

Climategate: The Point After

“I can't see either ... being in the next [IPCC] report. [(name deleted)] and I will keep them out somehow – even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!”

Imagine that the e-mail quoted above had occurred in a sporting venue:

it's the National Collegiate Athletic Association's BCS Championship football game.... One of the teams is in the Red Zone, say the Auburn Tigers, to be relevant to this year's game. While in the Red Zone, two of the officials, the referee and linesman, have accidentally left their mic's on. The one billion viewers watching this game hear the ref say to the linesman (in essence, paraphrasing the above e-mail):

“We have to keep them from scoring.”

The Auburn Tigers score anyway in spite of a few dubious penalties.

Imagine, however, that following the game, and in answer to the outrage that ensues over the officials' comments by all parties, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) acknowledges a problem but points out that the team in the Red Zone scored anyway in spite of the two officials having tried to prevent it. The NCAA then allows the officials to continue working games.

Of course, this is a ludicrous ending.

We know with certainty that such miscreant sports officials would NEVER again be allowed to work a game by the NCAA to ensure the highest degree of public trust in the outcome of games.

We in science are in exactly the same situation as in the sports metaphor above, except that what we do is far more important to society than a sporting event. But some of the “officials” in our “game” have expressed a view antithetical to fair play, namely, they have expressed a view that they desire to prevent some of the “truths” that our colleagues have found from reaching our journal readership.

Recent polls suggest that we are losing the battle over public opinion and the support for actions required to mitigate global warming. Without doubt, “climategate”, now supplemented by the “glaciergate”, has contributed to this erosion.

To regain some of this lost trust, and to also regain momentum toward mitigation, stern action must be taken against those who have forsaken our scientific ideals in favor of an “agenda” that does not permit the publication of manuscripts based on its conclusions. Addressing this problem today with stern action is critical for not only to strengthen the battle that will require sacrifices to mitigate anthropogenic emissions, but to also fight the “pollution” of the ideals of science that is illustrated in the quoted e-mail above.

And the stronger the action that we take, the stronger will be the “message” that will be sent to scientists who try to ban publications based on the conclusions reached. No one can doubt that publications that should have reached us via the journals have already been turned away in pseudo-review processes but that less solid science has, given the e-mail above via likely “soft reviews”.

What actions are appropriate?

I would suggest that we must at least ban researchers, such as the author of the e-mail above, from reviewing manuscripts on climate change. Preferably, even stronger actions should be taken such as a prohibition of national grant funding for a specified time, i. e., a probationary period similar to those imposed for athletic teams that violate NCAA rules.

In tolerating or minimizing this corruption of our ideals, as in in-house investigations which inherently lack credibility, we, too, will be seen as corrupt. Our funding agencies and the public count on us to be disinterested scientists and publish “truths” no matter where that “truth” takes us and to be disinterested when it comes to reviewing manuscripts.

The sociologists who study science have proclaimed the repugnant to us for decades; that science is dependent on subcultures and these subcultures can subvert our “truths” and not quite so much on objective searches for the truth.

In “climategate”, those sociologists have apparently been proved right.