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Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University



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Winning battles, losing wars . . .

Posted on April 15th, 2010 by earlehollland

There's a great old comedy routine dating back to the 1960s, perhaps, in the early days of Bill Cosby's career. He envisioned the Revolutionary War being conducted like a college football game with the referees meeting the "team captains" at the center of the battlefield for the flip of the coin.



Afterwards, the head ref announces that the Americans had won the toss and elected to hide behind trees and shoot the enemy while the British had to wear red coats and march in straight lines.

Sometimes, it seems as if science carries the same burden that Cosby's jokes placed on the Brits.

This week, the [report](#) was released of the second of three major investigations into allegations of wrongdoing by scientists in what has come to be known as "climategate" and the result again is a clearing of those accused of shoddy science.

The investigation by a seven-member panel, conducted in consultation with the prestigious [Royal Society](#), cleared the [Climatic Research Unit \(CRU\)](#) at the [University of East Anglia](#) of any wrongdoing in the matter. The harshest criticism — if it can be called that — was that perhaps professional statisticians might aid in data analysis more in the future. The report acknowledged that the CRU was a small research group lacking resources but that it accomplished admirable science.

In an earlier [investigation report](#) in March, the [Science and Technology Committee of the House of Commons](#) reached similar conclusions about the CRU and its leader, climatologist Phil Jones. "Insofar as we have been able to consider accusations of dishonesty . . . we consider that there is no case to answer," they wrote.

And in a [different](#)

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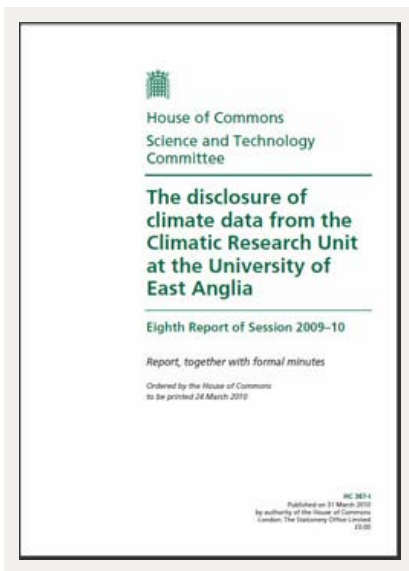


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investigation initiated by Pennsylvania State University into allegations that one of its researchers, climatologist **Michael Mann**, was culpable in scientific misconduct related to climategate, that team largely rejected accusations against the researcher. A final inquiry into a single remaining accusation – whether he “deviated from accepted practices within the academic community” for conducting research – is expected to be completed by the end of spring.

So three separate, official investigations into this episode have come to the same conclusion:

The claims by climate change skeptics and deniers that climate scientists falsified their work are patently false!

But that hasn't stopped those opposed from continuing their haranguing of researchers. Comments from the public to stories reporting those supportive findings still argue claims of impropriety within the science, and the news stories themselves seek to provide a “balance” in the reporting that really isn't reflected in the actual reports.

The obvious impacts on the lives of scientists targeted in this escapade have been equally horrendous and undeserved. But the larger impact on science and the people who do it is actually far greater.

Scientists, as a group, have never been seen as great communicators. There's generally nothing in their training that focuses on skills in simplifying their complex work. And while there are some researchers who are really, really good at describing their research to the public, they remain the exception rather than the rule.

Some communications experts are now advising researchers on how to improve their ability to translate, but whether or not that advice will be taken is still an open question. And the advice itself can lead scientists toward advocacy, if they are not careful, and the loss of their credibility as experts.

The irony, though, is that in American society, scientists are generally respected and trusted above all others, but that hasn't protected them from what appears to be a national movement towards incivility. Accusations and hyperbole are the weapons of the day and are just as deadly to careers as handguns.

Our national psyche is more attentive now to claims of wrongdoing than it is to evidence refuting such claims. Our legal system is built upon a foundation of “innocent until proven guilty” but in practice, the opposite seems true.

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Maybe this is just a natural evolution, the crumbling of the bridge that traditionally linked the public's lack of understanding of science with their respect and appreciation of science and scientists.

If so, then it's a klaxon warning researchers of tougher times ahead. __Earle Holland

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