

Climategate: The Point After

"I can't see either (publication)... 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!" (Writer's name omitted.)

Imagine the e-mail quote above (only slightly altered) had occurred in a sporting venue:

It's the Rose Bowl.... No, it's a more important than any college football game ever played. One of the teams is in the Red Zone. While in the Red Zone, two 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, "We have to keep them from scoring."

The team in the Red Zone scores anyway despite a few dubious penalties.

Imagine, however, that following the game, and in answer to the widespread 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 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 desires to prevent some of the "truths" that our colleagues have found from reaching our journal readership for wider evaluation, citation and commentary.

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" revelations, has contributed to this erosion of support. 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 solely due to conclusions that they do not agree with. Addressing this problem in our highly polarized science community and public is critical for not only to win the battle to mitigate anthropogenic emissions, but to also fight the "pollution" of the ideals of science that is illustrated in the quoted e-mail.

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.

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. 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 expressed in the e-mail above, 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 truth. In “climategate”, those sociologists have apparently been proved right.