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## FINDINGS

# E-Mail Fracas Shows Peril of Trying to Spin Science

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

If you have not delved into the thousands of e-mail messages and files hacked from the computers of British climate scientists, let me give you the closest thing to an executive summary. It is taken from a file slugged HARRY\_READ\_ME, which is the log of a computer expert's long struggle to make sense of a database of historical temperatures. Here is Harry's summary of the situation:

Aarrggghhh!

That cry, in various spellings, is a motif throughout the log as Harry tries to fight off despair. "OH [EXPLETIVE] THIS!" [he writes](#) after struggling to reconcile readings from weather stations around the world. "It's Sunday evening, I've worked all weekend, and just when I thought it was done I'm hitting yet another problem that's based on the hopeless state of our databases. There is no uniform data integrity. ..."

Harry, whoever he may be, comes off as the most sympathetic figure in the [pilfered computer annals](#) of East Anglia University, the British keeper of global temperature records. While Harry's log shows him worrying about the integrity of the database, the climate scientists are e-mailing one another with strategies for blocking outsiders' legal requests to see their data.

While Harry is puzzling over temperatures — "I have that familiar Twilight Zone sensation" — the scientists are confidently making proclamations to journalists, jetting to conferences and plotting revenge against those who question the dangers of [global warming](#). When a journal publishes a skeptic's paper, the scientists e-mail one another to ignore it. They focus instead on retaliation against the journal and the editor, a project that is breezily added to the agenda of their next meeting: "Another thing to discuss in Nice!"

As the scientists denigrate their critics in the e-mail messages, they seem oblivious to one of the greatest dangers in the climate-change debate: smug groupthink. These researchers, some of the most prominent climate experts in Britain and America, seem so focused on winning the public-relations war that they exaggerate their certitude — and ultimately undermine their own cause.

Consider, for instance, the phrase that has been turned into [a music video](#) by gleeful climate skeptics: "[hide the decline](#)," used in an e-mail message by Phil Jones, the head of the university's Climatic Research Unit. He was discussing the preparation of a graph for the [cover of a 1999 report from the World Meteorological Organization](#) showing that temperatures in the past several decades were the highest of the past millennium.

Most of the graph was based on analyses of tree rings and other "proxy" records like ice cores and lake sediments. These indirect measurements indicated that temperatures declined in the middle of the

millennium and then rose in the first half of the 20th century, which jibes with other records. But the tree-ring analyses don't reveal a sharp warming in the late 20th century — in fact, they show a decline in temperatures, contradicting what has been directly measured with thermometers.

Because they considered that recent decline to be spurious, Dr. Jones and his colleagues removed it from part of the graph and used direct thermometer readings instead. In [a statement last week](#), Dr. Jones said there was nothing nefarious in what they had done, because the problems with the tree-ring data had been openly identified earlier and were known to experts.

But the graph adorned the cover of a report intended for policy makers and journalists. The nonexperts wouldn't have realized that the scariest part of that graph — the recent temperatures soaring far above anything in the previous millennium — was based on a completely different measurement from the earlier portion. It looked like one smooth, continuous line leading straight upward to certain doom.

The story behind that graph certainly didn't show that global warming was a hoax or a fraud, as some skeptics proclaimed, but it did illustrate another of their arguments: that the evidence for global warming is not as unequivocal as many scientists claim. (Go to [nytimes.com/tierneylab](http://nytimes.com/tierneylab) for details.)

In fact, one skeptic raised this very issue about tree-ring data in a comment posted in 2004 on [RealClimate](#), the blog operated by climate scientists. The comment, which questioned the propriety of “grafting the thermometer record onto a proxy temperature record,” immediately drew a sharp [retort on the blog](#) from Michael Mann, an expert at [Penn State](#) University:

“No researchers in this field have ever, to our knowledge, ‘grafted the thermometer record onto’ any reconstruction. It is somewhat disappointing to find this specious claim (which we usually find originating from industry-funded climate disinformation Web sites) appearing in this forum.”

Dr. Mann now tells me that he was unaware, when he wrote the response, that such grafting had in fact been done in the earlier cover chart, and I take him at his word. But I don't see why the question was dismissed so readily, with the implication that only a tool of the fossil-fuel industry would raise it.

Contempt for critics is evident over and over again in the hacked e-mail messages, as if the scientists were a priesthood protecting the temple from barbarians. Yes, some of the skeptics have political agendas, but so do some of the scientists. Sure, the skeptics can be cranks and pests, but they have identified genuine problems in the historical reconstructions of climate, as in the debate they inspired about the “hockey stick” graph of temperatures over the past millennium.

It is not unreasonable to give outsiders a look at the historical readings and the adjustments made by experts like Harry. How exactly were the readings converted into what the English scientists describe as “quality controlled and homogenised” data?

Trying to prevent skeptics from seeing the raw data was always a questionable strategy, scientifically. Now it looks like dubious public relations, too.

In response to the furor over the climate e-mail messages, there will be more attention than ever paid to those British temperature records, and any inconsistencies or gaps will seem more suspicious simply because

the researchers were so determined not to reveal them. Skeptical bloggers are already [dissecting Harry's work](#). As they relentlessly pore over other data, the British scientists will feel Harry's pain:

Aarrggghh! There truly is no end in sight.

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