

Jonathan [focused](#) last week, appropriately in my view, on the ethics of the way in which Peter Gleick got documents from the climate-denying Heartland Institute. His conclusion is that as a scientist Gleick's deceptions to get the documents were unethical. A new [column](#) in The Guardian comes out in the opposite place, arguing that Gleick may have been justified in attempting to expose the denialists given the importance of the issue. But I have a different question that sidesteps the ethics question. Will the long-term effects of Gleick's move to expose the Heartland Institute's efforts to spread doubt about the science of climate change matter in efforts to persuade the American public (and politicians) that we need to dramatically cut greenhouse gas emissions?

For those who haven't followed it, here's the backstory. Gleick — a highly respected expert on water and climate change — [impersonated](#) a board member of the Heartland Institute in order to attempt to verify a document he says he received anonymously. His tactics worked in that he got the verification he was seeking and then anonymously forwarded the documents to journalists. He later admitted that he got the documents through fraudulent tactics. The Heartland documents show that the Institute receives money, including from the vilified Koch brothers (though their money apparently funds a non-climate project) and many energy companies and that the Institute's strategy includes a public education campaign to promote climate denialism aimed at school children. The Institute claims that one of the purloined documents is fake but tacitly admits that the others — including [a fundraising plan](#), are real. That plan includes a "Global Warming Curriculum for K-12 Schools" to produce materials that "isn't alarmist" about global warming. But much of the focus and outcry since the release of the documents has been on Gleick's admission that he falsely represented himself in emails as a Heartland board member.

Others have noted the parallels between the Gleick/Heartland incident and "[climategate](#)," the brouhaha that revealed emails stolen from researchers at University of East Anglia that climate denialists claimed show that the science behind global warming is fraudulent. Eight committees that have investigated the hacking scandal have concluded that the emails show no such fraud and that the scientific case for climate change remains strong.

What is of course striking about climategate is that the email hackers have never been identified and the moral outrage about the scandal has focused almost entirely on the scientists whose accounts were hacked. In the Gleick/Heartland affair, by contrast, a quick google of the incident finds all the focus on Gleick's behavior. Of course Gleick came forward and admitted his role and that admission has generated enormous press and criticism of him. We have never learned the identities of the climategate hackers. But the lack of equal condemnation still strikes me as wrong.

The larger fear is that the press will focus only on Gleick rather than on the behavior of the Heartland Institute and its donors. And the even greater fear is that Gleick's behavior will have the same effect on public opinion that climategate did (see, for example, [this study](#) showing that climategate led to declines in trust of scientists and belief that global warming is real).

My guess is that the Gleick/Heartland affair will not have such a significant effect. I suspect — and could be wrong — that Gleick will provide plenty of fodder and red meat for the denialist community and maybe help Heartland's fundraising. But I'm guessing that the effects will be mostly short term and marginal. He admitted wrongdoing. He's been punished by his own institute and will likely see his own career suffer dramatically. He's been roundly condemned by scientists and skeptics alike. I think the story may have short legs. And I hope I'm right.