

Study: Activism and civil disobedience help communicate the science of climate change

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A group of the world's top climate change biologists, including Professor Pete Smith from the University of Aberdeen, have published an editorial highlighting how global movements of civil disobedience focused on climate change are playing an important role in increasing public awareness and engagement with issues of climate change.

The idea for the analysis emerged when a recent *Global Change Biology* editorial meeting occurred in the same week as the September global climate strikes. Lead authors and *Global Change Biology* editors,

Professors Sharon Robinson and Pete Smith, and Ms Rhea Bruno, co-lead the analysis looking at trends in reporting of [climate change](#) in online and broadcast media.

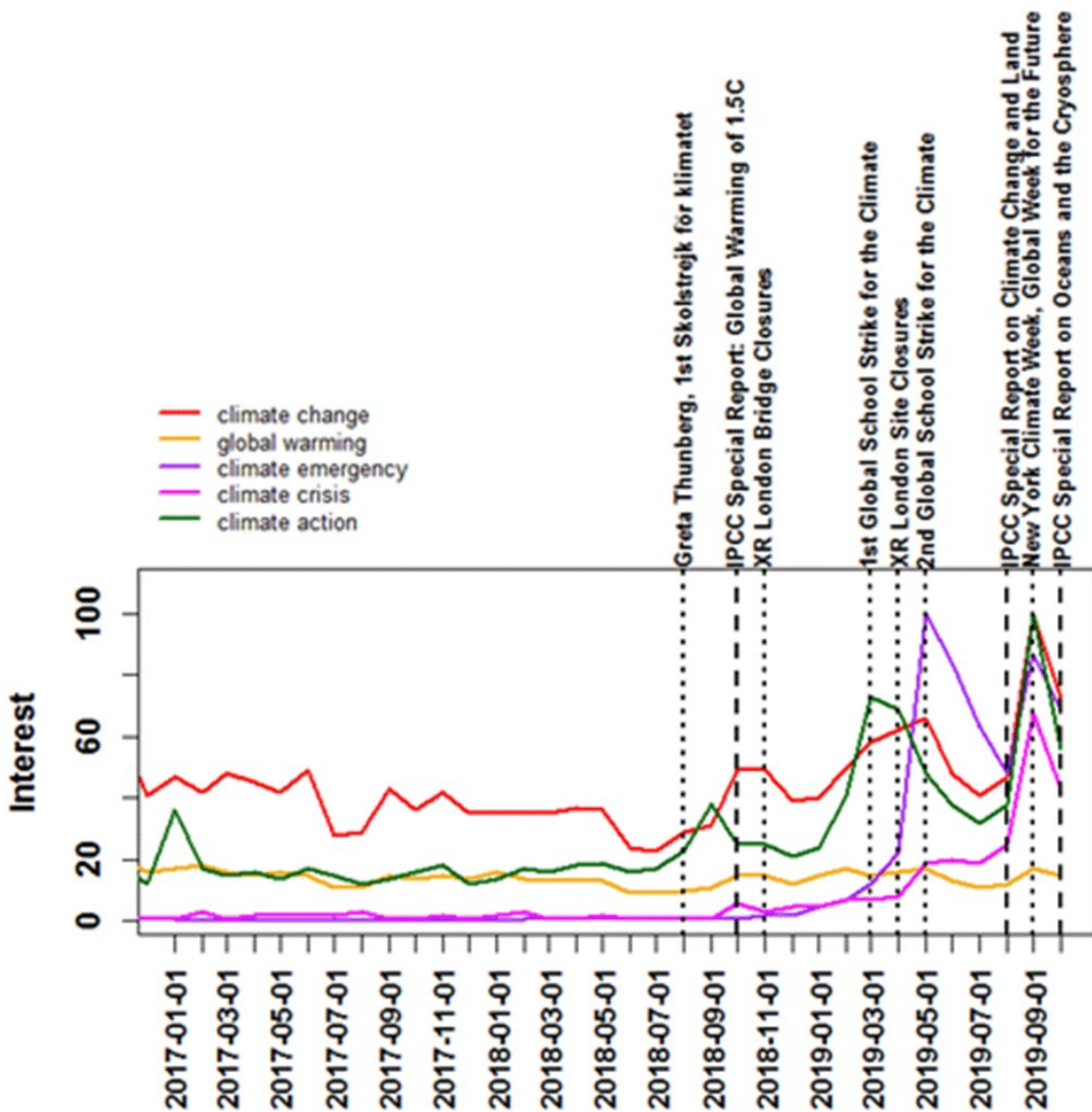
They found that the keywords "climate action" and "climate emergency" were generally not searched for in the past, but their use increased 20-fold in 2019.

Professor Robinson said: "As scientists, we are often told we aren't doing enough to publicize the consequences of climate change—as though the reason for a lack of action on climate change is because we have not been compelling enough."

Ms Bruno added: "The job of scientists is to build and examine the evidence and provide factual objective accounts of what is happening, and while [science communication](#) is an important skill, not all scientists are trained communicators."

The study shows spikes in search terms such as "climate action" and "climate emergency" accompany major global protests.

Professor Robinson continued: "Scientists are always very cautious about being emotive and we have boundaries around displaying concern and using language like 'crisis' and 'emergency,' but as the science seeps further into the public domain, particularly through [younger generations](#), it is now something that the public is finally talking about."



Measures of public engagement with climate change, 2017–2019. (a) Relative frequency of relevant search terms (“climate change,” “global warming,” “climate emergency,” “climate crisis,” “climate action”) derived from Google Trends as a measure of public interest. (b) Global newspaper, television, and radio reporting of the specific terms “climate change” and “global warming” surveyed by MeCCO. “XR” refers to Extinction Rebellion Credit: Sharon Robinson

"A distinctive feature of movements such as the School Strikes for Climate is that they are led by young people, a group that is informed about and accepts the science, and also the generation who have the most to lose from climate inaction."

Professor Smith adds: "Much of the civil action since 2018 has been led by the generation who will be affected most by failure to achieve net zero emissions by 2050."

The editorial which was supported by *Global Change Biology* founder Professor Steve Long and many of the journal's editors concludes that to address the significant environmental challenges facing society, we need the very best scientists, teachers and communicators capable of translating science to motivate and inspire wider audiences, including the public and policy makers.

Professor Robinson concludes: "As editors, publishing and reviewing research on climate change and how it affects life on the planet, the science has been clear to us. It has really been a question of how to translate that into action. For decades, it has been a political, social and economic issue, and the inaction was quite depressing. The [climate](#) protests have given us hope, that this wave of public opinion is finally enough to produce the change we need.

"Science without activism is powerless to enact change, but activism without science cannot direct change where it is needed. Both [science](#) and activism are needed for great societal change. Student movements are giving scientists hope that political and economic change will come."

More information: Stephen J. Thackeray et al. Civil disobedience movements such as School Strike for the Climate are raising public awareness of the climate change emergency, *Global Change Biology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/gcb.14978](https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.14978)

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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