

# Voices of a generation

Elisabeth Eide (✉ [elisabe@oslomet.no](mailto:elisabe@oslomet.no))

Oslo Metropolitan University: OsloMet - storbyuniversitetet <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5663-0800>

Risto Kunelius

University of Helsinki: Helsingin Yliopisto

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## Research Article

**Keywords:** Climate change, Fridays for Future, Climate science, Youth activism, Climate communication

**Posted Date:** February 23rd, 2021

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-255627/v1>

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1 1. (title page)

2 **The voices of a generation**

3 The communicative power of youth activism in climate communication

4 **Authors:**

5 Elisabeth Eide, Professor, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Department of Journalism and  
6 Communication studies, Oslo, Norway

7 E-mail address: [elisabe@oslomet.no](mailto:elisabe@oslomet.no)

8 Risto Kunelius: University of Helsinki. Dept. of Media and Communication Studies. Helsinki, Finland

9 E-mail address: [risto.kunelius@helsinki.fi](mailto:risto.kunelius@helsinki.fi)

10 No of words: 6728

## 1 Abstract

2 In this article, we look at the most recent high tide of the climate crisis attention from the  
3 perspective of the school strikers' movement. It is based on interviews with 31 young climate  
4 activists from 23 countries around the world, made possible by the work of several colleagues in  
5 *MediaClimate* –network (mediacclimate.net), a group of researchers who have studied global climate  
6 media coverage/debates since 2008. The interviews followed a semi-structured guideline,  
7 prompting respondents to discuss how their activism started, their role in the local movement, the  
8 nature of movement organization and their relations to other institutions and actors (NGOs, media,  
9 politicians).

10 This diverse sample of dialogues with activists in a wide variety of global political and cultural  
11 contexts cultures, languages and local conditions collectively produced a vast discursive material. In  
12 our analysis, we first look at the specific way science and interaction with scientists is part of the  
13 youths' action horizon, combining this to the ways in which they relate their life experiences to  
14 climate science. Second, we will situate this specific science-activism analysis to a brief overview  
15 of the nature (or inner logic) of the school movement and the identity of the activists. Through these  
16 two empirical excursions, we harvest some lessons about communicating climate science suggested  
17 by the youth movement.

## 18 Key words

19 Climate change; Fridays for Future; Climate science; Youth activism; Climate communication

# 1 **Voices of a generation**

## 2 The communicative power of youth activism in climate communication

3 *But while the 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist's impassioned plea for climate*  
 4 *justice has inspired an international movement, what's inspired Thunberg herself is*  
 5 *warming of just a half-degree Celsius. A half-degree Celsius that will make a world of*  
 6 *difference according to climate scientists. (Matthew Hart, 2019)*

7  
 8 *My message to political leaders is that they need to wake up. They need to realise that the*  
 9 *science is there, it's screaming at them to wake up. (Activist, South Africa)*

10

11 Greta Thunberg's concern about the 1.5 degree target of IPCC special report (IPCC 2018) captures  
 12 the importance of science and IPCC as a decisive factor in the emergence of global school strikes  
 13 and the Fridays for Future- activity. It also relates to the rise of Thunberg from a lonely 15-old  
 14 demonstrator in front the Swedish parliament to a global influencer with 4,4 million followers on  
 15 Twitter. Born in 2003 (or "at 375 ppm", as her Twitter handle says), Thunberg and her peers will,  
 16 according to earlier IPCC reports, inherit a planet with between 8,4 and 11,3 billion others, a planet  
 17 that is between 0,8 – 2,6 degrees warmer and sea levels from 5-32 centimetres higher. (IPCC SPM,  
 18 2013, synthesized in O'Brien et al 2018).

19 It is no coincidence that the school strike movement took off forcefully in 2018, at the  
 20 same time as the release of the IPCC 1.5 C report. The report, initiated after the 2015 Paris  
 21 Agreement, powerfully underlined drastic differences between a temperature rise of 1.5 and 2  
 22 degrees (IPCC, SPM 2018) and called for a new effort to intensify social transformation that would  
 23 meet the lower target. The summary for policy makers (SPM) explained, in relatively accessible and  
 24 simple terms, the losses and risks of not adhering to the 1.5 degree goal, which is treated by most  
 25 institutions, including the IPCC itself and by UNEP, as quite unrealistic<sup>1</sup>. The target was set in Paris  
 26 after pressure from a coalition of the Most Vulnerable Countries<sup>2</sup>, playing a very active role at the  
 27 COP21.

28 In its 1.5 report, IPCC stepped up its language and highlighted the need for  
 29 unprecedented, systemic changes. Supported by increasingly dramatic extreme weather events and  
 30 enhanced scientific evidence about their attribution to climate change, the report pushed the global  
 31 public attention to climate change up, reaching the levels of the Paris COP-moment during 2019  
 32 (e.g. Boykoff et al, 2020). This peak of climate change attention would have been possible without

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/15c-degree-goal-extremely-unlikely-ipcc/a-42154601> ; see also  
<https://www.carbonbrief.org/unep-1-5c-climate-target-slipping-out-of-reach>

<sup>2</sup> Website: <https://thecvf.org/web/climate-vulnerable-forum/>

1 the global school strike and youth movement, which served as a new kind of ambassador and  
2 collective voice supporting the role of scientific knowledge.

3

#### 4 **Transnational Voices**

5 In this essay, we look at this most recent high tide of the climate crisis attention from the  
6 perspective of the school strikers' movement. Our reflections here emerge from the work of a large  
7 collective. The paper grows from discussions with 31 young climate activists from 23 countries  
8 around the world (see Annex for list of countries), made possible by the work of several colleagues  
9 in *MediaClimate* –network (mediacclimate.net), a group of researchers who have studied global  
10 climate media coverage/debates since 2008 (see Authors, 2010, 2012, 2017). During 2019 and  
11 2020, members this of the network conducted in-depth interviews with climate youth activists in  
12 their respective countries. Our interviewed activists are between 12 and 30 years of age, and  
13 represent a wide range of experiences. The interviews followed a semi-structured guideline,  
14 prompting respondents to discuss how their activism started, their role in the local movement, the  
15 nature of movement organization and their relations to other institutions and actors (NGOs, media,  
16 politicians). The sample of respondents is not a rigidly systematic one: depending on location and  
17 our access, some interviewees were key national figures in their movements, some played a local  
18 role and some were (at least for now) more or less lonely actors. In most locations, the respondents  
19 clearly saw themselves as part of the global school strike or Fridays for Future -movement, but in  
20 some cases, they saw their activism as a parallel activity, following its own logic.

21 This diverse sample of dialogues with activists in a wide variety of global political and  
22 cultural contexts cultures, languages and local conditions collectively produced a discursive  
23 material that we are working with. Although all the specific interpretations in this essay (and the  
24 responsibility for them) are ours, it is important to emphasize that without the local knowledge of  
25 our colleagues and the commitment of the respondents, we would have nothing to say. With their  
26 help, we hope to be able to shed some light to the role, importance and meaning of the movement,  
27 in particular when we think about challenges of communicating climate science as part of  
28 enhancing relevant and effective policy discourse.

29 We will describe the activists and their perspectives in two parts. First, we look at the  
30 specific way science and interaction with scientists is part of the youths' action horizon, combining  
31 this to the ways in which they relate their life experiences to climate science. Second, we will  
32 situate this specific science-activism analysis to a brief overview of the nature (or inner logic) of the

1 school movement and the identity of the activists. Through these two empirical excursions, we  
 2 harvest some lessons about communicating climate science suggested by the youth movement.

3

#### 4 **Youth activists and climate science**

5 The exceptional success and global spread of the school strike movements has also engaged the  
 6 attention of researchers. Some already published work has focused on the experiences of young  
 7 climate activists (Wielk 2020; Nairn, 2019; O’Brien et al. 2018; Kleres & Wettergren 2017).

8 However, much of this research (except for Fischer, 2015) has focused mainly on activist  
 9 experiences in the Global North. There has been less research on activist relationship to science  
 10 (communication) and to media/journalism, as more attention has been paid to the emotional aspects.

11 Shedding light to the activists’ relationship to climate science and their experiences  
 12 about climate communication can be captured by five themes: 1) the strong basic trust on climate  
 13 science, 2) the importance of climate literacy emphasized, 3) reflections of science and advocacy, 4)  
 14 the dynamic of local and global climate science and 5) the role of media in knowledge  
 15 dissemination.

16

#### 17 **Trusting science**

18 Not surprisingly, almost all our interviewees found Greta Thunberg as an inspiration. It is also clear  
 19 that her steady dedication to climate science offered a model for many. The starting point of most  
 20 activists was, that science – and by implication the IPCC – should be taken seriously and should be  
 21 listened to. The movement was built on an explicitly stated trust of climate science, putting the  
 22 youth activists into the role of speaking in the name of science.

23 An interviewee in South Africa, sees the same urgency as her Swedish ‘colleague’:  
 24 “Because the way we’re going according to the IPCC and other credible sources, we are really  
 25 starting to get to a point where if we don’t do anything quickly, we’re not going to be able to stop  
 26 anything.” A French activist (16) says he follows Valérie Masson-Delmotte<sup>3</sup>, France’s most  
 27 internationally renowned climate scientist, on Twitter, besides “Citoyens pour le Climat” (citizens  
 28 for climate), which communicates scientific discoveries to the general public. A Slovenian activist  
 29 mentions how he has become an “amateur meteorologist”. These particular engagements relate well  
 30 to Greta Thunberg, whose trust in mainstream climate research in general and the IPCC in  
 31 particular, is well known, not least from her speeches in high-level forums (Thunberg, 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> Masson-Delmotte is currently leading the IPCC WG I in their work to complete IPCC’s Assessment Report No 6, due in 2021-2022.

1 Many of the youth activists demonstrate their acute awareness of the climate science during  
2 the interviews. Several have actually read original IPCC reports (supposedly the SPMs); others  
3 became aware through social media and recommended articles. In our material, it also seems that  
4 many activists have been cultivated this kind of scientific trust through their upbringing, often  
5 growing up with environmentally conscious parents, well-to-do academics in quite a few cases.  
6 This (not surprisingly) suggests that climate activism may to an extent be an élite phenomenon that  
7 builds on generationally accumulated social and cultural capital. However, there is wide variety of  
8 experiences amongst our informants, some coming from countries with a high degree of illiteracy,  
9 as well as countries at the top of the UN Human Development Index. The political situation and the  
10 spread of populist tendencies may also play a role, as when the Italian activist complains:  
11 “scientific ignorance is widespread, much more than in other countries”. She feels that media “do  
12 not understand how *we are those in favour of science* while they (opponents) are against science  
13 and development.” (Italy interview 2019).

14 A Swedish interviewee said she had read parts of the IPCC reports, and concludes, “When  
15 one reads them, one understands exactly how serious it is. I cannot understand how people can  
16 know of these facts and are (still) not willing to do anything” (Sweden interview 2019). A Ugandan  
17 activist also referred to the reports, and criticizes the global leaders for “their inability to take the  
18 necessary action, explaining that scientists have provided the technical information” (Uganda  
19 interview 2019). Thus, levels of trust in science among young people seem to be more directly  
20 linked to need/calls for action, since activism is a larger part of their social fabric.

21 One of the Norwegian activists told that the IPCC 1,5 report played a motivating role,  
22 “particularly the SPM and the [translated] summary created by the Directorate of Environment.  
23 These documents were very concrete and received a lot of press coverage” (Norway interview  
24 2019). This demonstrates how important local institutions (with their local trust capital and  
25 languages) are for disseminating climate science to broader segments of citizens. It also highlights  
26 the contrast to countries where local scientific and institutional structures are weaker and where  
27 there are, for instance, no prominent local climate scientists or IPCC authors (Nassanga et al. 2017;  
28 Nassanga & Rhaman 2020).

29 The trust on science does not mean that activists would not see the complexity of climate  
30 science. A Danish activist, for instance, expressed some scepticism towards “all these predictions of  
31 what will happen. Because with the climate crisis we [only] know how little we know” (Denmark  
32 interview 2020). Nevertheless, while he demonstrated an awareness of the uncertainty aspects of  
33 science, he also declared that you “don’t really need all these statistics to explain the climate crisis.  
34 Because it is evident: [...] we can’t continue doing things that harm the earth. And we know that.”

1 (ibid.) This points to a tacit understanding of how handling scientific certainty, scientific consensus  
 2 and public or political reasoning should – and must, to a degree – follow different logics. It also  
 3 shows the role that the activists can play in contrast to scientists. Communicating uncertainty is a  
 4 challenge for scientists – in particular for climate scientists – who have seen uncertainties  
 5 exaggerated in media representations as indicators of “controversial science” (Painter, 2017).

6

### 7 **Climate literacy: institutional critique and peer education**

8 A French activist blamed the media for giving too much space to “climate skeptics” and too little to  
 9 the scientists. He accused media and *schools* for his classmates’ ignorance, “who, for example, do  
 10 not know what the IPCC is” (French interview, 2020). A Slovenian activist, on the other hand, said  
 11 he had “a lot of environmental topics” at his primary school, also working practically to save the  
 12 environment (Slovenian interview, 2020). This way of acquiring knowledge through practice and  
 13 thus understanding the climate situation better, is confirmed by a Norwegian piece of opinion  
 14 research, where the correlation between doing something to ameliorate the climate/environment and  
 15 trusting the climate science, was clear (Austgulen & Stø 2013).

16 Some of the older activists, already in their 20s, had also assumed a role as peer-educators  
 17 (Indonesia, Pakistan), realizing that many of their fellow citizens suffer from low climate literacy.  
 18 An Indonesian activist said he had “educated the students ... not like a scientist, rather sharing or  
 19 introducing these issues, because not all children, maybe in Indonesia, especially in Sumatra, have  
 20 heard the issue of climate change.” (Indonesia interview 2019). He had successfully combined  
 21 lessons on climate change with the critical extinction of species, which the young can identify with  
 22 and observe around them. While this activity had made him well aware of science as a process and  
 23 a field that changes, he deemed it as – in relation to climate action – “crystal clear” (ibid.) In  
 24 Pakistan, a leading activist described his experiences and trust in science like this: “Awareness is  
 25 the most important step. Climate education needs to be imparted to the youth. [...] Climate scientists  
 26 should be included in decision-making”.

27 It is a paradox that while climate change “disproportionately affects those in the most  
 28 disadvantaged groups”, the “climate engagement tends to increase with education and income”  
 29 (Happer, 2019). For many, technology-based solutions as recommended partly by scientists, partly  
 30 by entrepreneurs and politicians, “investment in solar panels, electric cars, passive house  
 31 technologies are unreachable” (Fox, 2019, see also Brisman 2009). Additionally, features of climate  
 32 activism such as changing consumer habits, etc. may be less attractive to the poor, writes North  
 33 (2011). However, he concludes that unlike other global initiatives, “the range of spaces and scales at

1 which climate activists organise is greater” (ibid.). The youth movement, then, can at its best, as  
 2 ‘agents of climate science consensus’, play an educative role in societies with low climate literacy.

3

#### 4 **Science and activism**

5 One of the Norwegian activists told us that some scientific institutions unofficially sent scientists to  
 6 speak at the activist rallies and that [S]cientists and authors signed a protest published in  
 7 *Aftenposten* (Norway’s largest subscription paper) (Norway, interview, 2019). While a larger  
 8 proportion of climate scientists would not explicitly subscribe to activism, there are those who do so  
 9 (Ytterstad, 2017). One scientist said that to reach the 2 degree target, it has to be linked to other  
 10 societal problems, and underlines the complexity of the issue, which will “affect today’s youth  
 11 during their entire life span”. The same scientist adds that there might be a need for those who know  
 12 the science to dare “turn a little from *is* to *ought to*” (Duarte & Eide, 2018, e.a.).

13 Experiences of activist-scientist encounters had taken different shapes, though. A  
 14 Canadian activist found herself in a European conference: “We had IPCC scientists, over 150 media  
 15 present [...] IPCC scientists, one of them, like broke down in tears and hugged me, saying: ‘you’re  
 16 the reason I still wake up in the morning.’”. Such an emotional reaction from a renowned scientist  
 17 points to the different roles – and different modes of expertise – that scientist and youth activists  
 18 play, but also to the ways in which they can emotionally find together.

19 While scientific evidence forms a fundamental base for the activists, their specific  
 20 capacities in climate debate was often elsewhere. This was well iterated by an Australian activist.  
 21 For her, everyday experience comes first, science follows and verifies. “[...] feel most connected to  
 22 the issue was when people talk about their *experiences* because it is inherently an issue that affects  
 23 people [...] so it was an initial response from the *personal experience* that climate change has an  
 24 impact on people’s personal lives [...] lead me to read the IPCC report and other scientific  
 25 knowledge. (Australia interview, 2019). She added that many youth activists do not know much of  
 26 the science, but know “the basics”, that climate change affects people.

27 The interplay between citizen experience and scientists, had offered interesting openings to  
 28 further learning, though. From Canada, the young leader tells of how she has experienced  
 29 connecting to scientists: “I think you can call [a] sort of hotline of scientists, you know, like what’s  
 30 this fact, and they help you”. (Canada interview, 2019). This special ‘reach out’ from citizens to  
 31 scientists may prove an interesting path for future communication.

32

#### 33 **The science – global and local**

1 The degree to which one can connect global processes of climate change to local events has been a  
2 recurring issue for both academics and journalists. Climate researchers are often careful when  
3 communicating about climate change processes linked to extreme weather events (Duarte, 2016;  
4 Duarte & Eide 2019), although they conclude with scenarios of increased occurrences. IPCC special  
5 reports (IPCC 2012, 2014, 2018) of course, suggest that some connections and practices of weather  
6 attribution serve the debate increasingly better (Painter & Hassol, 2020). However, there is still an  
7 interpretational gap between lay people (who apprehend changes in local weather conditions) and  
8 scientists (who stress that weather is not the same as climate).

9           Our informants situated knowledge about the climate demonstrate a vast global  
10 variety of local experiences. From India, for instance, one activist is very engaged in the case of  
11 wetlands in Tamil Nadu, which “retain water when there are floods, they are not wastelands, but  
12 they are endangered. The 2015 Chennai flood damage could have been minimized if these wetlands  
13 were well preserved” (India, interview 2019). This is a clear example of how environmental  
14 degradation leaves an area more vulnerable to the more frequently recurring floods, whose  
15 increased frequency is estimated to be caused by global warming. A German activist observed  
16 “more wildfires [...] more droughts, less profitable harvests in the agricultural sector” and mentions  
17 heat waves affecting the elderly (Germany interview 2019). In France, an informant mentioned  
18 increased levels of droughts, floods, water scarcity, and sea level rise. The Danish activist said  
19 Denmark is “less vulnerable than many other countries”, but mentions how farming could be  
20 affected in the future. Norwegian activists also mentioned agriculture, as well as sanitation and  
21 floods.

22           Some activists were informed by more extreme experiences, though, and are  
23 motivated by these events – often ahead of having their convictions strengthened by accessing the  
24 science. A respondent in Bangladesh referred to a terrible cyclone that had devastated large areas of  
25 the country when he was seven years old. “The [coastal] area where I live is often hit by storm and  
26 cyclone”. The suffering witnessed on the ground had initially sparked his activism. “I got inspired  
27 by the field experience” (Bangladesh, interview 2019). In Pakistan, our interviewee started learning  
28 of the climate crisis when extreme weather and floods devastated his country in 2010. The Brazilian  
29 activist was much preoccupied with fighting against a megaproject in an area inhabited by  
30 indigenous people, while the Indian activist was inspired while working on a river pollution project  
31 when he was 15. The Indonesian activist had noticed changes in the livelihood in his village, partly  
32 due to the usage of pesticides. Furthermore, he had, from a young age, been engaged with  
33 preserving the habitat of the Orangutans, a threatened species in Indonesia.

1           It comes as no surprise that activists from the Global South speak more about actual extreme  
 2 events that those from the North. They are also more often inspired to action by events and  
 3 problems in their own country, then consciously or more spontaneously connecting them to the  
 4 climate science/reports. Their answers speak of a willingness to engage holistically and globally  
 5 with the climate crisis and the environment. Connecting dots, then, may entail more than seeing  
 6 local extreme events as indicators of climate change. The activist leaders also refer to species  
 7 extinction, signs of environment degradation, etc., not necessarily as directly linked to climate  
 8 change, but as proofs of an ontological understanding of man’s destructive treatment of the planet  
 9 and its livelihoods.

### 11 **Social media platforms and knowledge**

12 The radical shift of media landscape in recent years has revolutionized the landscape of emerging  
 13 social movements (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts, 2018). While warning against  
 14 “slacktivism” (i.e. youngsters evaluating “likes” and “retweets” as sufficient participation) Wielk  
 15 (2020), in her study of young climate activists, stresses that this change is particularly relevant of  
 16 the youth involvement.

17           Our interviews pointed towards some noteworthy pattern of on social media use in  
 18 relation to science and knowledge diffusion. It was clear that the generation of climate youth  
 19 activist, Instagram was seen is the most popular social medium, followed by Facebook (among the  
 20 older interviewees). Particularly the strong visual components of Instagram seemed to serve the  
 21 movement well, as it allowed flexible circulation of attention catching images and sharing of video  
 22 materials of demonstrations. Facebook and Twitter were seen more helpful in advertising of events  
 23 and in mobilization.

24           While this landscape is evolving quickly, there were some signs (somewhat familiar)  
 25 divisions of labor between ‘rational’, more directly policy related interaction and ‘emotional’, of  
 26 attention raising efforts. Roughly, we see that some of those who highlighted Twitter, are more  
 27 engaged with obtaining accurate *knowledge*, more involved in interaction with politicians, while the  
 28 ‘Insta people’ lean more towards working to mobilize and reach a wide range of people via images  
 29 and short, oftentimes emotionally laden short texts. While an elaborate account of the diverse media  
 30 experiences of the activist remains a subject of another article, for functional climate science  
 31 communication, an accurate sense of how different platforms are mobilized for different  
 32 communication purposes – from attention raising, community building to event organizing and  
 33 direct political engagement – and how this landscape evolves, remains a key concern.

## 1 **The nature of the movement**

2 While the activists direct reflections on the role of science and scientific knowledge offer important  
3 substantial insights, it is also important to situate these ideas into an understanding of political  
4 dynamics and nature of the movement. In order to capture a fuller picture of this, we highlight four  
5 themes: 1) how the activists perspective is was based on a sense of authenticity and personal  
6 experience, 2) how this helped them construct an autonomous, distinct role in the climate debates,  
7 3) how they used and protected this autonomy in building alliances with other social actors.

8

## 9 **Sense of authenticity**

10 A key feature of many respondents' story is their own, *personal* experience of the climate crisis. We  
11 often heard of an intense interplay of anxiety, stress and even depression (caused by the news and  
12 predictions of the climate crisis) and the powerful feelings of collective and personal enthusiasm  
13 (provided by the action and attention of the strikes). This dynamic fueled the "affective public" (cf.  
14 Papacharissi, 2015: 18 ff.) of the movement. The emotional anxiety had often been the original  
15 impetus to act: "It was like...sitting on that fear and anger is not going to do anything" (USA,  
16 interview 2019). It also was a source authority inside the movements: "Strongest voices [in the  
17 movement] have a massive emotional attachment to this" (Denmark, interview 2019). Emotional  
18 dynamic also framed how the activists communicated together: "We support each other and feed  
19 each other's anxiety (stress)" (interview, Finland 2019). This personal anxiety was juxtaposed with  
20 the thrill of the public attention and sense of being part of larger group, seeing "hundreds of  
21 thousands of young people, who had different national backgrounds, races, religions, colors"  
22 (Indonesia), "crying as we did the climate scream" (Norway), remembering "our first  
23 organization... It was very small compared to the other strike but it was so beautiful" (Turkey), or  
24 "leading chants and hearing ....the voices of up to 20,000 people strong reply " (USA).

25 It is impossible to understand the success of the movement, without this immediate sense of  
26 empowerment and ability to act to do something about the anxiety over future. It has offered an  
27 important of self-reliance and a sense of *authenticity* of their message. It also links to the core of the  
28 movement and its simple and personal claim. Climate politics has engaged a generation that has to  
29 imagine its *own* future directly under *concrete* threat.

30

## 31 **The value of autonomy**

32 As one would expect, being part of global network of youth activism was an important empowering  
33 factor for many respondents. However, this general sense of common cause did not extend to much

1 actual cooperation, coordination or interaction. Contacts between local actors and the spearheading  
 2 international figures appeared relatively thin and not systematic. In fact, many of the respondents  
 3 stressed the autonomy and self-decision-making nature of the *local* movements, emphasizing that  
 4 there is not a clear “connection between overseas strikes that are happening” (Australia, interview  
 5 2019), that “it is necessary to create an original [national] Japanese plan” (Japan, interview 2019) or  
 6 that “these things [other actions] would take place even without international movement, without  
 7 linking with them, attending the joint events etc.” (Slovenia, interview 2019). The South African  
 8 activist, coming from a country where the gap between rich and poor is among the largest in the  
 9 world, finds it “unfair to assume that other students are going to skip school when their parents are  
 10 working so hard to get them a good education to get them into a position where they can have a  
 11 better life than under apartheid.”

12 This emphasis on local judgement can partly be caused by a defence against national  
 13 criticism where the strikers have been blamed for being driven by fashionable media attention, co-  
 14 opted by the global movement, or so on. However, it is also connected to the local diversity of the  
 15 actual threats that climate crisis poses as it plays out differently across the globe. In this sense, this  
 16 stress on independence can be seen as an element of local, “spectral knowledge” practices that  
 17 balance the abstract global knowledge production – which is also the strong terrain of climate  
 18 science (e.g. Hulme, 2015). Momentarily, even the idea of global political coordination of climate  
 19 policy was called into question: “there’s no structure [in the movement] internationally. ...we’re  
 20 hoping never to have, even international spokespeople. Like, obviously Greta is a natural one, but  
 21 otherwise ... because that’s how we got into this mess” (Canada, interview 2019)

### 23 **Careful alliances**

24 The youth strike movements have emerged into a field of climate/environmental politics already  
 25 crowded with established, powerful actors and organizations. As one would expect, many global  
 26 NGO’s (particularly Greenpeace and 350.org) have provided important support to the movement  
 27 (workshops on activism skills, practical support for the events, help to figure out media strategies).  
 28 This cooperation is of course not a surprise. However, often the activists were also careful to sustain  
 29 a distinction, arguing that this easily becomes “a mix of adults and kids; and adults have an implicit  
 30 authority over children.” (Denmark, interview 2019). Many also said that these relationships were  
 31 of mutual benefit: old actors providing experience and the youth offering, “input of what the young  
 32 people today think” (Finland, interview 2019). There were also references to “conflicts because  
 33 some members of Fridays want to do it only with the students themselves” (Japan, interview 2019),  
 34 and some moments of outright opposition, as in France: “Greenpeace is 50 years old and there has

1 been no radical change over this time period. Maybe it's time to adopt a different strategy and to  
 2 ask for a global and systemic change and not just for incremental measures.” (France, interview  
 3 2019). Additionally, some of the youth leaders complained of being treated by the media as “cute  
 4 kids”, and subsequently being taken less seriously.

5           This defence of autonomy (and authenticity) was often seen as a balancing act. On  
 6 one hand, gestures of public recognition were highlights: being mentioned in politicians’ speeches,  
 7 being invited to delegations, meetings and networks – and being covered in the media : “I began to  
 8 be featured in the media right after the march and felt that I am playing a role in shaping public  
 9 opinion towards climate change”. (Japan, interview 2019) On the other hand, many activists  
 10 remained potentially suspicious the tide of appreciation. Some were annoyed that political parties  
 11 at times joined the strikes, prompting a Danish activist to accuse for an “attempt to hijack our  
 12 movement” and a Finnish activist despicable as “politicians [who]...show up for photo op in the  
 13 strike events, fetching a selfie saying here we are while their deeds, then, are completely  
 14 incompatible with this.”<sup>4</sup>

15

## 16 **Lessons for climate communication**

17 Problems of communicating about climate science have troubled academics, including the IPCC  
 18 itself (Lynn, 2016a, 2016b) and communication professionals for a long time, (e.g. Moser 2009,  
 19 2016, Painter 2013, Schäfer & Painter, 2019). Many of the challenges of effective climate  
 20 communication emerge from the nature (the reality) of climate change as such. Climate change  
 21 remains an exceptionally, perhaps uniquely, thorny, complex, global problem (e.g. Dryzek et al,  
 22 2013, Hulme, 2009). It demands the participation and transformation of many (if not all) sectors and  
 23 institutions of modern societies, begging us to re-orient and rethink frames that shape our  
 24 knowledge and communication about the world is situated in scales of time and place (in different  
 25 ways, see e.g. Brüggemann, 2019, Gosh, 2016; Latour, 2018; Bruhn Jensen, 2018).

26           In this vast and complex field of questions, our article seeks to make a small  
 27 preliminary contribution by taking advantage of the experiences of a new generation of activists,  
 28 who have committed themselves to tackling this problem and to challenging existing institutions  
 29 and actors. By entering the field on climate (science) communication, they have highlighted – and  
 30 helped to alleviate– some key problems that have plagued the mediation/communication of climate  
 31 change (politics and science). Their experiences represent both an inventory of the obstacles of

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<sup>4</sup> Our German informant: “Mrs. Merkel herself actually praise what we do, but is politically far away from implementing our demands. That is a kind of schizophrenia within these opportunistic forces in the end.” (Germany)

1 better climate communication and lessons in improving communicating climate issues. Drawing  
 2 from this pool of experiences and our report on them, we wish to highlight at least four key  
 3 (familiar) themes: 1) the need to better manage meaning of *scientific consensus* (the settled  
 4 science), 2) the value of youth participation as a new kind of *representation of future*, 3) the  
 5 importance on personally grounded, *affective authenticity* and the 4) base for *autonomy and*  
 6 *legitimacy* of calling for climate action that the movement has built. These four points are  
 7 interconnected, and in important ways, facilitate each other.

8

### 9 **Dynamics of consensus in science and in politics**

10 The first, deceptively simple lesson of the youth movement lies in the way it has taken a role as  
 11 spokesperson of climate science. By speaking as already living representatives of the future that the  
 12 science predicts, the activists have carved themselves the right to rely on scientific consensus in a  
 13 way that has been more difficult for other social actors including scientists. By taking the “settled  
 14 science” as a starting point, they have positioned themselves as unapologetic ambassadors of urgent  
 15 climate action. Their role highlights the value of *consensus as a public good*, a rationally valid,  
 16 temporally shared understanding that we should allow to *frame* the debate about political choices.  
 17 This reminds us of the lesson that transgresses institutional or field boundaries: the meaning and  
 18 usefulness of some values often shift.

19         Recent research on expertise underlines these complex dynamics well, pointing out that the  
 20 notion of scientific “consensus” – and the complex institutional practices of “scientific assessments”  
 21 – emerged particularly from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards as “preferred method for speaking truth  
 22 to power”, in the contexts of nation states and their science institutions whereas now we live in a  
 23 world where problems transgress such contexts and where many key relationships are in flux  
 24 (Oppenheimer et al, 2019, 11-12). The unstable role of consensus also points to a tension inside  
 25 science. The culture of scientific assessment and its reliance on consensus are potentially conflicts  
 26 with the ideas of scientific *doubt*, *uncertainty* and *disagreement*, all crucial elements of the  
 27 institutional production of (climate) knowledge advancement (and indeed, the advancement of  
 28 individual scientists).

29         Perhaps taking the position on common sense consensus and speaking about the “settled  
 30 science”, as a call for action serves a simple but crucial role: a voice that can bridge the distinction  
 31 between scientific production of knowledge (built on uncertainty and doubt) and policy debates that  
 32 aim for temporary agreement for action. It is perhaps easier for outsiders on science to say that  
 33 science is “crystal clear.”

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## **Speaking for the future: legitimate alarmism**

If the dilemmas about consensus repeats old distinctions, the new kind of political argument of *time* – or *future* – that the movement has enabled, looks like a more specific, unique achievement. As we have highlighted above, the activists see themselves as the voice of the world where *they* must live. By assuming this role – and emphasizing it through striking from school, education – they have provided a new kind of representation of the future and the *urgency* of climate action. In a sense, they have put aside the –sometimes also scholarly – critiques of “alarmism” and “disaster” framing. Studies on climate communication (its effects) have often warned that an idea that too dramatic, dystopic and disaster-driven communication tends to cause resignation rather than motivate people towards action (e.g. Nesbit, 2019). This caution makes sense, as we are facing a systemic problem: if a disaster-frame would take over, it might have serious consequences is the capacity of societies to mobilize their resources for mitigation and adaption and actually producing the necessary changes. In an extreme case, we might fear a collapse on social trust and institutions – which has not (at least not dramatically) taken place yet. However, in a more everyday, political scale there are signs: some on the practical, political denialism or promotion of inactivity (by national populist movements) fits this well. They no longer simply deny the future, but question whether any action is useful.

In this landscape, the youth movements’ personalized, emotionally loaded and morally strong points – it would be normal to panic, at least enough to spring into action – represent something that cannot be just pushed aside as “alarmism”, especially when the situation is *alarming* (Risbey 2008).

## **Translating authentic, personal experience into public capital**

We have shown above that the youth movement is deeply and personally anchored into emotional, existential experiences. In an important way, the movement has been part of a shift – or extension – of the climate change debate from the realm of politics and science to everyday life, personal experience and affective reactions. One might also argue that they have carved a space for more public recognition of the fears and anxieties that the dire future predictions must cause in wider parts of populations. Facing the growing uncertainties at a personal level – and sharing them publicly – must be an important part of public discussion and the way scientific predictions and scenarios (of both hope and despair) are handled. This psychological aspect of climate debate, on could argue, grows in importance as we begin to enter the era of what to do and think when we know it is in some sense “past the tipping point”, and “too late”? (Moser, 2020; Jensen, 2018).

## 1 **Building communicative power through alliances and autonomy**

2 Finally, by starting from the publicly meaningful consensus (rather than uncertainties or even risks)  
 3 of settled science, constructing a legitimate version of an alarming situation (based on the  
 4 generational claim of representing the future) and by extending the public emotional-affective  
 5 register (between personal anxiety/panic and collective hope), the youth movement managed to  
 6 carve out new position in the climate landscape of climate science and policy communication. This  
 7 is, in a way, almost a textbook example of what Hannah Arendt (1969) once termed  
 8 “communicative power” that draws its legitimacy from the very coming together and appearance of  
 9 the a group of people and its recognition of other social actors. The movement – at least for a while  
 10 – gained momentum and symbolic power and added a distinct, new voice to both global and many  
 11 national debates. The activists built their *autonomy* by claiming an identity in the field of climate  
 12 communication that had previously been unoccupied, as people who recognized they were going to  
 13 inherit a global climate crisis with all the unpredictable adaptations that will follow. At the same  
 14 time, it built careful alliances with already existing social institutions and actors that favour climate  
 15 action – parts of mainstream media, environmental NGO’s, transnational governance organization  
 16 and even some politicians, who were the main target of its claims. By connecting youth activist in a  
 17 loose global network, the movement seems to have also – at least partly – negotiated the pitfalls on  
 18 being reduced to the global geopolitics of climate change. Science, it seems, played a particular role  
 19 amongst these alliances, and only with a slight risk of overestimation one could say that the  
 20 movement supported in crucial way the communication of the IPCC 1.5C report and the global peak  
 21 of attention that it achieved – before the global pandemic changed political horizons radically.

22           These are remarkable achievements for a movement consisting of young activists with  
 23 few institutional power resources at their disposal 2-3 years ago. In the end – or at this point – the  
 24 consequences of the movement depend on how other institutional actors continue to work with the  
 25 added value that the movement has created. We know that “co-production” is key part of good  
 26 climate coverage (e.g. Lück et al, 2016). As political theorists and communication scholars well  
 27 know, translating communicative power into effective administrative rules, policy programme and  
 28 legal frameworks depends on also (and importantly) on struggles that take place inside existing  
 29 systems and institutions (e.g. Habermas, 1996). For this to take place, learning from the innovative  
 30 and inspiring – and at the same time “agonistic” (cf. Mouffe, 2013) – challenge that the youth  
 31 movement has created is the duty of all.

32 Word count: 6728

33 **(References as separate file as indicated in the submission form)**

1 **Declarations:**

2 **Ethical approval:** Even if many interviewees had no objections to being cited with full names, we  
3 have rendered all anonymous, since some live and work under authoritarian regimes.

4 **Consent to participate:** Interviewees cited have signed consent forms (those under 18 also had  
5 signed consent forms from their parents).

6 **Consent to publish:** The network (interviewers, see list in the annex), and the interviewees (see  
7 above) have no objections to our usage of the material for this article.

8 **Author contributions:** The two authors have contributed equally to the manuscript.

9 **Funding:** This research was partly supported by a grant from The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation  
10 for the project *Expertise, activism and policy. Mapping the challenges of transnational climate*  
11 *journalism*, and a Academy of Finland grant ECANET (Echo Chambers, Experts and Activists:  
12 Networks of Mediated Political Communication). A small amount used to pay interviewers  
13 (freelance journalists), received from JMIC (Journalism and Media International Center), OsloMet.

14 **Competing interests:** Not applicable

15 **Availability of data and materials:** The data is shared with network participants.

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1 **Annex 1: List of interviewers of youth activists:**

- 2 Australia: David Holmes, Monash University
- 3 Bangladesh: Mofizur Rhaman, Dhaka University
- 4 Brazil: Camila Nobrega, journalist
- 5 Canada: Matthew Tegelberg, York University, Canada
- 6 Chile: Benjamin Viveros, Universidad Católica de Chile; Katherine Duarte, University of Bergen
- 7 Denmark: Mikkel Eskjaer, Aarhus University
- 8 Finland: Kaarlo Somero, Nette Holopainen, Risto Kunelius, University of Helsinki
- 9 France: Elsa Regnier, SciencePo, Paris
- 10 Germany: Torsten Schäfer, Grüner Journalismus
- 11 India: Amutha Kannan, journalist, Chetan Sharma, Datamation Foundation, Delhi
- 12 Indonesia: Oni Sarwono, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta
- 13 Italy: Susanna Pagiotti, Perugia University
- 14 Japan: Mikhito Tanaka: Waseda University
- 15 Kenya: Joy Kibarabara, Stockholm University
- 16 Norway: Eva Fretheim, journalist, Elisabeth Eide, Oslo Metropolitan University
- 17 Pakistan: Syed M Shakib, FCC University College, Lahore
- 18 Russia: Dmitry Yagodin, Tampere University
- 19 Slovenia: Ilja Tomanic, Social communication research centre
- 20 South Africa: Alet Janse van Rensburg, journalist/editor
- 21 Sweden: Anna Roosvall, Stockholm University
- 22 Turkey: Elif Ünal, Bianet, Istanbul
- 23 Uganda: Linda Goretti Nassanga, University of Makerere
- 24 USA: Adrienne Russell, University of Washington

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## Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [YouthpaperReferences.pdf](#)