

Climate of crisis

The affair that became known as Climategate began in November 2009 when a large number of emails and other documents were stolen from the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia (UEA). The emails comprised private correspondence between the CRU director and his staff and many other leading climate scientists around the world.

Their publication created consternation among these scientists, and among CRU staff in particular, because their contents were used to suggest that they had been less than honest in their handling of data, had been hiding some of it, and had been using various other underhand ploys to frustrate the efforts of those who disputed the general view of climate change and its causes.

Throughout one of the biggest episodes in its history the SMC provided the media with a huge range of experts from across the climate science community, issuing hundreds of quotes and running several press briefings including all three of the inquiries into Climategate. Here, **Simon Dunford**, UEA's media relations manager, **Prof Phil Jones**, research director of the CRU, and **Mike Hanlon**, science editor of the Daily Mail during the period, reflect from their different perspectives on what it was like to have been at or near the eye of the Climategate storm. They also recall how the SMC eventually proved a valuable forum through which to put UEA's side of the story.

Professor Phil Jones

I am a scientist. I like to measure things. But it's difficult to quantify the shock I experienced when Climategate hit the headlines. The hacking itself felt a bit like being burgled: that sense of violation. But then things got much, much worse.



My life's work was suddenly being trawled by the global media, and I was accused of fiddling the results. My private emails were being quoted out of context in an attempt to prove that global warming was a giant conspiracy of which I was the chief con man.

After only four days the Guardian's George Monbiot was calling for my resignation.

"They should read my scientific papers, not my emails," I kept saying. But no-one was listening. This was too good a story. Too good, in fact, to be true. And my part seemed to be that of pantomime villain.

Within a day or two reporters were outside my house, knocking on my neighbours' doors, digging for dirt. I got hundreds of abusive and threatening emails. They said I should be killed. They knew where I lived, they knew my family, and we should expect a knock at the door.

I had absolutely no doubt that my science was rock solid. Two US groups had got almost exactly the same results. I knew the accusations were nonsense. But as someone used to being in control I buckled at the loss of it. My health deteriorated. I found it difficult to sleep and eat. I was under intense, spiralling pressure and felt I was falling to pieces. Looking back I suppose I was having some kind of nervous breakdown.

I wasn't the only one affected, of course. My colleagues in the CRU and climate scientists around the world were subject to similar abuse, similar pressure. Well aware that the media needed to hear my version of events, I did agree to one or two interviews and issued some written statements. But I couldn't do more. I couldn't think straight enough to explain with any clarity.

Two years later, in November 2011, when the second batch of 5000 stolen emails was released, things were very different. The CRU's science had been vindicated repeatedly by the independent inquiries and by more recent studies. I'd recovered and was feeling strong again.

So when the university press office asked me to give a press conference I agreed without hesitating. The following morning I was at the Science Media Centre taking journalists through the real meaning and the context of the newly released emails. I was slightly nervous, but it felt good to be there and to chat afterwards with reporters, including the Daily Mail science editor. His story the next day was headlined 'Climategate RIP'.

I wish I had been able to respond like this the first time round. But until you get pushed to the edge, you never know how you'll react.

Simon Dunford

I am still asked what it was like in the UEA press office when Climategate broke. "Busy," I say. But that doesn't quite capture it. TV crews were turning up unannounced on campus most days and our phones were alight.



It wasn't just the UK media calling, but journalists from the US, Australia, Russia, China, Japan, Turkey, Germany, Brazil, Iran, India, Poland, Scandinavia... This was a global, non-stop story.

Google hits for the word "climategate" reached 10 million by the end of November 2009, more than for "global warming". We were all experienced ex-journalists, used to the rough and tumble. But this was something different. A siege. And it was close to overwhelming.

The one thing the media wanted was the one thing we could not provide: Phil Jones. It wasn't just the Times, the Daily Mail and the BBC demanding interviews with Phil. It was the Washington Post, Der Spiegel, the Sydney Morning Herald, Fox News...

"I can't do interviews," Phil told us. And clearly he couldn't. His descent was rapid and shocking to all of us. Though incredibly frustrating to many at the time, the university's decision to put its duty of care towards Phil above the obvious urge to put him before the world's press was the right one.

Without Phil we did our best to counter the bewildering and complex allegations. Of fiddling the data. Of hiding data. Of losing data. Of corrupting peer review. Of bullying, lying and fraud. Most originated on a handful of climate sceptic blogs, and we were bemused by the

willingness of some in the mainstream media to provide credence to a coterie of partisan amateurs.

By the time of Climategate 2.0, as the second release of hacked emails last year was soon dubbed, we were able to give the media what it always wanted: an instant, no-holds-barred London press conference with Phil Jones.

The brilliant team at the Science Media Centre dropped everything to stage this for us. Within 24 hours of the story breaking Phil was taking questions from a packed room of specialist science reporters. Clarifying, explaining, giving the context, giving the facts.

There has been a lot of water under a lot of bridges since November 2009. The flood of Freedom of Information requests to UEA continues unabated, but the science remains watertight. Global warming is real and dangerous. This simple, alarming fact should never have been in any doubt. The Science Media Centre played a key role in explaining to the world exactly why.

Mike Hanlon

That the 2009 leakage of emails stored on the University of East Anglia's servers would become known as Climategate had a weary inevitability. And, like all "gates" since the Big One, there was both more and less to the story than met the eye.



For me it was, at first, a nightmare. There were several tens of thousands of emails that were supposedly "out there" but which were, in reality, accessible only through some obscure Russian site and then only in an unreadable gobbledegook format

and probably riddled with viruses to boot. It was a trying technological experience, like being transported back to 1987.

Having them all neatly laid out in a text-searchable Word document so that we could do a simple hunt for terms like "conspiracy" and phrases such as "Ice Age on the way chaps, but don't let on!" would have been wonderful. Sadly the world doesn't work like that.

Anyway, after lots of shouting and stabbing of keyboards and a Great Deal of Help from the computer-literate operatives at the SMC we (sort of) got there in the end. We had something to search through.

And stories there were - at least at first glance. Even George Monbiot admitted that some of the emails did not paint the climate researchers in a terribly good light. But scratch and sniff as we did there was still no smoking gun, no line that would show there had been a conspiracy to fabricate a Great Untruth.

The decision to withhold some key data on the grounds of confidentiality, copyright, national sensitivities or even commercial sensitivity was questionable. Some people had written some silly things. There was some unfortunate phraseology. We all remember the excitement over the allegedly damning "Mike's Nature Trick" - although I for one have forgotten what this trick actually was. And indeed whether this was Hockey-Stick Mike [a reference to the hockey stick shape of someone's curve] or some other Mike in the story. But that was it.

This was probably the biggest ever story to hit the UEA, and the press office was clearly overwhelmed. What we all needed as the alleged scandal rumbled on was a lot of help. As ever the SMC deserved the Order of Something or Other for rounding up numerous climatologists and meteorologists and exposing these poor critters to the glare of Her Majesty's press.

What we most needed of course was the Main Man, the Climatic Research Unit's beleaguered Phil Jones, to talk to us and make sense of it all. During Climategate 1.0 Professor Jones sensibly stayed out of the limelight. But Lo! After a second tranche of emails was released two years later there he was, at the SMC.

He looked tired and harassed, because he was. But he gave a competent performance and more or less put the story to bed. Not that that was the end of it. Not by a long way. There were more emails. And then more. But, as with Wikileaks, the effects diminished with each iteration. (Of course, say the conspiracy theorists, that was their plan all along...)



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