention to the microwave conspiracy and collected his *New Yorker* articles in *The Zapping of America: Microwaves, Their Deadly Risk, and the Coverup* (Norton, 1977). In a debate on CBS radio, Brodeur once accused me of using quantum mechanics to hide the truth. Personally innocent of any such scientific bias, Brodeur made no distinction between 900 MHz cell-phone radiation and 60 Hz power-line fields; it's all EMF. *Currents of Death: Power Lines, Computer Terminals, and the Attempt to*

Cover Up Their Threat to Your Health (Simon and Schuster, 1989) created a near panic. Power lines did not stop causing cancer until the National Academy conducted its own lengthy and expensive epidemiological study. Epidemiology found what science already knew; power-line fields, like microwaves, are not cancer agents. Sadly, science never mattered. With Devra Davis, it still doesn't.

Disconnect: could it have been written by Paul Brodeur?

Several readers of this column urged me to read "Disconnect: the truth about cell phone radiation, what the industry has done to hide it, and how to protect your family by Devra Davis. The authors name was not familiar to me, but I picked up a copy on my way to the campus health center for my annual flu shot. I opened it in the waiting room. At the top of page 1 was a quote from the Talmud that appealed to me: "Who can protest and does not, is an accomplice in the act." I hereby protest this book. By the time my name was called. I had reached page 21. The author was explaining that the background level of microwave radiation to which we are all exposed is billions of times greater than the natural background level. Should we be worried? She doesn't say. But I recalled another book that started with the same statistics. Paul Brodeur, *The Zapping of America: Microwaves, their deadly risk, and the cover-up* (Norton, 1977). Devra Davis has given us a rewrite of a 33-year-old book. It was wrong then too. I explained why in my 2001 editorial in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. Robert L Park, *JNCI*, Volume 93, Issue 3, Pp. 166-167.



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