

“Enemies of Society”: How the Media Portray Climate Activists

Article by Stella Levantesi

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With disruptive modes of protest becoming more widespread, climate activists are accused of alienating policymakers and public opinion from the just cause of climate action. However, an analysis of mainstream media discourse in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy suggests that the othering and demonisation of climate activists are neither new nor unbiased.

“Sociopaths”, “vandals”, “eco-anarchists”, “fear mongers”, “fanatics”, the list could go on and on. As civil disobedience-based protests are surging in response to continued climate inaction and obstruction by political leaders, polluting companies and other vested interests, climate activists are being labelled and accused across European media.

“The language of so-called ‘eco-extremism’ is being weaponised against groups, even groups that are using legal forms of civil disobedience to advocate for climate action,” said Jennie King, Head of Climate Research and Policy at the non-profit Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD).

This tactic, King explained, is increasingly stark in the UK context and is developing as a trend in Germany. Out of over 400 headlines in English-, German- and French-language media framing climate activists as a “security threat”, around 80 per cent were published by German-language outlets, according to a recent [analysis](#) by ISD.

These included comparisons with the 1970s and 1980s left-wing extremist group Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), and references in mainstream media to an interview in the tabloid *BILD* which reported that a terrorism expert warned of “radicalised” climate activists. “There is no distinction being made between [protests] that might be counter to the mainstream or might be considered as radical, and the actual ideology that undergirds eco-extremism, [...] which has a very clear history behind it,” King said.

ISD also found that mainstream media outlets echoing this narrative – even when the intention is to debunk connections between activists and eco-terrorism – can be “easily misused by alternative media to reinforce the ‘climate terrorists’ messaging.”

Promoting antagonism

According to King, mainstream media across the political spectrum “fall into the trap” of reporting on the controversies surrounding protests by movements such as Just Stop Oil and Last Generation, rather than reporting on the reasons and substance of their climate actions. This often results in the media focusing on and spotlighting the polarisation surrounding climate activism today, rather than issues relating to climate action.

“It’s rare that you will see an article about Just Stop Oil that is actually addressing their advocacy positions; 99 per cent of the article is about the methods being used and whether or not they are legitimate,” King said. “There is a broad trend of making the story [about] the methods and the antagonism, rather than making it [about] the positions that are being championed and why they’re being

championed.”

In Italy, too, mainstream media outlets often reiterate debates surrounding protests, echo direct attacks against climate activists and promote “[anti-climate activism](#)” narratives. According to [a study](#) by Greenpeace Italy and media monitoring hub Osservatorio di Pavia on the climate coverage of mainstream Italian newspapers, TV news broadcasts and the most followed outlets on Instagram, criticism of climate movements or their modes of protest are among the most frequently weaponised topics in order to delay and hinder the climate transition. On TV news, in particular, they are present in 7 per cent of news stories discussing the climate crisis.

“Over the last year, [climate activism] has emerged in the media, and it is central to those attempts aimed at bringing public discourse to obstruct climate action and the energy transition,” said Giancarlo Sturloni, communications director at Greenpeace Italy.

The “othering” of activists

Labelling activists, Sturloni says, fuels the perception that these are “violent” groups and are, ultimately, “enemies of society.”

King echoed this. “It is an obvious tactic to frame the fight against frontline movements in the language of eco-extremism because it delegitimises that activity,” she explained. “There is a very clear objective, which is to other these types of movements and to attribute blame in a way that distances them from the rest of society.”

The process of “othering” is a core strategy of climate obstruction efforts. For example, climate deniers and delayers have employed the terms “realists” and “alarmists” to discredit legitimate scientific warnings and associate denier messaging with rationality and realism.

In 2020, Cambridge University researcher Giulio Corsi and I [analysed](#) the use of these two terms on Twitter and found a 900 per cent increase in their use over the previous four years. Spikes in tweets about “alarmism” and “realism” often corresponded to high-profile speeches by activist Greta Thunberg between 2018 and 2019, when the climate movement was in the media spotlight for its strikes, protests and marches all around the world.

Our analysis also found that this framing, just like weaponising the language of extremism to attack activists, exploits the negative connotation of certain terms and creates an “us versus them” dynamic.

Language and messaging used to promote the othering of climate advocates also tap into right-wing identity values and propaganda – and the idea that climate action impinges on individual freedom.

Much like the “alarmist versus realist” narrative falsely portraying climate advocates and legitimate climate science as catastrophist, the analysis by ISD found that some English-language headlines described activists as “idiots”, “crazies”, “freaks” or “nuts”.

The idea of portraying activists as “crazy” or “insane” is also reminiscent of a decade-old climate denier strategy. In 1998, Big Oil trade association American Petroleum Institute published an “[action plan](#)” aimed at exploiting the “uncertainties” in climate science. The plan, developed by Exxon, Chevron, Southern Company, and representatives from conservative organisations, stated: “Victory will be achieved when those promoting the [Kyoto] treaty on the basis of existent science appear to be out of touch with reality.”

The rhetoric likening those who warn about the catastrophic impacts of the climate emergency to someone who is “out of touch with reality” was used to promote the idea that climate advocates and scientists were of unsound mind, delirious and not to be listened to.

Mocking language

Using mocking language to refer to climate activists is also a common strategy. In German media, the term “Klima-Kleber” – climate gluers – was used more than 200 times in both alternative and mainstream media outlets as activists started protesting by gluing their hands to picture frames in museums and art galleries, [ISD](#) reports. This expression comes with “contemptuous and mocking perception” and constitutes “emotive language” which “increases click rates” and “skews perceptions,” writes Sara Bundtzen for [ISD](#).

French-language mainstream outlet BFMTV cited Andréa Kotarac, a politician of the far-right party Rassemblement National, and referred to the protests as “*une explosion de crétins*” (“an explosion of idiots”), according to the same analysis.

Derogatory language and “othering” narratives were used to delegitimize climate activists even before Just Stop Oil, Last Generation and other groups. Many of the *ad hominem* attacks revolved around the figure of Greta Thunberg. In Italy, for example, the term “*gretini*”, a mix of the words Greta and “cretini” (“idiots”) circulated in the media when referring to activists of Fridays for Future and other youth climate movements.

In other countries too, some media outlets have worked as an echo chamber for propaganda-based messaging against the climate movement and Thunberg. As [reported](#) by [Scientific American](#), an editor of the right-wing British magazine [Spiked](#) called Thunberg a “weirdo” and wrote that “there is something chilling and positively pre-modern about Ms. Thunberg.” Andrew Bolt, a Sky News host, wrote a column where Thunberg is labelled as “deeply disturbed”.

According to [a study](#) published in 2019, German newspapers used “ageist” terms and images, including “pupils”, “absentees” and “dreamers”, to de-legitimise Fridays For Future. The study also emphasised that Greta Thunberg was held responsible for the students’ absenteeism from school during climate strikes.

Violence and criminalisation

Anti-climate activism narratives also seep into social media. During COP27, the UN global climate conference held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022, social media posts contained abusive language and calls for violence towards activists, [according to](#) [ISD](#) and the Climate Action Against Disinformation network.

“There is an escalation now in rhetoric, it’s not just ‘these people [activists] are stupid and we disagree with them’, there’s far more gendered disinformation and sexually graphic rhetoric being used,” King said.

In September, in Italy, a 23-year-old Last Generation activist was attacked with sexist comments on social media, as well as right-wing newspapers and radios. “Once you dehumanise any pocket of society, whether it’s an ethnic minority or in this case a climate movement, there’s a far greater likelihood of that translating into violent outcomes,” King explained. “It produces much more targeted abuse and harassment, death threats, rape threats, and all that stuff you see circulating in the digital sphere.”

Today, climate activists in multiple countries are also facing charges for their protests. In seven German states, police raids targeted Last Generation activists at 15 properties. In the UK and Italy, governments proposed and passed bills which are aimed at limiting and sanctioning activism, campaigners say.

In Italy, the crackdown on climate activists also reflects the current political context of Meloni's far-right government, according to Sturloni. "The [Italian] media is interested in what politicians are interested in, and the politicisation of the issue carries the interest of the media with it as well," he added.

In January, in response to a protest by Last Generation activists in Milan, Matteo Salvini, Minister of Infrastructure and leader of the far-right Lega, said: "These are not environmentalists, they are vandals who deserve to go to jail."

"What concerns us most is the criminalisation [of climate activism]," said Sturloni. "In other social movements, we have seen the attempt to criminalise groups that are more radical, [in this case] in an attempt to divide and weaken the climate movement."

The presence of anti-climate activism narratives in the media shows how these can be used to frame the whole public debate on climate action and, ultimately, contribute to shaping the public's perception of the issue.

This article is the first of a series dedicated to climate discourse in the European media. The series is a collaboration between the Green European Journal and Voxeurop.

Stella Levantesi is an Italian climate journalist, photographer, and author. Her main areas of expertise are climate disinformation, climate litigation, and corporate responsibility on the climate crisis. Her book *I bugiardi del clima* (Climate Liars), published in Italy with Laterza, investigates the history of climate science denial and obstruction tactics to climate action.

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