

# Climatic Research Unit email controversy, aka “Climategate” (online, 2009)

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Historical case study RU

# TRUST IN CLIMATE SCIENCE?

## Our motivation

- Climate science is complex and interdisciplinary
- Deliberate and politically motivated destabilisation of the scientific consensus
- The psychology of doom, Cassandra's dilemma

## Today's focus

- A critical incident in climate science discourse
- Where do we (as case study owners) go from here?

Review article

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Public trust and mistrust of climate science: A meta-narrative review

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*Annual Review of Environment and Resources*  
A New Dark Age? Truth, Trust, and Environmental Science

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# TRUST IN CLIMATE SCIENCE?

## Climate denialism appears to be in decline

- Most global communities acknowledge climate change as the result of human activity, with East Asia & the Pacific and North America being the exception (WE forum Climate Progress survey of 2021)
- Responders of the EU special barometer 2021 on climate change indicate climate change as the most serious problem facing the world
- In the UNDP Peoples' Climate Vote 2021 survey the majority of the responders (64%) acknowledge climate change as a global emergency

## Trust in climate scientists remains high worldwide...

- Scientists and climate experts remain the most trusted source of information regarding both climate change and responses to it (Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 special report on climate change)
- The WE forum Climate Progress survey of 2021 reports a steady increase in trust in (climate) science as a source of information about the environment, with responders in East Asia & the Pacific and North America being significantly less trusting

...but does not necessarily translate to behavioural/attitudinal change ([Gundersen et al., 2022](#))



Are we making a fuss over a minority?  
Are highly distrustful publics lost to us anyway?

## **“CLIMATEGATE”: A WATERSHED MOMENT FOR CLIMATE SCIENCE**

- Unauthorized circulation of email communications from the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia CRU (Nov 2009)
- United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen - COP15 (Dec 2009)
- Several truth investigations followed ensue

Accusations of:

- Data manipulation (the “trick”; the hockey stick graph)
- Nondisclosure of data (“culture of secrecy”)
- Tampering with the peer review process
- Suppressing dissent views

**(presumed) research integrity violations + (presumed) conflict of interest =  
climate change is a fraud**

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**“bad” integrity + “bad” benevolence =  
distrust in [the epistemic claims of] climate science**

## THE GOOD

- Transparency, openness as core values
- Some degree of reflexivity by the scientific community
- Incident affected mostly those **ideologically positioned** to be sceptical of climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2013)

 Is it enough?


## THE BAD

- (Online) harassment
- Extensive use of online media
- **Distrust directly connected to distrust in institutions**

 Are we naïve?

## THE UGLY

- The use and abuse of scientific consensus in **policy making**
- The dangers of propagating a “modern” image of science

 In science we trust?