THE CONVERSATION

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Blythe Pepino, founder of BirthStrike, on the Tucker Carlson show. YouTube

‘Too afraid to have kids’ – how BirthStrike for Climate lost control of its political message

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Katharine Dow

Senior Research Associate, Department of Sociology and Deputy Director of the Reproductive Sociology Research Group, University of Cambridge

Heather McMullen

Lecturer, Centre for Public Health & Policy, Queen Mary University of London

In March 2019, Blythe Pepino, singer-songwriter and founder of the environmental activist group BirthStrike for Climate, appeared on the right-wing Tucker Carlson Tonight show on Fox News in the US.

Carlson is a climate change denier, whose fans include Donald Trump and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. Yet, he started his interview with Pepino with a welcoming tone saying: “This story makes me sad, I don’t wanna attack you, I want to take what you’re saying seriously, but I’m not sure I understand why you’re choosing not to have children, so I would be grateful if you’d tell us.” In her early thirties and smartly turned out, Pepino came across as someone who was pushing back her trepidation to try and convey an important message. She told Carlson:

> *BirthStrike isn’t about trying to stop other people from having children … we feel too afraid to have kids because we feel we are heading towards civilisation breakdown as a result of the environmental crisis.*

Carlson – usually known for his confrontational interview style – remained apparently sympathetic, saying her answer was “sadder” than he was expecting. “You’re basically saying the species is over … we should in effect as a group end it, commit suicide?”

For Pepino, sharing her personal feelings about having children and the future they could face was intended to build solidarity and raise awareness. But her campaign raised a lot of people’s hackles and caused a lot of personal strife for her, ultimately leading to burnout and an early end for BirthStrike.

This story is part of Conversation Insights

The Insights team generates long-form journalism and is working with academics from different backgrounds who have been engaged in projects to tackle societal and scientific challenges.

Looking at the case of BirthStrike offers insights into public conversations about the climate crisis – and how they intersect with personal decision making, representations of women in the media and the thorny topic of how reproduction and environmental concerns might, and might not, be related. While BirthStrike achieved wide media coverage, we were in the privileged position to carry out in-depth research with members of the group, including Pepino.

What we found offers a salutary lesson about how core messages and themes can be misconstrued and misunderstood when put through a high-profile media lens. What we describe here centres on Pepino’s account, as a founder of the group and who we got to know over the course of our research. But our experience of researching and speaking with people about BirthStrike has made it clear that many accounts exist; many stories could be told and landing on a single or complete take on what BirthStrike was, meant, or achieved is not possible.

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What was BirthStrike?

BirthStrike was founded by Pepino in the UK, but was open to people around the world. Pepino is a singer-songwriter who has experienced popularity and acclaim as part of the band Vaults, whose music appeared on the soundtracks of the film Fifty Shades of Grey and a John Lewis Christmas advert. She now fronts the band Mesadorm.

Birthstrike sought to draw attention to the severity of the existential threats of climate change through public discussions about how they would affect future generations. It curated video and written testimonials on its website and social media so people could share their personal concerns about having children in the climate crisis, while Birthstrike activists attended demonstrations, rallies and other climate-related events.

Pepino carefully explained her fear about the likely effects of the climate crisis and the need for people to come together to try and prevent it becoming worse through demanding government action and corporate accountability.

This conversation about how reproductive decision making might be entwined with anxieties about the future of humans on a warming planet has come to the fore in recent years. One well-known example is an Instagram video in which American congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez says: "There's scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult. And it does lead young people to have a legitimate question: Is it OK to still have children?"

BirthStrike aimed to provide a space for people – most, but certainly not all of whom, were younger women – to share and express their concerns about their future children's lives in a world with an irrevocably changed climate. Pepino told us:

> *When I'm afraid of something, where I want to change something, I think about how can I make this into a piece of theatre? Or how do I communicate this by song? Or … how can I communicate and connect with people around this and do something?*

We carried out in-depth interviews with 16 members of BirthStrike and the similar climate activist groups, Conceivable Future, based in the US, and No Future No Children, based in Canada, as well as others with related concerns to talk about their thoughts and decision making when it came to having children during the climate crisis. We analysed media coverage and 164 testimonials on the collectives websites – all of which centre on the idea that children born today will have very difficult lives. For the people involved in these campaigns, this is both a source of personal grief and a motivation for activism to halt the climate crisis.

BirthStrike fascinates us as researchers because it was an activist intervention that mobilised powerful "normal" ideas, such as the desire to have children, and which capitalised on the privileged idea that, if young articulate women expressed fear about bringing children into the world, this would be sufficiently alarming to galvanise broader action.

Yet at the same time, it sought to effect radical ends and Pepino and the other leaders of BirthStrike genuinely wished to work towards a world in which everyone felt safe enough to enjoy family life. In this way, it was progressive and problematic at the same time.

Sounding the alarm

We first met Pepino in 2019 and have interviewed her several times since. We have found her to be an intelligent and articulate person who thinks seriously about issues, but also has a keen sense of fun. Drinking coffee in the sunny kitchen of her rented house in east London during the summer of 2021, we asked her to reflect on the story of BirthStrike.

In 2019, she was living in Stroud, a rural town in south-west England with a long history of involvement in the environmental movement. Attending an Extinction Rebellion (XR) seminar and reading the IPCC's 2018 report led her to "wake up" to the existential threats of climate change. She knew she needed to do something and an idea occurred to her, which became BirthStrike.

She started to discuss her fears about the existential threats of climate change with friends and members of XR, and her particular concerns about the future of any children she might have. She said:

> *The impression I got [from others] was, 'I've been thinking about this, I don't know how to speak about it because it seems really taboo and almost too scary for me to say out loud'.*

In our conversations, Pepino has reflected several times on how meeting her partner Josh had led to a profound conviction that she would like to have children with him. Yet, her deeper understanding of the climate crisis threw this into disarray. Like the other members of BirthStrike who joined her, she wondered how she could possibly bring children into a world facing ecological collapse. Another research participant described her feelings about finding BirthStrike like this:

> *It was quite empowering to come across BirthStrike, because it felt like going out and talking about it was another form of protest … It's sounding the alarm and saying 'this is how bad it is' … saying that 'I'm too scared about this exact same society that you're living in, to have children in it' … On some level I hope it might wake somebody up. I mean, that's kind of why I do it.*

In 2015, Pepino was involved in the Each Body's Ready campaign against a notorious Protein World advert that many criticised for being sexist and body-shaming.

Read more: Thank you bikini terrorists for moving us on from throwback diet ads – now #eachbodysready

She drew on this and her experience in the music industry when she decided in 2019 that she needed to spread the message about the climate crisis to the general public. The aim was to spark conversations and use her own (in her words) privileged status as a middle-class white woman to "pull everyone in" and provoke "fast change". She told us:

> *Those are the people I was trying to get to, the privileged community. The point of BirthStrike in a way, was to get to those people, and I was most happy when we were in* Cosmopolitan*, when we were in those kinds of magazines, where we would be talking to people who were still in that dream of like, 'everything's cool … the world's really nice', you know?*

One of the aspects of the climate crisis that particularly concerned her, as she tried to explain to Carlson, is the political inertia and mismanagement of environmental threats that has led to climate change being a present reality rather than a future threat.

She wanted to spread the message – and, perhaps, some of the fear that she felt – in order to persuade others to unite to pressure governments and corporations to act to prevent the worst predictions coming true. Though, as she later acknowledged to us, she became increasingly unconvinced that many journalists were understanding the nuance of her argument.

An epiphany?

At one point in his interview, Carlson suggested Pepino had had something akin to a religious conversion, and in some ways it is an apt comparison. The story she tells of her awakening to the existential threats of climate change does sound like an epiphany – it was a point of no return where she could no longer un-see the realities of the climate crisis, and felt compelled to warn others.

The 2021 Netflix film Don't Look Up has been read as an analogy for inertia about the climate crisis. In the movie, PhD candidate Kate Dibiasky (played by Jennifer Lawrence) discovers an enormous comet headed for a collision course with the Earth. Along with her PhD adviser, Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio), she tries to convince the world of the threat that the comet poses for life on Earth while there might still be time to avert its course. They appear on television breakfast show, the Daily Rip, where the frivolous, and scientifically illiterate, treatment of their message by the show's hosts infuriates Kate to the point where she screams, "we're all going to die!", only to be discredited on social media as a hysterical lunatic.

Watching Don't Look Up, and the character of Dibiasky in particular, reminded us of Pepino and the struggle she had to be taken seriously as a conveyor of a very serious message. Both she and Kate were cropped-fringed Cassandras, trying to convince the world of an existential threat that was incontrovertibly supported by scientific data.

Losing control of the message

While Pepino and other spokespeople for BirthStrike consistently emphasised that they had no intention to tell people what to do, this was often how their message was interpreted. Pepino told us how the media "ended up talking about population numbers a lot" and "constantly referring to fertility rates" which she felt undermined their call for system change.

This interpretation can be attributed to two existing narratives about climate change. The first of these is a "neo-Malthusian" argument that people should have fewer children because a growing human population contributes to carbon emissions. The second one is that people should take personal actions to mitigate their own impact on the environment. Both of these arguments, which were officially disavowed by BirthStrike, have been criticised: the first for ignoring the insidious history of population control, from mass murder during the Holocaust to compulsory sterilization in India in the 1970s and China's one-child policy. It has been used to justify curtailing the sexual, reproductive and human rights of people on the grounds of race, people on low incomes, people with disabilities and people with diverse gender and sexual identities. The second argument has been criticised for deflecting responsibility away from corporations and governments which hold far greater responsibility – and power – to prevent climate change than individuals. Pepino said:

> *I knew right from the beginning that population was going to be an issue … So the name BirthStrike, I think, triggered a lot of populationism, essentially, in people's brains most of the time. So whenever people did read pieces on us, unless it categorically was all about the fact that we weren't doing a population thing, then it would often be misconstrued as a population thing.*

She noted that some journalists didn't know about the history of population control. Because of this, they didn't understand the potential danger of inciting ideas about overpopulation.

In reality there is clear evidence which shows that global human population is not increasing exponentially, but is in fact slowing and is predicted to stabilise at around 11 billion by 2100. It could be argued that focusing on human numbers obscures the true driver of climate change – modern capitalism's focus on endless growth and profit accumulation.

Read more: Why we should be wary of blaming 'overpopulation' for the climate crisis

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The danger that Pepino described reached its grim nadir in recent mass killings by eco-fascists, animated by the "Great Replacement" theory (which has repeatedly been pushed by Carlson). The theory is predicated on the premise that white Americans and Europeans are being actively "replaced" by immigrants of colour.

Another problem for the BirthStrike campaign was that sex and reproduction are usually thought of as private matters, so many were confused about the link that Pepino and others were making between their personal feelings and decisions and their political demand for systemic change to address the climate crisis. We are used to hearing about how we should care for the environment and reading lists of tips about how to reduce our carbon footprint, so it's not surprising that many heard BirthStrike as an instruction not to have children in order to save the planet.

Sex and reproduction are still in many ways taboo subjects and many, especially those who are more conservative, do not want to hear about them in the media. Childlessness is also stigmatised, especially for women, while declining birth rates are causing some governments and public commentators to panic about ageing societies and the future of humanity.

Carlson, who is married to his boarding school sweetheart and has four children, ended his interview with some paternalistic counsel, remarking:

> *It's a bit early for me to be giving you advice, but I just wanna end with this: I think you should have children, I think they solve a lot of problems, put things in perspective. You seem like a nice person …*

Carlson claimed to be taking Pepino's concerns seriously though, like other rightwing commentators who discredited BirthStrike as just another example of "climate hysteria", he framed this in terms of her personal feelings rather than her political opinion. His comment, "you seem like a nice person", while apparently friendly, also implies a judgement about what "kind" of person should reproduce.

Pepino recognised that she was unsettling deeply held ideas about what makes a "good life". She said:

> *It's critiquing the very pro-natalist aspect of our society and how we're led to believe that children equals good … I suppose we were playing with the shock element of disagreeing with that in order to show how fucked up things are, basically.*

Carlson has a history of pushing climate denialism and, during the interview, he made several attempts to reposition Pepino's specific focus on climate change towards a narrative of the fall of western "civilisation" and political influence. Pepino had mentioned "civilisational collapse" as a likely outcome of the climate crisis and he picked up on this to suggest that her argument was that, "the species is over, we should effectively as a group commit suicide". This kind of misanthropic argument has been rejected by Pepino, as it can invoke apathy and a sense of doom that can paralyse activism – precisely the opposite of what she was aiming to do with BirthStrike.

BirthStrike suffered a problem of representation – both in terms of who and what people understood the movement to be, and in how their message was interpreted and represented to the public by journalists. This is illustrated by the Carlson interview, but also by subtler approaches, such as frequently pairing BirthStrike with campaigners who are focused on "overpopulation" in articles and panel debates. Or misrepresenting BirthStrike as only including women, or conflating BirthStrike's specific argument with a generalised misanthropy or anti-natalism.

Conservative commentators like Carlson clearly have a reason to downplay or reframe such unambiguous messages about the existential threats of climate crisis, yet even for those who are more sympathetic to Pepino's point of view, the message of existential threat is very troubling to hear. Indeed, Pepino's own sense of despair when she realised the potential effects of climate change was precisely what led her to question whether having children was the right thing to do. When she read the 2018 IPCC report and attended her first XR seminar, she said she felt that:

> *… a lot of the fears I'd had about climate change and, and the environment and how humans treat the world were essentially coming true … and so I became sort of addicted to the idea of telling the truth [about the climate].*

Whose reproduction is newsworthy?

Importantly, the critique of BirthStrike didn't only come from the right. When we have told people about our research on this movement, those on the left sometimes dismiss those involved in BirthStrike and groups like it as just being "privileged" white, middle-class women who are demonstrating a sense of entitlement. In other words, why should anyone would care whether they have children or not?

A group of student protesters striking for climate change action in Melbourne, Australia, in May 2021. Shutterstock/Christie Cooper

This critique is a generalisation, of course – not everyone involved in BirthStrike fits this characterisation and Pepino herself deliberately tried to leverage her position as a white middle-class woman (and as someone with a media profile) to effect progressive goals. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that, throughout history, some people's reproductive decisions have been more respected and supported than others and that this tends to reflect how people are categorised by race, class, disability, gender and sexuality.

Read more: 'It's a national crisis': UK's birth rate is falling dramatically

As some commentators have also pointed out, many people in marginalised groups and throughout history have experienced existential threat. So the idea of climate change's threat to survival being a wake-up call reflects the relative privilege of those involved in the campaign.

As the campaign grew, the leadership expanded. Jessica Gaitán Johannesson became more involved in leading the group, and became co-founder. Johannesson is a writer, who published a collection of essays related to climate and responsibility, including one about her involvement in BirthStrike and her perspective as a queer woman of colour.

BirthStrike co-founder Jessica Gaitán Johannesson. Nicholas Herrmann, Author provided (no reuse)

Reflecting on the experience Johannesson wrote: “Running BirthStrike taught me that using birth as a political tool, in a society that only sees individual choices and not the context in which they’re made, nor the incredible injustice surrounding them, inevitably leads to judgment. In a society mired in racism and exploitation, this is dangerous: whose children are deemed desirable? Who should be having fewer? It was a difficult lesson to learn in many ways, but one I’m also grateful for.”

Burnout: the end of BirthStrike

Ultimately, in the summer of 2021, the leadership of BirthStrike decided to disband the campaign and propose rerouting members towards a private group in which they could share their feelings and gain support, instead of an explicitly political campaign.

During 2020 and 2021, Pepino had conversations with her partner about the “political danger”, as he saw it, of getting involved in the population debate. She also asked for advice from researchers (including us) about why BirthStrike was being misrepresented as a campaign to tell people to have fewer children to reduce their carbon footprint. Further reflecting on this, Pepino said “the whole conversation about population is just inappropriate right now because we are too immature to have the conversation … We haven’t done our homework. We haven’t cooperated, we haven’t evened things out, we’ve not accounted for wealth inequality”.

It is no coincidence that this realisation about the political dangers of the campaign came at the same time in which people in the UK, US and all around the world were coming to recognise the true scale of racism and inequality in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on racialised groups.

This is apparent in the statement that BirthStrike released announcing its decision to end the campaign, which described how months of reflection and the public conversations about racial and social justice sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement had led to an understanding that it would be “dangerous” to continue in the same vein.

In the public announcement the group named the “flaws” in the campaign. First, they attributed the name itself, BirthStrike, to their being aligned with the neo-Malthusian argument that more children means a bigger carbon footprint. The statement continued:

> *Witnessing the loss of control of our narrative has been very distressing and humbling. We have to concede that we underestimated the power of ‘overpopulation’ as a growing form of climate breakdown denial – even in some of our most revered scientists and fellow climate activists.*

The announcement reflected the intense consideration and reflection that Pepino and others put into BirthStrike and its future, as well as the importance of understanding the histories of previous activism around reproductive rights and environmental justice when starting a new campaign.

So, why did BirthStrike come to an end? As well as the leaders’ own sense of it having become dangerous, the fundamental problem for BirthStrike was the tension between individual reproductive decision making and the much broader “ask” of rapid structural change from governments and corporations to arrest the climate crisis. This tension ultimately confused their message.

The wide audience that BirthStrike were trying to reach found it hard to hear the message about the existential threats of climate change. Pepino aimed to raise the alarm but, for many, it was just too alarming. As she told us:

> *I think a lot of those [media] interviews, not only was it a prism of their not really understanding, but it was also a real inability to connect with the full emotional truth of what's happening.*

The implication of this message, that individual actions will not solve the crisis, also exacerbated the anxiety and uncertainty of this historical moment. Nonetheless, along with other contemporary social movements, BirthStrike did open up a space for discussion and provide a forum for people to discuss their concerns about having children in a warming world. Reflecting on this after the disbanding of BirthStrike in 2021, Pepino told us:

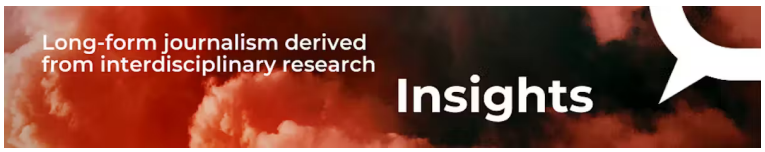
> *I'm still worried that its overall effect has been to amplify populationism as a topic, essentially … Then again, it did give a lot of the people who joined a sense of community … which was really useful, I think, for a lot of people who were really struggling at that time.*

Historically, climate activism has focused on extreme weather events and their consequences. But the environmental crisis is also bound up with how people think about the future and what kind of world they want to live in. For many, this prompts thoughts about future generations – whether their own children, or a more generalised sense of people who will be born in coming decades, as well as the kinds of responsibilities that current generations bear towards them. Yet, attempts to appeal to apparently universal values, like women's desire to be mothers, are tricky because they can reinforce norms of gender, family and sexuality.

Pepino has never completely discounted the idea of ever having children but recognised she needed to slow down and take care. She reflected:

> *I realised I was burnt out. I had a lot of health issues that I needed to look at … As a sensitive, artistic human, essentially, I could pretend to be that person for a bit. But I've given up on abusing my mind and my body to the point where I can be someone else, because I saw the road and the road was ill health.*

The short history of BirthStrike shows that raising the alarm can be galvanising for some, but paralysing for others. Similarly, eye-catching demands can succeed in grabbing attention, including that of those who are not normally interested in these topics, but this can come at the cost of losing control of the political message. Because of the flaws in the campaign, the message about the existential threats of climate change and the likely unstable future of children born today often went unheard.



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