

Dana R. Fisher, **Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024, 224 pp., \$19.95 (hardcover).

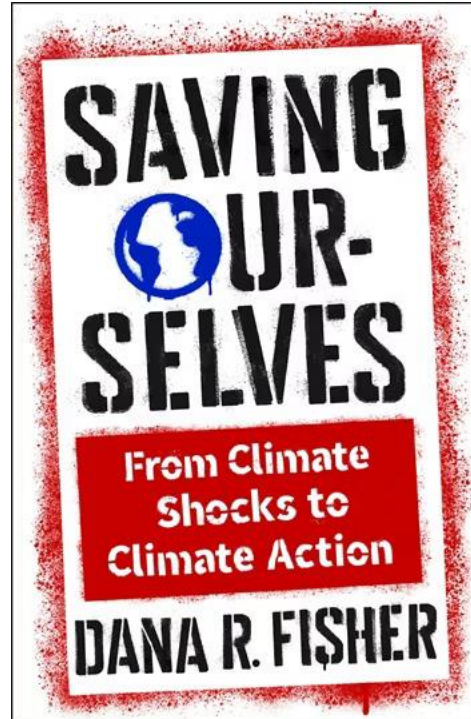
Reviewed by
Lluís de Nadal
University of Glasgow

In ***Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action***, scholar and activist Dana Fisher pulls the reader in opposing directions. On one hand is doom: climate disaster is coming; it will be painful, and there is no way around it. On the other hand is hope: We can still save the planet. The environmental gains of society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic gave Fisher reason for optimism, proof that a crisis severe enough can push society toward the transformation the climate emergency demands. This makes her an "apocalyptic optimist": We can save ourselves, but only through the collective action that climate devastation will force.

The book opens with a bleak assessment. More than 30 years after the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed, and twenty-seven Conferences of the Parties later, greenhouse gases are still climbing. Fisher, who has attended many of these meetings, has watched fossil fuel lobbyists take over the negotiations while civil society is shut out, and now sees them as mere "exercises in greenwashing" (p. 29). As for business responses, she describes them as "bipolar" (p. 11), with clean energy investment growing on one side and relentless industry efforts to prevent the transition on the other.

Fisher's account of these efforts and their evolution over time will be of particular interest to communication researchers. After reviewing the fossil fuel industry's long history of climate denial, she identifies the subtler forms of greenwashing obstruction increasingly taking place, from promoting unproven technologies like carbon capture to net zero pledges that count emissions from extraction but not from burning the fuel itself. This adds to a growing body of climate obstruction research (e.g., Timmons Roberts et al., 2025), which suggests that communication research would benefit from looking beyond what fossil fuel companies say to the contradiction between their public acceptance of climate science and their continued expansion of extraction.

Having taken stock of state and market failure, Fisher turns to the civil society actors who have stepped in as the pressure for change, with growing numbers turning to confrontational tactics like road blockades and defacing artwork in museums. The activist in Fisher is energized by this groundswell. Twenty-five years of research have convinced her that no meaningful change will come from a system captured by



the very interests responsible for the crisis, and she sees in the growing militancy of civil society evidence that others, too, have lost patience.

The scholar in Fisher is more cautious. Although she considers the civil society response promising, she doubts it will be enough. She cites Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) finding that nonviolent movements can succeed once around 3.5 % of the population takes part, but is quick to add that outside struggles against repressive regimes, sustained activism at that intensity is rare. She is equally cautious about confrontational forms, which are liable to escalate into violence once they collide with counterprotest or police force. Another concern she raises is that disruptive tactics, for all the media attention they generate, tend to elicit hostility from the general population. Still another, well-documented by media sociologists and born out by research on Just Stop Oil (Berglund et al., 2026), is that media coverage fixates on the disruption at the expense of the demands.

The book's central theoretical contribution arrives here, and many readers will find it uncomfortable, because it limits what collective action can achieve on its own. It rests on the AnthroShift, a framework Fisher developed with Andrew Jorgenson to explain why the relationship between society and the environment has swung between protection and degradation across times and places (Fisher & Jorgenson, 2019). The framework has two components. The first is risk as a driver of change: When the perception or experience of threat becomes widespread enough, the configuration of state, market, and civil society shifts, and with it the way society treats the environment. The second is multidirectionality: No shift is guaranteed to hold or move in the right direction. Much like the COVID-19 pandemic, when a widespread sense of risk shut down entire societies and cut emissions overnight, only for them to climb again as economies reopened, a climate shock could set off a green transformation, or society could revert to the status quo.

Readers may well find this account of social change plausible, though some may struggle with the "optimism" in Fisher's apocalyptic optimism. The apocalyptic side is clear enough: Climate scientists warn that we are approaching irreversible tipping points with potentially catastrophic consequences. If AnthroShifts are multidirectional, however, why should we expect the shift to go in the right direction? Fisher acknowledges that the AnthroShift can move society toward environmental protection or back toward fossil fuels, but the theory offers no account of what determines the direction, making her optimism hard to locate. Nor are these two outcomes the only ones. A society overwhelmed by climate shocks, from mass migration to economic collapse, could equally turn to closed borders, strongman rule, and the scapegoating of migrants, piling democratic breakdown on top of ecological disaster (Morris, 2025).

Of more direct concern to communications and social movements scholars, the book is largely silent on what kind of mobilization might work. Fisher writes that "a global mass mobilization that employs either nonviolent or more confrontational tactics has the potential to motivate the type of social transformation needed" (p. 19), but presenting nonviolent and confrontational as alternatives is a category mistake: The opposite of nonviolent is violent, not confrontational. She welcomes the climate movement's radical flank, drawing on the civil rights movement as her primary reference, yet presents a sanitized version of that history that never grapples with the evidence that as the movement turned violent, coverage shifted from "rights" to "riots" and contributed to a white backlash (Wasow, 2020).

Ultimately, the book offers little guidance on whether activists should “blow up a pipeline,” to borrow from the title of Andreas Malm’s (2021) influential book, or how far beyond that to go. Where Malm argues for sabotage and Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) argue for nonviolence, Fisher leaves the question open. The question matters, though, since whether a movement turns violent or stays nonviolent has historically decided its chances, and may well decide which way an AnthroShift goes.

The book would also benefit from a fuller engagement with the literature on framing and policy windows. As Fisher has it, only disaster can generate the sense of risk that mobilizes change on the scale required. But this robs activists of their creative capacity to make the risk visible, give the danger a public face, and turn it into political pressure through meaningful work. Populist leaders worldwide, after all, have proven remarkably effective at performing crisis into existence (Moffitt, 2016). If populists can manufacture a sense of crisis and turn it into political power, why should climate activists, with the evidence on their side, need to wait for a catastrophe to do the same? Climate activism research has shown that some strategies work better than others at motivating action (Berglund et al., 2026), yet this question seems beside the point once disaster is made the only trigger.

Despite these reservations, the book has much to offer. Fisher’s case for transformational change is convincing, and her account of why it has not happened is a valuable contribution to the literature on climate obstruction that has not yet received the attention it deserves. Accessibly written, the book will particularly interest students of social movements and environmental communication as well as activists and campaigners weighing insider against outsider strategies (Gitlin, 2003). For communications researchers, the book’s lasting contribution is to make the perception of risk a precondition for the kind of social transformation that “saving ourselves” demands.

The book leaves us with an uncomfortable question: Can activism alone produce transformational change before suffering becomes unbearable. Only time will tell how much suffering it takes before the world decarbonizes at the required scale and whether activists, equipped with the right message and strategy, can prove Fisher wrong by winning a mandate for transformation without waiting for an apocalypse.

References

- Berglund, O., Davis, C. J., & Finnerty, S. (2026). Assessing claims of counterproductivity of Just Stop Oil’s civil disobedience. *npj Climate Action*, 5, 27. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-026-00347-5>
- Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Fisher, D. R., & Jorgenson, A. K. (2019). Ending the stalemate: Toward a theory of anthro-shift. *Sociological Theory*, 37(4), 342–362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275119888247>
- Gitlin, T. (2003). *Letters to a young activist*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Malm, A. (2021). *How to blow up a pipeline: Learning to fight in a world on fire*. New York, NY: Verso.

- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Morris, H. E. (2025). *Apocalyptic authoritarianism: Climate crisis, media, and power*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Timmons Roberts, J., Milani, C. R., Jacquet, J., & Downie, C. (2025). *Climate obstruction: A global assessment*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Wasow, O. (2020). Agenda seeding: How 1960s Black protests moved elites, public opinion and voting. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 638–659.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542000009X>