

Caricatures and omissions: representations of the news media in *Don't Look Up*

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Abstract

Don't Look Up represents the news media as harmful to the public understanding of science. The news media turns honest scientists into corrupted and compromised media personalities. Its dynamics and demands make it unable to inform the public that a planet-killing comet, the film's allegory for climate change, is an existential threat. This commentary argues that these representations devalue the power of celebrity scientists to communicate science, ignore how journalists have placed climate change and ideas of climate catastrophe on the public agenda, and imply there is an idealised type of science communication — the deficit model — that journalists have corroded.

Keywords

Environmental communication; Representations of science and technology; Science and media

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.22323/2.21050307>

Submitted: 10th May 2022

Accepted: 17th May 2022

Published: 4th July 2022

Films can enhance the public understanding of science because they can portray what scholar David Kirby has called the “systems of science” [2014, p. 97]. These systems, he argues, include various scientific methods, the social interactions among researchers, the connections between academia and industry, the links between science and the state, as well as the formation of science policy. *Don't Look Up* [2021] represents another of these systems of science, one that is rarely depicted on screen — a system of science communication. The plot follows the film's protagonists, astronomers Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, as they engage with the news media system in an attempt to warn the world that a comet is hurtling towards the Earth and will wipe out all life when it strikes in six months. But the film presents a despairing view of this system. The scientists' warnings fail to register with a journalism so obsessed with triviality, so locked into a superficial mode of communication, so deflected from its historical public service mission, that it is unable to grasp the comet's cataclysmic seriousness. The news media also

corrodes and corrupts the scientists who engage with its workings to alert the public. It distorts their personalities, decimates their reputations, and undermines their values and vocations as honest scientists. *Don't Look Up* argues that the news media system not only *obstructs* effective science communication, but actually *harms* the public understanding of science.

This commentary challenges and critiques this portrayal. It examines the film not to the degree to which its representations are *accurate*, but the degree to which its representations are *authentic* [Kirby, 2014]. To evaluate the film's authenticity, this commentary interrogates the film and its social context, examines the world it represents, and scrutinises its premises of how individuals and institutions function in contemporary society [Sheehan, 2004]. It incorporates into its analysis the film's genre as satire, an artistic mode that has rhetorical and moral aims. Rhetorically, a satire aims to "persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous". Morally, a satire aims to present its characters and plot in "clear reference to some moral standards or purposes" [Griffin, 1994, p. 1]. The characters and situations in a satire are often exaggerated for effect, but the victims of satire come from the real world and can be evaluated by standards of referentiality, by how well they represent some recognisable features of the external world [Griffin, 1994]. The film seeks to persuade its audience that journalists are reprehensible and the news media system is ridiculous. It aims to convince its audience that reporters have failed to adhere to expected moral standards and that the system is no longer fit to meet its democratic obligation to inform citizens truthfully about events that affect their lives. This commentary argues that this satirical representation is inauthentic in its portrayal of journalists and the effects of the news media system on public understanding of science. *Don't Look Up*, this commentary argues, devalues the power of celebrity scientists to communicate science, ignores how journalists have placed climate change and ideas of climate catastrophe on the public agenda, and implies that there is an idealised model of science communication that journalists have somehow corroded.

The news media corrupts honest scientists

The film dramatises the way scientists have used the mass media to shape public opinion. As documented by Goodell in *The Visible Scientists* [1977], certain scientists in the United States (US), from the 1970s especially, came to see the mass media as an arena in which they could raise and discuss scientific issues directly with the public in an attempt to influence science policy, bypassing in the process the traditional route where scientists gave behind-the-scenes expert advice to policymakers. The scientists in *Don't Look Up* attempt to use the media in a similar fashion. After the White House ignores their warnings, they decide to make their claims through the news media in order to focus public attention on the comet. Their strategy is to persuade a prestigious newspaper to publish the story, triggering interest from other media, ultimately bringing the comet to wide public notice. At first their strategy is successful: *The New York Herald* — its title and gothic typeface making it likely referent for *The New York Times* — publishes the story and the scientists then appear on magazine television show *The Daily Rip*. The film dramatises effectively this process of bringing scientific issues to public attention.

But bringing an issue to public attention is no guarantee that audiences will be engaged and public opinion will be moved. In order to stand a chance of exerting influence, scientists must perform well in the media and present their arguments in

a way that resonates with the public. It is not that the news media must adapt to the communication styles of scientists (as many scientists naïvely assume and expect). It is that scientists must adapt to the styles of the news media. This is another science communication process that the film presents authentically. Government scientist Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe spells out the media's demands when he tells Mindy: "You are just telling a story. Keep it simple. No math." (The astronomer replies: "But it's all math.") Mindy, nevertheless, performs well on *The Daily Rip*. He communicates the central facts of the comet in a measured way that manages to conform to the show's lighthearted tone. He adapts to the show's aesthetic demands as he allows the stylist, before he goes on air, to cut his unkempt beard as she complements his "really great facial structure". Dibiasky, in contrast, does not adapt to the show's generic demands. She refuses a stylist's offer of different clothes that, presumably, would look good on television. On air she refuses to partake in the inconsequential chat about extraterrestrial life and fearlessly looks into the camera and tells viewers the stark reality that "we are all going to f**king die". There are problems with the scientists' combined media performance. Walking off the set, co-host Jack Bremmer tells Mindy: "You were great, man, but I think mullet girl, she probably needs some media training." The film's argument is that the news media is unable to deal seriously with a serious topic, and its mode of communication demands that all discussion, even warnings about a certain catastrophe, can only be communicated in a lighthearted fashion. The film argues that the medium and message, style and content, message and messenger, can and should be divorced for such an important topic. If only, the film argues, the news media worked differently.

The scientists' message fails to resonate with the public. After the segment airs, they meet with editors at *The New York Herald* to discuss public reaction to the story. The scientists and editors are told by a representative of the paper's audience analytics team that the story has generated little interest, receiving fewer clicks than routine weather or traffic stories. The scene is the film's only substantive representation of journalistic decision-making. The paper's commitment to the story does not depend on the comet's obvious public interest. It depends instead, the film's argues, on the amount of clicks and social media shares the story receives. The scene also describes how the White House has denied it met the scientists and NASA has dismissed the story as "more near-miss hysteria". Official denials present a genuine dilemma for journalists, who routinely depend on sources from official institutions to confirm whether stories are true or not. Yet the reaction of the editors to this dilemma presents them as cowards, too accepting of official denials at face value, too quick to dismiss their own sources, and too quick to move on from a story with enormous public consequences. It is a dismal portrayal of elite journalism — at once subservient to institutions of power and slavish to the whims of its audience. It's a journalism that has shamefully lost its way.

However, the television appearance has an unintended cultural effect for Mindy. It reinvigorates his moribund career and turns him into a celebrity scientist. The film portrays authentically how the media moulds him into a star scientist through a process of celebrification. He becomes a fixture in the news media, a science advisor to the president, and the credited discoverer of the comet. His trajectory from ordinary scientist to media star embodies the argument of historian of science Marcel Chotkowski LaFollette [2013] that television has tended to elevate to public attention scientists who, essentially, look good on screen. That process has a cost,

the historian argues, as television has a trivialising effect on most scientists, turning them from explainers of complex reality into figures of popular entertainment. Mindy follows this exact trajectory: he ends up with little political influence and his public communication is trapped within the generic demands of light-hearted daytime television. In his final appearance on *The Daily Rip*, he realises the ineffectiveness of his fame. He erupts in exasperation at the personality-based cheerful communication that, he realises, has become his style. “Sometimes we need to just be able to say things to one another. We need to hear things,” he pleads with the hosts. “Look, let’s establish, once again, that there is a huge comet headed towards earth.” In his last moments on air, he screams: “I think we’re all gonna die.”

The film represents scientific celebrity as corrosive to the public understanding of science. With its portrayal of Mindy, it argues that contemporary fame leads to a moral corruption of scientists, and this corruption seeps into and erodes their attempts at honest public communication. However, such a pessimistic representation devalues the demonstrated power of star scientists to enhance and shape public understanding about the intricate relationship between science and society [Fahy, 2015]. There are numerous obvious examples of famous scientists who have used their stardom to enrich popular culture with scientific ideas — and draw attention to environmental problems. Examples include Jane Goodall, Margaret Mead, David Suzuki, and James Hanson. The examples also include Carl Sagan, who is referenced multiple times in the film, starting from the very first scene where Dibiasky puts a figure of the planetary scientist on her desk as she begins her astronomical observations. Sagan is a symbol of the ideal public scientist. But the film neglects the inconvenient reality that the public persona of Sagan, the one the film venerates, has been largely created by the news media. As his biographers have noted [Davidson, 1999; Poundstone, 1999], Sagan came to public prominence in part because of his ability to capture and hold media attention, to use it for his own moral and rhetorical aims, to communicate about planetary science, to make him famous, to warn about the threats and consequences of nuclear war. As this scholarship on Sagan has shown, the media has not been exclusively a corrosive system, but one whose demands and routines he was able to navigate and leverage in order to communicate with millions of people. The film lambasts the media’s obsession with celebrity, but fails to acknowledge the power that scientific fame has had for facilitating exactly the type of science communication the film argues is needed, the type of science communication in the public interest that Sagan’s fame gave him a voice and platform to undertake.

The news media ignores the climate catastrophe

Don’t Look Up presents a pessimistic view of journalism. The profession’s corruption is made clear in the way all journalists in the film are portrayed as ridiculous and reprehensible. Brie Evantee and Jack Bremmer are the self-involved and shallow hosts of *The Daily Rip*, a self-involved and shallow programme. (Brie: “We keep the bad news light.”) The editors at the *New York Herald* are click-driven cowards. Phillip Kaj, Dibiasky’s boyfriend, exploits their relationship at his first opportunity, writing about her private life in his online news site *Autopsy*, which seems to only dissect stories concerning scandal and celebrity. The film also contains passing references to celebrity news being pushed to the phones of unknowing audiences, clogging up their minds with entertainment masquerading as news, focusing public attention not on the comet, but on the break-up and

reconciliation of two pop stars. With these journalists populating the industry, it is no surprise that the news media system is represented overall as shallow yet vicious. The film's portrayal of journalists fits seamlessly into an established pattern of cinematic representation where the reporter is a "sleaze merchant", a "purveyor of cultural trash", responsible for "the debasement of public discourse and the coarsening of society in general" [McNair, 2009, p. 9].

Although exaggerated for satirical effect, these portrayals of journalists are unfair and inauthentic. No environmental journalists appear in the film. But since *The New York Times* established the first environmental beat in 1969, these specialist reporters have collectively acted as a powerful lever of social change around the environment. Reporters on this beat have worked tirelessly for decades, often in the face of disinterest from their own editors and producers, to put climate on the media and political agenda in the US and across the developed world. Environmental reporters have also faced the recurring problem that the nature of climate change as a phenomenon (long-term, systemic, incremental) has cut against the news values of journalism (immediate, event-based, dramatic). Much of the history of climate change as a newsworthy topic has focused on the way increased scientific certainty about human-induced climate change has come to be accepted wisdom, with some exceptions, in global newsrooms [Fahy, 2017]. Yet these reporters have never had their cinematic equivalent of *All The President's Men* [1976] or *Spotlight* [2015] or *The Post* [2017]. These films herald journalists as heroes, their investigative work culminating in a single dramatic publication that uncovers official wrongdoing. By contrast, the contributions of environmental reporters to the public understanding of climate change has occurred over decades of undramatic work that has intersected with the efforts of environmental advocates and green politicians to create powerful and cumulative social and political change around the environment. Their moral work has contributed to the public good. *Don't Look Up* ignores these reporters. It writes them out of history.

However, environmental reporters have not always been heroic. There have been real and consequential failures in their journalism. They have been part of the "lost decade" [Boykoff, 2011, p. 129] of climate reporting, from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s, a period in which journalists attempted to fulfill their professional obligations to fairness by giving roughly equal attention in their reports to researchers who disputed the consensus on human-induced climate change, a practice that researchers have subsequently labelled false balance [Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004]. Reporters have been susceptible to the strategies of the fossil fuel industry that heightened the intrinsic uncertainties in climate science to forestall climate action [Jacques, Dunlap & Freeman, 2008]. Their reporting has been enmeshed in a media context riven by political polarisation, particularly in the US where cable television news refracts climate change through the ideological prisms of the political left and right, appealing to partisan audiences who selectively seek out news on climate that supports their existing political viewpoints [Feldman, 2016]. These are rich subjects for satire. Although it is difficult to tell complex and critical stories about the news media and its social and commercial context, there are precedents. The critically-acclaimed *Network* [1976], for example, satirised a global corporate media obsessed with ratings and profit. *Don't Look Up* does not attempt anything so ambitious or skillful. Instead it offers up for blame and ridicule the caricature of *The Daily Rip*.

There are others ways the film is out-of-synch with the journalism it wants to satirise. The film portrays journalism as failing to recognise the impending threat of the comet. By implication, journalism is failing to recognise the impending threat of climate change. However, researchers have consistently found that the news media, including television news, has tended towards alarmist portrayals of climate change, often using dramatic language and apocalyptic imagery to predict future impacts [Gavin, 2017; Lester & Cottle, 2009]. More recently, the geographer and leading intellectual on climate change, Mike Hulme [2019, p. 1], has observed that contemporary public discourse on climate has featured a heightened sense of urgency — which has been expressed in references to an “existential crisis”, “an emergency”, and the need for “panic”. For Hulme, this discourse has featured as its central argument that idea that humanity is running out of time to take action, a focus on imminent deadlines that he has termed [2019, p. 2] “the new climate zeitgeist” and the “new climate of deadline-ism”. The communication scholar Matthew Nisbet [2019, p. 23] has argued that “climate emergency journalism” is prevalent and problematic, because it conveys the idea that there is no time for compromise or deliberation of alternative paths to deal with climate problems. Ignoring these facts and arguments, *Don't Look Up* argues that a ridiculous news media is morally ruined because it fails to see climate change as an urgent existential threat. But the news media reporting of climate change does, in fact, cover the issue in *exactly the way* the film moralises that it ought to be covered. This is another major omission that renders the film's journalistic satire misplaced and unpersuasive.

Blaming a broken news media

Don't Look Up presents a system of science communication that researchers in the field will recognise wearily. It's the deficit model — brought to life on screen. The astronomers present the scientific facts clearly in news media, but the public do not come to see the issue in the way scientists do. The public's lack of understanding is blamed on the apparent failures and distortions of a news media that shamefully corrupts and vilifies honest scientists who engage with its dissolute institutions. Implicit in the film's representation of news media communication is the argument that the news media *should* report in a certain way, audiences *should* interpret facts in a certain way, and politicians *should* respond to scientific data in a certain way. These are all premises of the deficit model, which have been challenged and proven false by decades of research in the field, yet continue in the face of all evidence and experience to be brought out as a way to communicate climate change. It is an idealised model that fails to understand the dynamics of media and the plurality of society. The film blames immoral and reprehensible journalists for their part on climate inaction, but ignores the decades of work by journalists that helped put climate change on the public agenda and helped craft the catastrophic narrative of climate impacts that are routine features of contemporary climate coverage. The film argues the system of news media science communication is broken. It blames the flimsy media caricatures it created, ignores the heroic journalism that covered climate for decades, and overlooks the now-dominant style of reporting that portrays climate change in just the way the film argues it should be portrayed. *Don't Look Up* wants society to look directly at climate change. But through its omissions and selective representations, the film sees only what it wants to see.

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How to cite

Fahy, D. (2022). 'Caricatures and omissions: representations of the news media in *Don't Look Up*'. *JCOM* 21 (05), C07. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.21050307>.



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