

The use of satire to communicate science in *Don't Look Up*

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Abstract

Satire has long been used as a tool in social commentary and political communication, and in some cases this has extended to commentary about science and its role in policy. This is certainly the case for the recent Adam McKay film, *Don't Look Up*, where an allegorical story about a comet heading for Earth is used to satirise the current political and media response to the climate catastrophe. While the film succeeds in making its point, how the humour interacts with objectives of science communication highlights some risks of using satire where there's overlap between the subject of the satire and a potential audience for communication.

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Introduction

Many recent science communication initiatives have sought to use humour. For instance, Bright Club and Science Showoff events in the UK which feature scientists or science communication professionals doing stand-up comedy [Bultitude, 2011]. Previous research has argued that the use of comedy in science communication can help to break stereotypes around scientists and makes science more appealing [Pinto, Marçal & Vaz, 2015]. However, some science-themed comedy, such as the situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory*, has been criticised for enforcing unhelpful stereotypes around science and scientists [StephS, 2010]. Further, the political objectives of satire and the social function of humour need to be considered when it comes to science communication that has its objectives in changing attitudes and behaviours [Riesch, 2015].

Don't Look Up is a huge Hollywood feature film that uses humour to draw an allegory for humanity's current response to climate change. Through positioning the audience with the scientist protagonists, the film makes fun of the characters not taking the science seriously in response to an extinction level event of a comet

heading for Earth. From politicians being more concerned with their electoral success than the destruction of our planet, to the media trying to keep the news of the comet inconsequential and “light”, to the population at large denying the existence of the comet or believing that it will bring jobs and prosperity rather than the inevitable destruction, the film satirises many real-world populations.

Whilst most science-related fictional comedy, such as the *Big Bang Theory*, has its objectives purely in entertainment, rather than in science communication, the makers of *Don't Look Up* have been candid about the film representing an allegory for the current real-world response to climate change, perhaps pointing to an objective of prompting reflection or behaviour change among its audiences. This prompts the question of whether science comedy can be appropriate to meet the objectives of science communication, especially in relation to a topic as serious and urgent as the climate crisis.

Science comedy

Riesch [2015] points to different theories of humour that might be employed when it comes to science communication. There are three general theories on humour: incongruity, relief and superiority [Billig, 2005]. These theories are all evident in *Don't Look Up*. ‘Incongruity’ brings humour through incongruity between two concepts in an unexpected way. In *Don't Look Up* incongruity is employed in various ways, for example the scientist characters use very technical, scientific language to express a pretty simple and serious concept: that a comet will hit the Earth and everyone will die. ‘Relief’ explains humour that occurs when something causes a break in built-up energy or tension. In *Don't Look Up*, this occurs when Dibiasky breaks up a jovial televised conversation about the comet that doesn't acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. Tension builds from the perspective of the scientists (and the audience) who are frustrated that people aren't taking the news of the comet seriously. Dibiasky breaks the joviality with a frustrated speech culminating in the words: “we're all 100% for sure going to fucking die!” Finally, ‘superiority’ theories bring humour by pointing to ways in which we may see ourselves to be superior to others. Superiority often manifests in jokes which point to the stupidity of a person or concept and is the kind of humour most used in *Don't Look Up*: by painting politicians, media personalities and the population at large as characters acting in foolish ways, viewers are encouraged to laugh at their stupidity.

One review of *Don't Look Up*, by David Sims of *The Atlantic*, observes that “The satire of *Don't Look Up* is anguished and clear to the point of feeling bludgeoning” [Sims, 2021]. As a form of humour, satire draws most heavily from the theory of superiority: through analogy and exaggeration, satire seeks to make some point, usually by making some individual or idea the “butt” or object of the joke. Satire produces groups of outsiders (those who are the object of the joke) and insiders (those positioned to laugh at the object of the joke). Who is positioned as the object of the joke influences who will find the joke funny, why different people might find the joke funny for different reasons, and who might be influenced in their opinions as a result of hearing the joke. In political satire, the joke is set up to embarrass the elite. However, in science communication, if a potential audience for engagement overlaps with those being ridiculed, then there is a risk of potentially alienating audiences who might be otherwise engaged [Riesch, 2015].

In *Don't Look Up*, many of the characters are there to be the subject of ridicule. As Charles Bramesco says in a particularly critical review from *The Guardian*:

“Most damningly smug of all is McKay’s idea of reg’lar folks, from Dibiasky’s center-right parents (“We’re in favor of the jobs the comet will create,” they inform her before allowing her in the house) to the veteran tapped to pilot the hail-mary mission in space (Ron Perlman as a racist drunkard who addresses “both kinds” of Indians, “the ones with the elephants and the ones with the bow and arrows”).

Bramesco [2021]

Bramesco [2021] here points to the movie not only satirising the obvious subjects — the politicians, the media pundits, the celebrities — but also the public at large. Bramesco criticises the film for the smugness that positions many potential audiences away from being sympathetic to its message. He says: “The only group simpatico to its repellent self-celebratory attitude would be the pocket of liberalism on that same ideological footing, estranging others ostensibly on their side with an air of superiority.” However, Billig’s [2005] *Laughter and Ridicule* argues that humour can be used to teach social norms through the process of embarrassing people participating in certain behaviours. If someone is laughed at for doing something they may feel pressure to conform to specific social norms to avoid being laughed at. However, whether an alienated audience feels pressure to change their attitudes or behaviour is linked to whether they feel a social cohesion and respect with those delivering the message, or those laughing. While the Hollywood elite who star in *Don't Look Up* — the likes of Leonardo Di Caprio, Jennifer Lawrence and Meryl Streep — might seem well placed to provide social pressure, many publics may be sceptical of rich, elite and broadly liberal celebrities.

Satire coming from an elite — such as Hollywood celebrities — may not be received in the same way as satire coming from an “outsider” perspective. Bankes [2016] argues that the satirical comedy show *South Park* uses science to separate the obvious and common-sense in the world from misinformation and the ridiculous. With its crudely drawn characters, DIY feel and immature humour, *South Park* retains an “outsider” feel even after its huge success. Bankes [2016] argues that the narratives of *South Park* don’t seek to communicate science, but instead give the concept of scientific knowledge political meaning. In *South Park*, the characters reframe scientific knowledge to suit their worldview or else refuse to engage with science altogether [Bankes, 2016]. *Don't Look Up* uses science in a very similar way, with characters ignoring the comet’s presence, reinterpreting the potential risk of the comet’s collision, or reframing the comet from being a threat to humanity, to one which will bring economic opportunity. However, with its very high profile cast and big-budget feel, *Don't Look Up* may struggle to monopolise on an “outsider” perspective. The film’s Hollywood sheen may have created a film which feels like insiders laughing at those on the outside of science and outside of the joke, rather than outsiders laughing at those in power.

Riesch [2015] comments on how the psychology of comedy can offer potential opportunities or risks to science communication, and argues that humour can cause issues of alienating people who don’t have the knowledge to understand a science-themed joke causing people to be turned-off science. This consideration creates another dimension beyond satire that may separate some part of *Don't Look Up*’s audience as “outsiders”. The film never explicitly mentions the climate crisis,

and so audiences are required to use their knowledge of climate science (and the media response to it) to access much of the humour.

Research has shown that performances of science comedy often have an audience of people with university degrees and a pre-existing interest in science, and are largely made up of young adults between 20 and 40 years old [Bultitude, 2011]. This demographic reflects Netflix's core audience, where *Don't Look Up* is hosted, with 75% of 18 to 34 years olds in the U.S. having a Netflix subscription in 2021 [Stoll, 2021]. While we can only speculate about how "science interested" Netflix's audience is, it seems the audience demographic of the film may already be sympathetic to its message, bringing into question the role the film plays for those already engaged and sympathetic from the perspective of science communication, as well as for those who may be alienated by its approach.

Climate comedy

Communication about the climate is a difficult area, especially when it comes to persuading behaviour and attitude change. Representations of climate change which are too shocking can engender a feeling of hopelessness which prevents behaviour change [O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009]. However, attempts to avoid feelings of fear and hopelessness may trivialise climate science with tools like humour and satire.

One of the most obvious issues with using comedy and satire to discuss something as serious as climate change, is that the text must remain in the realm of serious discourse, while seeking to make its point using humour. In health communication, the use of humour has been shown to trivialise intended, serious messaging [Moyer-Gusé, Mahood & Brookes, 2011], and it is easy to see how the same thing might happen in discourse around climate change. However, *Don't Look Up* is not the first piece of media to use satire to communicate about climate science. *U: The Comedy of Global Warming*, written and directed by Ian Leung, was performed in Edmonton, Canada, in December 2010. Like *Don't Look Up*, the play uses satire to mock apathetic citizens and those in power. Bore and Reid [2014] use the play as a case study to consider some of the risks and opportunities of using satire to communicate about climate change. They argue that this incongruity between serious and humorous discourses, makes satire "slippery" and ambiguous. They quote Spicer [2011] who posits that the ambiguity in a satirical text can be used to facilitate different interpretations from the audience, which may in fact be useful for science communication objectives which seek to have the audience position themselves within a narrative. Nisker, Martin, Bluhm and Daar [2006] argue that audiences should be able to imagine themselves as the characters in theatre with a public engagement agenda, and ambiguity in how people see characters, can assist in an empathetic response.

Don't Look Up presents many characters, though most are written to be stark caricatures, making it difficult to interpret them as ambiguous characters which allow for broad audience interpretation. One of the only characters who occupies this ambiguous space is Yule, played by Timothée Chalamet, a "skater kid", who appears sceptical of authority, believes in the comet, reveres Dibinsky's approach to media appearances (no nonsense outbursts) and struggles with his religious faith. Yule is also an outsider in the film — he is outside of society (shoplifting and skateboarding out the back of an abandoned burger joint) and outside of science.

This outsider role allows Yule to be the only character who appears to be reasonably persuadable or sceptical of the science, religion and those in power all at once, and potentially gives the audience a window to reflect on the messages of the film, though he only appears 80 minutes into the film.

Conclusion

Much of the media commentary around *Don't Look Up* has pointed to its lack of subtlety around its satire and messaging. Some commentators have accused the film of being a “disaster” because of the breadth of the populations that it satirises. This accusation stems not from the satire being inaccurate or unfunny, but from of the film’s presumed science communication objectives, and the presumed alienation of audiences caused by an overlap between the film’s presumed target audience and the target of the satire.

In this commentary, I have argued that using science comedy with an agenda to change attitudes or behaviours can be very challenging, especially when it comes to satire that uses an approach that assumes the superiority of certain parties. However, satire might be useful as a tool for science communication when audiences respect those producing the satire, when the satire comes from an outsider perspective, and when the satire includes ambiguous and sympathetic characters. However, *Don't Look Up* struggles to make use of these approaches. The film not only satirises characters belonging to elites, but many populations who do not. It is transparently made by a Hollywood elite, meaning that it cannot position itself as offering an outsider perspective. While there is some representation within the film that allows for ambiguity and an outsider position on the events of the film, it remains an open question as to whether this is enough to prompt increased critical reflection on our response to the climate catastrophe.

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