

Volume 4

The Many-Splendored Society:
The Pursuit of Knowledge

First edition

This book describes how science became an independent realm of society. We also describe its contemporary nature and its relations to other realms, including those pursuing journalistic, religious, political, and economic ends.

This book stands alone, and one can read it by itself. It serves also as the fourth installment to a larger work in seven volumes about social theory and about a many-splendored society that is within human reach.

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Working with Tracks and Frames

A story dubbed “Climate-gate” by skeptics to global warming emerged at the time of my preparing the first version of this text for publication. Hackers had found about ten years of research data with long-term temperature measurements at the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia. They put the researchers’ emails and data on the Internet for all to see. This material was confirmed as genuine. Let it be our illustration to news presentations. News presentations are very different from presentations of discoveries at scholarly conferences and in science journals.

The emails revealed CRU’s routine treatment of raw data from time series of temperature. They told about excluding reports from stations judged as less relevant, and the use of proxy data such as annual tree rings in lieu of lacking thermometer readings. Such procedures are accepted in science, but require consistency and full transparency. Needless to say, one should not have to wait for hackers to provide the latter.

Some emails also contained belittling remarks about colleagues who had reached different conclusions from their climate research than had the CRU. This is not unusual in any conversation among scientists. The emails revealed attempts to prevent reaching print in peer review journals, what the CRU leadership considered as misleading conclusions by opponents. Such is the backside of the nature of peer reviewing, to keep bad science from being published. There were also emails calling for the erase of past emails, perhaps so that they would be unavailable to journalists or adversaries under the British Freedom of Information Act. An effort to clean out from the Wikipedia some conclusions about the warming of Europe in medieval time was also mentioned in the hacked documents.

The flow of news at the time was full of stories about global warming caused by emissions of carbon dioxide from fossil fuels. A UN conference in Copenhagen on climate change was to take place a few weeks later. The CRU had had a big hand in the so called IPCC reports, documenting for the United Nations

that a man-made global warming was under way, and that its main cause was human emission of carbon dioxide. On these reports, the UN conference in Copenhagen should base far-reaching and expensive decisions for the world community. It was impossible for mass media to ignore Climate-gate.

Some tracks available to editors to tell about Climate-gate are listed here. They make up a long menu.

1. Editors of mass media are accustomed to report law breaking, and one of their first impulses in presenting Climate-gate was to take the crime-track and tell about a crime of hacking. HACKERS STEAL DATA ON CLIMATE. Media accustomed to support claims of the UN climate panel apparently continued the mention of stolen data also in their further reporting on Climate-gate.
2. Cheating in research is not necessarily a statutory crime. In most instances, it is a matter for the discipline of an academic community. Universities and other academic institutors are fully capable of closing careers of cheaters. Some distortions by scientists are probably unconscious (4: ??). Media are accustomed and prepared to report wrong-doing and crack cloaks of secrecy (4: ??). Some announcers about Climate-gate on a television channel said SCIENCE FRAUD? – with a barely audible question mark. Hints of research fraud were subsequently used as a track among climate skeptics, the underdogs in climate debate at that time.
3. Some mass media have special editors for science news. They could take an intra-science track of scholarly self-correction (4: ??). SCIENTISTS CALLED TO REANALYZE CLIMATE DATA. The British Guardian was one of the few dailies with this track.
4. Many media took the Climate-gate story as a partisan attack in the ongoing debate over the extent of and response to man-made global warming. Editors know that swords crossed are more interesting to readers and viewers than are brotherly consensus. It had been known over several years, namely that Western journalists (more than the public) fa-

vored CO₂-reductions to cope with global warming, Nevertheless, their professional journalistic instinct remained that controversies should be publicized. Their track then became THE SKEPTICS HIT BACK.

5. Many media took a track to focus on the political consequences of Climate-gate. Would it affect the outcome of the big United Nations summit on climate? CONTROVERSY HITS COPENHAGEN CONFERENCE. As it turned out, only the spokesman from Saudi Arabia cited the hacked data to deny global warming. Nevertheless, it remains likely that several other delegates came away from Copenhagen and Climate-gate with a dose of disbelief in the UN reports.
6. Finally, it is always an attractive track for editors to personalize a news story. CLIMATE PROFESSOR TAKES TIME OUT. There were calls for Professor Phil Jones, the head of CRU, to resign. He did step aside during the official British inquiry that eventually cleared him from wrongdoing.
7. The whole set of stories on Climate-gate generated numerous comments, news analyses, and editorials attempting to assess the consequences of the event for the scientific status of climate research, the veracity of IPCC reports, the competence of United Nations to cope with climate change, and the future relations between rich and poor nations. My own hope is that the rhetoric of man-made global warming may have taken a good step away from the influence of the false fourth principle of magic (page 1: 108) that makes us believe that behind everything that happens in the world is always a being, and not a force of nature or a spontaneous social order.

Media researchers will undoubtedly analyze Climate-gate both for the content and the statistics of these and other tracks of reporting. Media editors are not unfamiliar with battles for recognition among large research organizations; such battles become news and the parties are usually eager to tell their sides to the media. The availability of multiple tracks in Climate-gate

made it possible for a majority of editors to brush over issues of misleading research reporting and of bias in research publicity.

To the insiders in an editorial office, the chosen track, “the angle” signaled by a heading, is a conscious device to help the audience to get a grip on a story. At the same time, the chosen perspective greatly influences how the media audience perceives reported events.

The choice of a track is an important source of editorial power. It structures the public’s conversations about events. PR-agents hijack this power when they spread stories in the media with tracks that put the (wrong) doings of their clients in a most favorable light possible.

Frames

The many tracks in mass media can be sorted in a smaller number of so-called “frames.” They are recurrent models for presenting news. Using codebooks of Pew Foundation researchers, we can label the seven tracks we illustrated about Climate-gate.

Tracks 1 and 2 are so-called Wrong-Doer Stories, 3 is a Straight Story, 4 is a Conflict Story, 5 is a Conjecture Story, 6 is a Profile Story of a Newsmaker, and 7 are several so-called Reality Check Stories.

The ‘frames’ in journalism correspond roughly to ‘plots’ in the study of folklore, for example, they resemble the 31 plots that make up the total of Russian fairytales that Vladimir Propp analyzed (1: 191). Frames do not normally qualify as “the present standpoint of science.” Frames are simply ways of storytelling.

One frame of the above selection qualifies as social science. The Straight Story conforms to one of Kenneth Burke’s discoveries (1: 204-205) It is worth repeating in the context of journalism that the question opener – what? who? how? where? when? and why? – prompts us to describe each separate aspect of a social event: the acts, the actors, the means, the scene, the time, the motivation. Burke discovered that together they pro-

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vide a full account. None of these six questions can be omitted if the description shall be exhaustive, and to add more questions adds confusion rather than illumination (K. Burke 1945, xvii).

Many other frames, more or less consciously used in journalism are simply effective ways of telling stories, including lies.