

Panic like it's 1999: Why aren't we tackling climate change like we did Y2K?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

On Dec. 31, 1999, USC students rang in the New Year in a variety of fashions. But they all faced the prospect of a global IT implosion, now that each year was about to start with a two instead of a one.

"I went camping in Death Valley. On New Year's Eve, we stayed up all

night and watched the sunrise. It was away from Y2K, which was a big concern," Jesse Chow, a sophomore, told the Daily Trojan.

Since 1998, a pervasive technological worry had spread worldwide. The Year 2000 problem, or Y2K, which ostensibly threatened to take down entire banking systems and drop planes from the sky, had scared a global population into action.

By the arrival of 2000, an estimated \$308 billion had been spent globally to prevent the potentially disastrous consequences of the Y2K bug. However, little, if anything, actually happened. On Jan. 1, CNN declared the Y2K bug a "New Year's Day loser."

Twenty years later, as the world heads into a fresh decade, climate change promises to upend our entire way of life. Yet, unlike Y2K, which saw a swift public and private sector response, climate change remains a looming disaster, with solutions bogged down by denial and inaction.

Why did we face Y2K with such prompt seriousness and yet flounder now in the face of a threat more pervasive and disastrous?

Panic like it's 1999

Even for those who lived through the moment, the exact threat of Y2K seems murky. Were we on the brink of a tech meltdown, fortuitously saved by quick-acting government and industry leaders? Or, was the whole thing way overblown?

"I think what happened was that a little problem got catastrophized by the media and then it became this big thing," says Barath Raghavan, assistant professor of computer science at USC Viterbi School of Engineering. "It had been blown into this big threat and a fair amount of money had been spent in fixing it, then it didn't happen the way that

people thought it would."

One of these disasters is not like the other

The same cannot yet be said for climate change. Evidence of the world warming due to [carbon emissions](#), and the havoc it will invoke if nothing is done, is rock solid and based on nearly 200 years of scientific inquiry. Yet, politicians and citizens around the world continue to deny, evade and resist collective action.

For Julien Emile-Geay, associate professor of Earth sciences, this is due in part to the difference in solutions. "It has everything to do with what we are asking people to change," he said. "One of the big issues with climate change is that people must make changes to their way of life, which is often perceived as sacrifices."

Jennifer Bernstein, lecturer at USC Dornsife's Spatial Sciences Institute, agrees and adds: "Despite their huge environmental costs, burning fossil fuels has made life better for many people around the world and contributed to a higher quality of life." It's hard to convince people to switch from products that have vastly improved their standard of living, even as those products cause great damage to the environment, she says.

Y2K was a hiccup along the timeline of progress; [climate change mitigation](#) and adaptation require years of concerted investment and behavior change.

Time and space also differ for these two threats. Y2K had a clear, fixed zero hour—midnight on Jan. 1, 2000. Climate scientists decline to put hard dates on catastrophic events because prediction models are inexact.

"If you predict a massive catastrophe and it doesn't happen, you lose credibility," says Emile-Geay. He points to the ice age that a small

minority of scientists predicted in the 1970s, which has now become a straw man argument for climate change deniers, who use it to erroneously—and sometimes disingenuously—refute climate science.

Action is also undermined because climate change often feels remote and unsolvable. We watch emaciated [polar bears](#) stranded by melting polar ice—thousands of miles away. "There's been a PR problem with climate change," Bernstein says. "We know it's a huge emergency, but where is it, what is it and what can I do about it?"

Doomsday marketing

Y2K prep may have become a sort of goofy joke, but it does provide some lessons for how to confront climate change. "It was an example where people with expertise said there's a problem and then they elevated that problem through the right channels. People took action and they actually dealt with the problem successfully," Raghavan explains.

Y2K was a crisis close to home, threatening our email, finances and security, which motivated us to find a solution. Bernstein believes that we should also try to make climate change personal. Things like tending to a home garden, recycling and composting don't do much to fend off climate change, but they help psychologically. "Microscale behaviors work," she said. "It keeps climate change in our personal live and keeps us connected."

Appealing to our own self-interest is another way to make it personal. As people learn that climate change threatens things like our morning cup of joe, their motivation to take action increases. "They might pressure institutions and governments to act as swiftly as was done for Y2K," says Emilie-Geay.

Change required; options needed

Y2K's fix promised to improve our modern technology, not do away with it. In contrast, there is a perception that action against [climate change](#) will strip away modern convenience. But [climate change](#) may actually be, in part, solved by making use of our modern technology, not powering it down.

Rather than do away with air travel, we can [find jet fuel alternatives instead](#). Rather than ban all single-use plastics, we can [develop biodegradable versions](#). Car travel can carry on through the [power of used cooking oil](#) and kelp.

Emile-Geay adds that carbon taxes should also be implemented, as an incentive for change. "The real solution is to put a price on carbon because that would encourage innovations on all levels."

And, perhaps we should make use of much maligned [nuclear energy](#), a zero-carbon energy solution that can produce many times what solar or wind can on a fraction of the land.

"I've spent most of my life as an advocate for the environment, and I'm now a cautious supporter of nuclear," admits Bernstein.

We can't get too techno-optimistic, however. There still remains a pressing need to reduce our consumption of resources, and we are a long way from being able to remove the tons of carbon from the atmosphere that are already threatening our future. Additionally, it's uncertain when and to what degree alternative energy sources will be able to replace fossil fuels. Compostable plastic does have its limits.

Bernstein recalls the omniscient words of environmentalist and founder of the Good Earth Catalogue Stewart Brand: "We are as gods and might

as well get good at it." It's no longer up for debate that humanity's choices will determine the future of the planet. Whether we guide our fate with compassionate innovation or chaotic disinterest still remains to be seen.

Provided by University of Southern California

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