

The Problem With Climate Change Influencers

This op-ed argues that we can't influence our way out of the climate crisis.

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In 1991, environmental organizers of color convened to create the [17 pillars of environmental justice](#), formally establishing the [environmental justice \(EJ\) movement](#) in the United States. They did so to fight the toxic industries that were exploiting their neighborhoods, interrogate the [dominant white narrative in mainstream environmentalism](#), and overturn the social-political systems that continued their oppression.

Today, environmental justice organizers address the same issues, but within the context of a drastically different activism landscape: With the rise of [highly publicized youth climate strikes](#), a lot of climate organizing has [moved over to social media](#), allowing some activists to make a living off of videos, infographics, and ads that promote sustainability.

While social platforms can allow for more voices to be heard and for activists to connect across borders, they also reflect societal inequities. Only a [certain type of account usually gets famous](#). Someone deemed “media-friendly” — i.e. someone who is conventionally attractive by Western standards, good at marketing themselves, and based in Western Europe or the United States — is far more likely to gain thousands of followers than a grassroots organizer based in the Global South, where the effects of climate change are more imminently felt.

“Eco-influencers” use their platforms mainly to share educational content via attention-grabbing videos and infographics, as well as to promote sustainable brands. This is all in their efforts to raise awareness, which they say is essential to actionable steps.

However, social media is structured in a way that encourages one’s interactions with an issue to awareness alone. It is designed to encourage users to spend hours scrolling through automated feeds. Users can like a single post from an eco-influencer and feel the gratification of having taken a stand against climate change, then move on to watching cat videos.

Unlike influencers, grassroots organizers advocate directly within communities, forming a genuine bond with residents and their needs. Online and off, they engage in tangible initiatives to divest institutions from fossil fuels, prevent the construction of polluting industrial facilities in Black and brown neighborhoods, influence local politicians on environmental legislation, and so much more. They take the crucial next step after raising awareness, which is making tangible change.

Influencer culture’s focus on individual branding and personality is antithetical to grassroots organizing. It creates a hierarchy within the climate movement, bestowing more clout on those with the largest platforms. The media fuels this effort by repeatedly highlighting a handful of individuals as the “face of the movement,” when it is actually a collective effort. Moreover, these “faces” are rarely from frontline communities, whose voices should be uplifted the most.

Eco-influencers now at the “forefront” of the environmental movement hoard media attention, instating a positive feedback loop of more attention and more followers, which can take the focus away from grassroots causes. Just take a look at the [speaker list](#) from this year’s South by Southwest festival in Austin. There were various climate panels at the high-profile event, but none of the sessions spotlighted the activism of local Austin organizers. “You would think if you are coming to do something in someone’s community you would invite someone from the community,” Susana Almanza, the director of PODER, an Austin-based environmental justice organization, told *Teen Vogue*

[Austin has a long history of environmental racism](#), but instead of addressing this at South by Southwest, the event promoted already flourishing eco-influencers. Once again, those most impacted by an issue, who are working toward solutions on the ground, tend to get left out of the conversation.

The issue of funding is worth talking about, too. Media attention is too often correlated with one’s ability to get grants and speaking gigs. Everyone should get paid, but too often those opportunities go to influencers while many grassroots environmental justice organizations in frontline communities struggle to pay their staff a living wage.

Additionally, many eco-influencers rely on sponsorships and branded content to make a living; Many promote “sustainable” clothing, cars, and household items. And while some businesses are better than others, this ultimately perpetuates commodity activism — [the idea that we can buy our way out of social problems](#) — allowing consumer culture to absorb more radical calls for social change. By

conflating activism with consumerism, influencers become a corporate tool to further their profits by selling social movements and identities.

Perhaps in a world where the logic of markets dominates our lives, in which all must actively brand themselves, being reliant on corporations to a certain extent is inevitable. Still, it is important to evaluate the amount of good versus harm that is being done. What material benefits do frontline communities receive via eco-influencing? Who is benefiting (via money, fame, opportunities) from branding themselves a climate justice activist? What does the average social media user do after liking an infographic on climate change? Who continues to die from pollution and the climate crisis?

If the environmental justice movement, as defined by the seventeen principles, is to challenge the colonial-capitalistic structures of oppression that have led to the climate crisis and placed pollution in communities of color, influencer culture's constant ask to center oneself to promote brands might not be in alignment with the radical changes necessary for liberation.

"White young people want to do the right thing but don't [always] know the way to do it," Michele Roberts, national co-coordinator for the Environmental Justice Health Alliance, told *Teen Vogue*. "They need to be able to see the phenomenal work coming out of [environmental justice] spaces, but equally understand that they can't co-opt these pieces. They must learn. They must be able to say, How can I support you?"

Social media does play a role in the environmental movement, but we have to be strategic in its use to center frontline organizers and local solutions. We cannot

let environmental justice become diluted and equated with influencing because we cannot influence our way out of the climate crisis. So dear eco-influencers, be mindful of the space you take — and please pass the mic.