

The climate spiral demonstrates the power of sharing creative ideas

Article

Accepted Version

Hawkins, E. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9477-3677>, Fæhn, T. and Fuglestad, J. (2019) The climate spiral demonstrates the power of sharing creative ideas. Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, 100 (5). pp. 753-756. ISSN 0003-0007 doi: 10.1175/BAMS-D-18-0228.1 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86155/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-D-18-0228.1>

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

The climate spiral demonstrates the power of sharing creative ideas

Ed Hawkins¹, Taran Fæhn², Jan Fuglestad³

¹ National Centre for Atmospheric Science, Department of Meteorology, University of Reading, Reading, RG6 6BB. UK.

5 ² Research Department, Statistics Norway, PO Box 2633 St. Hanshaugen, N-0131 Oslo and Oslo Centre for Research on Environmentally friendly Energy (CREE), Norway.

³ CICERO Center for International Climate Research, PO Box 1129, Blindern, 0318 Oslo, Norway

Correspondence to: Ed Hawkins (e.hawkins@reading.ac.uk) or the authors on twitter: @ed_hawkins, @taranfn, @janfug

10 Abstract

Graphical visualisations have the potential to engage diverse audiences in understanding the changes to our climate, especially when spread worldwide using both traditional and social media. The animated global temperature spiral was one of the first climate graphics to ‘go viral’, being viewed by millions of people online and by more than a billion people when it was used in the Opening Ceremony of the 2016
15 Rio Olympics. The idea, design and communication aspects that led to the successes of this animated graphic are discussed, highlighting the benefits to scientists of engaging actively online and openly sharing their creative ideas.

On 10th May 2016, an animated spiral graphic showing the familiar rise of global temperatures in an unfamiliar way (Figure 1; Supp. Info.) was published on Twitter and subsequently went ‘viral’. The original tweet (Hawkins, 2016a) has been viewed more than 3.7 million times but the reach is substantially
5 larger when considering other media channels. For example, the animation was viewed several million times on various Facebook pages and through many online stories (e.g. Mooney 2016, Plumer 2016). Prominent people known to have used or shared the graphic include Elon Musk, Bernie Sanders, the artist Banksy and senior policymakers in the UK and Australia. It was even shortlisted for a design award (Information is Beautiful 2016) and translated into several different languages by the U.S. Department of
10 State (2016) for their online webpages.

The most high-profile appearance of the visualisation was during the Opening Ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics, which included a section about climate change; probably the most watched broadcast about the climate ever. The animated climate spiral was used to emphasise how global temperatures have already increased, being viewed by more than a billion people, many of whom may not have been
15 previously exposed to climate science so directly (Koekoek, 2016). We discuss possible reasons why the climate spiral became so popular and describe how it was designed and created, with the aim of enhancing graphical visualisation and engagement throughout climate science. The story highlights the power of creativity, social media, open data, sharing of ideas, and collaboration between scientists who never met in person until more than two years later.

The data and the idea

The original idea for creating a spiral graphic came when author JF showed author TF some earlier graphics produced by author EH which had used stacked horizontal lines to represent global temperatures from January to December in each year since 1850 (Hawkins, 2016b). TF suggested that connecting
5 December to the following January to create a spiral would show the evolution of temperatures in a more dynamic way. JF thought this was a great idea and sent an email to EH, who he had never met, including the phrase *'this is just a (crazy) thought'*. EH found this hard to ignore and so further developed the idea and produced the graphic; subsequent email discussions between all the authors refined the design before it was published online.

10 The underlying data is the HadCRUT4 temperature dataset (Morice et al. 2012) which, at the time, included monthly values for global mean surface temperatures from January 1850 until March 2016. Since average global temperature in 1850-1900 was adopted as an approximation of pre-industrial conditions by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Stocker et al. 2013), we chose to measure change relative to this level. The spiral therefore displays global temperature differences relevant to the
15 aim of the Paris Agreement (2015) to hold 'the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C'. The different seasonal characteristics of temperature change are also visible, with the largest anomalies appearing in boreal winter, coinciding with the seasonal phase of the El-Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO). Figure 1 has been updated from the original version to include data until the end of 2018.

Possible scientific criticisms of the design include that uncertainty is not visualized, and that, despite clearly labelling the temperature limits, a viewer may interpret the *area* of each circle as representing the change rather than the *radius*. In this case, the change may appear to be faster than it is. However, the area arguably grows more in line with the damage of global temperature change, which can be expected to be super-linear (Arent et al. 2014).

Why was the graphic so popular?

Effective communication of how and why our climate is changing is challenging. The primary culprit – carbon dioxide – is invisible and the worst effects often seem remote in both space and time. As climate researchers we have access to bewildering amounts of data, but how do we best distil this complex information to make the risks of climate change easily understandable to the general public? Moser (2010) highlights the important role of the messenger, imagery, emotion, consistent messaging and keeping the audience's attention.

With hindsight, many of the design and communication aspects of the spiral resonate with the factors emphasised by Moser (2010). First, the choice to use temperature – a variable that the public is very familiar with – makes it feel instantly relevant and understandable. In addition, the graphic was produced by scientists, who tend to be trusted messengers. Importantly, the visualisation does not look like a traditional 'boring' scientific graph or require any complex interpretation; it is intuitive and eye-catching. Our impression is that the similarity with a circle or clock, usually regular and predictable, that gradually changes to be irregular, is effective imagery for communicating the temperature changes. The animated nature of the graphic is fundamental: it tells a story to the viewer about how temperatures are changing.

The animation is not too long, ensuring attention is maintained, and as the temperatures rise substantially it influences emotions by providing a visual surprise at the end. Many viewers reporting watching the animation over and over again for these reasons.

The year counter was placed in the centre of the graphic to ensure visibility and the colours were chosen
5 to aid interpretation and add to the message. The internationally adopted temperature limits are shown in red that emotionally signify ‘danger’. The spiral starts using dark blue and ends with yellow to emphasise that we have not yet reached those ‘dangerous’ levels. Although it may be tempting to use the analogy that temperatures are ‘spiralling out of control’, as some media stories did, an alternative (and more positive) message is rather that decision makers and society can still take control and choose to avoid
10 danger.

But, even well-designed and effective visualisations may not be widely seen or shared. Social media provides a new way of enabling ‘many-to-many’ communication and has been found to be an effective tool for raising the profile of climate science (e.g. Pavlov et al. 2018). In particular, Twitter is now actively used by several thousand climate scientists to discuss, engage and communicate, thus raising their profile
15 amongst peers and the public. Importantly, the platform allows a story to be consumed within the social media bubble rather than requiring a journey to another website (Hope 2016) and provides a relatively easy way of presenting information which can be subsequently amplified by journalists, the media and highly popular accounts. These factors facilitated the spiral’s spread to over a billion people. In addition, the timing of the publication was favourable, though perhaps fortuitous. It came a few months after the

1.5°C target had been adopted at COP21, and during a large El Nino event which pushed global temperatures slightly higher in 2016-7.

We believe that the reason why the spiral went viral is the combination of a creative idea, collaboration, design, timing and, importantly, openness and possibility for sharing on social media, both within and
5 beyond the research community. This has facilitated a diffusion of the spiral in various forms (Hawkins, 2016c), and its message to be communicated at various fora and to diverse stakeholders. The spiral has stimulated collaborations and inspired other climate scientists to produce a range of visualisations of climatic changes which have also been widely shared (e.g. Schmidt 2017, Lipponen 2017, Labe 2018, Hawkins 2018, Lipponen 2018). These are all examples of how unrestricted sharing of data and creative
10 ideas are beneficial. We are delighted that our small contribution has led to a spiralling of creativity and we encourage others to experiment and continue sharing ideas.

Acknowledgements

EH was funded by the UK National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS), and by the Natural Environment Research Council (grant: NE/I020792/1). We thank Simon Evans for producing a small
15 enough version of the animated graphic to be uploaded onto Twitter initially, Anders Levermann for suggesting that we write a short discussion about the spiral, two anonymous reviewers whose comments improved this discussion, and everyone who has shared and used the spiral.

References

- Arent, D.J., R.S.J. Tol, E. Faust, J.P. Hella, S. Kumar, K.M. Strzepek, F.L. Tóth, and D. Yan: Key economic sectors and services. In: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Field, C.B., V.R. Barros, D.J. Dokken, K.J. Mach, M.D. Mastrandrea, T.E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K.L. Ebi, Y.O. Estrada, R.C. Genova, B. Girma, E.S. Kissel, A.N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P.R. Mastrandrea, and L.L. White (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 659-708, 2014
- Hawkins, E.: Spiralling global temperatures from 1850-2016,
5 https://twitter.com/ed_hawkins/status/729753441459945474, 2016a
- Hawkins, E.: Global temperature changes since 1850, <http://www.climate-lab-book.ac.uk/2016/global-temperature-changes-since-1850/>, 2016b
- Hawkins, E.: Climate spirals, <http://www.climate-lab-book.ac.uk/spirals>, 2016c
- Hawkins, E.: Visualising global temperature change since records began in 1850,
15 https://twitter.com/ed_hawkins/status/999242147135188993, 2018
- Hope, M: Temperature spiral goes viral, Nature Climate Change, 6, 657, 2016.
- Information is Beautiful: <https://www.informationisbeautifulawards.com/showcase/1428-climate-spirals>, 2016
- Koekoek, P: How the climate action community reacted to Rio's Olympic
20 surprise, <https://www.climate-kic.org/how-the-climate-action-community-reacted-to-rios-olympic-surprise/>, 2016

- Labe, Z.: The extreme event continues to unfold in the high Arctic today,
<https://twitter.com/ZLabe/status/967838618252320768>, 2018
- Lipponen, A.: Temperature anomalies arranged by country 1900 – 2016,
<https://twitter.com/anttilip/status/892318734244884480>, 2017
- 5 Lipponen, A.: Temperature anomalies 1880-2017 by country,
<https://twitter.com/anttilip/status/1033342041474969601>, 2018
- Mooney, C.: This scientist just changed how we think about climate change with one GIF,
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/05/11/this-scientist-just-changed-how-we-think-about-climate-change-with-one-gif/>, 2016 (subscription required)
- 10 Morice, C. P., J. J. Kennedy, N. A. Rayner, and P. D. Jones: Quantifying uncertainties in global and regional temperature change using an ensemble of observational estimates: The HadCRUT4 dataset, *J. Geophys. Res.*, 117, D08101, doi:10.1029/2011JD017187, 2012
- Moser, S. C., Communicating climate change: history, challenges, process and future directions. *WIREs Clim Change*, 1: 31-53. doi:10.1002/wcc11, 2010
- 15 Pavlov A. et al., Does Your Lab Use Social Media?: Sharing Three Years of Experience in Science Communication, *BAMS*, 99, 1135–1146, <https://doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-D-17-0195.1>, 2018
- Plumer, B: This viral climate GIF offers an incredibly clear view of rising temperatures,
<https://www.vox.com/2016/5/10/11643864/global-warming-spiral-temperatures>, 2016
- Schmidt, G.: Global average monthly temperature distributions since the 19th Century from GISTEMP,
20 <https://twitter.com/ClimateOfGavin/status/887522165196820480>, 2017

- Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, L.V. Alexander, S.K. Allen, N.L. Bindoff, F.-M. Bréon, J.A. Church, U. Cubasch, S. Emori, P. Forster, P. Friedlingstein, N. Gillett, J.M. Gregory, D.L. Hartmann, E. Jansen, B. Kirtman, R. Knutti, K. Krishna Kumar, P. Lemke, J. Marotzke, V. Masson-Delmotte, G.A. Meehl, I.I. Mokhov, S. Piao, V. Ramaswamy, D. Randall, M. Rhein, M. Rojas, C. Sabine, D. Shindell,
- 5 L.D. Talley, D.G. Vaughan and S.-P. Xie: Technical Summary. In: Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 33–115, doi:10.1017/
- 10 CBO9781107415324.005, 2013.
- U.S. Department of State: You haven't seen climate change like this before, <https://share.america.gov/climate-change-like-youve-never-seen/>, 2016

Global temperature change (1850–2017)

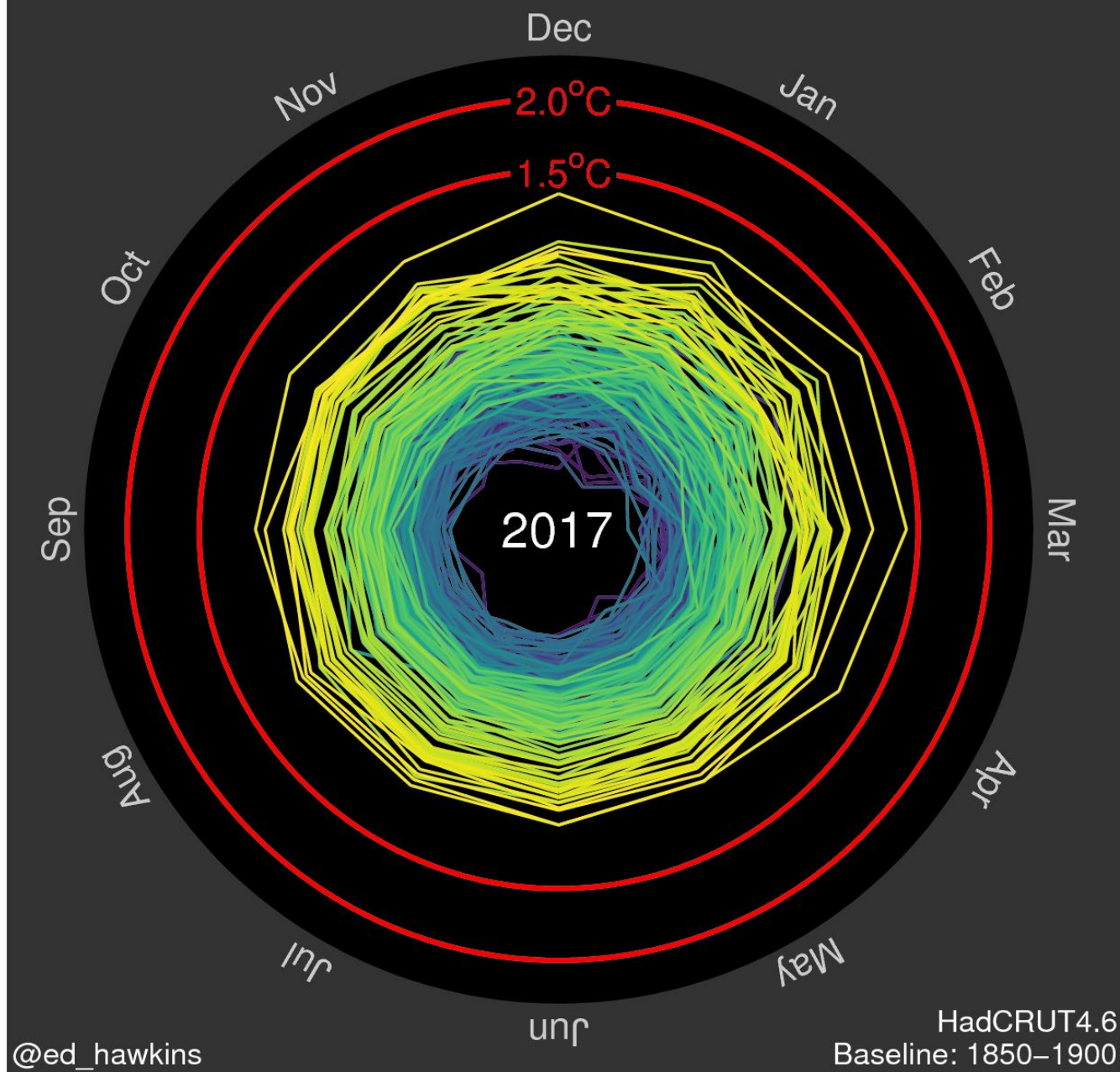


Figure 1: The final frame of the animated climate spiral, updated to the end of 2017. Regularly updated versions are available from: <http://www.climate-lab-book.ac.uk/spirals/>