

No laughing matter, yet humor inspires climate change activism

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Melting icecaps, mass flooding, megadroughts and erratic weather are no laughing matter. However, a new study shows that humor can be an effective means to inspire young people to pursue climate change activism. At the same time, fear proves to be an equally effective motivator and has the added advantage of increasing people's awareness of climate change's risks.

"Young people have a huge stake in [global climate change](#). They are going to bear the brunt of it, more so than old guys like me," said Jeff Niederdeppe, associate professor of communication at Cornell University, who oversaw the study. "Young people buy green products, they believe in climate change, they're worried about it, but they're not as politically active on the issue as older generations are. And if you look at where millennials get news information, it's from John Oliver and Trevor Noah, these satirical news programs. We wanted to test if this humorous approach could be used to engage [young people](#) in climate change activism."

The study, "Pathways of Influence in Emotional Appeals: Benefits and Tradeoffs of Using Fear or Humor to Promote Climate Change-Related Intentions and Risk Perceptions," published in the *Journal of Communication*, was the result of a partnership grant between Cornell's Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future, where Niederdeppe is a faculty fellow, and the Environmental Defense Fund.

Niederdeppe readily admits that academics don't make the best

comedians. So, the researchers partnered with Second City Works, a marketing offshoot of the legendary improvisational theater troupe in Chicago that launched the careers of Bill Murray, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and other Saturday Night Live alums.

Second City Works created a series of online videos that feature a weatherman providing forecasts about extreme weather patterns caused by climate change in the United States, each with a drastically different tone. A humorous video emphasized the weatherman's cluelessness as he struggled to understand the signs of climate change. A more ominous version highlighted the severity of climate change and its devastating impacts. A third video used a neutral tone and language to present an informational view of climate change. Each video concluded with a recommendation to "Find out what your local officials and the presidential candidates think about climate change. Have your voice heard on Nov. 8." A fourth video about income inequality was used as a control.

"The humor video made people laugh more, and people who found it funny were more likely to want to plan to partake in activism, recycle more and believe climate change is risky," said Christofer Skurka, a third-year doctoral student in communication, who is the paper's lead author.

While the study focused on adults between the ages of 18 and 30, the researchers found that college-aged adults between 18 and 24 were most inspired to activism by the humorous video. Fear, meanwhile, proved to be equally effective across the entire age range, both in raising awareness about [climate change](#)'s risks and motivating viewers to intend to engage in direct action, although the ominous video was not perceived by respondents to be as informative as the neutral, informational video.

"I don't think this study, in and of itself, says we should use fear over

humor," Niederdeppe said. "This was a particular type of humor. It was very silly. The clueless weatherman was the butt of the jokes. But if you look at the kind of satirical commentary like John Oliver does, there is a bite and a target: industry or the hypocrisy of politicians, for instance. Our next project is looking at whether we can combine humor with this biting, anger-inducing satire, and if that can promote even greater motivation to take action."

More information: Christofer Skurka et al, Pathways of Influence in Emotional Appeals: Benefits and Tradeoffs of Using Fear or Humor to Promote Climate Change-Related Intentions and Risk Perceptions, *Journal of Communication* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/joc/jqx008](https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx008)

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