

Berkeley Leadership Case Series

21-180-017

January 12, 2021

Greta Thunberg: The Voice of Our Planet

“Over 1,000 students and adults sit alongside Greta on the last day of the school strike. Media and news reporters from several different countries gather around the crowd at Mynttorget Square.

Many people believe she has achieved more for the climate than most politicians and the mass media has done in years. But Greta seems to disagree. “Nothing has changed,” she says. “The emissions continue to increase and there is no change in sight.”

- Malena Ernman (Greta Thunberg’s mother)

At the age of 17, Greta Thunberg is one of the most powerful voices in the global movement addressing Earth’s climate crisis. Thunberg has successfully stepped up to create a call to action, reached a massive audience, and rallied support across multiple nations. Her activism and sudden rise to world stage has earned her numerous honors as the youngest Time Person of the Year and two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee. “The Greta Thunberg Effect”, as journalists have dubbed it, has compelled politicians and government officials to focus on climate change.

Despite her accolades, however, Thunberg believes there remains much to do before the planet is truly safe and healthy. “Our house is on still on fire,” she warned earlier this year. Going forward, how can Thunberg scale her movement to deliver substantive policy change?

The Problem of Climate Change

Since the mid-20th century, scientists and researchers have attributed the exponential increase in global temperature (see Exhibit 1) to an increase in human activity. From the Industrial Revolution onwards, the world has experienced heightened carbon emission rates each year (see Exhibit 2), with key factors pointing to pollution, the burning of fossil fuels and oil, as well as deforestation.

This case was reprinted for the Sutardja Center for Entrepreneurship and Technology by Lecturer Pamela Park and Vin Anand. Funding for the development of the original case was provided by the authors and North Star Leadership Labs. Berkeley Engineering cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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As climate change transforms global ecosystems, it affects the places we live, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. With the high rate of rising global temperature, environments around the world have been shaken up with dynamic and extreme weather patterns, inconsistencies in water supply, and more. These consequences have led to damaged ecosystems and rising sea levels (see Exhibit 3) which, in turn, will affect current and future generations.

With the onus of solving climate challenges on world leaders, hours of debate by politicians often led to limited solutions or outright dismissal. For example, in Australia in 2019, dozens of out-of-control bushfires blanketed Sydney in a smoky haze while parliamentary politicians debated non-climate issues for a full week. Though world leaders did join together in 2016 to sign The Paris Agreement, an international treaty on climate change within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, experts point out that having real accountability on climate remains tricky because modern governments (and politicians) rely upon the concept of jurisdiction. Think tank researchers note: “When we are able to establish jurisdiction we are able to establish rules, laws, and accountability for adherence to the law ... [but] in the absence of jurisdiction, everyone is accountable and therefore no one is accountable.”

In May 2018, Greta Thunberg at 15 years of age, won a climate change essay competition in a local newspaper and began her local movement by protesting in front of the Swedish parliament, calling for the government meet the carbon emissions target agreed by world leaders in Paris.

Thinking Differently: Coping with Early Challenges

“Humans are social animals – we follow the stream. Since no one else behaves like climate change is a crisis, we see that and think that we should probably behave as they do. For me, I am on the autism spectrum and I don’t usually follow social coding. I go my own way.”

- Greta Thunberg

Thunberg was born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden to parents with careers in the performing arts. In her early years, she was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder and selective mutism. Thunberg mentioned that she “basically only speaks when [she] thinks it is necessary.”

Thunberg’s mother, Malena Ernman, recalled when they first found out about Greta’s conditions. In late 2014, eleven-year-old Greta would spend her days in school and nights crying, sparking alarm in her parents. Eventually, Greta stopped attending her extracurricular activities, socializing, and eating. Deeply concerned, Ernman cancelled all her performances and tried to find ways to get Greta to open up. Under pressure from her parents urging her to eat, Greta experienced her first panic attack -- yelling and screaming for minutes on end. At a loss, her parents met with various doctors and psychologists to diagnose the issue and received distressing emails from Greta’s school, where her lack of attendance raised even more concerns with teachers.

Through extensive household adaptations and parental monitoring, Greta’s health conditions gradually came under control and she consciously decided to begin eating and speaking again. This early phase of her childhood proved extremely tough on Greta, particularly at school where she felt a sense of isolation and abandonment from her peers. Despite the circumstances, Greta’s family made it an absolute priority to support her unconditionally through any obstacles.

Thunberg has openly discussed how her early challenges empowered her to think differently. She called her conditions her “superpower” and noted: “In this society, everyone thinks the same. It is a gift to be different. In a crisis, we need people who think outside the box. We need people

who think differently and that means that people who work differently can be a good resource for that.”

Seeing Differently: A School Documentary

Thunberg recalled a pivotal moment at school that pushed her thinking on climate change. Her teacher showed the class a documentary on garbage dumps in oceans and their environmental impacts. Wiping away tears, Greta could not reconcile the truth of the environment with the amount of waste and pollution happening right in front of her. Her teachers flew in fuel-burning jets across the globe to attend weddings and fellow classmates chattered about shopping in cities around the world. Her mother remarked, “It was as if she could see our CO₂ emissions with her naked eye” and feel the terrible impact of pollution on the environment.

Thunberg said candidly, “For those of us who are on the spectrum, almost everything is black or white. If emissions have to stop, then we must stop them. To me, it is black or white. There are no gray areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't. We have to change.” She added, “You would think that the media or our leaders would be talking about nothing else, but they don't mention it.”

The lack of headlines on the climate crisis puzzled Greta. She wondered, “I just thought if it's really as serious as they are saying it is, why isn't it being discussed more or a higher priority? So, I started to read about it more and more and started to understand how acute it was and is.” She explained, “The more I read about it, the more I understood and once I fully understood it, I couldn't just look away anymore.”³

Thunberg first discussed her concerns at her dinner table. She pointed to her wealthy parents -- celebrities and artists -- who travelled around the world. She noted that everybody chases success, and being successful meant travelling in luxury and living in abundance. After one of her parent's trips, Greta delivered a stinging rebuke: “You just released 2.7 tons of CO₂.” For reference, she added, “that corresponds to the annual emissions of five people in Senegal.” Since this exchange, Greta's family has given up flying, become vegan, and started upcycling materials.

What set Greta apart from her peers was her unrelenting drive for a solution to a pressing challenge affecting everyone. Teachers in her school would show documentaries depicting the horrific effects of pollution and global warming, yet when the period bell rang, other students would move on to the next class, with the climate problem pushed to the back of their minds. This was simply unacceptable for Greta.

Vision on a Board: School Strike for Climate (Skolstrejk för klimatet)

In the summer of 2018, Greta took her first steps as an activist. One morning, she took a white-trimmed wooden board with “Skolstrejk för klimatet” written on it (see Exhibit 5) along with sheets with information on the climate crisis to the Swedish Parliament.

The sign was plain and simple. Black and White. School Strike for Climate. From the unaltered words of a young student wishing to see a positive change in the world, the message was crystal clear: take steps to fix our climate before it's too late.

What began as one person with a sign quickly snowballed to a global movement. At first, Greta literally stood alone in her efforts. Every day, she showed up with her black and white sign. During her three-week long strike outside the Swedish parliament, Thunberg demanded the government reduce emissions by 15% each year. Local news noticed and interviewed Thunberg on her efforts. Greta explained that her only power as a child was to raise attention by striking from school. She noted “we young people don't have the vote, but school is obligatory.” Striking gave her a way to

make her voice heard. “I thought I would be sitting here by myself,” Greta admitted. Yet, day by day, families and children alike came and showed growing support for these strikes (see Exhibit 5).

Building a Community around a North Star Vision

In addition to her own school strike, Greta coined and launched the *Fridays For Future* movement in 2018. This global movement encouraged students to skip school to demand action on climate change from their respective local governments. Video and news of her protests went viral on social media and, by December 2018, more than 20,000 students around the world joined in support of her cause. By picking up traction in her local and surrounding communities as well as spurring movements globally, Greta Thunberg created what Time magazine editors called a “global attitudinal shift, transforming millions of vague, middle-of-the-night anxieties into a worldwide movement calling for urgent change.”

Creating this much passion around a movement is a difficult task for a young teenager with selective mutism. Two factors likely contributed to her effectiveness. First, Greta’s steadfast mentality and unyielding passion to see positive change drove her to show up – day after day – to protest government inaction and give media interviews despite her discomfort. Second, her clear vision paired with the power of social media inspired countless others throughout the globe to make their voices heard through the *Fridays For Future* movement.

Media reported on the break-neck growth of the movement. In May 2019, only a few months after the December protest, *Fridays For Future* protests drew participants from 130 countries; later in September 2019, Thunberg led kids and adults from 150 countries in a “Global Climate Strike” ahead of the UN Climate Action Summit. Throughout 2019, Thunberg honed her storytelling skills by speaking at protests in Europe and United States (see Exhibit 6). She also made headlines presenting her vision on a global stage at the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.

Storytelling and Voice: Waking Up the World

“How dare you...The world is waking up...Change is coming, whether you like it or not.”

- Thunberg at the United Nations

With these words, Thunberg accused global leaders of inaction while addressing the United Nations. She likewise did not mince her words challenging elite power brokers at the World Economic Forum to pay attention. Thunberg’s passionate message drew attention to the rapidly deteriorating state of the environment and, with her youthful perspective for the future of our world, served as a call to action for many world leaders.

Spreading her message on a global stage, Greta drove home the need to truly reduce the global carbon emission rate saying “we must forget about net zero, we need real zero.” In 2020, she also called for plans and policies that introduced radical emission cuts to meet the 1.5-degree commitments of the Paris agreement. With this North Star vision of a green future, Greta gained millions of followers. This community propelled her forward and elevated her as a leader and champion. In 2019, Time named Thunberg Person of the Year, inducting alongside influential leaders throughout history.

Often times, organizations and communities are led by individuals with rigorous experience and years of wisdom. One could argue that the issue of climate change is one of the oldest challenges faced by humanity. That a teenage girl from Sweden is leading a movement across continents with her North Star vision to improve the global environment speaks to how Thunberg is effectively waking up the world.

Sustaining Global Change: The Risks of Celebrity Movements

“I’m just an activist and we need more activists.” – Thunberg

According to experts, movements typically fall into three categories: 1) the campaign wins and is successfully completed or made irrelevant, 2) the campaign does not win and runs out of steam permanently, or 3) the campaign temporarily runs out of steam but serves as a foundation for a later generation of activism. While social media has recently helped movements bypass traditional modes of mobilization, researchers argue that collective action now is more transient; protest movements face the great challenge of capturing bursts of attention and fluid commitment and solidifying them into a stable “win” of change.

Demonstrating Continued Personal Commitment. Perhaps one of the greatest risks facing Thunberg’s initiatives is her personal celebrity. The movement runs the risk of petering out or not surviving if 1) the founder leaves or 2) the founder is discredited. On the first risk, Thunberg continues to actively and personally participate in her climate movement to ensure the continual emphasis on the world’s climate health. Thunberg addressed over 3,000 political and business leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020 to achieve net zero carbon emissions and seeks to work with legislators and leaders to realize her vision.

Reframing the Movement Beyond Personal Celebrity. On the second risk, various news reporters have regarded Greta as “a prophet,” but detractors have tried to discredit her as an over ambitious teenager funneling “climate alarmism” without the proper expertise or knowledge of science. A recent tweet sarcastically mocked the efforts of Thunberg, stating how she is “having a remarkable career already in that as a teenager she’s now a world-renowned infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist AND a leading scientific voice when it comes to global climate policy”, referencing her being on a CNN town hall panel. Thunberg responds to such criticism by broadening the movement beyond her personal involvement to include others like scientists. She states “I am not an expert; I am an activist. My message has always been to unite behind the science and listen to the experts.” However, comments sowing doubt about Greta’s leadership demonstrate a key risk with Thunberg being the face of the climate revolution.

Notably, a movement with a celebrity hero can also give space for the rise of an anti-hero. One of the most famous adversaries of Thunberg is Naomi Seibt, a 19-year-old from Germany supported by a conservative American think tank to question established climate science, but better known as the anti-Greta. Conservative organizations support the idea of *climate realism* and argue that overreaching environmental regulations have negative impacts. One institution in particular is funding Seibt to create a video series to bring additional attention to their cause. This effort to directly counter Thunberg’s appeal represents one of the ways certain groups are fighting back against large-scale climate improvement policies; more importantly, it represents some of the challenges Thunberg faces spreading her vision of a green future.

Broadening Community by Financing Climate Organizations. More recently, Thunberg has focused on sustaining the movement by growing it beyond herself. She has supported other climate organizations in addition to her own activism on improved environmental accountability. Importantly, she established the Greta Thunberg Foundation to institutionalize support for other organizations and movements. In 2019, Greta was one of four recipients of the Right Livelihood Award and donated the prize money to various climate organizations around the world.

Thunberg has also championed a number of smaller climate activist communities such as the Stop Ecocide Foundation and the SOS Amazonia Campaign, which take on various facets of the climate problem – from holding large corporations accountable for their waste and pollution to

fighting deforestation of large rainforests. In September 2020, Thunberg received the Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity and donated the \$1.15 million award to smaller activist groups.

Broadening Community by Fundraising for Global NGOs and Advocacy Groups. Since establishing the Greta Thunberg Foundation, Thunberg has raised funds for organizations such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the solar power-focused NGO Solar Sister, as well as advocacy group Oil Change International and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 by two Swedish legislators. Looking at the work of Solar Sister in particular, one of their priorities are to increase clean energy access in rural villages across Africa. Thunberg, through her foundation, donated 50,000 euros to this energy focus and underscored her support of clean technology to revolutionize the world's environmental and climate systems.

From her own movement for a greener planet, Greta Thunberg has inspired others with her voice and sustained this vision by building a global community.

Scaling Up: Building a Machine for the Movement

North star leaders are known to travel the road not taken. Thunberg chartered her own course through an unyielding passion to tackle the climate crisis and hold global leaders accountable for their actions. Using her youth and novel thought as a powerful tool for clarity, Greta has rallied millions of people in a call to action to better our planet. While she has made numerous strides in the right direction, there is still much left on her plan to truly deliver the vision of an environmentally healthy future.

A Scalable Organization. Media reports on explosive growth of movements are instructive. What happens, writes journalist Britt Peterson, when a “movement grows so much that it must pivot to becoming an office-space-occupying-salary-paying, benefits-offering operations?” She cites other movement leaders like Kat Calvin, founder of Spread the Vote:

“The toughest thing for some of these leaders who are running major national organizations is that they started as activists. Now they’re expected to succeed in completely new roles—essentially, running a business. What they want to be doing is movement work and [to] be in the streets, but that’s not the job.”

Thunberg took a step towards institutionalizing her work with the Greta Thunberg Foundation. However, it remains unclear if Greta seeks to enlist experienced “gold star” executives, like the Time’s Up movement did by hiring Tina Tchen (Michelle Obama’s former Chief of Staff), to build a scalable organization and to push for long-term “wins” in policy and business outcomes.

A Scalable Platform. Early in 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Thunberg launched *Talks for Future*, as a digital initiative to continue the discussion around climate change and feature climate experts such as scientists, activists and journalists to carry on the spirit of the climate strikes online. Despite school shutdowns across the world, young activists have still been attending Thunberg’s newest initiative, posting pictures of themselves holding up signs demanding action to protect the environment. Going forward, Thunberg will use her platform and influence to amplify the voice of scientists and policymakers to people globally. Using technology as her medium, she will be able to scale her reach and continue to rally groups behind the mission of a carbon zero future.

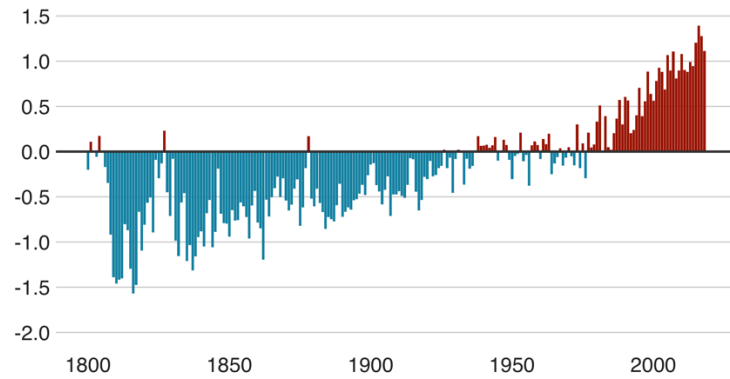
Nobody could have predicted that a Swedish teenager would cause a paradigm shift in the way the world considers global climate change. With growing support from governments and organizations around the globe, the challenge ahead for Greta Thunberg’s movement will be to capture and funnel global attention into sustainable policies, technologies and systems for a healthier world.

Appendix

Exhibit 1: Evidence of Increasing Land Temperature since the 1800s (BBC, UC Berkeley)

The world has been getting warmer

Annual mean land temperature above or below average (°C)



Note: Average is calculated from 1951-1980 land surface temperature data

Source: University of California Berkeley

BBC

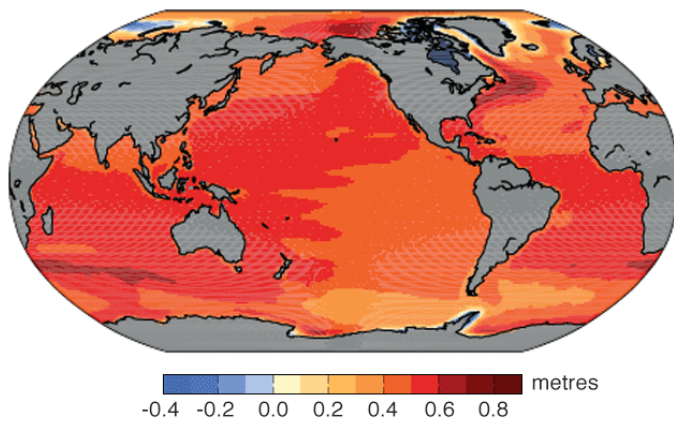
Exhibit 2: Evidence of Increasing Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide since the Industrial Revolution (NASA)



Exhibit 3: Forecasted change in sea levels by 2100 (BBC)

Forecast change in sea level

By 2100 under a medium-low emissions scenario



Source: IPCC

BBC

Exhibit 4: International Leaders Stand for Paris Climate Agreement ([Presidencia de la Republica Mexicana via Flickr](#))



Exhibit 5: Photos of Greta Thunberg's School Strike ([The Local](#))



Greta with her sign, reading 'School strike for the climate'. Photo: Catherine Edwards/The Local



A group of parents and their children who joined the protest. Photo: Catherine Edwards/The Local

Exhibit 6: Photos of Greta Thunberg at 2019 Climate Strike Protests in Berlin, Washington, DC and Bristol ([Vox](#), [Reuters](#), and [Time](#))



Endnotes

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