

'Don't Look Up' shows bashing people over the head with facts does not work

January 7 2022, by Josh Ettinger



Credit: Niko Tavernise / Netflix

The global top three programs on Netflix currently include the heroic quest of a monster hunter; the escapades of an American woman in Paris; and, at No. 1, a dark comedy about climate change called "[Don't Look Up](#)."

The film, directed by Adam McKay and featuring a star-studded cast including Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence and Meryl Streep, tells

the story of two scientists who spot a comet rushing toward imminent destruction of Earth. We follow their ill-fated attempts to convince society to act on this existential threat, which generate more interest in the handsome climate scientist than the impending end of the world.

The film has sparked [enormous discussion](#) online. As an environmental communication researcher fascinated by [the power of storytelling](#), it's a debate I have followed very closely. So what does the academic literature on [climate change](#) communication tell us about the potential impacts of this film?

Driving issue attention

Environmental advocates have long struggled to convey climate warnings to a largely disengaged public—in fact, this inspired the entire premise of the film. That a movie about climate change can hold the top spot on Netflix is therefore a big deal. Its popularity is also being driven, at least in part, by its celebrity cast. Environmental campaigns often [feature celebrities](#) for this exact reason.

The film's popularity matters as media can have an [agenda-setting effect](#)—audiences assign greater importance to topics that receive more media coverage (known as "[issue attention](#)"). It is undeniable that the film is driving attention to climate change, regardless of whether viewers love or hate it. Its success also underscores the [meaningful role](#) the arts and humanities can play in portraying alternative imaginings of climate change.

It's OK to laugh at climate change

"Don't Look Up" is not the first instance of comedy being used as a tool for [climate change communication](#). In September 2021, late night

comedy hosts in the US [joined forces](#) for a climate comedy night and [climate internet memes](#) abound. However, a feature-length satirisation of the climate crisis pushes climate comedy to a new level.

Is humor an effective way to engage audiences about climate change? Comedy is a powerful way of communicating and making sense of societal issues, and this [holds true in the climate context](#) where it can help us [process and cope with our emotions](#).

Many of us who care about climate change [can closely relate](#) to the film's protagonists as their experiences validate our own feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness about climate inaction. As one of the film's characters exclaims: "We are trying to tell you that the entire planet is about to be destroyed!"

Good comedy captures absurdities we all experience in our daily lives. We then feel like we are "in on the joke." This is especially important for climate action as a sense of group belonging is [a key predictive factor](#) of individual participation in activism. Therefore, the film might promote a sense of solidarity and shared identity among climate action advocates.

Who will watch?

The tricky thing about humor is that it can be polarizing. It's clear who is being satirized when the film depicts Americans wearing red baseball hats emblazoned with the phrase "Don't Look Up" who deny the existence of the comet.

We can safely assume that those already concerned about climate change are more likely to be drawn to the movie, whereas those being mocked will be less inclined to watch. It is also unlikely that the film will dramatically alter the beliefs of steadfast climate change skeptics or

climate activists. Confirmation bias leads us to seek out information that supports our views and [motivated reasoning](#) causes us to process information in ways that support our pre-existing beliefs. The film's greatest chance of influencing climate engagement is among individuals who are aware or concerned about climate change, but not yet alarmed. This group [represents a majority of the American public](#).

Will we stop the comet? (caution: spoilers ahead)

Will the [film's dark ending](#) scare us into acting on climate change or will it only paralyze us further? Whether climate change communicators should use fear-inducing or hopeful narratives is a [topic of significant debate](#), and my [own research](#) urges caution: we shouldn't assume that a single piece of content will necessarily lead to dramatic changes in climate-related attitudes or behaviors.

However, communicating our ability to act on climate change—portraying a sense of efficacy or "[constructive hope](#)"—is crucial. Although the comet ultimately destroys human civilisation in the film, humans did have the opportunity to avert catastrophe. Likewise, it is still in our power to mitigate and adapt to climate change. As Leonardo DiCaprio [tweeted](#), "we may not stop this comet but we can stop the climate crisis." On the other hand, the comet metaphor has limitations. Climate change is a lot messier. Its effects are not evenly distributed nor preventable with a single quick solution.

If "Don't Look Up" teaches us anything, it's that bashing people over the head with facts is not an effective communication strategy. As the comet makes impact with Earth, the movie ends with a heartfelt discussion around the dinner table. If only such candid, tough, and meaningful conversations happened while the society depicted in this film still had time to act.

Fortunately, there is still time for us to act on climate change. As climate scientist [Katharine Hayhoe argues](#), interpersonal conversations are one of the most powerful forms of climate action. This means listening more than we speak, and helping people connect the dots between their personal values and fighting climate change. Sparking dialog will likely prove the film's most important long-term impact.

Overall, despite its depressing ending, the fact a satirical film about [climate](#) change can reach the top spot on Netflix has me looking up.

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