Strategies for Climate Justice in the Academic Publishing Industry: From Pledges to Direct Action

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Abstract: This article outlines strategies for climate justice as employed by various actors involved in academic knowledge production, from the climate pledges made by publishing conglomerates to the direct actions of science advocacy groups. Taking inspiration from the climate activism tactics used within literary publishing by the campaign group Fossil Free Books, which explicitly positions authors as *workers* in the publishing industry, this article makes a plea for scholars to similarly position themselves more clearly as workers in the academic publishing industry. The article contends that acknowledging how scholars and their labor are materially embedded in and shaped by systems of knowledge production, and hence recognizing the leverage they have to argue for and demand a more ecologically sustainable publishing system, can benefit their climate justice organizing. I further support this argument by making connections to recent research on ecological governance and knowledge production, especially to theories and theorists arguing for the importance of seeing climate justice principles and practices as integrally connected to issues of labor and social justice in publishing. Based on this, I put forward and discuss various (speculative) strategies focused on reframing ecological governance in knowledge production (ranging from degrowth and the redistribution of wealth under conditions of structural inequity to slow science and situated openness) and explore the potential of disruptive actions and alternative publishing models to re-politicize technocratic approaches to environmental governance in the publishing industry.

Keywords: Climate Justice, Climate Activism, Academic Publishing, Degrowth, Labor Relations, Social Justice

In August 2023, a group of authors wrote an open letter calling on the Scottish investment management firm Baillie Gifford, the main sponsor of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, to divest from the fossil fuel industry. According to the Scottish investigative journalism platform *The Ferret*, Baillie Gifford "had up to £5bn invested

in companies which make money from the oil, coal or gas sectors at the end of 2022" (Dobson 2023), a revelation that led climate activist Greta Thunberg to pull out of her scheduled appearance at the festival, accusing the fossil fuel industry of greenwashing by sponsoring cultural events (Brooks 2023). By the end of the festival, the open letter had been signed by over 150 authors and was accompanied by an audience walkout and on-site protest (Gaitán Johannesson and Ordorica 2024). This intervention led to the official launch in November 2023 of the Fossil Free Books (FFB) book workers collective and campaign group, which continued its campaign for Baillie Gifford to cease its investments from companies linked to fossil fuels, widening its call to include companies with links to Israeli occupation, apartheid, and genocide and for festivals to use their relationships with Baillie Gifford to call on the firm to divest. The FFB campaign led to the Hay Festival of Literature & Arts making the decision to suspend its sponsorship deal with Baillie Gifford, after which the Edinburgh festival followed suit. After that, Baillie Gifford announced that instead of divesting it would end its existing sponsorship deals with UK literary festivals, withdrawing around £1 million a year in funding (Ellingham 2024).[1]

These strategies by FFB to achieve a genocide-free, fossil-free books industry have been heavily criticized in the United Kingdom and global media, and by fellow authors and arts workers, as failing to ensure divestment while making book festivals even more precarious. This critique notwithstanding, I argue here that the tactics employed by FFB to compel the book industry toward divestment exemplify a model and strategy that is important to explore more in-depth from within the context of climate activism in the academic publishing industry. After a run-through of the nature of FFB's campaign and protest (which has mostly focused on the literary book industry), I provide a short overview of strategies and commitments made by actors in the academic publishing industry to tackle the climate emergency. These come mainly in the form of climate pledges, which have triggered various types of critique and activism from within the academic and publishing community, which I briefly discuss. In doing so, I focus on how scholars (as organized in climate advocacy groups) predominantly position themselves *outside* of the publishing industry, both as part of their climate activism and in their labor relations. I then argue how the strategies employed by FFB in their climate activism—focused on boycotts and the abstaining of labor and a strong positionality as workers and stakeholders in the publishing industry—could also be beneficial for and strengthen the strategies employed by the scholarly and publishing community in their fight for climate justice. To achieve this, scholars must start to position themselves more

1. Baillie Gifford was at that point sponsoring a broad portfolio of ten literary festivals across the United Kingdom and one literary prize (Gaitán Johannesson 2024).

directly as workers in the academic publishing industry and in solidarity with other book workers involved in climate activism. To further support my argument, I make connections to recent research on ecological governance and knowledge production and the crucial connection between climate, labor, and social justice in developing speculative strategies for climate activism in the publishing industry.

The Positionality of Fossil Free Books

The tactics used by FFB to achieve a fossil-free books industry received a lot of critique, ranging from accusations that their campaign backfired when Baillie Gifford pulled its sponsorship without divesting—as environmental author Mark Lynas (2024) writes, "not a dime has been divested from fossil fuels. Not a gram of CO2 has been reduced"—to arguing that it resulted in damage to the budgets of arts festivals and to the literary and art world's relationship with corporate sponsorship, having to find new "ethical sponsorship" during a cost-of-living crisis (Creamer 2024; O'Mahony 2024). Arguments were also made that Baillie Gifford is not necessarily the worst offender or "climate villain" where fossil fuels are concerned, as the company claimed that its fossil fuels investments were 2% compared with an industry standard of 11% (Knight 2024a; Pratley 2024). FFB were also accused of hypocrisy for not targeting book chains or publishers involved in or owned by companies that invest in fossil fuels, for actively making use of platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (owned by Meta) for their campaign, and for selling their books via Amazon while also calling out Baillie Gifford's clients for their investments in Amazon and Meta, which have commercial dealings with the state of Israel (Knight 2024b; O'Mahony 2024).

Yet FFB's defense of their actions has been clear. Authors including Naomi Klein, a signatory of FFB's campaign, and Tom Jeffreys and Jessica Gaitán Johannesson (both FFB organizers), have pointed out that it is outrageous how all the attention and critique have been on FFB instead of on how Baillie Gifford responded to scrutiny by pulling its funding—thereby stranding book festivals—and discrediting FFB rather than face accountability for itself by reconsidering its investments (Armitstead 2024; Jeffreys 2024). FFB has highlighted that it wants to work with the book and publishing industry to find new sponsors and, instead of being so dependent on corporate sponsorship, help the industry transition to more sustainable, ethical, robust, and community-based funding models "more in line with the values that these literary spaces claim to uphold" (Knight 2024a; see also Gaitán Johannesson and Ordorica 2024; Jeffreys 2024). Jeffreys (2024) argues that austerity in public funding for the arts has been a political choice, and the highly profitable books industry could similarly choose to support book festivals more rather than festivals having to turn to companies that profit from arms

manufacturing and fossil fuel extraction for sponsorship. FFB further emphasizes that their campaign has been an important awareness exercise, making the industry conscious of how, beyond its investment in fossil fuels, Baillie Gifford also invests in companies that profit from Israeli apartheid, occupation, and genocide.[2] Awareness raising and boycotts work as important strategies against greenwashing and artswashing, FFB and their supporters argue, and help to "delegitimise and stigmatise" the funders of fossil fuels, who are using corporate sponsoring and their association with book and arts festivals to launder their reputation and invest in their public relations (Warfield 2024; see also Gunaratne 2024). Hence tactical interventions such as FFB's protests and boycotts—and their specific focus on book festivals—are "not an appeal to moral purity, but a strategic attempt to drain these corporations of their political power" (Warfield 2024). Book festivals are where authors have the most strategic chance of making an impact when they withdraw their labor (Ellingham 2024; Knight 2024a). As Klein states, "Literary festivals rely on the labour of writers, editors and translators. We donate our labour because we love to gather and meet our readers, but we have the right to demand that these gatherings divest from the forces causing death and destruction on an unfathomable scale" (quoted in Knight 2024b).

This is where one of FFB's more interesting tactics is elaborated: namely, how they explicitly position authors as *workers* in the publishing industry, defining themselves not as a collective of authors but as "a collective of book workers—authors, publishers, illustrators, and more" organizing together for a genocide-free, fossil-free books industry, among others, by withdrawing their labor through boycotts (Gaitán Johannesson 2024). FFB has attempted to redefine how, as Ellingham explains, "writers often don't see their work as labour—which produces value and can be withdrawn" (2024), and author Noreen Masud (2024) similarly argues that authors have the most power and leverage in areas where they can withdraw labor and work together. The usage of the term *book worker* in FFB's organizing and founding is important as it "disrupts the way the literary establishment encourages us, as authors, to view ourselves," highlighting how "the definition of people as workers is itself political," Gaitán Johannesson (2024) argues.[3] She points out that the term *book workers* appeared in citation marks in many opinion pieces on FFB, where Baillie Gifford further questioned their position in the book industry by labeling them "activists" engaged in an "anonymous campaign,"

2. As Jeffreys (2024) outlines, "In December 2023, the Don't Buy Into Occupation Coalition named Baillie Gifford as one of the top 50 European investors in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories," and Baillie Gifford "also invested £61m in Babcock International, a large UK defence company that is linked to state-owned Israeli arms manufacturers. The value of shares in Babcock International increased significantly after the 7 October attacks in 2023."
3. This positionality put FFB in opposition to the Society of Authors (SoA): "During a meeting, representatives from the SoA management also told us that referring to authors as 'workers' would be unpopular among our membership. It's not surprising that a trade union that doesn't regard its members as workers also views 'politics' as exceeding its remit" (Gaitán Johannesson 2024).

delegitimizing their stake in the industry and their right to change it through collective efforts such as labor organizing (Gaitán Johannesson 2024). Yet positioning themselves as workers also challenges what Gaitán Johannesson sees as some of the fundamental codes in the industry, such as the image of the author as a "uniquely creative genius," obscuring the work of all other agencies (e.g., "agents, editors and copy-editors, designers, printers and many more") involved in the production of books as the "products of the labour of many." Instead, she argues that we need to reframe how we view authors and how they view themselves: as a workforce. And this, I argue next, is crucial for scholars as workers in the academic publishing industry too.

Climate Pledges in the Academic Publishing Industry: Critique and Resistance

The academic publishing industry, including the big five commercial publishing companies,[4] has increasingly adopted climate and sustainability pledges, set up climate initiatives, and made further commitments to climate action, both as part of their own operations (e.g., Springer Nature announced that it had become carbon neutral for its business operations in 2020; Lorigan 2021) and as part of cross-sector or supply-chain initiatives. Some of the more well-known cross-sector pledges include the United Nations (UN) SDG Publishers Compact, a joint initiative of the UN and the International Publishers Association (IPA), which was launched in October 2020 to "accelerate progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030."[5] The compact has more than 300 members, who as part of SDG 13 ("take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts") pledge to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 and cut emissions by 43% by 2030. Publishing Declares, launched by the Publishers Association (PA) in the United Kingdom in October 2021, is a sustainability pledge from across the UK book and journal publishing industry, standing at 213 signatories and counting at the time of writing.[6] The signatories pledge, among others, to "join the global climate effort to limit warming to 1.5°C by setting ambitious, measurable targets across our own operations and extended supply chain to achieve net zero as soon as possible and by 2050 at the latest" (Haynes 2021). Reaching beyond the publishing industry, Elsevier and Springer Nature have signed up to the Climate Pledge, a commitment to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2040 that was co-founded by Amazon

4. This refers traditionally to Elsevier, Sage, Springer Nature, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley, but MDPI and Frontiers also deserve a mention in this lineup of large commercial academic publishing companies.
5. See https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sdg-publishers-compact/.
6. See https://publishingdeclares.com/home.

and Global Optimism in 2019 and has been signed by over 500 global companies "to accelerate joint action, cross-sector collaboration, and responsible change."[7] A further initiative, which takes a different approach by focusing more on the publishing industry's role in distributing and making climate research more accessible, is the Climate Change Knowledge Cooperative, which includes among its "sponsors" Elsevier, Springer Nature, Frontiers, and Wiley. Set up in 2021 by research communication companies Kudos and Impact Science, this initiative aims to broaden discovery and understanding of climate change research by providing freely available summaries of research articles, written by professional science writers in plain language.[8] Each sponsor of the cooperative has selected articles, books, and other climate science content that have been made available as part of a showcase on the Kudos platform.[9]

The question remains whether these kinds of pledges and initiatives are ambitious, rapid, comprehensive, and unambiguous enough and to what extent they are and can be translated into actionable frameworks that are actively monitored by the organizations launching these cross-sector initiatives and/or their signatories, members, or sponsors. In the end the value of these kinds of pledges lies in their actual achievement, in bringing about the transformative change needed to tackle the climate emergency. Yet most of these pledges are voluntary and not legally binding, meaning that companies face no penalties for failing to meet their targets. Does the publishing industry not need stronger commitments or stronger climate and environmental governance (including legislation and penalties) that goes beyond these kinds of self-regulatory frameworks?

Haseeb Irfanullah, an independent consultant on the environment, climate change, and research systems, has been gently coaxing the academic publishing industry to do more toward climate action and to track their pledges and their impacts. He has done so specifically with regard to the SDG Publishers Compact and reports regularly on any progress made toward this pledge based on publicly available resources (e.g., signatories' websites and annual reports), critiquing how progress has been reported and measured: How are the SDGs being implemented, where has progress been made, and where could actions still improve? From this it becomes clear that reporting is not widely present across the industry, with Irfanullah noting in 2022 that "there is no progress report available on the United Nations or IPA websites on how the Compact signatories are doing in terms of implementing the 10 action points," while reporting by individual organizations was also limited at that point. As he states, a thorough stocktaking of the progress made, as well as planning for the changes organizations will have to make (how will these pledges be operationalized?) toward 2030, is crucial: "While certain

7. See https://www.theclimatepledge.com.
8. See https://info.growkudos.com/climate-change-knowledge-cooperative.
9. See https://www.growkudos.com/showcase/collections/climate-change.

actions are relatively easier to take, such as making public announcements upon joining the Compact or making subtle modifications to organizational websites, most of the Compact actions . . . demand well-thought-out plans supported by human and financial resources leading to incremental, collective changes." What is therefore needed, he argues, is a "move away from celebrating how many joined the Compact and focus more on how to speed up our collective action towards sustainability." Such a focus would involve regular monitoring of the industry's performance toward the SDG Publishers Compact's commitments to track the effectiveness of its climate actions and to ensure any new challenges and changing situations can be managed and properly responded and adapted to.[10]

Similarly, Publishing Declares has seen a large growth in initiatives that have signed up to the pledge, but its accompanying website and further updates and announcements by the PA do not seem to indicate they themselves are actively monitoring or measuring individual members' achievements and progress beyond encouraging them to "share experiences and support each other" and to self-monitor.[11] The Climate Change Knowledge Cooperative, given its described ambition as "a major new collaborative initiative" and to be a "one-stop shop for trustworthy climate change research" (Rapple 2021), seems very modest in scale; some of the large corporate "sponsors" of this initiative, such as Springer Nature and Elsevier, have by January 2025 only made summaries of 10 and 20 articles, respectively, available on a platform that is lacking a proper search function.[12] The Climate Pledge has also received a staggering amount of critique, including

10. Irfanullah (2024) also notes some of the efforts to monitor progress that the sector says have been made, including the IPA SDG Dashboard (https://sdg.internationalpublishers.org), which compiles resources and efforts toward the SDGs; the SDG Publishers Compact Fellows (https://www.sdgcompactfellows.org), who provide practical tools and actionable guidance for the publishing sector, including their "Top Action Tips"; and the STM's SDG Sustainability Roadmap (https://stm-assoc.org/what-we-do/strategic-areas/social-responsibility/sdg-roadmap/), a five-phase action plan for publishers. There have also been surveys conducted in 2022 by the UN/IPA and EASE (European Association of Science Editors)/HESI (Higher Education Sustainability Initiative) to assess the progress made by signatories to the compact and obstacles to joining, which showed that "the majority of the respondents did not use a formal method, indicators, or metrics for reporting or documenting their actions" (Lad et al. 2024, 11), and by Kudos in 2023 to measure publishers' awareness of and attitude toward the SDGs. The results of this latter survey are, very unhelpfully, not openly available, and the survey seems to be more focused on publishers who want to "gain strategic insight and identify commercial opportunities" in relation to sustainability research (see https://info.growkudos.com/landing/real-world-change-sdg-research-study). It is therefore easy to concur with Irfanullah when he states that "to measure research impact—linking to the outward aspect of sustainability—we need real time data, not overdue surveys."
11. The Publishing Declares press release does mention that this is the first in an ongoing scheme of work led by the PA's Sustainability Taskforce, "which will also include a report, carbon calculator and a materials index" (see https://www.publishers.org.uk/our-work/carbon-calculator/). However, both these tools are only available to PA members, which might not include all signatories to Publishing Declares. The PA has also hosted events and summits to bring signatories together and has conducted a survey of signatories, but the results of this survey do not seem to be openly available (see https://www.publishers.org.uk/events/publishing-declares-3-years-on-where-is-the-industry-now/).
12. This lack of uptake by publishers might be due to the cost to take part in this initiative, which in 2021 had an entry cost of £2,995 (+VAT) for 10 professionally written summaries, a cost that might be affordable for the larger commercial publishers, but it means that this initiative will be out of reach to most smaller journals and not-for-profit publishers. See https://app-na1.hubspotdocuments.com/documents/5642616/view/251133796?accessId=e6316d.

from Amazon's own employees, who have organized walkouts over Amazon's lack of commitment to its own pledge and the disconnect between its stated goals and the actions taken by the company.[13] This includes, as they state, Amazon silently abandoning one of its main climate commitments (its Shipment Zero program; see Clark 2019) and massively underreporting its carbon emissions (disproportionately concentrated in communities of color) by only counting emissions for its own Amazon-branded products, which make up about 1% of its online sales (Evans 2022).[14] Lynn Boylan and Alma Dufour, representatives of the international worker-activist coalition Make Amazon Pay, strongly critique what they call Amazon's "so-called leadership" with the Climate Pledge, arguing that, "as Amazon itself is failing to live up to its stated ambitions, the pledge risks becoming not much more than greenwashing—and showing other corporations that you can get away with it" (2023).[15]

This accusation of greenwashing is also increasingly being made from within the scholarly community toward major actors in the academic publishing industry. Several groups, initiatives, and campaigns have been set up over the last few years focused on climate justice and the actions undertaken by the publishing industry. These initiatives are using strategies that go much further than critiquing and monitoring the industry on its climate mitigation efforts, including by taking legal action, calling out publicly what they see as the rampant greenwashing in the sector, and engaging in acts of civil disobedience, including boycotts. Mostly led by scientists, these initiatives have predominantly focused on Elsevier and its parent company RELX as the target of their campaigns.

One big catalyst to their organizing has been an exposé in *The Guardian* by journalist Amy Westervelt, who in a 2022 article revealed how Elsevier helps fuel oil and gas drilling. Westervelt writes that Elsevier "is one of the top publishers of books aimed at expanding fossil fuel production" and also publishes several journals focused on fossil fuel extraction and provides consultancy and data services to fossil fuel companies.[16] Based on interviews with scientists working with Elsevier who are "increasingly alarmed that the company works with the fossil fuel industry to help increase oil and gas drilling" and former and current employees who say that "dozens of workers have spoken out

13. Wikipedia has a good overview of the criticism of Amazon's environmental impact: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Amazon%27s_environmental_impact. On criticism by Amazon employees, see https://www.amazonclimatejustice.org and Lauren Rosenblatt's (2024) article.
14. See https://sustainability.aboutamazon.com/shipment-zero-update.pdf. Further critique includes that since announcing the Climate Pledge in 2019, Amazon's emissions have increased 34.5%. This is in addition to the vast emissions of Amazon's data centers and the company making billions by selling tailored artificial intelligence (AI) services to fossil fuel companies (Amazon Employees for Climate Justice 2024).
15. See https://makeamazonpay.com.
16. Elsevier also marketed the Geofacets tool (now retired), which "combines thousands of maps and studies to make it easier to find and access oil and gas reserves, in addition to locations for wind farms or carbon storage facilities" (Westervelt 2022).

internally and at company-wide town halls to urge Elsevier to reconsider its relationship with the fossil fuel industry," Westervelt highlights concerns about conflicting business interests and how Elsevier is "navigating relationships with both climate researchers and fossil fuel executives"—for example, when publishing key peer-reviewed climate research while also commissioning "authors, editors and journal advisory board members who are employees at top oil firms."[17] Westerveld points out that several other publishers who publish climate research and who have signed up to the SDGs are partnering with the oil and gas industry: "The UK-based publisher Taylor & Francis, for example, signed the UN pledge and released its own net-zero commitments while also touting its publishing partnership with 'industry leader' ExxonMobil, the oil company most linked to obstructionism on climate in the public consciousness. Another top climate publisher, Wiley, also signed on to the sustainability compact while publishing multiple books and journals aimed at helping the industry find and drill for more oil and gas." The article quotes Sherri Aldis, acting deputy director for the UN Department of Global Communications, who states, regarding the SDGs, "we will not comment on the practices of individual companies, but any actions actively supporting the expansion of fossil fuel development are indeed inconsistent."

Based on this exposé, in 2022, two science advocacy organizations, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR), initiated a petition urging Elsevier to share its plans for halting its anti-climate practices and started a dialogue with the company.[18] After they failed to secure a pledge from the company to end support for fossil fuel expansion that is associated with human rights harms, UCS and SGR announced the initiation of a UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) Human Rights Grievance Mechanism[19] in February 2024, together with over 150 partner organizations—all stakeholders potentially impacted by RELX's actions—to be spearheaded by the Climate Rights Coalition (CRC).[20] Their

17. In response, a spokesperson for Elsevier said that "they are not prepared to draw a line between the transition away from fossil fuels and the expansion of oil and gas extraction. She voiced concern about publishers boycotting or 'canceling' oil and gas firms" (Westervelt 2022).
18. UCS is a US-based nonprofit membership organization with half a million members and supporters—including professional scientists and ordinary citizens—working for a healthier environment and a safer world. See https://www.ucsusa.org. SGR is an independent UK-based membership organization of "hundreds of natural scientists, social scientists, engineers, IT professionals and architects," promoting responsible science and technology. See https://www.sgr.org.uk.
19. Grievance Mechanisms are defined by the UNGPs as "any routinized, State-based or non-State-based, judicial or non-judicial process through which grievances concerning business-related human rights abuse can be raised and remedy can be sought." The outcomes from a Grievance Mechanism may include "apologies, restitution, rehabilitation, financial or non-financial compensation and punitive sanctions (whether criminal or administrative, such as fines), as well as the prevention of harm through, for example, injunctions or guarantees of non-repetition" (United Nations 2011, 27).
20. CRC is an organization that brings together groups, organizations, and individuals who want to address climate-related human rights impacts through climate litigation, "generating accountability for those that would continue to promote new fossil fuel projects after 2021, a point at which such activity was determined by the global community to carry a high risk of human rights harms." See https://www.climaterightscoalition.com.

complaint to the UN Human Rights Council (also delivered to RELX) details "the science-based reasoning for positing company negligence of UNGP human rights obligations and the company risking complicity in human rights harms" and asks RELX to provide a timeline for when it will stop supporting activities that carry the risk of generating substantial human rights harms.[21] These include "providing technological and geographic guidance for the fossil fuel industry to develop new resources," which stand at odds with RELX's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to "discontinuing activities with potentially adverse climate change-related human rights impacts."[22] SGR and UCS's argument focuses on how "publicly, Elsevier claims that it's committed to clean energy and climate solutions. Its actions tell a very different story." Elsevier continues to subsidize climate pollution by providing analytic tools and data services to oil, gas, and coal companies; by publishing books and journals supporting coal, oil, and gas exploration and extraction; and by lobbying and funding US politicians who block climate action, among other practices (such as hosting exhibitions sponsored by the fossil fuel industry) that support the fossil fuel industry and actively harm the climate (Lyall et al. 2025, 3; Macmillan and Jones 2022; Union of Concerned Scientists 2023; Westervelt 2022).

Westervelt's (2022) article also inspired the activist group Scientist Rebellion (SR) to launch the #StopElsevier campaign, set up as a boycott campaign of the company.[23] SR argue for non-violent civil resistance and disobedience as a strategy to catalyze societal change. As stated on their website, "As scientists we have tried writing reports and giving presentations about the climate and ecological crisis to those in power. We must now have the humility to accept these attempts have not worked. Now is the time for us to take action, so that we show how seriously we take our warnings."[24] Tactics they endorse as part of the campaign include refusing to peer review (reducing as they say Elsevier's capacity to profit off academic publishing—with profit margins of nearly 40% annually—based on free academic labor and exploitative processing charges); writing to editors about Elsevier's fossil fuel ties; refusing to submit research to Elsevier outlets (ensuring research is not sold to fossil fuel companies); reporting greenwashing; taking part in direct actions (e.g., rallies at Elsevier annual general meetings); and supporting alternative (diamond open access [OA] and community-driven) publishing models.

Scientist Rebellion comes closest to the strategies used by FFB with their focus on boycotts; the withdrawal of labor that scholars provide to the publishing industry, such as authoring publications, reviewing them, and editing them; and alternative diamond

21. See https://www.climaterightscoalition.com/dialogue.
22. See https://www.climaterightscoalition.com/dialogue.
23. SR (a sister organization to Extinction Rebellion) is a network of scientists, scholars, and academics geared toward mobilizing the academic community to engage in civil disobedience.
24. See https://scientistrebellion.org.

OA and community-driven models, which, as they state, "provide a way for researchers to free themselves from [these] exploitative practices of Elsevier and other commercial publishers."[25] Yet, even though they acknowledge how scholars are entangled in the exploitative labor relations that Elsevier and other commercial publishing companies uphold (and that uphold them as an industry), and have power and leverage in their ability to (collectively) withdraw that labor from this industry, they do not position scholars as workers *in* the academic publishing industry in the way that FFB does, nor do other science advocacy organizations and initiatives (such as UCS and SGR) that have targeted the publishing industry's climate commitments.

However, this is not necessarily surprising, as the academic community and higher education (HE) institutions have for decades been outsourcing publishing activities to large publishing conglomerates while the labor required for academic publishing as conducted by scholars is severely undervalued by universities (Academy of Science of South Africa 2006; Adema and Moore 2023). This has led to a situation in which academic publishing (as an activity and as an industry), though in many ways connected to HE, is increasingly perceived as separate from academic research (see Adema 2021; Thompson 2005). Publishing is seen as a separate activity that comes at the end of a research project, focused on the distribution of research outcomes and outputs. This view ignores how academic publishing is and functions as "a highly consolidated industry that is propped up by extracted and (largely) unremunerated scholarly labour" and how large parts of the academic publishing industry (especially in the humanities and social sciences) are controlled and managed by the scholarly community, such as through university presses, society publishers, new university presses, and scholar-led presses and journals (Adema and Moore 2023, 9). Furthermore, it also overlooks how the labor that supports academic publishing is an integral part of scholarly research and the various ways in which knowledge production materially shapes research.

Hence, both in literary (as I have discussed in the previous section) and in academic publishing, authors tend to be situated outside of the publishing industry while creating the content the industry relies on. One of the main distinguishing features of academic publishing is that authors are not generally paid for their content, nor do they receive a share of the profits it might generate (royalties, if any, tend to be very low in academic publishing). What authors do get in return (next to the dissemination of their research) is prestige or academic recognition by publishing in peer-reviewed outlets, which in theory should advance their careers. The commercial publishing industry has generated huge profits from this reputation or prestige economy, based on the exploitation of the free labor of authors and reviewers and from selling back (high-prestige) content, data,

25. See https://stopelsevier.wordpress.com/alternative-publishing-models/.

and metrics to libraries and academic institutions. This prestige relies on scholarly labor that often remains under or unacknowledged and invisible (Fyfe et al. 2017).

There seems to be a clear opportunity here both for scholars individually and for those organized in scholarly climate advocacy groups to position themselves as workers in the academic publishing industry.[26] Emphasizing their entanglement and role as key stakeholders in this industry might help make scholars more aware to what extent they are complicit in its actions but might also highlight the power and leverage they have as workers to withhold their labor and support alternative, more ethical publishing models. In the next section of this article, I turn to the question of climate justice to further support this argument. Acknowledging that, as Mandy Meikle et al. (2016) conclude, it may be impossible to satisfactorily define the term *climate justice*, given the competing and "fundamental difference in worldview between indigenous and industrialised countries and people," I concur that "the principles of climate justice remain tied to a fundamental change in attitudes towards human rights and ecological balance." As such, I want to connect the issue of climate justice in academic publishing more directly to what I position here in short as *labor justice* (i.e., arguing for labor rights and improved working conditions under exploitative publishing labor conditions) and *social justice* (i.e., arguing for equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, inseparable from the question of cognitive justice; De Sousa Santos 2024). Working toward these requires that scholars acknowledge that they are materially embedded in and shaped by systems of knowledge production and that positioning themselves more clearly as industry stakeholders and publishing workers can benefit their climate justice organizing.

Climate Justice and Labor Justice

In the next two sections, drawing on Jana Bacevic's and Tomislav Medak's work on ecological governance and knowledge production, I outline how this argument—that scholars should acknowledge their role as workers in the publishing industry and how this reflects their entanglement with the industry's climate responsibilities and liability but also their leverage to withhold their labor to demand a different, more ecologically sustainable publishing system—can give further weight to the urgent, integrally

26. Interestingly, Angus Lyall, Mark Ortiz, and Emily Billo make a related argument when they propose to stretch the category of energy worker "beyond the gas fields and oil pipelines and into the diverse spaces of science production and distribution," given the entanglement of the publishing industry with the fossil fuel industry (especially seeing how corporate publishing firms, universities, and funding agencies "generate essential data and data infrastructures" for the fossil fuel industry) (2025, 11).

connected struggle to address distributive and social justice issues within global systems of knowledge production. In other words, I want to outline how problems of climate change and extractivism need to be addressed in tandem with labor and equity issues. From this perspective, pledges to lower carbon emissions and commitments to decarbonization are not enough if actors in the publishing industry do not acknowledge how the climate emergency, and any potential for climate justice, is directly connected to this industry's capitalist modes of production and how these reflect a tendency to "extract, use, and dispose of natural resources in ways that systematically harm both the people and the environment" (Bacevic 2021, 1). Hence these industry pledges do not sufficiently address strategies for how, as Bacevic argues, "academic knowledge production becomes detached from the commitment to profit that ensures carbon emissions continue to rise" (2021, 3). And this commitment to profit is directly connected to an academic system and the actors within it (be they "archivists, publishers, or scholars") for whom, as Anne Baillot states, "the standard modus vivendi in north-western countries is that of a fierce competitiveness, leading to an inflation of activity, of production, and of the general visibility necessary for professional survival" (2023, 124). Furthermore, as discussed earlier, acknowledgment of the material stake that scholars have in the publishing industry as workers might serve to counteract the tendency within academia to simply outsource publishing and to see "the production of theory as distinct from the question of knowledge production and its role in climate change" (Bacevic 2021, 3). This includes recognizing how, as Bacevic has compellingly argued, scholars and institutions of knowledge production in the Global North "not only contribute to, but benefit from, modes of production that both created and sustain the global climate crisis" (3).

The publishing industry's continued focus on growth and profit is further supported by the strong influence of *ecological modernization theory* on (trans)national ecological governance frameworks (Medak 2022; Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000), frameworks that have also been adopted in the form of pledges, compacts, and declarations by some of the major actors in the publishing industry, as outlined above. As Medak explains, "ecological modernisation assumes that, by using technologies and markets to replace the old fossil-fuelled technological base, economic growth can be harmonised with environmental sustainability" (2022, 2–3). We see this reflected in the concept of sustainable development and in how, as Weber and Weber (2020) also argue, the SDGs, as an integrated framework that wants to address global environmental change and global development, both align with ecological modernization and inherit its problems. For example, Medak warns that these kinds of market-driven approaches based on potentially unrealistic advances in negative emissions technologies, which have not reached maturity and might not be able to be deployed at scale (Anderson and Peters 2016), may not be "rapid enough to prevent global warming beyond 2°C above the pre-industrial

levels and thus a significant breakdown of ecosystems, rendering vulnerable indigenous, low-income, and working-class communities across the world" (Medak 2022, iii). This means, Medak argues, that societies might need to consider more "politically challenging interventions into the patterns of production, social needs, and redistribution of wealth," including changes to their economic systems and their provisioning for social needs (41). If extended to publishers and HE institutions, this would involve rethinking their business models and their reliance on growth and exploitative labor relations based on free academic labor, including the massive extraction of behavioral user data in the form of surveillance publishing (Pooley 2022; Lamdan 2019), both modes of socioeconomic production that further amplify the climate crisis. It would also involve reconsidering their reliance on commercial platforms, technologies, and infrastructures for the production and distribution of knowledge and the provision of data and research analytics services.

Based on Bacevic's and Medak's work, I want to focus on the potential of two approaches to "thinking about knowledge production in post-carbon futures" (Bacevic 2021, 5) that try to address the exploitation of material and immaterial labor specifically, which we can also adopt in the context of climate justice strategies in publishing. One approach emphasizes the potential of alternative ecological governance frameworks, including new ways of thinking and framing knowledge production, and the other explores the agency of actors involved in disruptive actions of market-driven approaches to ecological governance, who through these actions are "re-politicising and re-democratising" otherwise technocratic environmental governance (Medak 2022, iv).

The first approach involves, as Medak argues, shifting the dominant framing of effective climate action and governance away from the ecological modernization theories preferred by policy makers—those that remain focused on making changes to technology and energy systems and on continued economic growth and see this as compatible with and mutually sustaining of environmental protection—"to framings that prioritise social wellbeing within the limits of a stabilised planetary ecology" (2022, 5). This includes governance frameworks that target the socioecological impacts of climate change instead. See, for example, two of the ideal-typical regimes of eco-political governance (Climate Mao and Climate X) conceived by Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright in their book *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (2018), which Bacevic (2021, 5) discusses in her article,[27] and *degrowth environmentalism*, which Medak focuses on in his work. Standing at odds with ideas of sustainable development,

27. Mann and Wainwright (2018) sketch four potential global political responses to climate change, represented in a grid with capitalist and anticapitalist responses on one side and planetary sovereignty and anti-planetary sovereignty-focused responses on the other. Climate Mao and Climate X represent the anticapitalist responses: an anticapitalist, anti-sovereign Climate X and an anticapitalist, state-centered Climate Mao.

green growth, and green capitalism, "degrowth insists that environmental stability and sustainability can only be achieved through a departure from the present growth oriented global capitalist system" and implies that forms of redistribution of (social) wealth and the limiting of economic growth in affluent nations would "lower the demand for material extraction and energy generation" (Medak 2022, 132, 5–6).[28] What would it mean for the publishing industry to seriously start thinking about business models and labor relations that promote degrowth, and what options are there in this context for diamond OA models, which Claudio Vitari and Zakaria Laala (2024), in a preliminary study, identify as the publishing model that aligns most with degrowth principles (but perhaps not with ecological sustainability)?[29] Also, what are the options for governance principles such as "scaling small"—for example, balancing labor capacity with prioritizing care rather than increasing the volume of output to prioritize profit—in the context of horizontal community-led publishing collectives (Adema and Moore 2023; Baillot 2023, 146–47; Joy et al. 2025; Vitari and Laala 2024)?

The second approach involves looking specifically at, as Medak calls it, the agency and significance of "middle-ground" actors, or "social actors that are neither governments, corporations, or scientific bodies," as "catalysts of sociotechnical and sociometabolic change" (2022, 11). Both Medak and Bacevic are interested in the "future-oriented proposals, necessarily speculative, experimental and prefigurative" and alternative pathways that these groups could put forward for environmentally livable and socially just futures (Medak 2022, 211; see also Bacevic 2021, 5). These proposals include the potentially disruptive action of environmental justice activists (such as those explored earlier) engaging in collective action "to push the governance institutions to move away from the market logic to a democratic-redistributive logic," which, as Medak argues, we should see as important actions of re-politicization (2022, 216). There are possibilities here for both scholarly climate activism and organizing in the publishing industry, as well as for scholars and publishers who are experimenting with alternative community-led publishing models. In this context, what is the potential of community-led non-profit presses, collectives, and infrastructures to be catalysts for change, to re-politicize environmental action (e.g., away from pledges), and how can they contribute to this concretely through their publishing practices, ways of organizing, and forms of governance? What is the potential of these actors to "disrupt

28. Medak engages with some of the critiques of degrowth environmentalism (e.g., that intersocietal redistribution is politically unfeasible; that ecosystem restoration, decarbonization, and economies of care all require investments that will generate economic growth; and that the degrowth community has predominantly focused on mitigation policies rather than on practices of resilience and adaptation) in his work by highlighting that these kinds of proposals do not come without their contradictions. Although they aspire global transformations, to become politically feasible they need to start from national or local contexts, and it is in this "middle ground" between global governance and local social realities where most degrowth actors are situated (Medak 2022, 161–64).

29. On ecological sustainability, see discussion of Baillot's work in the next section.

the dominant forms of environmental (in)action and transform these forms from the bottom-up" (Medak 2022, 14)?[30]

One such potential future-oriented proposal in the realm of knowledge production, developed specifically from within the humanities, is the call for *slow science* as put forward by Isabelle Stengers, which echoes thinking about potential models for degrowth in publishing. Stengers argues that our current model of knowledge production, of "doing science," has been invented for the "fast" sciences, "with their strict differentiation between the cumulative production of knowledge addressed only to competent colleagues, and 'vulgarised' forms of knowledge" (2017, 52). Stengers's plea for slow science, for relationalities and collectivity, offers an interesting perspective of resistance to the knowledge economy and how it has been redefining research and labor relations and forms a critique of "a model of research that promoted as a general ideal the fast, cumulative advance of disciplinary knowledge along with a correlative disregard for any question that would slow this advance down" (98). For Stengers, this model represents the collusion and symbiosis of fast science and industry that has privileged a disembodied knowledge that is increasingly disconnected and abstracted from the messiness of the world, which has direct ecological impacts: "in ignoring messiness, and dreaming of its eradication, we discover that we have messed up our world" (120).

Climate Justice and Social Justice

In addition to its connection to labor justice, climate justice—and relatedly strategies for climate justice activism in publishing—is integrally connected to issues of equity and social justice in knowledge production, which requires paying attention to the "deep structural, spatial and social inequalities underpinning knowledge production" (Bacevic 2021, 1). Issues of justice and distribution, already touched upon in the

30. In this context, the withdrawal of labor in the form of boycotts would be one key strategy that has previously been successful in HE and publishing contexts. As Sam Moore and I have written elsewhere, withdrawing of authorial, reviewer, and editorial labor from extractive or non-ethical publishers (e.g., as part of the international "Cost of Knowledge" boycott of the publisher Elsevier; http://thecostofknowledge.com) "can be seen as part of a now rich tradition of editors resigning their labour (often en masse) from commercial journals and starting their own community-led initiatives from within the university and library settings" (Adema and Moore 2023). The Open Access Directory keeps a list of "journal declarations of independence" or "the resignation of editors from a journal in order to launch a comparable journal with a friendlier publisher or less-restrictive access policies" (https://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Journal_declarations_of_independence). For another good example of the success of boycotts and protests in HE, see the fossil fuel divestment movement, which has seen major wins in, among others, the United States and the United Kingdom with hundreds of educational institutions committing to pull investments in polluting companies (Noor 2024; Taylor 2024). Also see the Global Fossil Fuel Divestment Commitments Database (https://divestmentdatabase.org). Noel Healy and Jessica Debski further argue that "the FFD movement is pushing HEIs [higher education institutions] to move from compliance-oriented sustainability behaviour towards a more proactive and highly politicised focus on HEIs' stance in the modern fossil fuel economy" (2017, 1).

previous section, help account for how knowledge production is rooted in the history of global capitalism, bears the legacies of colonialism and extractivism, and has directly benefited from forms of structural inequality (Bacevic 2021, 9). This is further reflected in the extremely uneven and inequitable impacts of the climate emergency, which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. Such socio-spatial differentiation is also known as climate apartheid, reflecting the urgent need to decolonize climate (Sultana 2022)—including climate activism. As Sultana highlights, this requires both material and epistemological change, including alternative framings: "To decolonize climate at a basic level means to integrate more decolonial, anti-colonial, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist critiques and struggles into mainstream climate discourses and practices to redress ongoing oppressions and marginalizations" (2022, 6), which echoes Magdalena García's (2022, 3) call for a democratization of knowledge production as a way to challenge climate injustices.

One could argue that the SDGs and the publishers who have signed up to them aim to do exactly this. As Adam Hodgkin states, they are "recognizing the broader context in which urgent and crucial climate goals have to be achieved without deleterious effects on other values, of which equity, preservation, and access are of long-term concern to publishers" (2023, 13). Yet the SDGs have received a considerable amount of critique, among them pointing to a potential internal inconsistency between ecological sustainability and socioeconomic progression (Swain 2018). Instead, as Medak argues, climate justice might only be possible if we enable a social transition to sufficiency, which may only be "politically feasible under conditions of large-scale redistribution and distributive justice" (2022, 6). In this context, Medak points out that the degrowth environmentalism movement is well positioned as it maintains solidarities with the environmental justice movement, reparation ecology, and calls to decolonize climate and to target climate apartheid and environmental debt.

The overproduction of research in relation to climate and social justice, as Baillot (2023) excellently points out, also needs to be considered from the perspective of access, problematizing whether universal access to text (e.g., through archiving, publishing, and digital editing) is needed and who this really benefits. This is especially important from the perspective of the digitization of cultural heritage and our "preservation, recording, and dissemination strategies for textual content in a context of greater respect for the limited natural resources that are at our disposal" (Baillot 2023, 112). Access in this context mainly means access for the rich, and Baillot argues that this requires a shift in perspective from a Northern-Western point of view to a global one: "Who has access to what exactly, and at what cost?" (115). For many, she states, the natural losses that activities such as providing digital access cause are more visible than the digital benefits such as access to cultural heritage, and therefore we need to have more radical discussions about whether everything needs to be preserved indefinitely. As Baillot concludes,

"it will not be possible to archive in as inflationary a manner as we have done over the past decades" (130).

This further chimes with perspectives of situated openness, which recognize that knowledge production is "situated within particular historical, political, socio-cultural, and legal relations," especially where it concerns access to and ownership of Indigenous climate knowledge and the need to "develop a political, ecological approach to understanding the relationship between climate change, intellectual property, and Indigenous peoples" (Chan et al. 2019, 15). For example, focusing in particular on research with Indigenous people in South Africa, Cath Traynor et al. (2019) explore the limits and boundaries of implementing open science practices, especially if these are asserted in an exploitative, one-sided fashion. They argue instead for a more situated approach to openness to account for historical injustices, including the appropriation of materials, resources, and research results, and how openness and accessibility framings have often been used to miscast Global South countries and communities as "suppliers" of knowledge (and Indigenous knowledge, resources, and heritage as "free for the taking") rather than as producers of knowledge. Hence "efforts to adapt to climate change, which involve or will impact Indigenous peoples or their lands and resources, must begin with developing more socially just ways of doing research" (Traynor et al. 2019, 224). These include various practical strategies to adequately protect Indigenous knowledge and meet the needs and interests of Indigenous people, from community-based research contracts that clearly outline expectations, responsibilities, and how knowledge will be conducted and shared, to co-research methods applied to the design, implementation, and outcomes of research to address established hierarchies of knowledge production.

Conclusion

The progressive strike action employed by the FFB workers collective discussed at the beginning of this article offers an inspiring horizon for climate justice organizing. It does so by explicitly combining calls for climate justice with issues of labor justice in its positioning of authors as workers and with wider social justice issues by, among others, urging divestment of companies with links to Israeli occupation, apartheid, and genocide. I have in this article outlined different ways in which the publishing industry has been engaging (or not engaging) with the climate emergency—mainly in the form of cross-sector pledges and commitments—as well as some of the responses their actions (or lack thereof) have garnered from within the scholarly and publishing community, from monitoring to accusations of greenwashing, and from grievance mechanisms to boycotts and withdrawals of labor. Yet, in their climate justice organizing, these activist-scholars and their communities tend to position themselves outside of the

publishing industry—as a separate field or as its clients or customers—whereas a stronger positioning of scholars as workers in the academic publishing industry could benefit their commitment and leverage to making changes therein. A clearer connection between climate struggles, anti-capitalist struggles, and struggles for social and cognitive justice in the publishing industry and for better labor relations (and the acknowledgment that these struggles are integrally connected and share common ground) could support the creation of alternative framings of ecological governance based on degrowth and distributive justice. They could also inspire further disruptive actions of market-driven approaches—as exemplified by UCS, SGR, and SR—as well as more experiments with publishing models that are community led, situated, not for profit, and scaling small as alternative, more ethical ways of organizing knowledge production that support climate justice and clear alliances with other social movements for change.

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