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Stolen E-Mails Sharpen a Brawl Between Climate Scientists and Skeptics

By LAUREN MORELLO of
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The University of East Anglia said yesterday that it was cooperating with police and launching its own internal probe into how thousands of e-mails and documents from its Climatic Research Unit ended up on the Internet last week, sparking an ongoing fight between climate scientists and skeptics who say the data breach suggests ethical lapses in the research community.

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The incident came to light last Tuesday morning, when hackers attempted to post the stolen data on "RealClimate," a group blog maintained by many prominent scientists, including some quoted in the CRU e-mails.

Some of the e-mails and files are impolite, revealing deep grudges between scientists and skeptics. Others are mundane announcements of upcoming conferences or research trips.

But by the end of last week, climate skeptics were busy posting and analyzing CRU e-mails and files they say justify their objections to mainstream climate science, including the idea that humans are driving global warming.

"Some of them are embarrassing," said Pat Michaels, a senior fellow in environmental studies at the Cato Institute. "The one about 'let's punch Pat Michaels' -- that's really no big deal. Much more important are the e-mails showing attempts to intimidate the editors of journals and the refereed scientific literature."

Messages Michaels objects to include a March 19, 2009, e-mail from CRU Dsirector Phil Jones in which he complains to another scientist about the new editor of *Weather*, a journal published by the Royal Meteorological Society. "If I don't get him to back down, I won't be sending any more papers to any RMS journals and I'll be resigning from the RMS," Jones writes, in an apparent protest to a change in the journal's guidelines for authors.

Other e-mails that have drawn scrutiny include a message from Kevin Trenberth, a climate scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., that includes this sentence: "The fact is that we can't account for the lack of warming at the moment and

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it is a travesty that we can't."

Heated battle over 'lack of warming'

Skeptics have also pounced on an e-mail from Jones to colleagues that reads: "I've just completed Mike's Nature trick of adding in the real temps to each series for the last 20 years (ie from 1981 onwards) and from 1961 for Keith's to hide the decline."

But the scientists affected by the data breach say the leaked information doesn't contain a smoking gun.

"I'm involved in 102 of the e-mails," Trenberth said. "I don't see anything embarrassing to me particularly. There are a few things that can be taken out of context, and they have been."

That includes the line about a "lack of warming," which Trenberth says was part of a longer message intended to highlight shortcomings in scientists' understanding of recent temperature fluctuations.

"We've always had some problems with the observing system," he said. "It's obviously not as good as we would like, and that's true of the temperature record, as well. What this is saying is we need better observations. What it's not saying is that global warming is not here."

Trenberth said it's telling that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found evidence of climate change to be "unequivocal" in its 2007 report. "The IPCC is actually a fairly conservative process," he said. "It involves people from over 100 countries and different parts of the political spectrum to see what the best statements we can make about global climate change are. They are consensus statements, so by definition that means they are somewhat conservative."

Nothing unethical about a 'trick'

Meanwhile, Jones defended his "trick" e-mail in a statement posted on the University of East Anglia's Web site. "The word trick was used here colloquially as in a clever thing to do," he said. "It is ludicrous to suggest that it refers to anything untoward."

Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann -- the "Michael" in Jones' message -- agreed.

Mann said the second portion of Jones' message referred to a known problem with certain temperature records gleaned from tree rings. Up until 1960, temperature records measured by weather stations agree with records extrapolated from tree rings. But after 1960, it's a different story. Some of the trees no longer accurately register temperature variations.

That's a problem that CRU scientist Keith Briffa identified in a journal article more than 10 years ago, Mann said, arguing that scientists shouldn't use the inaccurate post-1960 data.

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