

# Team studies evolution of climate change activism

November 20 2017, by Kara Soria

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Credit: University of Texas at San Antonio

Climate change is a topic that is debated, doubted and covered by news outlets across the world. Luis Hestres, in the Department of Communication at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), is researching the evolution of climate change activism and how advocacy groups use digital platforms to mobilize.

Hestres and Jill Hopke, assistant professor at DePaul University, co-authored "Internet-Enabled Activism and Climate Change," which was

recently published in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia on Climate Change Communication*. In the article, the collaborators describe how the landscape for climate change advocacy has transformed due to technology.

"In some cases, digital communication technologies have simply made the collective action process faster and more cost-effective for organizations," said Hestres. "Groups are using [digital platforms](#) to self-organize and expand their reach."

Hestres said digital communication technologies make it easier for members to connect remotely and reduces the role for traditional methods of collective action, like face-to-face meetings.

The UTSA researcher says the shift in [collective action](#) and climate change advocacy began in the mid-to-late 2000s with 350.org, the Climate Reality Project and the "Keep It in the Ground" campaign, which depended on the Internet and other digital platforms to gain traction.

Created in 2007, activists and journalists started 350.org, its most successful campaign aimed to block the approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline project. After protests, writing letters to senators and other online efforts, President Obama rejected the permit to build the pipeline in 2015.

Part of 350.org's success is its effective use of online tools to spur action at its rallies and events, says Hestres. For example, following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the organization rallied supporters to challenge President Donald Trump's support for fossil fuels and to fight against fossil fuel infrastructure. In April 2017, 350.org lead its second People's Climate March, the first being in 2014, and used [social media](#) to mobilize supporters.

The non-profit organization, Climate Reality Project, was established in 2011 after the joining of two environmental groups founded in 2006 by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore. Climate Reality Project uses online advertising to drive messages related to its anti-fossil fuel and climate change activism efforts. Its website is used to recruit volunteers for its Climate Reality Volunteer Corps. Since its establishment, Climate Reality Project has trained nearly 8,000 people from more than 120 countries who deliver presentations around the world about the effects of climate change and ways to combat it.

The third example, the "Keep It in the Ground" fossil fuel divestment campaign, was launched in March 2015 by British newspaper The Guardian to "keep fossil fuels where they belong: in the ground" to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. In 2015, the publication partnered with 350.org to work on a digital campaign to recruit supporters passionate about its mission to urge governments around the globe to take action on climate change. In its first six months, the campaign received support from more than 226,000 online petitioners.

"Activists are trying to figure out how to be more effective while using social media in an era when photos and videos are more important than ever," said Hestres. "This trend is already changing the types of advocacy efforts reaching decision makers. That in turn may impact the policies they are willing to consider and adopt on issues related to climate change."

Hestres plans to expand on his research by studying the types of audio and visual communications used by activists as well as the effectiveness of their digital strategies during Donald Trump's presidency in the United States.

He predicts [climate](#) change advocacy campaigns will continue to navigate changes to the digital media landscape and will most likely

continue utilizing heavily visual media to promote their advocacy efforts supporting polices to respond to [climate change](#).

Hestres studies the intersections of digital communication technologies, political communication and mobilization, Internet freedom and governance and social change. His research has informed the advocacy and social media and digital media production courses he teaches for the UTSA Department of Communication, which prepares students for careers in digital [communication](#), public relations and related fields.

**More information:** Luis E. Hestres et al. Internet-Enabled Activism and Climate Change, (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.404](#)

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

Citation: Team studies evolution of climate change activism (2017, November 20) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-team-evolution-climate.html>

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