

Our House is on Fire:

How Librarians can Help Young Climate Activists

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Many librarians are inspired by Greta Thunberg and the millions of young people who have begun mobilizing to pressure government and corporate entities to address the climate crisis. During the Global Climate Strike week from September 20 to 27, 2019, it is estimated that over 7.5 million people worldwide joined Thunberg in agitating for change (Global Climate Strike, 2019). Our situation is dire. In June of 2019, scientists at the Permafrost Laboratory at the University of Alaska Fairbanks reported that permafrost melting in the



Greta Thunberg





Children are protesting in the streets.

Canadian High Arctic had already exceeded estimates of melting not previously expected to occur until the year 2090 (Farquharson et al., 2019). In response, Jennifer Morgan, executive director of Greenpeace International, stated that “thawing permafrost is one of the tipping points for climate breakdown and it’s happening before our very eyes” (Reuters, 2019). Rapid permafrost thawing would suddenly release enormous quantities of carbon dioxide and methane, initiating a feedback loop that could cause global temperature to rise even more catastrophically (Reuters, 2019). Recently, 400 scientists from 20 different countries released a statement urging mass actions of civil disobedience as the only way to pressure policy makers to act quickly enough in order to avert the worst consequences of climate change (Green, 2019).

Although many environmental activist groups, including the Sunrise Movement, Fridays for Future, and 350.org, have worked together to organize previous and future climate strikes, the group that has received the most media attention worldwide is Extinction Rebellion. Extinction Rebellion activists have staged numerous actions all over the world, including a “die-in” on Wall Street wherein activists splashed the iconic Charging Bull bronze statue with fake blood, during which 93 activists were arrested (Associated Press, 2019). Students affiliated with Extinction Rebellion recently staged a sit-in at the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University, demanding that the University become carbon-neutral within six years (O’Connell-Domenech, 2019). In London, Extinction Rebellion has engaged in repeated and disruptive actions for months, blocking streets (Snaith & Mitib, 2019) and bridges (“Extinction Rebellion Protests,” 2018) and obstructing access to banks (Davies, 2019), weapons manufacturers, and train stations near financial districts (Gayle & Quinn, 2019). There are large worldwide climate protests planned for Earth Day, April 22, 2020.



As actions of civil disobedience continue and build worldwide, police have responded with mass arrests, which have been welcomed by protesters. As noted by Alleen Brown of *The Intercept*, “By getting arrested in visually compelling acts of civil disobedience inspired by Gandhi, the civil rights movement, and ACT UP, Extinction Rebellion hopes to jolt world leaders into taking action on the climate emergency” (2019). But law enforcement agencies have also carried out more controversial actions. In London, the Metropolitan Police declared a total ban on protests in London (“Extinction Rebellion: Police,” 2019), a ban which was later overturned in court (Dodd & Matthew, 2019). In Australia, the Queensland Parliament designed legislation specifically for members of Extinction Rebellion so that activists possessing lock-down devices risk a possible two years’ imprisonment (Brown, 2019). In Paris this past June, police officers sprayed peaceful climate activists with teargas at point-blank range during a sit-in on the Pont de Sully (“French Police,” 2019). On the 11th of October, Plan B, a United Kingdom-based group formed to “support strategic legal action against climate change,” wrote a letter to the Metropolitan Police Service documenting many human rights violations in the policing of protests sponsored by Extinction Rebellion, including “treading on protestors and dragging protestors,” “cyber attacks on social media assets . . . including its website and crowd-funding platform,” and “a plain clothes police officer attempting to incite violence in the crowd” (Crosland, 2019). Recently, one of the co-founders of Extinction Rebellion, Roger Hallam, was jailed for six weeks and his electronic equipment was confiscated (Extinction Rebellion, 2019).

In the United States, there is a long history of law enforcement efforts to silence, infiltrate, surveil, and imprison activists. In 1971, a group of activists known as the Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI burglarized an FBI field office in Pennsylvania and stole documents proving the existence of a program called COINTELPRO, or the “COunter INTELLigence PROgram.” From 1956 to 1971, the FBI carried out a series of covert, and at times illegal, operations targeting a wide range of activists and organizations, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the civil rights movement, anti-war organizations, the American Indian Movement, the Black Power movement, and the Communist Party USA. Under COINTELPRO, the FBI used the same techniques used against foreign espionage agents against domestic “perceived threats to the existing social and political order” (Select Committee, 1976, p. 3). Scholars have widely acknowledged that in 1969, Black Panther Fred Hampton was assassinated by members of the Chicago Police Department in collusion with the FBI (Williams, 2015).

More recently, additional disturbing information about intelligence activities has surfaced. In 2013, CIA whistleblower Edward Snowden released to the media secret documents that revealed that the National Security Agency had been collecting Americans’ phone records, text messages, and Internet activity (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2014). In the wake of publishing his autobiography, *Permanent Record*, Snowden has given interviews to many media outlets describing the current state of cell phone surveillance. Smartphones are in constant communication with nearby towers, not only reporting users’ physical location and movements, but also allowing users’ various applications to continuously report their data and behaviors to advertisers, analytics servers, and other third-party vendors (PowerfulJRE, 2019). And it turns out that these third parties not only do not have users’ best interests in mind, but regularly report users’ information to U.S. intelligence agencies. Amazon, for example, is a major defense contractor and works closely with ICE, the CIA, the Department



of Defense, domestic local police forces, and the data mining company Palantir (Scheer, 2018). Police departments target particular neighborhoods and individuals based on algorithms developed by data mining companies like Palantir. Any government or government agency can now utilize information supplied by Facebook, Google, and Amazon marketing services to compile an extensive trove of details about everything a person does using those applications (Scheer, 2018). These companies can do so without fear of violating the Fourth Amendment because the data shared is legally not the customer's property. It is considered to be the property of the corporations that collect it (PowerfulJRE, 2019).

In 2015, Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum admitted that an investigator with the Oregon Department of Justice had digitally surveilled Oregonians who mentioned the social justice group Black Lives Matter in messages on social media platforms (Therault, 2015). In August, the British newspaper *The Guardian* obtained emails showing that the Southwestern Oregon Joint Task Force (SWOJTF), a group led by the Coos County Sheriff's Office, had been monitoring activists who oppose the Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas plant project. The Task Force shared intelligence to an email list that included an anti-environmental public relations operative as well as the FBI, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Justice, the National Forest Service, Oregon State Police, and a number of local sheriffs and police departments (Parrish & Wilson, "Revealed: FBI," 2019). More recently, *The Guardian* reported that the Oregon Titan Fusion Center, which describes itself as "a collaborative effort of state and federal law enforcement agencies" focused on "terrorism, organized crime and gang-related criminal activity," disseminated information gathered by the SWOJTF and by a private security firm attached to the gas project. In a letter to Oregon legislators advocating for an increase in funding for the Fusion Center, Coos County Sheriff Craig Zanni stated that the task force would "be instrumental in combating the extremist agenda in Southern Oregon." In response, Lauren Regan, the executive director of the Civil Liberties Defense Center, stated that "the use of the term 'extremism' is a government calling card when it intends to use repressive criminalization against a social movement" (Parrish & Wilson, "Revealed: Anti-terror," 2019).

Librarians can and should begin more aggressively collecting materials in the areas of community organizing, environmental activism, nonviolent direct action philosophies and strategies, mass surveillance, and the history of law enforcement efforts to repress social movements in the United States. We should begin producing finding aids devoted to similar topics, including what civil liberties Americans are guaranteed under the United States Constitution (for an example, see the "Climate Activist Toolkit" LibGuide developed by this author for students and staff at Lane Community College [LCC] [Ferro, 2019]). Libraries can also begin offering programming aimed at young people who have already become activists or who wish to begin. For example, libraries can invite lawyers or experienced activists to offer trainings on climate activism, direct action methods, and/or how to interact with police officers, whether young activists intend to get arrested or not. Here at LCC, librarians have begun forming ties with a local organization, the Civil Liberties Defense Center, hoping to begin offering "Know Your Rights" and "Digital Security" trainings for students and staff. LCC librarians have also been at the forefront of recent efforts to organize staff and students to form a new Climate Action Team on campus, LaneCAT, which would serve as a means to more aggressively pressure decision-makers to take action to accelerate LCC's plans to become carbon-neutral sooner than our current goal of 2050.



Of course, libraries have long been considered bastions of democracy, and librarians the staunch defenders of civil liberties, the Bill of Rights, the freedom to read, the right to privacy, and intellectual freedom. Nancy Kranichin focused on the function of libraries in democracies during her tenure as ALA President from 2000 to 2001. She advocated that libraries play an active role in civic education, including acting as “civic information centers,” gathering difficult-to-locate materials, but also that they serve as active educators, teaching “youth to participate in community problem solving” (2012, p. 81). In the well-known radical collection of essays *Revolting Librarians*, Celeste West contended that “true professionalism implies evolution, if not revolution; those who ‘profess’ a calling have certain goals and standards for improving existence, which necessarily means moving, shaking, transforming it” (1972, p. [i]). It is not all that revolutionary to call for librarians to begin providing young activists with the information they need to preserve their own freedom and safety as they attempt to save the very civilization that makes our profession possible. 

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Appendix

Bibliography of Suggested Titles for Collection Development

CLIMATE ACTIVISM

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Hunter, D. (2019). *Climate resistance handbook: Or, I was part of a climate action. Now what?* Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y55rdq2n>

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