

Transcript of 'When Scientists Become Activists'

Season 3, Episode 30, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

What do you call a group of scientists taking part in climate action? We don't know! Answers on a postcard please.

But today we are looking at this kind of activism from a social and psychological perspective.

[Theme music]

Paul: What's the most active thing you've ever done, Jan?

Jan: What, running-wise or leaping up mountains?

Paul: I dunno, you tell me.

Jan: Canoeing down waterfalls? I don't know.

Paul: Do you consider yourself active?

Jan: Uh, I'm physically active, yes...

Paul: [laughing] ...mentally, shut down years ago, [Jan laughs] but physically active, is that what you're saying?

Jan: Yes, that's true. Oh, do you mean in a, like a, um, an activism sense?

Paul: Well, I was gonna get to that. [Jan laughs] Well, you, you spoil it and take away the, the fun I was having with you, trying to decide what you do.

Yes, I was gonna eventually get towards activism. Have you ever considered yourself an activist?

Jan: Uh. It's quite hard to say because, because my work focuses on trying to change, um, corporate practice, change government policy, change people's perceptions of things, that has an element of activism in it. But then you're an academic, so you also, you know, you have to be, I won't say objective 'cause I don't think there's any such thing as objectivity, but you need to have some sort of credibility...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...but then I have, on occasions, um, gone to protests. Um, but I'm not very good at going to protests.

Paul: Do you get lost?

Jan: There's too many people. [laughs]

Paul: Too many people. Oh yeah, we've discussed before, you don't really like lots of people around...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah. But I have been, I went, went to like the classic ones for people of our age. So certainly, uh, protested Iraq, used to do, it was in a very small town where, um, we met a few other people also protesting that. Um, but the, some of the Brexit ones, we went to those as well in London. Um, but yeah, so I've done a few of those things.

Paul: You prefer small scale protests, maybe...

Jan: ...um, well, yes...

Paul: ...have you ever seen Father Ted?

Jan: Yes, I have.

Paul: You hold, hold up a, a banner saying 'down with this sort of thing', [Jan laughs] that kind of thing, you know, just a small group of you, that, that kind of protest is more your kind of thing.

Jan: Yeah, well, it's sort of big, big groups are not so good. But also, um, yeah, so, oh yeah, I feel quite shy. I'm, I'm quite often uncertain about what I think about things, which is maybe not a very good sign, but [laughs] down with this sort of thing as well.

Paul: Yes, yeah, yeah...

Jan: ... what about, what about you? Are you an act, active?

Paul: Am I active? [laughs] I'm not as active as I should be, probably, my doctor would say. I'm, uh, I've never really been an activist, no. I have strong opinions on things, but you know, if you were to get me out on a Saturday afternoon away from what I would be doing anyway, it'd probably take an awful lot.

Jan: Yeah, yeah. And I suppose now that we've got, uh, uh, Twitter as was, and various things, you could be a keyboard activist, I don't know, quite know.

Paul: I'm definitely not one of those. I cannot stand keyboard activists. No, that's, yeah, people, especially because I'm a big sports fan, you see it so much...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...keyboard warriors in sport where people have got such strong opinions, and will slag off people left, right, and centre and criticise them. And as soon as they see that person, uh, in person, it's like they're their best friend and never said anything to them, and things like this. That, yeah, that kind of activism annoys me.

Jan: Right. So there's something about activism in public and activism in private then, I suppose.

Paul: Yeah. No, I mean, I, I suppose it's more being willing, not so much in public and private, but anonymous and with your face on it. If you're doing something anonymously and, uh, in one way, but then when you're in public act a whole different way when people *know* it's you, *that's* where my objection comes.

Jan: Ah, fair enough. So why, why are we chatting about our, our plans to rule the world?

Paul: I, I'm just, uh, compiling a government spreadsheet on all your activities. So I just thought I'd better get some information down now...

Jan: ...I've come up as less than average I suspect... [laughs]

Paul: [laughs] Yeah, don't worry about her. She, as long as there's too many people there, she won't go out and get involved.

Uh, no, because today we're going to be talking about activism again. Last time we talked about corporate political activism. This time we're gonna take it down more to maybe an individual level at times, and see how all that works.

Jan: Excellent.

Paul: Yes. And we're gonna be joined by someone who is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Psychology here at Lancaster University.

Someone with a background that's taken in anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology. If you ask me, [lowers voice] can't decide what he wants to do. [Jan laughs] Too, too many things.

Uh, and now is doing a lot of study into the likes of climate protest and activism. And that is Dr Samuel Finnerty. Hello, Sam.

Sam: Hi there. How are you?

Paul: Good, thank you. Have you ever been an activist?

Sam: Yes. [laughs]

Jan: Ah, this is, he's gonna put both of us to shame...

Paul: ...he is, he is...

Jan: ...which is, which is well, well deserved to be put to shame.

Paul: His Saturday afternoons, he, he wouldn't rather be on the terraces watching Barrow AFC play. He does get out there and take action.

Jan: That's why I think we need to get, look into the psychology of watching this football team play.

So, so maybe we start with some of those disciplines, because they're really interesting. So, anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology, and obviously the, the merge of them all together. So for our listeners, could you tell us a little bit about what each field looks at and what do they tell us when we combine them together?

Sam: Yeah. Well, I'm, I'm still trying to combine them all together. Uh, I think that's been a, been a life mission.

Um, so just very, very briefly, so social cultural anthropology is all about, um, you know, what people do in their context, looking at their culture and how they, they kind of, their practices and their norms. Um, and you do this by spending a lot of time with them and observing their everyday activities.

And then cognitive science is kind of a combination of different, um, I suppose, sciences that look at the human mind. So you have psychology, you've human

computer interaction. Uh, you've philosophy of mind, um, and, and, and different disciplines. So again, that's just looking at looking at the person, um, across these different areas.

And then I, I suppose maybe I should tell you a bit about my journey into psychology, but I ended up doing, uh, social psychology, which is essentially looking at, looking at the individual, and looking at their kinda social relationships with one another, and how they relate to one another in society.

Um, but, yeah.

Jan: Well, I think it's all been sociable then, hasn't it? You know, so how a person thinks about the world, how they interact with the world, how it all comes together.

So how's that ended up with you studying climate protest and activism?

Sam: Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, it's, it's funny, when I did anthropology, I was actually, uh, working on, uh, stigmatisation of people living with HIV from a medical anthropological perspective, which is vastly, vastly different.

Um, and that was all about, you know, how human people categorise one another, how we discriminate and how that affects how we're pro-social. I suppose the other, uh, side of that coin is, you know, how we are pro-social and how we, how we try and benefit one another, especially where people are making, um, personal sacrifices to, to be pro-social.

And I was aware, I'm sure like yourselves, that, you know, the climate issue, um, is, is getting worse and hasn't gone away. And so I really wanted to, to kind of study, I decided to do a PhD and I decided to look at, uh, I suppose pro-social action around climate.

And so I was interested because of my anthropological background, um, in kind of social movements and how they, uh, I suppose how they have evolved over time. You know, why people join them, uh, why people are willing to invest considerable time and sometimes, um, even risk their own autonomy to engage in these kinds of actions.

And so it's an interesting question from a psychological perspective, but it's also an interesting question from a societal perspective.

Paul: how did you then come to specifically look at scientists when it comes to climate activism?

Sam: Yeah, so going back, um, because of my anthropological background, I was always doing ethnography. And for the listeners, ethnography essentially is spending time, uh, observing, um, and participating in group activities.

And so you, you do this over a long, long period of time, and so you begin to get an understanding of how this group thinks, what they do on a daily basis, and kind of what is their, I suppose you could call it their group culture.

And because I was doing this with climate movements more generally, I became aware of scientists participating, um, in protest, um, and actually often wearing white lab coats, so they were very, very easy to spot.

And what's interesting about this is, so scientists have always advocated for, uh, different causes. I mean, we've, you know, Einstein, Jane Goodall, uh, Carl Sagan are kind of clear examples of, um, scientists being willing to speak out on, on kind of social and political issues.

But what was interesting about this was that these were groups of scientists coming together as scientists participating, um, collectively. And as you know, um, getting academics degree in anything is really, really difficult. So actually getting, seeing I suppose, scientists participating together in action, um, in protests is a really, I suppose a, a curious thing to study.

And so that's what I ended up studying, um, that specifically. So I didn't start out with that, I ended up just kind of naturally falling into that because I was already working on, on social movements.

Jan: So if we could take a wee step back. Could you paint a picture for our listeners of what contemporary climate protest movements in the UK look like?

Sam: Yeah. Um, I'll try and, uh, provide a kind of a, a very brief but, um, I just call it, I'll, I'll try and capture all the diversity that there is. So, I mean, the climate movement is incredibly diverse, um, both in what they, who they are and what they do.

I mean, if you look at polling, especially over the last 10 years, climate concern has been really high in the UK. It's like, it's hovered around 80 plus percent. So this kind of cuts across all sectors of society that are worried about climate change. And so you see that reflected in the groups that are taking action.

So of course you've got people, um, you know, you even have lawyers engaging in lawsuits against governments, against companies. Uh, you have, lobby groups specifically. You have charities such as Friends of the Earth, um, who also participate sometimes in protest.

Uh, you then have a wide range of kind of protest movements or protest groups around these issues. So we have, I think what captured the popular imagination most in the last 10 years is probably Extinction Rebellion. Um, and for listeners who don't know them, they're a, a social movement that started in the UK specifically, but has since gone global.

And of course, they engage in kind of normal forms of protests such as marching, demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, petitioning, um, you know, turning up to, uh, local MP meetings to have those kinds of conversations. But they've also engaged in, um, civil disobedience or, or disruptive protests.

Paul: You talk about Extinction Rebellion, I think also of Just Stop Oil who've had lots of well publicised activities...

Sam: ...yeah...

Paul: ...and most of which would probably be described as disruptive, causing inconvenience, causing issues for certain groups, certain types of people. What do we actually mean when we say disruptive, in practice, for these groups?

Sam: Yeah. So when, when we say disruptive or, or, you know, uh, I think we have to separate, um, how the media talks about it from how, like, maybe academics sometimes talk about it as well.

But generally speaking, what we mean by disruptive protest is that you're, you're disrupting normal life in some way. So, for example, um, we've seen activists from Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and other groups say they target a company because it has, uh, you know, invested in fossil fuel licencing, for example, and, and benefits from that.

You might see activists chained to the front of that building. And so of course, that disrupts the normal practice of that, of that business. It also, um, generates attention and, and kind of forces people to look at the issue. So in that sense, it's disrupting normal practice.

Another example is, say, sitting in a road, uh, to kind of raise awareness of, of the climate issues. And so of course you're disrupting, um, motorists' normal,

um, normal life, right? So you're kind of forcing, um, attention on the issue. And so in that sense it's disruptive.

But I think we have to be very careful as well that um, obviously this has a long history, um, this kind of civil disobedience protest. So essentially you're breaking the law to draw attention to, to an issue, but you have to do it peacefully, hence the word civil...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Sam: ...and so obviously, um, Mahatma Gandhi did this in India, you know, in the, for, for independence. We had this with the civil rights campaign in the US. Um, but this, so this has a very long history as a form of, of protest.

And the argument always is, is that if you purely do, kind of, peaceful protest by the sidelines, without some form of disruption, it doesn't tend to generate the, the change needed, um, or the attention needed to, to bring, um, bring an issue to fruition, essentially.

Paul: I think sporting events have been particularly targeted, I think of Test matches in this country, the World Snooker Championship where someone poured a load of orange powder all over the table, and they had to completely replace the surface on the snooker table.

Um, also golf, uh, I think the 18th green at a major tournament. And that really is about capturing attention, isn't it? Yeah, that's something that millions of eyes are gonna be on.

Sam: Yeah, for sure. And I think this is something, you know, I, I've spoken to a lot of activist groups and there's a, a frustration but also a acknowledgement that they need the media, um, as the oxygen to actually bring attention to the demands.

And so there's a question of how do you get attention? And this is one of the key ways of, of getting attention. The issue is always it, the media doesn't necessarily always cover the issue that they're asking about. It might focus purely on the, the spectacle itself. And so that's a kind of a, a difficult, um, yeah, it's a difficult thing to navigate.

Um, but the reason why these groups are doing these actions as well is because they're looking at what's actually happening and they're making a case saying, well, we're not seeing this covered in the media unless we're doing this kind of, uh, protest.

Jan: And of course the media coverage also brings, maybe, the cause to a wider public.

So it seems, you know, what, what kind of relationship then is there between activists who are, you know, making their point through civil disobedience - I'm gonna try, I don't wanna use the word disruption - and then the public who might be either seeing it directly or seeing it through a media. How does that, what kind of relationship exists between those two parties?

Sam: So yeah, regarding the, the relationship between these forms of protest and the public. I think in general we tend to see that the public doesn't like these kinds of protests, and they don't tend to identify with those protesters, so they don't tend to increase support for those specific groups. On, on, you know, on average. Of course, it does drive membership, it does drive attention, so that does happen as well.

Um, but what we do see, which is what's, what's interesting is that these more, you could call them radical, um, groups, or groups who are willing to, uh, disrupt. You tend to see this can increase support for more, for more moderate groups.

So, for example, you know, in some research a few years ago where, with Insulate Britain and then Just Stop Oil, these protests were driving people to, say, Friends of the Earth and other groups. So there's an interesting thing there where, if you think about this from a wider ecosystem, some people call this the, the radical flank and how it can increase support for the moderate flank.

So it can raise salience of the issue, but it doesn't lead to identification with those protestors, but it can then allow people to, to move on to more moderate groups.

And I read a piece of work actually recently again that, they said, when the moderate group said, we are actually the moderate group, we're not doing these kinds of actions, that, again, drives, um, people to kind of become part of those groups.

So if you're thinking about it from a wider perspective, these groups are actually forming a, a kind of useful social function, um, because they're raising awareness and they can actually drive people to, uh, I suppose the wider social movement to the wider kind of, uh, lobby for, for climate, um, policy.

Jan: And I've often thought that's the case with, you know, uh, I guess Greenpeace might be some of the more active and, you know, the general environmental movement, and they don't interact with companies very closely. WWF does and through to other things. So I like the idea of this sort of, you know, there's a whole set of, a set of people coming to it.

And so, would you say then, because that, that if you like, is not counterproductive. So like the, the more disruptive edge is driving a bigger awareness of the issue and engagement with others. So what about the argument that all this is counterproductive? That kind of falls apart at this stage, doesn't it?

Sam: Yeah. So, so myself and a couple of colleagues at uh, Bristol were thinking about this question. So this is when I was a, uh, during my PhD I was very fortunate to do a, a postdoc at, um, at Bristol, which is, someone called it a postmodern postdoc, where you're a postdoc while [Jan laughs] you're still a PhD student.

Um, and that was between the Schools of Policy Studies and, and Psychology. And we were kind of trying to interrogate this question of, well, what do we mean by counterproductive? Um, 'cause that framing was often used in, in media. And so one is, when people see these protests, does it make them less climate concerned? Well, no. So in that sense, it's not counterproductive.

Does it lead to people then, um, not supporting the demand? So say for example, if you are in favour of, um, removing oil and gas licencing, and you then saw these protests, you then decide to become in favour of oil and gas licencing that would be counterproductive. Um, but we don't see that borne out from, from the research.

So I think in that sense, we can't say these things are, are counterproductive because it doesn't, um, it doesn't fit right with what's actually happening when we, when we interrogate this empirically.

You could argue that if your aim with these protests is to drive wide identification with those groups, then yes, as, as I said earlier, they're not very popular, these kinds of positions. Um, so in that sense you could argue that maybe it's, that's not the, if they're looking to get increased support for themselves, then yeah, that's not going to be the, the method to do that.

But that's not their aim. Their aim is to, is to drive salience of the issue.

Paul: Do they care at all if anyone joins their movement, as long as people support what their long-term overarching goal is?

Sam: Yeah, I mean, if you look at these groups, they have a, they have a shelf life. So say for Extinct, um, Insulate Britain, for example, was a group that existed for, I'm trying to think, maybe two or three years.

And they, in one sense, they did what they wanted to do, which was raise the issue of, of insulation. I mean, you can look at media, uh, analysis of the time, like the word insulate, independent of the group, became way, way more, uh, widespread. So in that sense, they were raising the issue of, of, of insulation.

With Just Stop Oil, they were successful at raising this, the issue of oil and gas licencing. And so they forced a response from both the Tory government and, at the time, um, this was in 2023 and 2022, and the Labour Party. So they had to respond to this issue of oil and gas licencing. And so, that did actually, they were able to force that through.

Of course, the problem is given the kind of protests that they were engaged in and the fact that a lot of people were arrested, you know, you do begin to run out of people who are willing to take those kinds of actions. So I think that kind of protest can only exist for a, for a shorter space of time. It, it's not built for the long term, ultimately.

Paul: So you've mentioned a few times already media coverage of these activities. How generally does the media frame what these groups get up to?

Sam: Yeah, so it's a good question. So when we did, um, so we published, myself and Oscar Berglund and Colin Davis published our paper last month, um, looking at this kind of claim of counter productivity.

And what was interesting was that, as I mentioned earlier, Just Stop Oil were very successful at raising salience of, you know, of themselves and of the issue of, um, oil and gas licencing.

What we noticed was that initially, um, they tended to mention the demand, the media, early on in these protests, but over time, um, the group was mentioned and the disruption was mentioned and the action was mentioned and the, the demand wasn't mentioned as much.

So I think there's an interesting relationship there where initially they were able to be quite successful at getting, you know, most of the focus, but from the media was on the, uh, the specific action and what the group is doing, and

usually it was negative. The framing sometimes was neutral, but it was generally, it was usually very, you know, definitely not positive. Maybe the, occasionally you'd get one or two environmental correspondents who would give them the benefit of the doubt, but generally speaking, it was neutral or, or negative.

But initially they were covering the specific demand, but as time went on, they focused more and more on the disruption and less on the, and less on the demand, really.

Paul: If that's how media are maybe looking at these issues. What about criminal justice systems around the world? Is there an element that climate protests are being criminalised and that those taking part in them, uh, being prosecuted in ways that maybe they weren't previously?

Sam: Yeah. So something we also did at um, this is when I was at, at Bristol, and what we found was that there was growing repression of protests. So the UK, in a, quite a negative sense was leading the way about bringing in more draconian laws for, for policing protest.

And so what these were brought in was under the idea that, well, we need to stop these forms of disruptive protest. We need to stop, so it's targeting environmental protests specifically, but obviously they've changed the laws around protest in general.

Um, and so in 2022 and 2023, there was changes to the, kind of, policing acts and so on, about how, and also how protest was, uh, was essentially tried. And so we've seen the increase, you know, from sometimes it was, it was simply fines to prison time, um, you know, for, for certain kinds of offences. You know, for locking on to buildings that became, you know, punishable and you could get prison time as well, depending on, on the circumstance.

I mean, if you were associated with any of these activist groups, you could be arrested on suspicion for having a bike lock in your bag. And so it's an interesting, I suppose, growing repression around protest. Now I think people didn't quite put these two things together at the same, at the time, which is they were happy for environmental protestors that they didn't like to be, uh, treated in this way.

But of course, this has changed the law around protest in this country more generally. You know, if we were, I say, to move to a more, towards a more

authoritarian government, um, it would, it would limit the kinds of, um, I suppose, freedom of expression that people have in this country ultimately. And so there is issues around that, and this is something Amnesty International has, has commented on over the last few years.

And we've seen this trend not just in the UK, but more globally, that there's been this, uh, increased repression of environmental protests, but actually this has then been used to repress free speech and, um, protest around other issues as well.

Jan: So that's protest in general and protesters in general.

Let's come back to the scientists, because scientists are not the general public. They're not, or ordinarily thought of as, activists. So how and why do some scientists decide to go beyond their research and become involved in activism?

Sam: Yeah, I mean, there's a lot to unpack there. Um, I suppose I'll start with a kind of common, um, refrain, or a kind of comment that came up in my, in my work interviewing and serving and, and observing scientists engaged in this. Was that there was a frustration about their job in the sense that they were hoping that if they got into science to study the world, um, to study people and, you know, ultimately to make the world a better place.

I mean, that's part of the kind of the academic dream, right? The dream is that you, you contribute significantly. And there's a sense that, well, you know, they've been producing the papers, they've been engaging in communication, they've, uh, they've done interviews, they've done written stuff for, for policy makers, they've written stuff for scientists, they've written stuff for the public.

And a sense that, well, they're watching the, you know, mission still going up and they're watching the, the temperature rising, that it's not sufficient purely to communicate, uh, in this way. And so part of that is just this frustration that they want to keep doing those things, but they also want to communicate more strongly. And so sometimes this is, this is, you know, joining social movements and being a, I suppose a stand in for the science you could call, call it, um, as part of protest really.

Paul: Jan was saying back at the start about the need for academics, for researchers, to have a level of objectivity.

Um, how does that sit with scientists who want to be activists?

Sam: Yeah. So what I'll do is, uh, it, it's a wee bit complicated, so I'll just unpack some of the stuff here. So, one is of course, if it was impacting on how scientists were engaging in their actual job, so, you know, how they conduct research, um, how they interpret it and how they present it, I think that'd be problematic and, and scientists who engage in activism would also agree.

So if you're an ecologist and you're trying to argue one thing in favour of another purely because of your values, and it was not agreeing with reality, I think that'd be hugely problematic. I mean, this is why we also have peer review and why we check each other's work, right?

But then the other question is, okay, how does it affect perception of people who engage in activism? And I think that's a, a more complicated thing. Because there are these different cultures between science and activism.

So in science, you're encouraged to be objective. You're encouraged to be neutral or impartial about, about your work. Uh, and you're encouraged to not be certain. Ehile in activism, it, it demands that you take a, a strong stance, you have to be clear, you have to be, um, you know, have some kind of moral conviction that this is the right thing to do.

And so of course these two things kinda sit uneasily, especially for scientists who've been trained one way and they want to also make it a stronger stance. So I think what I can tell you a bit about is how maybe scientists transition into activism and how they make that fit with their roles while balancing those things.

Paul: Mm-hmm...

Sam: ...would that be helpful...?

Paul: ...yes, yeah, go ahead.

Sam: So some of my work, um, you know, this is a, this has just been covered in a paper, uh, ethnographic paper I've just published in PLOS Climate, and is also in that Conversation piece that you, uh, that you found.

Um, you know, one thing is that scientists who want to engage in activism, they don't want to abandon their scientist identity. You know, partly because they know it gives them more of a platform, uh, to communicate about these issues, right? Because it, it they have more, uh, sway, you could argue, than the average climate activist or the average, you know, citizen because they have this kind of trusted position in, in society.

And when we look at, um, globally, I mean the, the good thing is people still do trust scientists. They are amongst the most trusted group in society, in spite of political polarisation, in spite of misinformation. Uh, scientists are still, you know, uh, trusted. And, so what they do is they sometimes do things like, okay, what I'll do is, I want to join the social movement, but maybe I'll produce evidence summaries for activists.

So they'll say the activists need an empirical basis for the claims they're making. So they try and come up with, well, how do I take all the evidence and make it, you know, something that you can actually make, make a placard around. And that could be quite difficult, right?

Um, or you, you know, I've seen scientists, they do signs, information stalls. So for example, there might be a mass protest, like at the March for Nature in 2023, and that was around Westminster for a few days. You know, so you had all these different nature groups, you had like, um, Friends of the Earth, um, Extinction Rebellion, even Just Stop Oil, all kind of cohabiting in this space.

And we had Scientists for Extinction Rebellion, which is a member of, uh, Extinction Rebellion. You know, they had a, a stand where members of the public come up and ask questions. So we had like ecologists answering questions, we had, um, you know, battery experts asking questions about, you know, how do batteries actually work and, and you know, how important are they for the climate transition?

And so these kinds of actions help scientists kind of navigate these, uh, things, because they're still doing stuff that they do within science, but they're contributing to social movements. And they're not necessarily arguing for one policy over another, 'cause that would be, like, policy advocacy. They might be just saying, you need to listen to the climate science more, more seriously and that they need action. And that's a more general claim than, than something very, very specific.

Paul: I think back to many, many decades ago when you had certain scientists who would say 'tobacco is good for you, smoke these brand of cigarettes'. That's, you know, that, that'll be fine. Certain beers, certain alcohol is great. Go ahead and do it.

Obviously they were being paid off by the tobacco lobby, by alcohol, by whoever it was, they were doing it. Is there a similar danger, do you feel, that people might have these perceptions of scientists who are speaking about

certain environmental issues that, oh, maybe they've been paid off by X group or Y group in order to say this?

Sam: Yeah, I mean, I think that, that, and I think that danger goes back to sometimes how these things are framed and kind of media discourse that like we see there's these two sides. So for example, with climate science, that there's two sides. There's the people who say there's climate science and there's the people who are saying whatever.

And you'll, the thing that you're talking about there is that when we, we see some ex-climate scientists that is happy to say, that's all a hoax and, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So in that sense, yeah, there is a concern that for some members of the public, they might see there being a, there's, I suppose, two sides to this, as if that's the issue.

The thing that, the counter would make is that, well, there is this, this, this, uh, consensus around the issue of climate change. This is not something that's disagreed upon, but we're now seeing scientists is stepping into social movements to say, look, just *look* at this consensus, but doing it in a more forceful sense.

And so I think that is a different position than if you're one or two scientists take putting your head above the parapet and you're saying something, contradicting all the, all the evidence. I would say, then, yes, that's a problem. Or if you saw scientists who were willing to take it kind of a clear stance on one specific policy, and they had some connections to that.

So, for example, they've got investments in mini nuclear reactors and are really pushing for that as the, as the climate solution, you might say, well that seems a little bit suspicious. But if you've got scientists saying, well, you know, new oil and gas licencing doesn't fit with, our efforts to keep below 1.5, I think that's something that's fairly innocuous.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Sam: But this kind of goes back to also media framing, I think, as well. And I think some papers and some, media outlets are much, much better at representing these debates and representing, uh, what's in the, I suppose, scientific consensus, while others are doing a poorer job of that, I would say.

Jan: And I suppose if you're a, a bad actor in the media sense, you, you would, you could, you know, sort of manufacture that uncertainty as well.

And I've, I, I really like those examples that you were speaking about, where there are scientists there, you know, saying, come and ask me a question. And for members of the public, because that, if you like, is a, that's a, you know, a, a big, a big benefit to anyone who might want to ask a question, especially because we lock a lot of our knowledge away behind paywalls, and our sort of pay to publish kind of, kind of, uh, approaches.

Um, so I think that they, they feel quite different. So you've got quite a spectrum there, which makes of course, making hard and fast, you know, summaries about the whole thing quite hard, 'cause it, it depends on these different roles and different contexts.

Sam: Yeah, and it's not that you don't get challenges. I mean, sometimes you had members of the public coming up to scientists saying, are you a real scientist? [Jan laughs] And then they'd be saying, well, what do you mean by real scientist? Well...

Jan: ...I've got a coach. I've got a coach... [laughs]

Sam: ...well, which is interesting. And someone said, well, you know, does it have to be a specific kind of science? Is it ecology or climate science, or is it, is it more about your qualifications?

And some members of the public were like, well, you know, once you have a Master's degree, they were happy, which is interesting. Others were saying, well, if you're not an atmospheric, atmospheric physicist, you're not the right kind of scientist.

And so there's an interesting thing there where, um, you, of course you get challenges from, from the, from the public, um, about these kinds of things. But most of the time when they speak to scientists who are, who are doing these kinds of things, they realise, oh no, they're just, you know, this is, this is fine.

You know, and it, it kind of provides that bridge, um, between, as, as you said, the university and, and kind of the public. And I sometimes think we can be, um, a little bit isolated from the communities in which we're, which we're embedded, right?

Paul: So coming towards the end then, Sam, just, how do you see things shaping up with regards to scientists being involved in climate activism?

Do you think we'll see more of it in the years ahead?

Sam: Yeah, I mean, so it's interesting. I think, with social movements in general, especially around climate issues, we did have a peak, say, around, before Covid. Um, and obviously Covid had a big impact on kind of affecting that trajectory. And now we've also seen this kind of lag where we have increased repression of protests more generally. But, I mean, the climate issue isn't going away.

Um, we've also seen a lot of walk backs from certain governments and certain companies, especially in the US, but, but not just there, there there's been kind of a, a shift. So this issue isn't going to go away and the scientific community isn't less aware of the issue.

So I can only imagine that it will, it will continue., I think, how, what it looks like in the form and shape that it takes, um, I can't, can't comment on. You know, maybe we'll see more civil disobedience from scientists. So, I mean, I, you know, that's something we didn't talk about, but that's something I've been, I've filmed and I've, I've observed and I've been with scientists while they're being arrested, say, for protesting government, [short laugh] government policy.

But I don't think that's gonna go away. And that's something we'll see, uh, you know, coming back in different forms over the next 10, 20 years and, and longer.

Paul: Well, Sam, thank you so much for joining us and giving us such a great insight into the whole issue.

Sam: Thank you.

[Theme music]

Paul: I feel you've been given permission, Jan, should you so choose, to now become an activist.

Jan: Well, I suppose it all comes down to definitions, doesn't it? There we are, how's that for an academic answer? [short laugh]

Paul: Although you're not really a scientist.

Jan: Well, as a social scientist, we do have norms of how we decide what's robust. [laughs]

Paul: [laughing] Yes, your norms are totally different from normal people's norms, but yes, yes...

Jan: ...they will do. But I think it is a, I think it is a different situation for a social scientist versus a natural scientist. Um, but...

Paul: ...did you say an actual scientist [Jan laughs] or a natural scientist there? Can I just check...?

Jan: [laughing] ...I said a natural, natural scientist...

Paul: ...okay...

Jan: [joking] ...get back in your box, boy. Um, so there, I think it is a slight, uh, a different...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...sort of context for, for what we do.

But many of the same kind of things would exist. Like, you know, um, you know, how do you, how do you inform the public? How do you inform protest movements? How is that perceived? How do you engage with the, the newspapers?

And, um, I really quite, I could tell you a wee story about insulation if you like. [laughs]

Paul: [humouring Jan] Yeah, all right. We've got a few minutes. Go on, Jan, yes.

Jan: So the, the best description of me when I was doing a, a policy role alongside my academic role, um, was when a newspaper in Scotland called me a 'cold porridge eating eco-Taliban'. So, um, so leaving aside, you know... [laughs]

Paul: ...and this is one of your favourable reviews...

Jan: [laughing] ...yes. Leaving aside the, you know, the reference to the Taliban, cold porridge eating, of course that's, it's a very Scottish, uh, approach.

The reason why this was a description of me is because the organisation I was working for was making suggestions about, um, insulating houses.

Paul: Oh. God, how dare you want people to insulate their houses...

Jan: [laughs] ...exactly...

Paul: ...people should live in the cold and wet and damp...

Jan: ...yeah, well, it's one of my most favourite insults of that's ever been levelled at me.

Paul: Ah. Cold porridge eating Jan...

Jan: [laughing] ...yes, that's it...

Paul: ...I'm gonna, it's not really one I can deploy very easily in casual conversation...

Jan: ...in everyday conversation...

Paul: ...but I'll, I'll find, I'll find ways, don't worry...

Jan: ...yes, indeed, indeed...

Paul: ...yeah. What I found interesting from what Sam has been telling us is how even if people don't support the groups that were advocating for certain things and carrying out protests, they quite often support the issues that they are advocating and will, as a result, get involved somehow in that issue, even if not with the specific group.

Jan: And I love the way he characterised that as a, as almost like a protest ecosystem.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Jan: So that you need different parts of a, of a movement in order to be able to reach all parts of the public.

Paul: Yeah. And he stressed very much that those groups don't so much care if people don't come and join them and support them, they just want to make sure that the issue gets more awareness and more, more action around it. Which is the key thing for them, that they want the right result no matter how you get there, you don't have to get it through them.

Jan: Yeah. Well, that's pretty, pretty cool.

Paul: So what have we got next, Jan?

Jan: Let's have some more activists.

Paul: Okay. Have you got any in your pockets?

Jan: [laughing] No...

Paul: ...have you got any more cold porridge eating members of your clique there?

Jan: Uh, well, a pal of mine, and if he does listen to the podcast, will know I'm speaking about him, um, I, I knew him as a policy advisor. But you, do you remember Swampy or maybe it's some of our...

Paul: ...yeah, yeah, I was thinking about Swampy earlier, yes...

Jan: ...ah, right. So, so if you remember Swampy, and some of our listeners might remember Swampy, he, he did the same thing, you know, lived up, up trees for X number of times. And then I knew him latterly as a, as a policy advisor for sustainability. So there's also like a lifecycle from protests through to the mainstream as well.

Paul: So should we get someone in from a thinktank that tries to shape policy? Is that what you're trying to say?

Jan: That's what I'm trying to get you to. [laughs]

Paul: Thank goodness for that. I knew we'd get there eventually. We went down a rabbit hole, never mind up a tree.

Um, yes, let's bring in Alice Martin, who is Head of Research for the Work Foundation. She can talk to us all about the evolving shape of work in the UK at the minute, and things such as employment rates and the like.

Well, until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: and from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]