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Hacked E-Mail Data Prompts Calls for Changes in Climate Research

By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

Some prominent climate scientists are calling for changes in the way research on [global warming](#) is conducted after a British university said [thousands of private e-mail messages and documents had been stolen](#) from its climate center.

The scientists say that the e-mail messages, which have circulated on the Internet and which disclose the inner workings of a small network of climatologists who chart the planet's temperature, have damaged the public's trust in the evidence that humans are dangerously warming the planet, just as many countries are poised to start reining in greenhouse gas emissions.

"This whole concept of, 'We're the experts, trust us,' has clearly gone by the wayside with these e-mails," said Judith Curry, a climate scientist at [Georgia Institute of Technology](#).

She and other scientists are seeking more transparency in the way climate data is handled and in the methods used to analyze it. And they argue that scientists should re-evaluate the selection procedures used by some scientific journals and the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), the panel that in 2007 concluded that humans were the dominant force driving warming and whose findings underpin international discussions over a new climate treaty.

A fierce debate over the significance of the hacked material erupted as soon as the e-mail messages and other documents [surfaced on Web sites](#) just over a week ago. Some see in the e-mail correspondence — which includes heated discussions about warming trends, advice on deleting potentially controversial e-mail messages and derisive comments about climate skeptics — evidence of a conspiracy to stifle dissenting views and withhold data from public scrutiny, or, as some have put it, "[Climategate](#)."

To others, the e-mail messages are merely evidence that climate scientists can be as competitive, proprietary, defensive and caustic as people engaged in any other high-level enterprise. They cast as villains those who disclosed the e-mail correspondence and who now, they say, [are distorting the contents](#)

Gavin A. Schmidt, a [NASA](#) climatologist involved in many of the e-mail exchanges, said that voluntarily disclosing more data would never satisfy the "very hard-bitten, distraught core" of climate skeptics. "The number of attacks on our integrity will actually increase since there will be more ways to twist what it is we do to support some conspiracy theory or other," he said.

Officials at the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia in Britain say the disclosed material

was copied from computers there in a [“criminal breach.”](#) (Some e-mail exchanges involved or [described this reporter](#) and other journalists).

On Friday, scientists at the university said the school was preparing to announce an inquiry, led by an independent panel, into the theft and related issues.

The most serious criticisms leveled at the authors of the e-mail messages revolve around three issues.

One is whether the correspondence reveals efforts by scientists to shield raw data, gleaned from tree rings and other indirect indicators of climate conditions, preventing it from being examined by independent researchers. Among those who say it does is Stephen McIntyre, a retired Canadian mining consultant who has a popular skeptics' blog, [climateaudit.org](#). A second issue is whether disclosed documents, said to be from the stolen cache, prove that the data underlying climate scientists' conclusions about warming are murkier than the scientists have said. The documents include files of raw computer code and a computer [programmer's years-long log](#) documenting his frustrations over data gathered from countries in the Northern Hemisphere.

Finally, questions have been raised about whether the e-mail messages indicated that climate scientists tried to prevent the publication of papers written by climate skeptics, which were described by the scientists in the e-mail messages as “garbage” and “fraud.”

Officials with Britain's national climate office have defended the integrity of the climate unit's work, noting that the warming trend it has measured is largely replicated by separate groups at NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “This is a shallow and transparent attempt to discredit the robust science undertaken by some of the world's most respected scientists,” said Vicky Pope, the office's senior spokeswoman, in an e-mail message.

Rajendra K. Pachauri, the chairman of the intergovernmental climate panel, issued [a statement rebutting claims](#) that the e-mail messages, which involved some members of the panel, indicated that the panel's reports were biased. In posts on the blog [Realclimate.org](#), some of the scientists who participated in the correspondence have also said that, although inappropriate language was used at times, their critical comments about people or research papers were based on the quality of the arguments.

The public disclosure of the e-mail messages has already led to calls from conservative British and American legislators for investigations.

The lead Saudi Arabian climate negotiator, Mohammad al-Sabban, said that the affair could affect negotiations over a new [global climate treaty](#). “This is very serious and can put the whole climate debate, including any future agreement in Copenhagen and beyond, in big question,” Mr. al-Sabban said in an e-mail message. And even some environmental campaigners believe that the disclosures have damaged calls for climate action. [George Monbiot](#), a British environmentalist and author, excoriated some of the climate unit's scientists and many of his fellow activists on Wednesday in a [column in The Guardian](#).

“No one has been as badly let down by the revelations in these emails as those of us who have championed the science,” he wrote. “We should be the first to demand that it is unimpeachable, not the last.”

[Mike Hulme](#), a climate scientist at the University of East Anglia and author of “Why We Disagree About Climate Change,” said the disclosures could offer a chance to finally bring the practices of climate researchers and the intergovernmental panel into the modern era, where transparency — enforced legally or illegally — is inevitable and appropriate.

“The I.P.C.C. itself, through its structural tendency to politicize climate change science, has perhaps helped to foster a more authoritarian and exclusive form of knowledge production,” he said in an e-mail message, “just at a time when a globalizing and wired cosmopolitan culture is demanding of science something much more open and inclusive.”

Dr. Curry and others said that if nothing else, the e-mail correspondence suggested that climate scientists needed to show more temperance in dealing with their critics.

“We won the war — the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, and climate and energy legislation is near the top of the U.S. agenda,” Dr. Curry said. “Why keep fighting all these silly battles and putting ourselves in this position?”

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