Conspiratory fascination versus public interest: the case of ‘climategate’

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Conspiratory fascination versus public interest: the case of ‘climategate’

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Abstract
Anderegg and Goldsmith (2014 Environ. Res. Lett. 9 054005) use Google Trends to examine the impact of specific media events—the so-called ‘climategate’ imbroglio and the glacial-melt error in the IPCC’s 2007 report—on public opinion regarding climate change. There has been an overall decline of public interest in climate change after 2007, accompanied by spikes of interest with a half-life of six days for these two media events. The brevity of public interest in ‘climategate’ stands in contrast to the continued and growing fascination of the ‘skeptic’ blogosphere with that event. These results document the assertion that conspiratory obsession by a small number of people should not be mistaken for general public interest.

Keywords: climate change, rejection of science, public opinion

Anderegg and Goldsmith (Anderegg and Goldsmith 2014, A&G from here on) use an innovative approach to examining the impact of specific media events—the so-called ‘climategate’ imbroglio and the glacial-melt error in the IPCC’s 2007 report—on public opinion regarding climate change. Their analysis of Google Trends data reveals an overall decline of public interest in climate change after 2007, accompanied by relatively brief blips of interest around the dates of the two media events. Those spikes in interest were expressed in greater search volumes for ‘skeptical’ terms such as ‘global warming hoax’. Intriguingly, no long-term effects of those events on ‘skeptic’ search volumes were observed, corroborating other findings (e.g., Maibach et al 2012) that the impact of ‘climategate’ was largely limited to a subset of society that was already predisposed to reject the findings of climate science for political or ideological reasons.

The data of A&G permit several insights. First, the brevity of public interest in ‘climategate’ is remarkable, with the event having a ‘half-life’ in Google Trends of merely six days. To place this into a broader context, a brief half-life seems to characterize a wide range of events, from the rather obscure to the highly visible. At the more obscure end, it is known that the half-life of the announcement of a Nobel Prize is also approximately seven days (Baram-Tsabari and Segev 2013). Public excitement over ‘climategate’ therefore lasted roughly as long as public interest in Venkatraman Ramakrishnan’s Nobel Prize in chemistry, which was awarded around the time that the scientists’ e-mails were stolen from the University of East Anglia in 2009. At the other end of the scale, even a momentous event such as Hurricane Sandy has a brief half-life: the Google Trends search term ‘Sandy climate’ returns a sharp spike that peaked on the 30th of October 2012, the day after the storm struck New York, but diminishes rapidly with an estimated

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half-life of just over five days\(^2\). The uniform brevity of public interest is all the more remarkable because the absolute interest in those events span three orders of magnitude, as revealed by an undated Google search (conducted on 7 June 2014): whereas ‘Venkatraman Ramakrishnan’ returns 193 000 hits, ‘climategate’ returns 2 100 000, and ‘Sandy climate’ returns 27 300 000.

Second, the now virtually complete lack of interest in ‘climategate’ by the public and mainstream media contrasts notably with the ongoing and persistent fascination with ‘climategate’ in the ‘skeptical’ climate blogosphere. To illustrate the lack of public interest, at the time of this writing Google News returned 329 stories about ‘climategate’ during the previous 30 days (six of which were about the A&G paper), falling somewhere between the number of news items about ‘Manjimup’ (\(N = 266\)) and ‘Ceduna’ (\(N = 331\)), two rural Australian towns with a combined population of around 6000. For comparison, there were 14 200 news stories about ‘Sandy climate’ (Google News search conducted on 7 June 2014).

By contrast, the continued obsession of the blogosphere with climategate is revealed by a Google search of the top 20 most-frequently read ‘skeptical’ websites (identified by Alexa rankings), which reveals an increasing number of hits from 2009 onward. This search was conducted between 9 and 13 May 2014, collecting hits to the search term ‘climategate’ for each year from 2010 to 2013. In a dated search, only those pages are returned that were created or updated for the period in question: this measure provides a rough indication of activity and interest on ‘skeptical’ websites surrounding climategate. The annual total for 2010 was 2169, which increased over the next three years (2011–2013) to 3358, 4509, and 5450, respectively. Among ‘skeptics’, interest in ‘climategate’ thus appeared to more than double in the years after the imbroglio briefly attracted public interest.

This persistent fascination is not entirely surprising in light of the well-known involvement of conspiratorial thinking in the rejection of well-established science, from the link between HIV and AIDS to the fact that the globe is warming from human greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., Kalichman 2009, Smith and Leiserowitz 2012, Lewandowsky et al. 2013, 2013a). One known element of conspiratorial thinking is its ‘self-sealing’ quality (Keeley 1999, Bale 2007, Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), whereby evidence against a conspiratorial belief is re-interpreted as evidence for that belief. In the case of ‘climategate’, this self-sealing nature of conspiratorial belief became evident after the scientists in question were exonerated by nine investigations in two countries (including various parliamentary and government committees in the U.S. and U.K.; see table 1), when those exonerations were re-branded as a ‘whitewash.’ This ‘whitewash’ response can be illustrated by U.S. Representative Sensenbrenner’s published response to the EPA’s endangerment finding (http://republicans.globalwarming.sensenbrenner.house.gov/press/PRArticle.aspx?NewsID=2799).

Third, given the limited public and political significance of ‘climategate,’ the number of peer-reviewed articles that have addressed this event appears striking. An ISI Web of Science search (7 June 2014) returns 47 articles addressing the topic ‘climategate’ (e.g., Nerlich 2010, Ceccarelli 2011, Friedrichs 2011, Gauchat 2012, Goeminne 2012, Lahsen 2012, Painter and Ashe 2012, Philipp and Storch 2012, Scruggs and Benegal 2012). This total does not include the present commentary or the paper by A&G, suggesting that the number of articles will soon reach or even exceed 50. The range of scholarly opinions about the event is broad, ranging from recognition of the conspiratory aspects of the fascination with ‘climategate’ (Bricker 2013) to the presumption that ‘climategate illustrated
the importance of the blogosphere as an empowerment of the extended peer community, ...’ (Curry and Webster 2011, p 1679).

In closing, I propose a tentative but broadly-contextualized interpretation of those three insights. It is known that the perception of the prevalence of ‘skeptic’ opinions is grossly over-estimated compared to the actual extent of ‘skepticism.’ In a representative Australian sample, (Leviston et al 2013b) found that only around 6% of respondents denied that climate change was happening, whereas the public’s estimate of the prevalence of that opinion was in excess of 20%—more than three times greater. Conversely, the prevalence of the majority opinion (agreement with the scientific consensus; just over 50%), was considerably underestimated (by 15% or more). Given the well-known linkage between the perception of a consensus and actual opinion (e.g., Lewandowsky et al 2013b), people’s mis-calibration of the perceived public-opinion landscape—in particular the inflation of a small minority into 1/5 of the population—raises the possibility that people’s attitudes are disproportionately shaped by a small but very vocal minority. It must be of particular concern that the scientific community does not appear to be immune to such misperceptions. There is some evidence that ‘skeptical’ voices are affecting—and arguably distorting—the course of climate science and the communication of its findings (Freudenburg and Muselli 2010, Brysse et al 2013).

It therefore appears advisable not to mistake the continued conspiratory obsession of the ‘skeptic’ blogosphere with ‘climategate’ with widespread public interest. The results of A&G have confirmed other research (e.g., Maibach et al 2012) showing that the wider public astutely lost interest in ‘climategate’ long ago.

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| Table 1. Summary of investigations (and exonerations) of climate scientists after the ‘climategate’ event. |
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| February 2010 | Pennsylvania State University released an Inquiry Report | Foley, Scaroni and Yekel, 2010 |
| March 2010 | UK government’s House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published a report | Willis, Blackman-Woods, Boswell, Cawsey, Dorries, Harris, Iddon, Marsden, Naysmith, Spink, Stewart, Stringer, Turner and Wilson, 2010 |
| April 2010 | University of East Anglia set up international Scientific Assessment Panel, in consultation with the Royal Society and chaired by Professor Ron Oxburgh. The Report of the International Panel | Oxburgh, 2010 |
| June 2010 | Pennsylvania State University published their Final Investigation Report | Assmann, Castleman, Irwin, Jablonski and Vondracek, 2010 |
| July 2010 | University of East Anglia published the Independent Climate Change Email Review Report | Russell, Boulton, Clarke, Eyton and Norton, 2010 |
| July 2010 | US Environmental Protection Agency investigated the emails | EPA, 2010 |
| September 2010 | UK Government responded to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report | Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, 2010 |
| February 2011 | Department of Commerce Inspector General conducted an independent review of the emails | NOAA, 2011 |
| August 2011 | National Science Foundation concluded investigation | OIG, 2011 |
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