

How the 'climategate' scandal is bogus and based on climate sceptics' lies

Claims based on email soundbites are demonstrably false – there is manifestly no evidence of clandestine data manipulation



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Tree rings have historically correlated well with changes in temperature, but that relationship has broken down in the past half century. The reasons are still debated among scientists. Photograph: Getty

Almost all the media and political discussion about the hacked climate emails has been based on brief soundbites publicised by professional sceptics and their blogs. In many cases, these have been taken out of context and twisted to mean something they were never intended to.

Elizabeth May, veteran head of the Canadian Green party claims to have read all the emails and declared: "How dare the world's media fall into the trap set by contrarian propagandists without reading the whole set?"

If those journalists had read even a few words beyond the soundbites, they would have realised that they were often being fed lies. Here are a few examples.

The most quoted "climategate" soundbite comes from an email from Prof Phil Jones, director of the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, to Prof Mike Mann of the University of Virginia in 1999, in which he discussed using "[Mike's Nature trick](#)" to "[hide the decline](#)". The phrase has been widely spun as an effort to prevent the truth getting out that global temperatures had stopped rising.

The Alaskan governor [Sarah Palin](#), in the [Washington Post](#) on 9 December, attacked the emailers as a "highly politicised scientific circle" who "manipulated data to 'hide the decline' in global temperatures". She was joined by the Republican senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma – who has for years used his chairmanship of the Environment and Public Works Committee to campaign against climate scientists and to dismiss anthropogenic global warming as "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people". During the Copenhagen climate conference, which he attended on a Senate delegation, he referred to the Jones's "hide the decline" quote and said: "[Of course, he means hide the decline in temperatures.](#)"

This is nonsense. Given the year the email was written, 1999, it cannot be anything else. At that time there was no suggestion of a decline in global temperatures. The previous year was the warmest on record, coming on top of a run of record warm years in the warmest decade of the century. It is only in the decade since that the rise in

temperatures has slackened, due to natural cycles of variability.

The full email from Jones says: "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 [Briffa]'s, to hide the decline." The decline being referred to was an apparent decline in temperatures shown in analysis of tree rings. Tree rings have historically correlated well with changes in temperature, but that relationship has broken down in the past half century. The reasons are still debated among scientists.

The "trick" was a graphic device used by Mann in a 1998 paper in Nature to merge tree ring data from earlier times with thermometer data for recent decades. He explained it in the paper. Jones was repeating it in another paper. "This is a trick only in the sense of being a good way to deal with a vexing problem," Mann told the Guardian.

Clearly this problem with modern tree ring data raises questions about older tree ring data – at least until the recent divergence from real temperatures is nailed down. And to anyone not familiar with the problems of reconstructing past temperatures from such proxy data, the "trick" may come as a surprise. But it is manifestly not clandestine data manipulation. Nor, as claimed by Palin and Inhofe, is it a trick to hide global cooling. That charge is a lie.

While he was in Copenhagen, Inhofe made a direct link between the "trick" to "hide the decline" and the second most popular soundbite from the emails. He said "of course [Jones] meant hide the decline in temperatures, which caused another scientist, Kevin Trenberth of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, to write: "The fact is that we can't account for the lack of warming at the moment and it is a travesty that we can't."

The link is bogus. The two emails were ten years apart. Unlike Jones, Trenberth's remark from October 2009 was indeed about the slackening of the warming trend that some like to interpret as cooling. That much is agreed. But Inhofe and other sceptics latched on to Trenberth's "travesty" phrase as a revelation that scientists were trying to keep cooling secret because it undermined their arguments about global warming.

Again this is demonstrably false. Nothing was hidden. For months, Trenberth had been discussing publicly his concerns about the inability of scientists to pin down the precise reason for the "absence of warming" since 1998. He had argued in the journal *Current Opinion in Environmental Stability* in early 2009 that "it is not a sufficient explanation to say that a cool year [he had 2008 in mind] is due to natural variability (pdf)". Such explanations "do not provide the physical mechanisms involved." This was the "travesty" he was referring to in his email. He wanted scientists to do better.

He said the best way to improve the explanation and make it more specific was to make better measurements of the planet's energy budget. This would allow scientists to distinguish between any changes in the greenhouse effect, which would result in more or less heat overall in the atmosphere and oceans, and short-term natural cycles of variability, which merely redistribute heat. He was debating this with the former head of the Climatic Research Unit Tom Wigley, who took a different view. But their genuine scientific discussion has, since the publication of the emails online, been hijacked by ignorant or malicious invective.

Several other soundbites were subject to perverse or dishonest interpretations by commentators. Patrick Michaels, the climatologist and heavyweight polemicist for the rightwing Cato Institute published a long op-ed piece in the DC Examiner, slamming Mann for an email quote about keeping sceptics' papers out of the IPCC report "even if we have to redefine what the peer-reviewed literature is". Michaels is an old foe of Mann's, but this genuinely damaging statement was actually made by Jones.

In another case George Will, celebrated in some circles as an intellectual, told ABC's This Week programme that Mann had said in an email that he wished to "delete, get rid of, the medieval warming period". No such words appear anywhere in the emails. What Mann actually said was that "it would be nice to try to 'contain' the putative 'MWP'". Some bloggers suggested this amounted to extinguishing it from the data record. But an

intellectual like Will should have known that, in this context, "contain" means to understand its dimensions – how warm it was and how long it was. Mann explained as much to anyone who asked. Verdict: not guilty.

- This article was amended on 2 February 2010. In the original, Canada's Green Party leader was named as Elizabeth Green. This has been corrected.

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