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Good Science, Bad Politics

'Climategate' reveals a concerted effort to emphasize scientific results useful to a political agenda.

By HANS VON STORCH

"Frankly, he's an odd individual," a well-known climatologist wrote about me in a private e-mail to a friend in the U.K. On this, we agree—I am an odd individual, if by that we mean a climatologist whose e-mails would not document a contempt for such basic scientific virtues such as openness, falsifiability, replicability and independent review.

The colleague is a member of the CRU cartel—the influential network of researchers at the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit and their colleagues in the U.S.—whose sanctum was exposed last month when a whistleblower or hacker published e-mails and documents from the CRU server on the Internet. What we can now see is a concerted effort to emphasize scientific results that are useful to a political agenda by blocking papers in the purportedly independent review process and skewing the assessments of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The effort has not been so successful, but trying was bad enough.

We—society and climate researchers—need to discuss now what constitutes "good science." Some think good science is a societal institution that produces results that serve an ideology. Take, for instance, the counsel that then-Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen gave to scientists at a climate change conference in March, as transcribed by Environmental Research Letters: "I would give you the piece of advice, not to provide us with too many moving targets, because it is already a very, very complicated process. And I need your assistance to push this process in the right direction, and in that respect, I need fixed targets and certain figures, and not too many considerations on uncertainty and risk and things like that."

I do not share that view. For me, good science means generating knowledge through a superior method, the scientific method. The merits of a scientifically constructed result do not depend on its utility for any politician's agenda. Indeed, the utility of my results is not my business, and the contextualization of my results should not depend on my personal preferences. It is up to democratic societies to decide how to use or not use my insights and explanations.

But it seems I am an odd individual for taking this position. As a scientist, I strive for independence from vested interests. I am in the pocket of neither Exxon nor Greenpeace, and for this I come under fire from both sides—the skeptics and the alarmists—who have fiercely opposing views but are otherwise siblings in their methods and contempt.

I am told that I should keep my mouth shut, that criticizing colleagues is not "tactful," and will damage the reputation of science—even when the CRU e-mails have already sunk that ship. I hear that the now-notorious "trick" is normal, that to "hide the decline" is just an unfortunate colloquialism. But we know by now that the activity described by these words was by no means innocent.

And what of the alarmists' kin, the skeptics? They say these words show that everything was a hoax—not just the historical temperature results in question, but also the warming documented by different groups using thermometer data. They conclude I must have been forced out of my position as chief editor of the journal *Climate Research* back in 2003 for my allegiance to science over politics. In fact, I left this post on my own, with no outside pressure, because of insufficient quality control on a bad paper—a skeptic's paper, at that. But in 2006 I urged a CRU scientist to make his data public for critics and, yes, skeptics—as documented in one of the stolen e-mails.

We need to repair the damage, and heal the public's new mistrust of the workings of climate science. True, we are in a difficult situation: Climate science is in an abnormal situation, hounded by manifest political and economic interests of different sorts, and the uncertainties in our work are large and unavoidable. Then this abnormal brew forms, with scientists acting as politicians and politicians posturing as scientists.

But the core of the knowledge about man-made climate change is simple and hard to contest. Elevated greenhouse gas concentrations have led, and will continue to lead, to changing weather conditions (climate), in particular to warmer temperatures and changing precipitation. Such a change causes stress for societies and ecosystems. More emissions mean more stress, fewer emissions less. Thus, when society wants to limit this stress, it has to make sure that fewer greenhouse gases enter and remain in the atmosphere. Societies have decided they want to limit the stress so that temperatures rise no further than the politically produced number of two degrees Centigrade, relative to pre-industrial conditions. Fine. For this goal, it does not matter whether the sea level will rise 50 cm or 150 cm by the end of this century, or if hurricanes do or do not become significantly more severe. These are relevant scientific issues, with great importance for the design of adaptive strategies—but

not particularly relevant to the political task of coming to an effective agreement on reducing emissions.

What we need to do is open the process. Data must be accessible to adversaries; joint efforts are needed to agree on test procedures to validate, once again, already broadly accepted insights. The authors of the damaging e-mails would be wise to stand back from positions as reviewers and participants in the IPCC process. The journals *Nature* and *Science* must review their quality-control measures and selection criteria for papers.

So please, you media, you NGOs, and you Mr. Rasmussen: You have the knowledge you need for the political decisions. Let us sit in our studies and discuss the remaining issues, the sea level, the ice sheets, the hurricanes, and other issues. Give us time to consider, to test alternative hypotheses, to falsify theories—to do our work without worrying if the results support your causes. Science is a valuable and unique societal institution, but not if it is consumed by short-sighted political goals.

But, admittedly, I am an odd individual, one who loves *København*—when it is not the "Hopenhagen" for thousands of COP-15 activists, lobbyists, business leaders, and politicians.

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