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Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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## The controversy's dilemma . . .

Posted on December 4th, 2009 by earleholland

The real problem looming behind the so-called “climategate” — the email hacking incident involving scientists from one of the world’s great research centers — is not that there is some previously undetected conspiracy among scientists.

Instead, this is just the latest in a long line of instances where the complexity of the issue at hand forces the public to preferentially seek a simpler, more diabolical motive.

As a people, we flee from the detail and long for the rumor, convincing ourselves that it is more likely that individuals will do wrong, given the chance.

For those unaware, someone hacked into the computer system at the Climatic Research Unit at the [University of East Anglia](#) in Great Britain and stole files and hundreds of emails between researchers focusing on global climate change.



The other day, a colleague asked me about the episode and what it meant to the public’s understanding of science in general, and of climate science in particular. It was, she figured, devastating to the public’s trust in science, and since Ohio State is also a respected center of climate change research, then we should speak out on the issue.

I simply asked her how many of the bootleg emails had she read and what it was about them specifically concerned her?

“None,” she admitted, but said she’d read a number of news stories describing the emails’ content and it seemed damning.

I had assumed that she hadn’t actually sought out the source material herself, and I’d guess that the majority of reporters who have produced stories on the controversy in the news media didn’t either. Frankly, it is a daunting task since the [online archive](#) of the pilfered messages contains at least 1,100 files.

Personally, I only read through about 15 percent of the collection and only those that related to Ohio State climate researchers but to me, nothing in that sampling suggested anything more than the typical dialogue between collaborating scientists.

News reports have focused on a few quoted passages that at first glance seem to imply a coordinated effort on some researchers’ parts to strengthen

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their arguments and diminish those of their critics. This, climate change opponents have argued, proves a conspiracy to mislead the public and overstate the severity of the alleged threat.

Hogwash! Conspiracy theorists, and those who seem all-too-eager to believe them, forget that pulling one off is really hard. It demands a level of coordinated activity and shared actions which, frankly, scientists are loath to undertake. Instead, they want to do their science – that's all.

The oft-cited questionable excerpts pointed to by conservatives as the "smoking gun" are really something entirely different – evidence of the honest naiveté of most researchers! In a time when even the least-savvy among us knows that nearly everything on the internet is obtainable, would these scientists devise a devious plot leaving such an electronic trail? I think not.

True, one of the key actors in this drama, Phil Jones, the director of the research center at the heart of the controversy, voluntarily stepped down from his leadership post this week as he waits for [an investigation](#) to be completed. And another player, Michael Mann of Penn State University, [is awaiting an assessment](#) by his university of the emails in question. But these are both moves by the principles to accede to public concerns – not admissions of guilt.

The respected British journal [Nature](#) this week [announced](#) that it saw no conspiracy in the episode and refused to investigate further.

What no one seems to recognize – at least not yet – is the Catch-22 situation that researchers are now finding themselves in. In his [latest blog entry](#), science communications scholar [Matt Nisbet](#) [with whom this writer often disagrees] rightly explained:

*" . . . the public is expecting and demanding greater involvement in science-related decisions and greater accountability on the part of scientists."*

He and others have argued for scientists to enter the public arena more, to work harder at explaining their science, and to abandon their collective, historic reservations about "popularizing" their research. Only then, they suggest, will the public increase its support for, and appreciation of, science.

But "climategate" shows why that's difficult – if not impossible – to pull off.

The media frenzy surrounding this whole affair is centered on the assumption of conspiracy, as if working scientists spend their time plotting and strategizing as if they were contestants on the reality television show *'The Survivor.'* And the public, ever content to jump to the nastiest of conclusions, will never actually evaluate the data to reach a logical, rational conclusion.



But that kind of evaluation is exactly what scientists do.

A public unwilling to understand — much less practice — even the most basic of scientific processes in reaching their own conclusions will never expend the effort to really understand complex topics like climate change, with all its countless variables.

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No, it's easier to assume malevolence on researchers' part. It simply requires less thinking. \_\_Earle Holland



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## 16 Responses to “The controversy’s dilemma . . .”

[16 Comments »](#)

[Dave Mosher](#) // Dec 4, 2009 at 6:05 pm

I read some of the more “incriminating” e-mails and could only shrug my shoulders. I only winced thinking of under- or un-informed people eating ‘em up.

Damage done? Of course. But I also think this is a great opportunity to educate those when it comes up in conversation, say, at a bar. It’s an invitation to start with the basics: how science is actually done. Only after people understand that can they hope to understand why the leaked e-mails are innocuous from a scientist’s perspective.

[Dan](#) // Dec 7, 2009 at 3:24 pm

I don’t think climate change is a hoax, and I don’t think it is the end of the world. I think this email hacking thing means there is hardly any public support for it. The potential manipulation of data and the blocking of opposing views from gaining publicity tells me the science isn’t confirmed yet. Not that we aren’t having an effect on the planet, just not as profound effect as so many seem to think. And by the time we can show our exact effect on the planet, it won’t matter, as our weather will be wild and we’ll just be adapting. Let’s worry about adapting to a changing climate, not preventing it, just doesn’t seem realistic.

[Doug](#) // Dec 8, 2009 at 9:18 am

“No, it’s easier to assume malevolence on researchers’ part. It simply requires less thinking. \_\_Earle Holland”

So, the bottem line is, if you think the 1,000 plus emails reveal the manipulation of data you are an idiot. If you disagree that Global Warming is manmade you just haven’t thought about it enough.

I have worked in a government position for over 32 years. I know that funding without results, results in lack of funding.

You can continue to profess to be wise. My conclusion is to follow the money.

Paul // Dec 8, 2009 at 9:55 am

All you need to do is read the Wall Street Journal or Investors Business Daily to find well-written and thoughtful articles that dissect this issue. These papers are highly respected, so they're not a bunch of right-wing kooks. It would be extremely foolish to live in denial and say that there isn't a political agenda on both sides of this issue. The potential manipulation of data and the blocking of opposing views just emphasize the political component, and draw into question the integrity of the researchers. Events like this, and issues like this do not occur in a vacuum. I think that if you have read articles from the above media you might be more familiar with the facts.

Mark // Dec 8, 2009 at 11:45 am

Nah, Doug is right: Where's there's smoke, there's fire. It's just that simple.

You can speculate I and others "are motivated enough to voice dissent, (but) they're not interested enough to read the data.", but this is specious. Why did you stop at 150 messages and draw your conclusions?

[» Climate Change Conference Gets Underway This Week » Beyond Penguins and Polar Bears](#) // Dec 8, 2009 at 1:01 pm

[...] computer hackers released emails stolen from a research site and claimed that the emails showed suppression of or deception about climate research data.) Everyone, skeptics or not, can watch and follow the world leaders' [...]

David Woolf // Dec 8, 2009 at 11:48 pm

I'll follow Doug's advice and follow the path of money... it seems to lead me to Exxon.

[Dan](#) // Dec 9, 2009 at 1:39 pm

"Researchers, as a group, are bound by those conclusions derived from their evidence and limited in what they can say."

Apparently not, based on these emails. I'm not saying data manipulation did take place, but we certainly cannot rule out that there are climatologists out there blocking opposing views and manipulating their own data because they have an agenda.

Earle, you have an agenda. I have an agenda. Everyone has an agenda. We all push our agenda, always. There is no such thing as objectivity in this world, it simply does not exist. Climatologists are no different than anyone else.

"Ohio State research has shown recently that people tend to believe only

that news which supports their pre-existing beliefs ”

Case in point. People who disagree with climate change theories will interpret the news on these emails to support what they believe. Those who agree with climate change theories will do the opposite. So why is anyone acting surprised?

[earleholland](#) // Dec 9, 2009 at 4:54 pm

Dan is making a gigantic intellectual jump. Even if we assumed that the worst interpretations of the East Anglia episode were true — and nobody's come close to proving that yet — that doesn't mean that thousands of other climate scientists are doing likewise. Simply saying that “we certainly cannot rule out” that possibility in our modern communications society carries the suggestion that it is a viable possibility. And our human nature reinforces that, sometimes changing the possibility to a probability in many peoples' minds. That simply isn't the case!

Don argues that we all have agendas. If I have one it is purely to provide accurate and understandable information about science — nothing more. Saying one has “an agenda” nowadays really means that people have a “motive” behind what they do, and it usually is for personal gain. Sorry, but I rebel against that thought. Some people still in this world simply do things because they are the “right” things to do, primarily for the good of others.

And as to his last point, “why is anyone acting surprised?” — The surprise comes from the harshness and anger that so many commentators have levied towards scientists, and the willingness of people to form opinions and argue them without the facts at hand.

Fasih // Dec 13, 2009 at 11:21 am

Earle, as a non-expert, I am begging you to make a more thorough investigation of the data that was made public before and publish those results on Ohio State's blog. 1) Please do not stop at 15% of the \*emails\*, please continue sampling specifically covering the emails that have been highlighted. 2) Please comment on the fact that it was not just email that was made public but Fortran code as well, which contains fudge factors whose legitimacy may be rightfully questioned.

When I see “researchnews.osu.edu”, I expect far more thoroughness than the random sampling of 15% of the email and none of the code you have presented here. Please, please correct this shortcoming.

[sosaipan](#) // Dec 14, 2009 at 1:44 am

“Climategate”, huh? Is that snappy title used because of the illegal break-in?

You think you're facing the issue head-on, when you're actually falling into the logical trap of accepting a false premise and then arguing against it. I wonder why it's uphill slogging?

I have read some of the emails, but not even 150. I stopped because there is basically "no there, there". It's a waste of precious time unless I have a source of funding with an agenda like, say "some" of the "sceptics". Not fair, you might say: not all of the "sceptics" are beholden to Exxon, et al; I'm brushing too broadly.

Welcome to your world, that's exactly the same logical trick you use trying to impugn all climate researchers and claim a grand conspiracy based on what "some" of them discussed in a few emails. The aforementioned hackers and their paid allies are winnowing the wheat from the chaff anyway, so I only need to let them do the work. They haven't even gotten enough for half a loaf.

In fact, the parts of the emails that generate the most controversy exactly prove your main point, the dilemma scientists face when they start thinking about affecting policy. The one alleged 'sin' that troubles me (though there is absolutely no proof it got past the point of loose comment) is the discussion of avoiding Britain's FOIA. It appears some adults are dealing with that and the other smoking guns in an adult way.

Meanwhile, how about leaving the sideshow and returning to the main tent? Has there been warming? Has CO2 increased? Is there a relation?

[earleholland](#) // Dec 14, 2009 at 1:05 pm

I haven't a clue as to what you're trying to say. My position has clearly been that the allegations screamed in this episode have been weightless and misrepresent the actual validity of the body of climate change research.

[Norma](#) // Dec 19, 2009 at 7:55 pm

I didn't read all the e-mails, but read a number of them, and I'm quite concerned that the so-called science has been presented to us as confirmed or a consensus, we anyone can read that there was manipulation of data—and this isn't all of it. Hacking or stealing is hardly the word if it was a whistleblower.

[Rui Viegas](#) // Dec 26, 2009 at 3:49 am

There are scientific backed-up answers to all of the skeptic arguments concerned with climate change – even the most brainless, illogical ones. The out-of-context CRU email portions may be interesting to support the intellectual 'thirst' of the common layman, but the ones which search the truth will find it in the scientific data.

The CO2 that nature emits (from the ocean and vegetation) is balanced by natural absorptions (again by the ocean and vegetation). Therefore human emissions upset the natural balance, rising CO2 to levels not seen in at least 800,000 years. In fact, human emit 26 gigatonnes of CO2 per year while CO2 in the atmosphere is rising by only 15 gigatonnes per year – much of human CO2 emissions is being absorbed by natural sinks.

Scientific studies show that downward longwave radiation is increasing due to an enhanced greenhouse effect. By analysing high resolution

spectral data, the increase in downward radiation can be quantitatively attributed to each of several anthropogenic gases, thus providing multiple lines of empirical evidence for CO2 warming. Basically:

- 1) Lab tests show CO2 absorbing longwave radiation;
- 2) Satellite measurements confirm that less longwave radiation is escaping to space;
- 3) Surface measurements detect increased longwave radiation returning back to Earth at wavelengths matching increased CO2 warming.

Conclusion: the result of this energy imbalance is the accumulation of heat over the last 40 years.

[Glenda](#) // Jan 27, 2011 at 1:10 pm

Around the world, the concentration of carbon dioxide has increased by about 25 percent since the Industrial Revolution in the early 19th century. Climate change experts have concluded that this increase is due in large part to the expanding use of fossil fuels.

According to NASA, the National Air and Space Agency, the average temperature of the earth has risen by 1.4oF since the Industrial Revolution. This increase in average temperature has been the major cause of a 4–8 inch rise in sea level over that time period, as well as an increase in extreme precipitation events.

Sea levels are rising because land-based ice is melting in the Arctic and Antarctic and in glaciers.

[SUVs with Best Gas Mileage](#) // Aug 29, 2011 at 7:40 pm

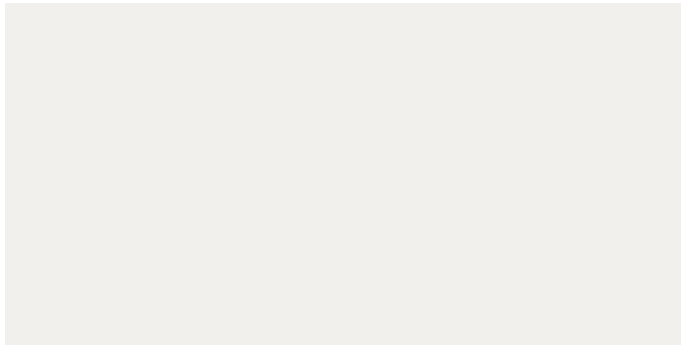
Not that we aren't having an effect on the planet, just not as profound effect as so many seem to think. And by the time we can show our exact effect on the planet, it won't matter, as our weather will be wild and we'll just be adapting. Let's worry about adapting to a changing climate, not preventing it, just doesn't seem realistic.

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