

# THIS WEEK

## EDITORIALS

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## Closing the Climategate

*The official inquiry might have exonerated scientists, but attitude changes are needed for science to ensure it holds the public's trust.*

This week marks the first anniversary of the worldwide scandal over the release of e-mails stolen from a computer server at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich, UK. The server was in the university's Climatic Research Unit (CRU), most of the correspondents involved were climate scientists and the affair will be forever known as Climategate. The scientist at the centre of the storm, Phil Jones, the head of CRU, tells *Nature* on page 362 that he feels the worst is behind him.

It would be naive for Jones and other scientists to assume that the fuss has passed into history. Never mind that almost all of the accusations thrown at the researchers involved have been proven baseless. Never mind that much of the media has retreated from the aggressive stance it adopted during its 'comment first, ask questions later' approach to the content of the e-mails. And never mind that the scientific basis for the global-warming problem remains as solid as it was a year ago. Huge damage has been done to the reputation of climate science, and arguably to science as a whole. That impact deserves to be assessed and the necessary lessons need to be learned.

Take the name Climategate itself. The 'gate' suffix, now routinely applied to the most mundane controversies, is as trite as it is predictable. At the height of the controversy, senior figures called for journalists not to use the word, which they argued lent false seriousness to far-fetched claims of research skulduggery and corruption. That reaction alone helps to explain the sluggish response of the science establishment a year ago to the allegations made against their colleagues and their profession. One lesson that must be taken from Climategate is that scientists do not get to define the terms by which others see them and their place in society. This journal has already warned that climate scientists have to accept that they are in a street fight. They should expect a few low blows. The key is to learn which punches to roll with and which to block and counter.

### TYPICAL EXCHANGES

Take peer review. To many veterans of this bruising process, the talk from Jones in the e-mails of going to town on negative reviews to keep papers from being published was run-of-the-mill stuff. "That's nothing, you should see the rudeness of some of the reviews that go around in microbiology/quantum physics/oncology," was a common reaction. To the outside world, such bravado did little to appease. Likewise, many were shocked by the foolish (if vain) e-mailed boasts of Jones to keep poor papers from inclusion in a report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, even if it meant having to "redefine what the peer-review literature is".

The official inquiry into the e-mail affair concluded that such robust exchanges were typical in science. But many non-scientists were still unconvinced. They hold peer review as a revered gold standard of scientific excellence, not to be questioned or used as an opportunity to be rude about academic rivals, even in private. Why? Researchers

may routinely complain about the shortcomings of peer review to other scientists, but they often unite behind it in the face of criticism from outside the scientific sphere. That a study has been through peer review is used too often as a universal defence of its quality. If more scientists were more forthcoming about the flaws in their quality-control

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system, then commentators and the wider public may have been more willing to accept that scientists engaged in it do not always act as the public would expect.

With the official inquiry clearing the CRU scientists of fudging data and of abusing the peer-review process, most of the more informed criticism has now settled on the fuzzy notion of the need for greater transparency and openness. Calls for full release of computer code written by climate researchers seem driven more by the fact that it is not routinely made available rather than because it is particularly useful, but it is clear that the CRU scientists did not cooperate fully with all requests for data and other information.

### DUTY TO REPORT

For critics of CRU and their, sometimes legitimate, complaints about data access to be taken seriously, they must be more specific about who should be more open with what, and address their concerns at the correct target. It remains the case that many of the data used by CRU scientists are covered by agreements that prevent their wider distribution. This is not ideal, but it is hardly the fault of the CRU researchers — even if they did seem reluctant to share.

Climate is not the only research area affected by such data restrictions — a paper published earlier this year on the failure of African game parks to conserve large mammals, for example, could not present local data it gathered from reserve operators, who wanted it kept confidential (I. D. Craigie *et al. Biol. Conserv.* **143**, 2221–2228; 2010). There are often good reasons for such sequestering of data, and some studies might not be done without it. But where the full information needed to reproduce a study is not publicly available, scientists have a duty to report that, and say why.

Just as scientists cannot choose the name of future scandals, they cannot choose where allegations will appear. The UEA has taken some justified heavy fire for its handling of the crisis, which was crippled by the enforced absence on medical grounds of Jones, its chief defence witness. Had Jones been strong enough to face the media at the beginning, and say many of the things he says now, the crisis may have blown itself out. The UEA hierarchy misjudged the need to respond and the role that Internet blogs now play in seeding stories for the mainstream media. "I won't worry about it until I hear it on the [BBC Radio] *Today* programme," one university official said when pointed to early online coverage at the time. He got his wish a few days later. By then, the Climategate was already swinging off its hinges. ■