Comment on EDGI’s “Changing the Digital Climate”
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Paul N. Edwards
William J. Perry Fellow in International Security and Senior Research Scholar
Center for International Security and Cooperation
Stanford University

Professor of Information and History
University of Michigan

Brief bio: Paul N. Edwards is William J. Perry Fellow in International Security and Senior Research Scholar at Stanford University, as well as Professor of Information and History at the University of Michigan. He writes and teaches about the history and politics of climate knowledge infrastructures. Edwards is the author of A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming (MIT Press, 2010) and co-editor of Changing the Atmosphere: Expert Knowledge and Environmental Governance (MIT Press, 2001), as well as numerous articles.

The Environmental Data and Governance Initiative has emerged as one of America’s most important political watchdogs. In Changing the Digital Climate, EDGI documents the Trump administration’s all-out assault on hard-won knowledge about the causes and consequences of climate change.

Smokescreens and outright deletions are the main strategies that appear in EDGI’s thoroughly documented report. The smokescreens: in hundreds of cases, agencies have deleted the phrase “climate change” from their web pages and replaced it with vague statements about “sustainability” or “emissions.” In other cases, agencies reorganized and revised their websites without documenting the process, breaking external links to their pages and raising serious concerns about government transparency.

The outright deletions are even more concerning. The White House website no longer mentions climate change at all, even though the USA remains legally committed to the 2015 Paris accords. The Environmental Protection Agency deleted numerous mentions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. At the Departments of State, Energy, and Interior, as well as the EPA, renewable energy has largely disappeared as a priority, replaced by fossil fuels and job creation.

Every administration has the right to choose policy priorities, including how it responds to the threat of climate change. But no administration has the right to lie about the existence of the problem, perhaps the most studied and the best confirmed of any environmental issue in
history, nor to sweep it under the rug. Deleting well-settled knowledge from federal websites will have no effect at all on climate change — except to aggravate it, by confusing the public and demonstrating American disregard for the most urgent environmental policy problem in history.

These moves are all part of a much larger Trump administration siege on America’s environmental knowledge infrastructures. The good news is that so far, at least, EDGI has detected no deletion of datasets, an act which would be illegal under federal law. Nonetheless, this administration’s record of disdain for law and established procedure gives cause for ongoing concern. EDGI’s vigilance is a major public service.

In November 2016, climate.data.gov (an Obama administration addition to the data.gov portal for federal government data) listed 762 climate-related datasets. Today, in January 2018, it lists only 677. Thanks to EDGI, we know that the 85 datasets no longer available through the portal probably still exist — but they are less accessible than before, perhaps due to re-tagging consistent with the smokescreen strategy.

The bad news: this administration’s hatred of the very phrase “climate change” is already leading to self-censorship by career agency staff and scientist and scientists whose work depends on government research funding. The climate change denial it has unleashed provokes direct comparison with Soviet-era Lysenkoism or the Newspeak of George Orwell’s 1984.

The attacks on climate knowledge extend far beyond the smokescreens and deletions EDGI has documented. Trump administration budget requests for NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration eliminated satellite missions relevant to monitoring climate change, as well as individual laboratories and programs that model Arctic sea ice, air chemistry, and the spread of pollutants such as mercury and anthrax bioterrorism. Congressional budget negotiations may restore some of these capabilities, but the Trump administration is certain to continue targeting them for elimination. As budget director Mike Mulvaney put it in March 2017 during a press conference on the administration’s priorities, “Regarding the question as to climate change, I think the President was fairly straightforward. We're not spending money on that anymore. We consider that to be a waste of your money...”