

## The science communication of *Don't Look Up*

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### Abstract

In December 2021, Netflix released a comedy feature film, *Don't Look Up*. The film follows two scientists who discover an extinction-level comet heading for Earth, which they then attempt to warn humanity about. The makers of the film have publicly stated that the film is meant as a satirical metaphor for the response to the climate emergency. The film presents representations of science, scientists, and science communication. In this set of commentaries, experts have been selected to explore these representations and the lessons the film presents for using satire in science communication.

### Keywords

Environmental communication; Science and media

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In December 2021, the streaming giant Netflix released an apocalyptic black comedy feature film, *Don't Look Up*. The film tells the story of two scientists who discover a comet heading for Earth with the potential to cause an “extinction-level event”, which they then attempt to warn humanity about. On Christmas Eve, my family and I congregated around the television, each with our own motivation for watching it. My sister was convinced by the sound of a comedy starring Leonardo Di Caprio, my astronomy-obsessed mother was convinced by the mention of comets, and I — a science communication professional — was interested, knowing that the film was a metaphor for the climate emergency, and intrigued by how the film would fare in getting across its messaging.

We certainly weren't the only people settling down on Christmas Eve 2021 to watch *Don't Look Up*: the film was watched more than 160 million times in its first two weeks on Netflix, making it the second most successful film the platform had ever released [Grater, 2022]. It has achieved critical acclaim, with four Oscar nominations including Best Picture. However, it has also received mixed reviews, many of which comment not only on its merit as a piece of comedic cinema, but on its success in its presumed science communication objectives. Is the film successful in making its metaphor clear? Is this film able to drive its audience to be critical of the global response to climate change? Would the film cause decision-makers to reflect on their actions and attitudes in relation to climate change, including those

in government, the media and activists? Is the film's use of satire appropriate for its messaging?

In this set of commentaries, experts in science, media studies and communication comment on how the film represents science, scientists, the processes of science communication and the interplay between science and society. They also reflect on how the film serves as a metaphor for communicating climate science. The commentaries include critique on the use of satire [Little, 2022] and reflections about the film's representations of science and risk [Guenther & Granert, 2022], climate science and activism [Doyle, 2022], science denial [Mede, 2022], scientists [Chambers, 2022], and the news media [Fahy, 2022]. Together, the commentaries provide insight into how the film converges with science communication issues and theory.

The makers of *Don't Look Up* have publicly stated that the film is meant as an allegory or metaphor for the climate emergency. Adam McKay said in an interview with *The Atlantic* [Sims, 2021] that the original idea came from David Sirota, a political speechwriter who had made an analogical comparison between climate change and a comet hitting Earth. What if, rather than the Earth's climate changing slowly over decades leading to what scientists warn will be devastating effects, we were faced instead with a comet heading directly for us — would our response be the same? The film explores this question, and satirises not only responses from politicians, journalists and celebrities, but also scientists, activists and the public at large.

Analogy and metaphor are powerful tools for science communication. Communicators can build on their audiences' existing knowledge to help them gain knowledge about something unfamiliar. Analogy can be used to illustrate direct causal relationships between objects, for instance explaining how evolution works by pointing to artificial selective breeding of domestic animals. Analogy and metaphor can also be used to make a point about how we should respond to situations, which is how it is employed within *Don't Look Up*. In science communication, this latter use can cause unwanted repercussions, firstly because people can misinterpret the intended learning outcome of the analogy (as in Little [2019]), or because audiences don't always respond well to being told how to feel or respond to a certain situation.

*Don't Look Up* is both subtle and obvious in how it paints its metaphor. At no point in the film is the climate emergency mentioned, and so viewers are left to make this connection for themselves. Conversely, the film has also been criticised for its lack of subtlety in its satire. In this set of commentaries, Little [2022] explores how this simultaneous lack of explicit messaging and its lack of subtlety in its metaphor might alienate potential audiences in different ways. Firstly, audiences may feel like they are outside of the joke if they do not have the necessary knowledge to access the humour (e.g. knowledge of the climate change metaphor). Secondly, because *Don't Look Up* satirises so many publics, including many characters who are broad-stroke representations of the public at large, audiences may feel like the object of the satire, and therefore feel laughed at by the film.

While Little [2022] points to problems for science communication when viewers may feel ridiculed as the subject of satire, Doyle [2022] points to the film's

inclusiveness, with the audience complicit in the story, but sees other problems; the film does not propose an alternative reality where the situation is resolved. Doyle [2022] also highlights areas where the film successfully mirrors real-world trends in communication and activism around the climate emergency. She points to the scientist characters in the film mirroring the climate emotions of young activists in the real world, and the metaphorical representation of Klein's "disaster capitalism" [2008] in attempts by corporations within the film to profit from the comet.

Despite the successes of representation that Doyle [2022] points to, reviews of the film have argued that the metaphor behind the film is "rather ill-suited" [Bramescio, 2021]. In *The Guardian*, Bramescio [2021] argues that much of the lack of urgency and scepticism around climate change is because of its gradual nature. It lacks the clear deadline that a comet-hit gives. This disparity brings into question how we understand climate science and the risks associated with not taking it seriously, and whether a metaphor that emphasises urgency is appropriate. In another commentary, Guenther and Granert [2022] unpack the representations of the science in *Don't Look Up* and how risk is communicated and interpreted in different ways by scientists, politicians, journalists, and business people within the film. They show that scientific certainty is reframed by parties with interests that don't align with the science. The discussion of how risk is reframed according to the interests of different parties certainly mirrors how similar processes happen with the discourse around climate science.

Mede [2022] picks up the theme of how different parties interpret the science, describing how the film offers a rich representation of current science denial movements, including analysis of how these movements interact with politics and the media. Mede [2022] highlights how the film's use of satire creates stereotypes and exaggerations that paint an overly pessimistic representation of current science denial movements. Fahy's [2022] commentary aligns with this critique, arguing that many of the representations in the film show an unrealistic science communication landscape. Focussing on representations of the news media, Fahy [2022] argues that the representations in the film underplay the ability of celebrity scientists to influence the public understanding of science and the active role that journalists take in covering the climate emergency. Fahy [2022] argues that the film idealises scientists as knowledgeable advocates who we should listen to within a deficit-style model of communication, something much of modern science communication is trying to get away from.

Chambers [2022] explores how the film represents scientists more thoroughly. Within the film, the scientists are defined by the prestige of their institutions, as well as their willingness to be commodified by the media, including an inclination to avoid more political and emotional communications that might be interpreted as activism. These observations are complemented by Doyle's [2022] commentary, which notes that climate scientists in the "real world" have been careful to avoid taking activist roles to preserve public perceptions of objectivity. In *Don't Look Up*, both the male and female scientist protagonists take on activist roles, publicly displaying emotion. Both of these commentaries point to gendered media responses to these scientists and their outbursts.

Together, the commentaries in this collection critique representations in *Don't Look Up* of science, science denial, scientists, science communication and society. They

explore points of convergence between the objectives of science communication and the representations in the film and its satirical approach. While many commentaries point to warnings about exaggeration and stereotyping, at times these caricatures mirror reality, providing potentially insightful commentary that the audience is positioned to learn from.

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