

COP, Look, Listen: Special Edition (1)

The Growing Threat to Climate Activists

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Key Findings

1. **On X (formerly Twitter)**, over 220,000 posts were found to include **loaded language such as “climate cult”** (>65k posts alone) and over 90,000 posts and replies contained **securitised language such as “eco terrorist”** (>34k posts alone) between 1 January 2022 and 30 November 2023.
2. The overall volume of posts containing terms like “climate cult” or “eco terrorists” has not risen dramatically over the past two years. However, **the number of replies containing securitised, dehumanising or ‘othering’ language to describe activists has more than doubled.**
3. References to **“climate cultists”** and **“eco-terrorists”** featured prominently in high-traction posts, both in reference to specific protests and anyone broadly concerned by climate change or climate action.
4. As with #ClimateScam (explored extensively in [“Deny, Deceive, Delay Vol.3”](#)), **high-traction content about climate protests stems from a small group of accounts.** This includes accounts such as ‘End Wokeness’ (1.9m followers), right-wing influencer Ian Miles Cheong (861k followers) and [far-right conspiracy channel](#) Disclose.TV (1.2m followers).
5. **On Facebook and Instagram**, over **68k posts were found to contain denigrating language** such as “climate lunatic”, “eco extremist”, “green zealot” or “Net Zero terrorist” in the same period, from more than 35k unique accounts. This content was **shared a cumulative 1.86 million times** across the two platforms.
6. **On TikTok**, the platform’s comparatively strict content moderation has created a **culture of coded violence that uses [dog whistles](#) and [irony](#) to evade detection.**
7. Even when original TikTok content was ‘neutral’ towards climate activists, **violent rhetoric often emerged in the comments.**
8. Direct calls to shoot protesters were rare in the content analysed, but **users frequently voiced support for police violence.** This includes comments suggesting or endorsing: the use of batons, cattle prods or pepper spray; running people over; knocking people unconscious, setting dogs on protests; and/or electrocuting those involved.

Introduction

In recent years, groups like Just Stop Oil, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future and Last Generation have raised the profile of climate protest across the Global North. In tandem, they have generated controversy over their tactics and messaging. There is a debate over [whether disruptive protests are, on balance, the most effective route](#) for advocacy, or if they can serve to alienate a 'mainstream' audience. If the aim of these groups is to increase visibility and build public pressure for action, such questions can and should be explored in good faith. However, whether you support civil disobedience or baulk at it, violence against activists should never be accepted.

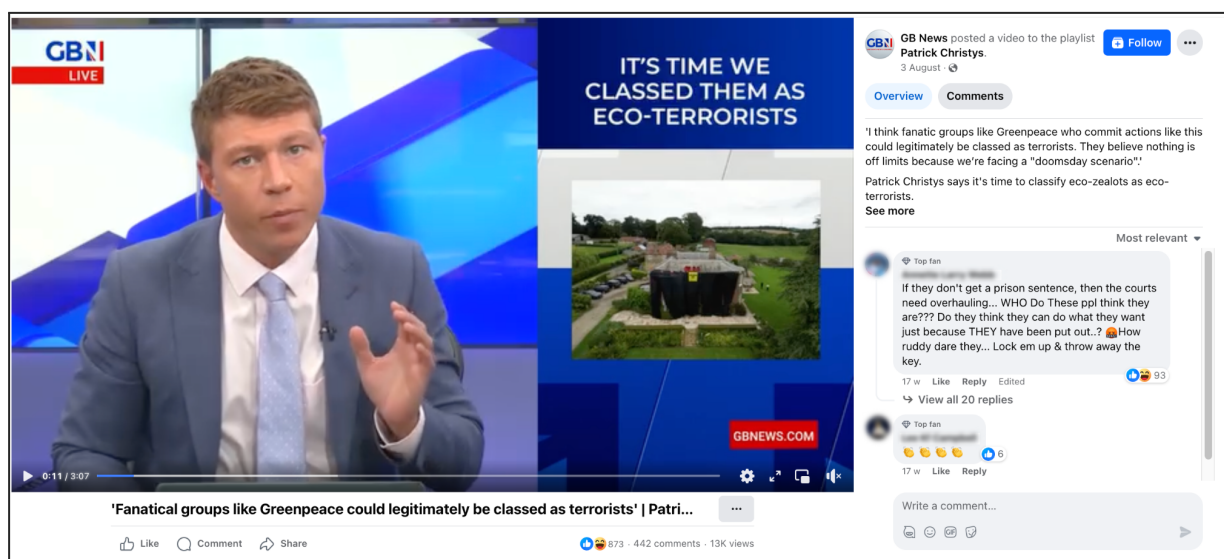
Activists as a "Security Threat"

Labelling climate activists as "extremists", "lunatics" or "zealots" is common amongst right-wing media, as are calls to proscribe environmental groups as "terrorist entities" (see examples shared by [Spiked](#), [The Daily Mail](#), [GB News](#) and [Turning Point UK](#), to name a few). As [Amy Westervelt and Geoff Dembicki have revealed](#), vilifying activists is also a well-worn and explicit strategy used by groups like the [Atlas Network](#) – a US-based non-profit supporting over 500 "free market" think tanks and organisations across the globe.

However, the problem extends beyond mere rhetoric or posturing, with these narratives becoming normalised by political actors and law enforcement alike. One example: in October 2022, US Congressman Mike Johnson [posted a video by Jordan Peterson to Facebook](#) titled "Wicked Globalists Are Causing Starvation and Poverty Under the Guide of Environmentalism", in which he warned of the "the Left's radical climate agenda". Johnson is now Republican Speaker



of the House of Representatives, making him second in line to succeed the President in a crisis (after the Vice-President). Equally, UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman (recently replaced) has [branded groups](#) like Extinction Rebellion as "militant eco-zealots" and [urged police to adopt a more stringent approach](#) to "the radicals, the road-blockers, the vandals, the militants and the extremists". **18 US states have passed anti-protest laws** [after extensive lobbying from the fossil fuel industry](#), as Westervelt and Dembicki report; they also detail how everywhere from Germany and Guatemala to Canada and the United Kingdom, **responses to activism are becoming more securitised.**



GB News segment from August 2023 in which a Greenpeace protest at Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's home is referred to as "mafia-style intimidation" that "exposes a gaping flaw in [the UK's] national security". The host goes on to claim that "these eco-zealots rely on the British public being decent and not battering them", arguing that "nutters could look at the actions of Greenpeace and others like them and be more likely to commit atrocities".

Why Does this Matter? A Pipeline to Violence

Nearly 2,000 land and environmental defenders [have been killed in the last decade](#), with [177 fatalities in 2022](#) alone.

At COP27, we explored how pushback against activists was [increasingly graphic](#) and [dehumanising](#) across the online world. In the year since, activists have been denigrated [in mainstream media headlines in English, French and German](#), while **many posting online hold them explicitly responsible for social ills**, including the [cost of living crisis](#) and spiralling [energy bills](#) after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Such scapegoating drives an 'us versus them' narrative and lowers the threshold for violence, sometimes with fatal outcomes.

Human rights experts, including [Amnesty International's Catrinel Motoc](#), have raised the alarm about the **"criminalisation, harassment, stigmatisation and negative rhetoric" of climate activists**. UN Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders, Michel Forst, [has also expressed dismay](#) over governments "calling these people eco-terrorists, or...using new forms of vilifications and defamation", stating that such rhetoric **"has a huge impact on how the population may perceive them and the cause for which these people are fighting."** Last December, Volker Türk, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, urged governments to safeguard "civic space" for environmental protest, warning against the "crack down" seen in "many parts of the world".

Case Study: Panama Shooter

In November 2023, two people protesting a copper mine were fatally shot in Panama. Photos and videos of the killing were circulated widely online, with comments expressing both outrage and indifference to the violence. **Many posts clearly glorify the murders and the shooter himself in coded form**, although on the surface they appear anodyne and/or beyond the scope of content moderation. Since the shooting, a ruling from Panama's Supreme Court found that [the mine's contract was unconstitutional](#) – it will now be shut down.



[Media Matters](#) has explored how US pundit Matt Walsh [blamed](#) the protesters for their deaths, but his framing was by no means unique. Multiple X Premium accounts (formerly known as Twitter Blue) sympathized with the shooter's "frustration", with tweets stating "This is what happens when you try to impose your will on others. It was only a matter of time" or "Block a public road on purpose, get shot. I am OK with that. Problem solved."

Social media platforms, including X, have [clear rules regarding incitement to violence](#). As such, **many high-profile accounts stopped short of condoning the murders and instead "reported the headline" with footage of the shooting** – this level of restraint was not echoed in the comments underneath. For example, right-wing pundit Ian Miles Cheong (861k followers) got 1.7 million views for tweeting a picture of the shooter captioned "Hero or villain?" While replies were mixed, many commenters landed on "hero" or even "martyr", with some **posts lionising the shooter via generative AI or turning footage of his crime into memes**.

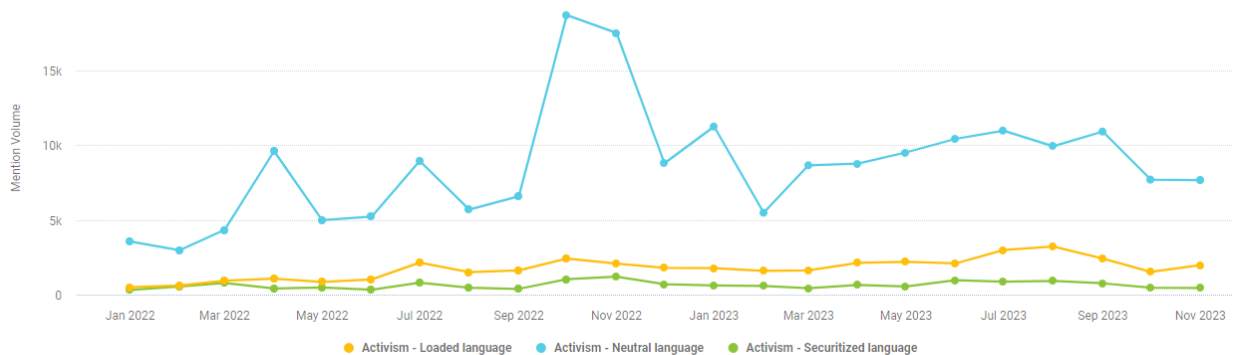


Screenshots from X – original post from Ian Miles Cheong (top left, 861k followers), plus various comments glorifying the shooter or condoning violence posted underneath. We have blurred the image in Cheong's post since it depicts the moment of murder.

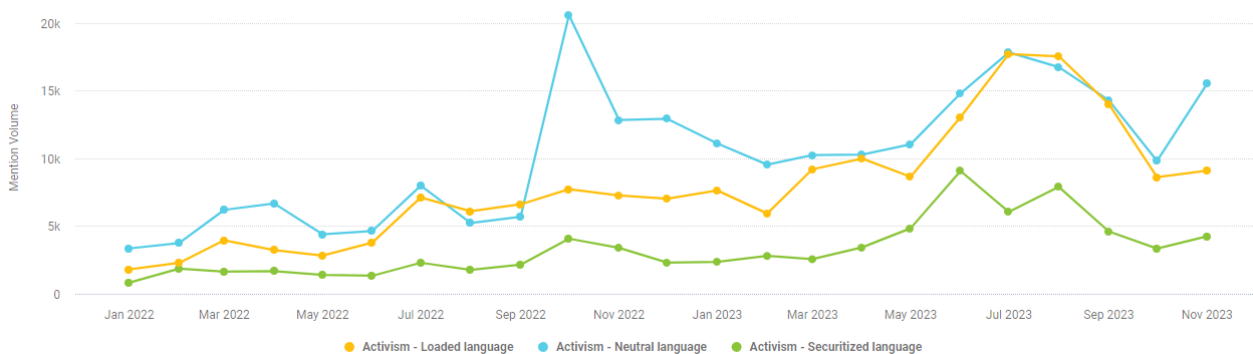
'Othering' the Climate Movement: Activists as the Enemy

X/Twitter

[Climate Action Against Disinformation](#) collected **430,000 posts and replies that used 'neutral' language to describe climate activism** on X between 1 January 2022 and 30 November 2023 – for example, content including phrases like 'climate protest', 'green activist' or 'net zero demonstration' (see Annex 1 for further details). We found another **220,000 posts that included loaded language such as "climate cult" (>65k posts alone)** and **over 90,000 posts and replies with securitised language such as "eco terrorist" (>34k posts alone)**. Since our approach was based on prominent but specific keywords, these categories cannot fully represent the extent and proportion of such language across the platform. However, it is notable that while the overall volume of posts has not risen dramatically over the past two years, the number of replies has more than doubled.



Number of original posts containing 'neutral', 'loaded' or 'securitised' language posted on X/Twitter between 1 January 2022 and 30 Nov 2023 (see Annex for further details on each category)



Number of posted replies containing 'neutral', 'loaded' or 'securitised' language posted on X/Twitter between 1 January 2022 and 30 Nov 2023 (see Annex for further details on each category)

Category of Language	No. Identified Posts on X/Twitter	Key Subset of Posts
'Neutral'	433,120	Only "climate activists" and "climate activism" – 325,780
'Loaded'	221,198	Only "climate cult" and "climate cultists" – 95,815
'Securitized'	90,568	Only "eco terrorist" and "eco terrorism"

Notable Trends



- As with #ClimateScam (explored extensively in ["Deny, Deceive, Delay Vol.3"](#)), **high-traction content about climate protests stems from a small group of accounts**. This includes users such as 'End Wokeness' (1.9m followers), right-wing influencer Ian Miles Cheong (861k followers) and [far-right conspiracy channel Disclose.TV](#) (1.2m followers).
- While there are comments that condone violence, celebrate protestor injuries, or argue for excessively harsh sentencing, the majority of these have minimal engagement. Some isolated examples gained hundreds of likes.
- One [widely-shared video](#) showed a Nevada Tribal Ranger breaking through a roadblock of climate protestors with his truck (nobody was harmed) and arresting those involved. It has 1.2m views, 245k likes, 35k shares and 16k comments. The comments include widespread support for the Ranger, but most **stop short of actively condoning violence or rough handling**; instead, they express general delight or approval at the events depicted. A few comments (see below) suggest more extreme tactics and received thousands of likes.

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End Wokeness @EndWokeness · Oct 19
Climate extremists try blocking a bus. The bus driver wasn't having any of it.



From **Just Stop Oil**


3.2K 2.8K 30K 2.8M

Their parents will thank you if you squish them. Opens up a bedroom and cuts down on the groceries 🍌

5:42 PM · Oct 19, 2023 · 12.8K Views

2 2 112

Ian Miles Cheong @stillgray · Aug 28
This is how the police deal with climate protesters in Nevada. That's how you do it.




From **Michelle H**

16K 35K 245K 20M

Would like to move those creatures with high pressure water ! Would like to thank as well this brave officer 🍌🍌

Example 🍌



58 117 1.4K 113K

Ian Miles Cheong @stillgray · Jul 21
Climate activists prevent a mother from taking her child to the hospital. Disgusting.



From **Catch Up**

9.7K 13K 74K 14M

Should be laws protecting drivers who run these people over



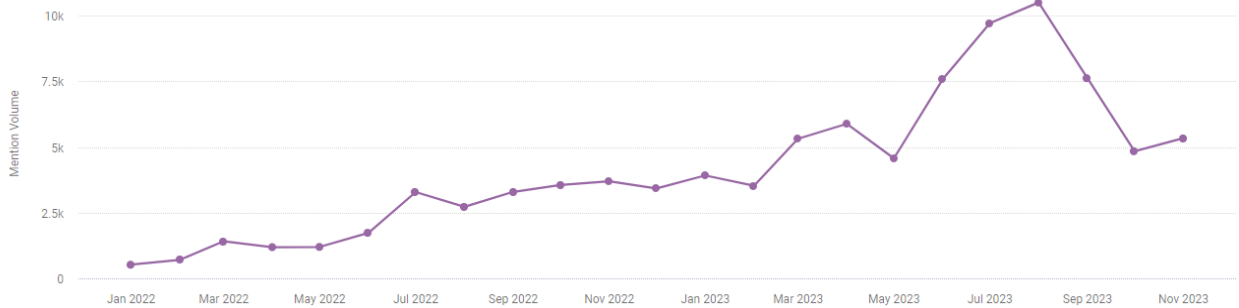
GIF ALT ROLL ON GIRL!

5:00 PM · Jul 21, 2023 · 25.1K Views

11 11 415 2

Screenshots from X – original ‘neutral’ posts from Ian Miles Cheong (861k followers) and End Wokeness (1.9m followers) provoke debate, with indicative comments posted underneath that condone or celebrate violence against protesters. One commenter, @TWTHEREDDRAGON, has over 16k followers and suggests impunity for running people over.

- References to “climate cult” or “climate cultists” are extensive, especially on the right wing of US politics.** This language is generally used to dismiss climate action writ large, rather than criticise specific protests. Widely shared posts include [“the Sh-tposting King of MAGA Twitter”](#) Catturd2 (2.1m followers), Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green (2.8m followers), Republican Presidential candidate and [climate denier](#) Vivek Ramaswamy (1.5m followers), and [‘alt-right’ agitator](#) Mike Cernovich (1.1m followers).



Number of original posts or replies on X/Twitter using either of the terms “climate cult”, “climate cultist” or “climate cultists” between 1 January 2022 and 30 Nov 2023



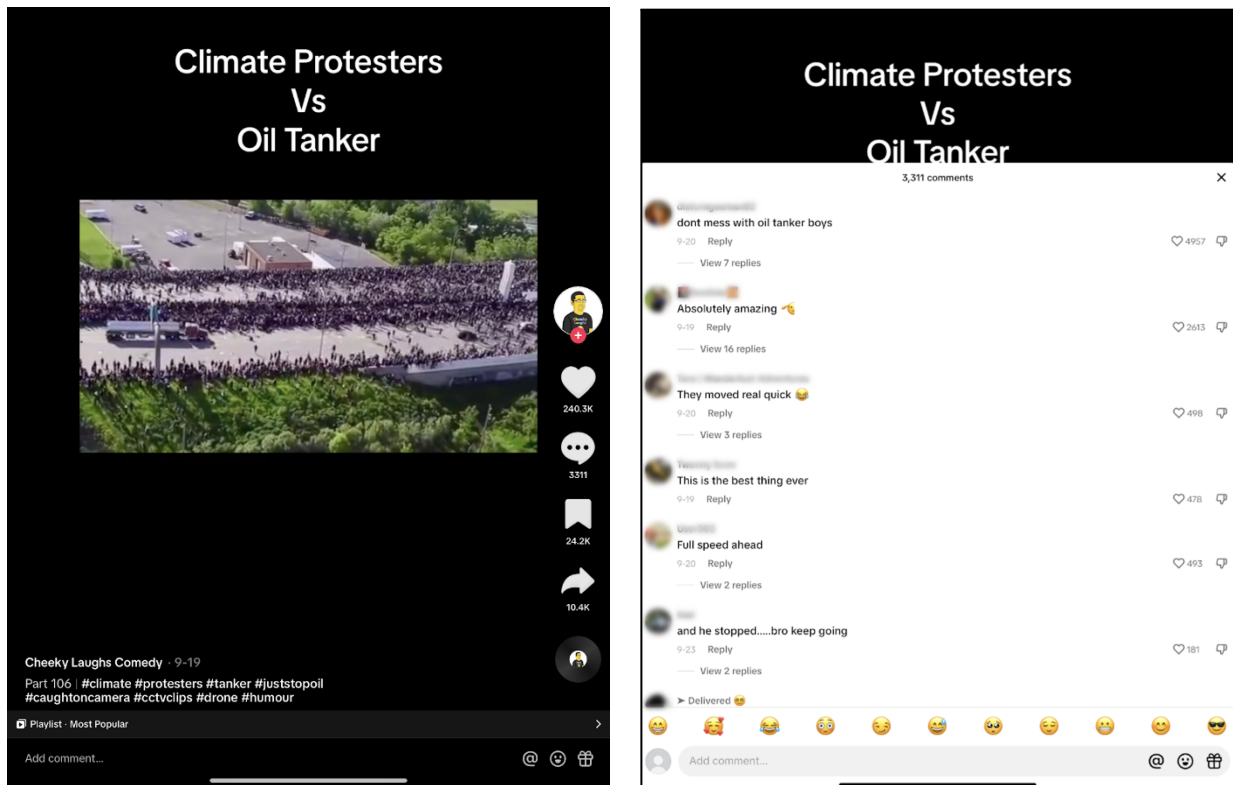
Comments responding to an original post by End Wokeness (1.9m followers) which criticised a Just Stop Oil stunt at The National Gallery in London and referred to those involved as “lunatics” from the “climate cult”.

TikTok

TikTok’s comparatively strict content moderation has created a **culture of coded violence that uses devices like dog whistles and irony to evade detection**. Rather than call for outright violence against climate activists, popular videos rely on veiled references that signal to certain groups while remaining opaque to ‘outsiders’.

One [video](#) on the platform received over **80,000 likes** and features **footage of climate protesters alongside clips from the video game Grand Theft Auto**, with the accompanying text “when protesters block the wrong people.” Grand Theft Auto is a game known for reckless driving (see [here](#): a player mowing down pedestrians for 6 minutes straight).

Another [video](#) identified by CAAD had **4.5 million views** and came from an account called “Cheeky Laughs Comedy.” The video featured footage from 2020 of **a truck veering into crowds at a George Floyd protest in Minneapolis, with the text “Climate protesters vs Oil Tanker”**. While framed as a ‘joke’, the comment section underneath reveals the true implications and resonance of such content. High-ranked responses included “full speed ahead” and “this is the best thing ever,” as well as users urging the driver to “keep going” (i.e. to run over the protesters).



Video from the account Cheeky Laughs Comedy (400k followers) with a snapshot of popular comments. The video has 240k likes, 24k bookmarks and 1.8k shares (including to other platforms). Although the footage depicts a racial justice march from 2020, it has been falsely credited as a standoff with Just Stop Oil using the hashtags #climate and #protesters

Even when original TikTok content was 'neutral' towards climate activists, violent rhetoric often emerged in the comments. For instance, one [video](#) from CBS News shows a man confronting climate protesters and pushing someone to the ground. Users celebrated his actions, commenting *"This dude genuinely deserves a medal"* and *"Not the hero we want but the hero we needed"* with hundreds of likes. Another posed the (rhetorical) question *"Why do you need an AR15?"*, implying that climate protests were enough rationale to obtain an automatic rifle. When asked if they were joking, the user doubled down: *"Not after the 2020 riots, I don't joke around getting stuck behind protesters in traffic *locked and loaded at all times bitches"*.

Calls to shoot protesters were rare in the videos and comments analysed, but **users frequently voiced support for police violence.** Under one video, which showed a police vehicle driving through climate protesters, comments included *"Thank you for your service! #backtheblue"* and



"that's how it's done." Another [video](#) from Channel 4 News (a UK broadcaster) discussed the ["pain grip"](#) used by German police and showed **footage of a climate protester screaming in pain**, asking viewers *"Should German police be doing this?"*. Users answered with their resounding support, including some who suggested such measures do not go far enough. The video has **over 13,000 comments**, many of which propose or endorse more severe tactics – for example the use of batons, cattle prods or pepper spray; running protesters over; knocking protesters unconscious, setting dogs on them; and/or electrocuting them.

Comments under a Channel 4 video on TikTok asking whether the 'pain grip' should be used by German law enforcement against climate protesters

Conclusion

This is an essential moment for climate action – citizens are expected to step up in building a liveable future, yet increasingly punished for engaging via activism. As the findings here demonstrate, violence against activists is increasingly normalised across the digital world. Far from being isolated in fringe or extremist platforms, such content is readily accessible via high-traction accounts and circulating unchecked within comment sections on mainstream social media. Users are routinely finding ways to evade platform moderation, whether through image-based content, coded language or layers of context that require human review.

As noted in CAAD's [Policy Asks](#), we urge platforms to publish data on how their products are being weaponised and misused. From that basis, they should engage civil society to produce meaningful plans that can curb the spread of climate disinformation, hate speech and content which threatens public safety before another tragedy occurs. This could include stronger community content standards; robust enforcement mechanisms; greater allocation of resources across languages and contexts; and clear channels to report or flag content that may endanger users.

Annex I: Keywords Used for Data Collection

The following searches are written in Boolean query format. Rationale for the various categories were informed by various studies, including:

- Kyyrö, J., Äystö, T., & Hjelm, T. (2023). "The Cult of Greta Thunberg": De-legitimizing Climate Activism with "Religion". *Critical Research on Religion*, 11(2), 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032231174208>
- ["Think tank's talking points deepen the divide about climate change"](#) (The Conversation, February 2012)

1) 'Neutral' Language

"climate protest" OR "climate protests" OR "climate protesters" OR
"climate activism" OR "climate activist" OR "climate activists" OR
"climate demonstrations" OR "climate demonstrator" OR "climate
demonstrators" OR
"green protest" OR "green protests" OR "green protesters" OR
"green activism" OR "green activist" OR "green activists" OR
"green demonstrations" OR "green demonstrator" OR "green demonstrators" OR
"net zero protest" OR "net zero protests" OR "net zero protesters" OR
"net zero activism" OR "net zero activist" OR "net zero activists" OR
"net zero demonstrations" OR "net zero demonstrator" OR "net zero
demonstrators" OR
"eco protest" OR "eco protests" OR "eco protesters" OR
"eco activism" OR "eco activist" OR "eco activists" OR
"eco demonstrations" OR "eco demonstrator" OR "eco demonstrators" OR

2) 'Loaded' Language

"climate cult" OR "climate cultist" OR "climate cultists" OR
"climate radicalism" OR "climate radical" OR "climate radicals" OR
"climate zealotry" OR "climate zealot" OR "climate zealots" OR
"climate fanaticism" OR "climate fanatic" OR "climate fanatics" OR
"climate hysteria" OR "climate hysteric" OR "climate hysterics" OR
"climate lunacy" OR "climate lunatic" OR "climate lunatics" OR
"climate crusade" OR "climate crusader" OR "climate crusaders" OR
"climate narcissism" OR "climate narcissist" OR "climate narcissists" OR
"climate apocalypticism" OR "climate apocalypticist" OR "climate
apocalypticists" OR
"climate doomism" OR "climate doomist" OR "climate doomists" OR "climate
doomster" OR "climate doomsters" OR
"green cult" OR "green cultist" OR "green cultists" OR
"green radicalism" OR "green radical" OR "green radicals" OR
"green zealotry" OR "green zealot" OR "green zealots" OR
"green fanaticism" OR "green fanatic" OR "green fanatics" OR
"green hysteria" OR "green hysteric" OR "green hysterics" OR
"green lunacy" OR "green lunatic" OR "green lunatics" OR
"green crusade" OR "green crusader" OR "green crusaders" OR
"green narcissism" OR "green narcissist" OR "green narcissists" OR

"green apocalypticism" OR "green apocalypticist" OR "green apocalypticists" OR
"green doomism" OR "green doomist" OR "green doomists" OR "green doomster"
OR "green doomsters" OR
"eco cult" OR "eco cultist" OR "eco cultists" OR
"eco radicalism" OR "eco radical" OR "eco radicals" OR
"eco zealotry" OR "eco zealot" OR "eco zealots" OR
"eco fanaticism" OR "eco fanatic" OR "eco fanatics" OR
"eco hysteria" OR "eco hysteric" OR "eco hysterics" OR
"eco lunacy" OR "eco lunatic" OR "eco lunatics" OR
"eco crusade" OR "eco crusader" OR "eco crusaders" OR
"eco narcissism" OR "eco narcissist" OR "eco narcissists" OR
"eco apocalypticism" OR "eco apocalypticist" OR "eco apocalypticists" OR
"eco doomism" OR "eco doomist" OR "eco doomists" OR "eco doomster" OR "eco
doomsters" OR
"net zero cult" OR "net zero cultist" OR "net zero cultists" OR
"net zero radicalism" OR "net zero radical" OR "net zero radicals" OR
"net zero zealotry" OR "net zero zealot" OR "net zero zealots" OR
"net zero fanaticism" OR "net zero fanatic" OR "net zero fanatics" OR
"net zero hysteria" OR "net zero hysteric" OR "net zero hysterics" OR
"net zero lunacy" OR "net zero lunatic" OR "net zero lunatics" OR
"net zero crusade" OR "net zero crusader" OR "net zero crusaders" OR
"net zero narcissism" OR "net zero narcissist" OR "net zero narcissists" OR
"net zero apocalypticism" OR "net zero apocalypticist" OR "net zero
apocalypticists" OR
"net zero doomism" OR "net zero doomist" OR "net zero doomists" OR "net zero
doomster" OR "net zero doomsters"

3) 'Securitized' Language

"climate extremist" OR "climate extremists" OR "climate terrorist" OR
"climate terrorists" OR
"green extremist" OR "green extremists" OR "green terrorist" OR "green
terrorists" OR
"net zero extremist" OR "net zero extremists" OR "net zero terrorist" OR
"net zero terrorists" OR
"eco extremist" OR "eco extremists" OR "eco terrorist" OR "eco terrorists"
OR