

**Climate Silence and the Failure of Environmental Communication in
*Don't Look Up***

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Abstract:

The present paper examines Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* from the perspective of climate change and shows how society fails to notice, even when presented with scientific evidence. It focuses on political delay, corporate interests, entertainment media, social media, and emotional avoidance that prevent scientific warnings from leading to collective action. The study brings together the concepts of Kari Marie Norgaard's concept of socially organised denial, George Lakoff's framing theory, and Maxwell Boykoff's analysis of media power. These concepts help explain why, despite numerous warnings, the public does not make timely decisions to act. McKay's satire shows how corporate, media and political institutions transform the environmental danger into a source of entertainment, business opportunity and partisan conflict. However, the comet's sudden and universal impact simplifies the slow and unequal forms of climate harm as described by Rob Nixon. The film, therefore, explains the failure of environmental communication more successfully than it offers a fair and inclusive solution. Nevertheless, its quiet final dinner scene suggests an alternative response based on trust, grief, human connection, and shared responsibility.

Keywords: *Don't Look Up*; climate communication; climate silence; socially organised denial; media framing; slow violence; environmental justice; climate inaction.

Introduction:

In *Don't Look Up*, a doctoral candidate, Kate Dibiasky, in astronomy, discovers a comet on a collision course with Earth, which leaves humanity only a little more than six months to respond. In theory, this leaves little room for uncertainty. Dibiasky and astronomer Randall Mindy present scientific evidence, institutional credentials, and a clearly defined timeframe. Having all these advantages still fails to convey the seriousness of the threat, as they do not prompt action that reflects it. President Janie Orlean initially delays the announcement because it does not serve her electoral interests. At the same time, television programmes reduce the warning to entertaining content and technology billionaire Peter

Isherwell treats the comet as an opportunity to profit rather than a threat to humanity's survival. The public, meanwhile, splits into two opposing groups that repeat the slogans and then replace them with meaningful discussion. In this way, the allegory of *Don't Look Up* is not concerned with ignorance and is simply a lack of information. Instead, it presents a society that already knows enough to act but has organised its political and media systems in ways that weaken the authority of knowledge and prevent it from producing meaningful collective action.

The difference becomes important because the phrase “climate silence” suggests a simple absence of speech or public discussion. McKay, however, dramatises a different form of silence produced by excessive communication, including constant noise, repetition, and distraction. The comet remains at the centre of public discussion, but jokes, political scandals, commercial branding, opinion polls, and conspiracy theories constantly distort its actual meaning. Building on the climate communication scholarship and environmental criticism, this paper argues that *Don't Look Up* portrays silence as a gradual process rather than a single failure. The role of a political institution is first to delay inconvenient knowledge that threatens its immediate interests, and the role of the media is then to reshape that danger into entertainment. The corporate power role is to replace the public debate with fantasies of technological rescue, and an increasingly overwhelmed public withdraws into ideological camps, personal identities, and distraction. The film powerfully demonstrates that environmental communication becomes ineffective when knowledge is disconnected from political authority and collective agency. It nevertheless presents a climate crisis through an exaggerated and spectacular portrayal of planetary destruction that may reproduce some of the same communicative problems that film seeks to criticise. To understand how knowledge is socially neutralised, it is useful to begin with Norgaard's concept of socially organised denial.

Kari Marie Norgaard explains the concept of “socially organised denial,” which refers to how the characters in the film can encounter danger while continuing their normal lives. Based on a study of a community confronted with abnormal winter weather, Norgaard explains that, in this context, nonresponse does not arise from ignorance but from shared social norms and the careful management of uncomfortable emotions (4-6). Also, in this sense, it means that people learn what not to notice, what not to speak about and when, and how to protect themselves from familiar practices and routines that disturb our knowledge. President Orlean's meeting with the scientist reveals the pattern that says it very clearly. She does not challenge or deny the fact of the comet's presence. Instead, she put forward the view that the warning should be viewed through the narrower lens of polling and electoral timing, and advised them to “sit tight and assess”. In this way, bureaucratic language performs the work of denial by making an important crisis seem like an issue that can be safely postponed. However, this organised denial does not remain confined to the White House; it also extends into the film's television and celebrity culture.

Instead of focusing more on the attention given to the comet, people are more concerned with celebrities' lives than with the fact that on one side of the planet, it is being destroyed. Randall is introduced as a television personality as the figure of the “sexy scientist”, while on the other side, Kate’s visible frustration is turned into a meme. It leads her warning to reach the public, and what changes is how the public is encouraged to receive it. Rather than listening to the evidence behind her outburst, viewers focus more on whether it seems amusing or excessive. Through Norgaard’s framework, it is evident that the form of silence is maintained by many people simultaneously. Each group focuses on their own reasons: for example, politicians want to protect their electoral interests; presenters focus on keeping the programme entertaining; audiences want to feel that life is still normal; and scientists feel the pressure to deliver urgent warnings calmly. And in this way, the comet constantly becomes the centre of the news, but the pressure to stay composed and pleasant can drain urgency from the warning.

According to George Lakoff, people interpret facts through existing values, familiar stories, and moral beliefs (71-73). This process helps explain the political conflict in *Don't Look Up*. Comets pose a measurable danger to other people’s lives, but as the warning moves through political, media, and corporate institutions, its meaning changes. People who present on television portray it through entertainment. Orlean considers the comet a symbol of partisan loyalty.

Peter Isherwell, who is head of BASH, goes a step further by reframing it as a valuable mineral asset. As a result, his extraction plan changes the central question of “*How do we protect life?*” to “*How can this crisis generate economic growth?*” Though the scientific facts remain unchanged, their ethical meaning is reshaped by political and corporate power. Boykoff’s analysis of the media's power helps explain this shift more specifically, as he argues that climate change is portrayed and shaped by political and economic power, journalistic conventions, and unequal opportunities afforded to the media (13-17). In the film, BASH is not given more power than others in terms of an equal voice. Instead, in the film, it's money, data, and a close connection with the president that allow the company to cancel the planned attempt to destroy the comet and, in relation to the planetary crisis, redefine it as an economic opportunity. In this way, corporate authority replaces democratic decision-making. The main question arises from the film's assumption that better scientific communication alone cannot correct societal indifference.

In the film, the comet is seen as something with clear, observable data, and people can observe it to know exactly when it will strike Earth. Climate change is, however, difficult to observe with the naked eye, as it is a slow, gradual process with various causes and affects different communities in different ways. In addition, responsibility for the crisis is not shared equally by everyone. According to Rob Nixon, “slow violence” refers to environmental harm that unfolds gradually, making it difficult for the media and the public to observe (2). McKay

responds to this problem by turning towards long-term climate change as a sudden physical threat. Although this device gives climate urgency a powerful cinematic form, it also overlooks the experiences of people for whom environmental disaster is already part of everyday life through heat, flooding, pollution, displacement, and hunger.

The film showcases a global crowd and focuses more on non-human life, suggesting that a comet can threaten or destroy the planetary environment. Despite that, the film focuses more on American institutions and mostly white American characters. This creates a universal problem: everyone is easily threatened. In reality, the effects of climate change seem to focus more on extraction, wealth, race, location, and colonial history, which means certain communities are more vulnerable than other groups. BASH's extraction scheme illustrates this very well and works to gain profit while simultaneously maintaining power. Along with this, the film leaves behind other important factors, such as indigenous knowledge, global south knowledge, the labour movement, and environmental justice. It uses the word "we" to illustrate that all are included in the environmental problem, and it blurs the distinction between actually recognising the possible cause and who gets the profit, who is responsible for the crisis, and who is hiding from it.

This limitation also affects how the film communicates its climate message. When climate stories suggest that everyone is equally responsible and equally at risk, they can hide the governments, corporations, and economic systems that have contributed most to the crisis. At the same time, they may overlook the communities and movements that are already resisting environmental harm. Nixon's idea of slow violence, therefore, encourages environmental stories to show how climate damage develops gradually and affects some groups more severely than others. A stronger climate allegory could still keep McKay's effective criticism of politicians, corporations, and the media. However, it should also show that climate disasters are already happening and that their effects are not the same for everyone. In this way, the story could move beyond simply raising awareness of the crisis. It could also help them understand who is responsible, which communities are most affected, and how collective action may bring about change.

The two competing slogans reduce an enormous environmental crisis to a simple choice for oneself. In such an instance, individuals are forced to confront the danger or choose to avoid it. But in that case, one cannot entirely depend on public awareness. Also, one cannot regulate large corporations and industries, transform the energy system, or distribute resources fairly. As a result, the campaigns encourage people to pay attention, but they do not question the power of the government, corporations, and other major institutions. In such a case, climate communication should clearly identify who has the authority to make a decision and what actions are needed. In addition, it should also help concerned audiences come together and demand practical laws and policies that create real change.

Conclusion

In *Don't Look Up*, it seems that climate issues remain even after everyone talks about them. The core of the issue remains in how it is being discussed and managed. The point is that the initial political leaders tend to put off the process through elections and votes. Also, the media prefers to focus on fun and entertainment rather than address the actual issue or its gravity. In this case, fear arises among people due to a lack of practical ways to deal with it. By analysing characters such as Norgaard, Lakoff, Boykoff, and Nicholson-Cole, Nixon reveals facts that everyone ignores. The film has an important weakness. The comet arrives suddenly and threatens everyone equally, whereas climate change develops slowly and affects some communities much more severely than others. The film also gives ordinary people a few realistic ways to respond.

Nevertheless, the ending scene shifts from political noise and entertainment to a quieter, calmer one focused on care and human connection. They suggest that better climate communication should explain the danger honestly, identify the people and institutions with power, connect with everyday experience, and offer clear ways for communities to act together. Simply seeing the problem is not enough; people must also have the support and power needed to respond collectively.

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