

Climategate 2.0: Anatomy of a Media Distraction

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Media](#)

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Climate sceptics have kicked their campaign into overdrive prior to the Durban UNFCCC Conference with a new round of leaked emails aimed at debunking the case for man-made climate change.

How should journalists and environmentalists respond to these latest allegations to avoid sabotaging their efforts thus far?

The 'climategate' scandal first broke in November 2009 immediately prior to the UN's Copenhagen Climate Change Summit with the leak of hundreds of hacked emails and documents surrounding the Climate Research Unit at East Anglia University. Those exchanges raised doubt over the strength of scientific evidence for man-made climate, and the mainstream media lapped it up. Just in time to derail Durban, the sceptics have struck again with a fresh batch of leaked emails.¹

Sceptics have stepped up their campaign to get their message out there, and this new bout of denial gives them ample ammunition to continue their assault. But does it have to be this way?

Climategate 1: Jumpstarting the Engines of Denial

Whistleblowers and leakers help to maintain a transparent and accountable society, and, provided there is a compelling public interest at stake, illegal procurement shouldn't preclude availability. In this case the disclosed emails depict four scientists grossly misrepresenting data, withholding other data and even attempting to destroy material subject to a freedom of information request. These actions represent a clear dereliction of the scientific method, and a downright repudiation of their social responsibility. Given the social and economic costs entailed with pursuing a strategy to mitigate the effects on climate change, ensuring our policy is based on the best available data is crucial, and therefore the availability of this information is key.

Despite this deluge, the scientific community remained unconvinced. Six committees (the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, the UK Science Assessment Panel, the UK National Science Foundation, Pennsylvania State University, an Independent Climate Change Email Review body and the US Environmental Protection Agency) launched investigations into the affair.

Despite criticising the lack of transparency surrounding the data, the scientific consensus of manmade global warming remains unchanged. The case for climate change contains hundreds of different threads of evidence and argument, and these emails addressed only a handful of those. In short, little of our current understanding of climate science was affected

by these emails.

The timing here is crucial. These sorts of committees take time to assess all the available evidence, and by the time they had returned their findings the Copenhagen negotiations had long-finished. While it is impossible to tell for certain, there is a strong case to be made that the climategate saga significantly weakened the Copenhagen Accord. We were left with an agreement with no legally binding obligations that set us down the road to a 4 degree (4 ° C) increase over the industrial average, twice what the IPCC propounds as necessary for “avoiding dangerous climate change”.

While the scientists were unconvinced, the public fallout from the scandal was much more severe. A Report[2] from the George Mason University Centre for Climate Change Communication suggests that Climategate ‘deepened and perhaps solidified the prior observed declines in public beliefs that global warming is happening, human caused, and of serious concern’, as well as eroding public trust in the scientific community. Other factors, such as the revelation that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s 2007 Report included an incorrect and improperly sourced claim that the Himalayan glaciers could melt completely by 2035, and periodic bouts of colder weather, exacerbated this fallout.

How can we explain this vast discrepancy of opinion between the scientific community and the general public? A study [3] from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed that during the Copenhagen Summit media coverage tended to under-report climate science itself. Analysing more than 400 print media articles from 12 countries, the study showed that articles on the actual science of climate change represented less than 10% of all surveyed reportage, and nearly 80% of the articles mentioned devoted less than 10% of column space to climate science. Our news media shape our understanding of the world, and without reconciling the climategate revelations with the views of climate scientists themselves, the argument for taking climate change seriously took a serious hit.

Climategate 2: Keeping the Machine Oiled

Fast-forward to 22 November and all of a sudden another tranche of 5000 hacked emails (hand-picked from a total of 220,000) have been made available on a Russian server. As with the Wikileaks cables, without an exhaustive analysis of all the emails it is difficult to know which emails contain the most important revelations. Most of the major climate sceptic blog sites excitedly venerating these emails have reduced the data down to a few key quotes, such as

“What if climate change appears to be just mainly a multidecadal natural fluctuation? They’ll kill us probably”;

“The results for 400ppm [parts per million carbon in the atmosphere] stabilization look odd in many cases ... As it stands we’ll have to delete the results from the paper if it is to be published”; and

“I find myself in the strange position of being very skeptical of the quality of all present reconstructions, yet sounding like a pro-greenhouse zealot here!”

Viewed by themselves these quotes hint towards some damning conclusions, just as the initial emails did. However when viewed in their proper context, as here [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/nov/24/leaked-climate-science-emails>], most

of the quotes lose their controversial edge.

Still, considering the impact of the first climategate, the threat must be taken very seriously, especially in the lead up to Durban. I spoke about this to Richard Dent, a climate change communication and policy consultant with the Climate Communications Forum. He argued that despite the lack of concrete scientific evidence refuting climate change, the dual climategate sagas demonstrate in graphic relief where the media's loyalties sit right now – with the corporations that continue to dominate our lives and constrain us from tackling climate change.

As a social force the media shapes our understanding and our response to social and environmental issues, and when events such as these are actively sensationalized rather than assessed in relation to established scientific data then the impetus to act is lost. At the same time, while this power to shape discourse can obstruct our response, Dent also sees an opportunity. Harnessing this power in pursuit of meaningful action based on sound science rather than alarmist rhetoric could trigger the massive social response required to deal with this problem. Environmentalists need to arm themselves with more than just sound science – they have to brace themselves for the inevitable strike, learn to play the media as well as (or better than) the denial industry, and learn to jump into damage control mode before the media circus hits town.

Notes

1 <http://foia2011.org>

2 http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/Climategate_Public%20Opinion_and%20Loss%20of%20Trust%281%29.pdf

3

<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/news/item/article/marked-differences-between-countrie.html>

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