

**“Humor’s Efficacy in Communicating Climate Change Messaging”**

*A thesis presented by*

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*The sample acknowledgements section that I am using encourages me to include a section "to thank God." In this case, I will decline to do so. Instead, I will thank Michaela again. Take that as you will.*

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Political cartoonist Joel Pett had a problem. In Copenhagen, the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference was about to start, and as the Monday morning cartoonist for one of America's four papers of record, *USA Today*, his work would be skimmed by nearly the entirety of the conference. "If he hit it out of the park with his cartoon on Monday, the opening day of the conference, it could get passed around at the highest level among actual decision-makers," explains Chris Bliss, a friend of and comedic collaborator.<sup>1</sup> Many of Pett's cartoons got a laugh but were immediately lost to the cultural ether, but now, Pett had a chance to communicate directly to an audience that was making important policy decisions. Anything was possible. In his TED talk, "Comedy in Translation," Bliss claims, "When you get a good viral joke with a powerful punchline, that's crafted with honesty and integrity, it can have a real-world impact at changing a conversation."<sup>2</sup> Pett had the opportunity; he just needed the right joke.

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<sup>1</sup> Bliss, Chriss. (2011, December). *Comedy in Translation* [Video]. TED Conferences. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_bliss\\_comedy\\_is\\_translation/up-next?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_bliss_comedy_is_translation/up-next?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> Bliss, Chriss. (2011, December)



Figure 0.1: Joel Pett's Cartoon "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?"  
Modified from *The Lexington Herald Leader*

Pett crafted in his cartoon what he wanted to see from the Climate Summit: a crowded lecture hall, next generation technologies being discussed, and the climate discussion reframed and reenergized. A skeptic in the back interrupts the lecture and asks, "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?" The irony is palpable. Like most examples of good humor, what is notable about Pett's humor is not in what it does do, but what it does not. Pett does not condemn, shame, or catastrophize, but rather he asks a simple, admittedly ironic question, and he leaves it there, unanswered: "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?" Independent of whatever constitutes a "scientific consensus," Pett's question forces the reader to ponder why we debate about goals we all essentially want. The question provides "a lot of punch for 14

words” —the kind of question that the audience cannot leave unresolved.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, Pett described his inspiration to a room full of cartoonists in a “16 Damn Cartoons” Chalk Talk: “It’s an example of one of these ideas that I had in my head for ten years before I realized that I hadn’t cartooned it. Like it doesn’t matter if global warming were a hoax... the scientist made it up, we still have to do all that shit.”<sup>4</sup>

Wherever it came from, the joke landed. Following the conference, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Lisa Jackson, reached out to Pett to ask for a signed copy of the cartoon to hang in her DC office. To date, over 40 environmental groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe have asked Pett for permission to use the cartoon in presentations and advertising campaigns. In 2012, Australia’s Green Party used it as a centerpiece in an energy campaign that resulted in the country’s parliament adopting the world’s most progressive carbon tax.<sup>5</sup> The cartoon had caught on and connected with his audience in a way that Pett himself could not have predicted. Sarcastically complaining about its overnight adoption by the global environmental movement, Pett quipped, “I’ve drawn 7,000 cartoons in my life, but really only one.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout his Pulitzer-prize winning career, Pett has taken on the full gamut of social-political issues, but it is his climate change cartoon that still finds its way onto t-shirts a decade later.

Admittedly, the American environmental movement has loftier goals than selling t-shirts. Climate change poses an unprecedented crisis for the global community, with

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<sup>3</sup> Bliss, Chriss. (2011, December)

<sup>4</sup> AAEC Wuerker. (2012, October 11). *16 Damn Cartoons Chalk Talks Joel Pett*. [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WgMNGc\\_cvw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WgMNGc_cvw)

<sup>5</sup> Bliss, Chriss. (2011, December)

<sup>6</sup> AAEC Wuerker. (2012, October 11)

humanity's whole way of life hanging in the balance. That is not funny. If our current socioeconomic systems remain in place, those who will pay the costs for climate change will disproportionately be those who will suffer the most. That is not funny either. On the surface, nothing about the environmental movement or, for that matter, the hard work done by environmentalists, lends itself to comedy. There is certainly nothing funny enough about climate change that belongs cartoonishly plastered on a t-shirt.

But Pett can still get a laugh, and, even more profoundly, he can promote positive environmental change in a system bogged down by decades of stagnation. The crux of the thesis is this paradox: climate humor should not work, but it does, and when it does work, it connects to valuable audiences in the United States in a way that outcompetes most (if not all) alternatives. Drawing upon a wide variety of sources, including humor theory, science communication, media studies, and the firsthand experiences of comedy creators, this thesis attempts to create a complete picture of climate humor – theoretically and practically – as a means of communicating climate issues. In doing so, it seeks to answer some lingering questions within this growing field of research. If climate humor is so effective, where has it been for the last 30 years? Can climate humor be categorized similarly to other forms of humor? What considerations can and should shape climate humor's efficacy in policy? These theoretical questions, this thesis argues, can only point toward adopting thoughtfully crafted environmental humor to communicate messages about environmental issues and policy to Americans.



Communication Stakes and Humor:

The stakes have never been higher. In a 2016 study titled “The Politics of Climate,” the Pew Research Group found that most Americans believe that the earth is warming due to human activity, that disastrous effects are very likely to occur because of climate change, and that bold policy can make a big difference.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite these beliefs, and the investments of hundreds of millions of dollars, U.S. sentiment toward protecting the environment is overwhelming apathetic. Authors Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus pithily sum this up by noting environmental protection is “supported by a large majority — ... *just not supported very strongly*.”<sup>8</sup> Why, then, is there such a gap between belief and action?

Increased politicization of climate issues might be contributing to this inaction. The Pew Research study found that while 70% of liberal Democrats trust climate scientists to give full and accurate information, only 15% of conservative Republicans feel the same way.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, recent years have seen trust in news media hit an all-time low. In January 2021, 55% of Americans reported to the Edelman Trust Barometer that they mistrusted media.<sup>10</sup> Most news organizations, Americans seem to feel, “are more concerned with

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<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center. (2020, August 21). *The politics of climate change in the United States*. Pew Research Center Science & Society. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/>.

<sup>8</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004). *The death of environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world*. Verlag nicht ermittelbar.

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center. (2020, August 21). *The politics of climate change in the United States*. Pew Research Center Science & Society. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/>.

<sup>10</sup> 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer. Edelman. (2021, March 16). Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>.

supporting a political position than with informing the public."<sup>11</sup> In other words, politicized climate media is not trustworthy, causing many Americans to reject valuable information and messaging.

Access to information regarding climate change is not enough. As Professor Susanne C. Moser, who has long studied climate change communication, explains, "It is far too simplistic to assume that individuals merely lack education, information, or understanding of climate change, and if these knowledge gaps could be filled... they would automatically act to reduce their energy consumption and carbon footprint."<sup>12</sup> The details of climate change have already been effectively established, what is missing is salience, or "the level of importance placed on a given issue."<sup>13</sup> In their essay *The Importance of Salience: Public Opinion and State Policy Action on Climate Change*, Professors Rebecca Bromley-Trujillo and John Poe offer a more nuanced conception of climate salience, which breaks it apart into two key parts: "issue problem status" and "issue attention." Bromley-Trujillo and Poe define issue problem status as "the degree to which [the public] view an issue as a problem," and issue attention as the degree to which "the individual places some level of importance on the issue *and* is willing to invest a minimal amount of effort to investigate the issue."<sup>14</sup> New messaging needs to be more than informational; it needs to

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<sup>11</sup> Salmon, F. (2021, January 21). Media trust hits new low. *Axios*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.axios.com/media-trust-crisis-2bf0ec1c-00c0-4901-9069-e26b21c283a9.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Moser, S. C. (2009). Communicating climate change: History, challenges, process and future directions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 1(1), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.11>

<sup>13</sup> Burden, B.C., Sanberg, J.N.R. Budget Rhetoric in Presidential Campaigns from 1952 to 2000. *Political Behavior* **25**, 97–118 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023825212333>

<sup>14</sup> Bromley-Trujillo, R., & Poe, J. (2018). The importance of salience: Public opinion and state policy action on climate change. *Journal of Public Policy*, 40(2), 280–304. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0143814x18000375>

both help audiences conceptualize the scale of the climate crisis and motivate audiences to engage deeply and personally.

Beyond this, mainstream environmentalism's failure to "listen to the [social] science" (to modify a phrase associated with Greta Thunberg) is deeply related to its failure to effectively communicate climate change. Certain psychological facets of climate change make capturing audience's attention, motivating action, and instigating behavioral change more difficult. Climate change is an intergenerational global commons dilemma, the type of problem that looks, *Washington Post* columnist David Fahrenthold notes, as "if it was designed to be ignored."<sup>15</sup> Climate change creeps onward at time-scales difficult for humans to grapple with, and most of its more visible effects, do not happen "in climate-controlled buildings [or] moving in protective vehicles through vastly human-altered landscapes."<sup>16</sup> Why should anyone act against climate change when environmental disaster seems so temporarily and spatially distant from his or her lived experiences?

In his essay, "The Dragons of Inaction," Professor of Psychology and Environmental Studies Robert Gifford lays out the underlying psychological mechanisms behind this "fabled gap between attitude and behavior." Psychological barriers present themselves, Gifford claims, in seven interrelated ways: "limited cognition about the problem, ideological worldviews that tend to preclude pro-environmental attitudes and behavior, comparisons with key other people, sunk costs and behavioral momentum, discredence

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<sup>15</sup> Pearson, A. R., Schuldt, J. P., & Romero-Canyas, R. (2016). Social Climate Science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 11(5), 632–650. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616639726>

<sup>16</sup> Moser, S. C. (2009)

toward experts and authorities, perceived risks of change, and positive but inadequate behavior change.”<sup>17</sup>

This thesis borrows Gifford’s approach of framing climate change as a problem rooted in social psychology and the public policy concept of salience to suggest that humor and its unique sociopsychological mechanisms are a viable solution to these cognitive and social paralytics. Humor has the capacity to connect to some Americans on deeper levels, both engaging their interests and framing scale in relatable ways. While humor is not a panacea for all these issues, this thesis argues that environmental humor can be a valuable tool in the science communication toolbox. This thesis will explore exactly how humor communication can transcend political boundaries, reach apathetic audiences, and close the gap between belief and behavior.

After all, humor has been identified as an important catalyst for overcoming other deeply rooted psychological and social biases. Hannibal Buress’ stand-up broke through years of collective silence and brought important attention back to the Bill Cosby rape allegations, putting the scandal at the center of public consciousness and, to some, reigniting the #MeToo movement.<sup>18, 19</sup> Even the sitcom, a play-it-safe conservative space for comedy, changed public opinions about gay rights. By providing important (if limited)

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<sup>17</sup> Gifford, R. (2011). The dragons of inaction: Psychological barriers that limit climate change mitigation and adaptation. *American Psychologist*, 66(4), 290–302. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023566>

<sup>18</sup> Graves, L. (2018, April 26). Hannibal Buress: how a comedian reignited the Bill Cosby allegations. *The Guardian*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/26/hannibal-buress-how-a-comedian-reignited-the-bill-cosby-allegations>.

<sup>19</sup> Wicker, K. (2019, August 12). Bill Cosby’s conviction was a #MeToo triumph. Now his defense wants it reversed. *ThinkProgress*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/bill-cosbys-defense-team-returns-to-court-82a08e560c78/>.

representation of gay characters, shows such as the 1970's sitcom "All in the Family" resulted in an uptick in audience sympathy for gay causes and taught valuable lessons about "gay identity, not by preaching politics or morality, but by portraying a spectrum of characters who in different ways defy stereotypes of gay men and women."<sup>20</sup> Laughter has created several impactful psychological connections, and perhaps communicating environmental issues through humor can once again push forward progressive social change.

Throughout the country, comics are running new climate material at open-mics, and audiences are reacting accordingly, largely with disinterest. What could be so funny about the end of the world? Who wants to go to another preachy environmental lecture masquerading as a comedy show? Comedy itself is similarly question-begging. As we saw with Joel Pett's work, sometimes humor can force us to ask ourselves what is and is not permissible, or even what is and is not possible. This is perhaps humor's most important role within environmentalism, its ability to reimagine and reframe social conversations. Some Americans may find this distasteful, but environmental humor should push the boundaries of what environmentalism is comfortable with; mainstream solutions are not working, so why not think outside the box? Communicating environmental policy with humor may require the distasteful, but perhaps sensibilities need to be pushed, especially if we are only running the risk of "a better world for nothing."

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<sup>20</sup> Aronstein, A. J. (2012, May 30). *All in the Family' and the First Gay Sitcom Character*. Vulture. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.vulture.com/2012/05/all-in-the-family-and-the-first-gay-sitcom-character.html>.

Chapter Organization:

This thesis constructs a narrative around environmental humor as communication: how it works, when it has worked well, and what its goals are. The early chapters of this thesis attempt to enumerate the important considerations (from theory and from history) in using humor to communicate environmental messages. These findings are based on an extensive literature review of a variety of topics relevant to humor and climate (psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, and philosophy). Through a series of interviews, the later chapters attempt to bring these considerations into the practical concepts, forcing a variety of experts to weigh in on what a humorous approach to environmental communication might look like and how different actors may have to work together to solve this aspect of the climate crisis.

Humor itself is a problem just as complicated as climate change. But humor has also been thoroughly studied, through several theoretical lenses. Accordingly, Chapter One provides an important theoretical background to humor. The chapter examines the rich, philosophical history of the study of humor, as well as modern dialogues in humor theory surrounding its rhetorical power. Chapter One presents critical frameworks employed throughout the rest of the thesis to analyze humor, the practice of humor, and its utility.

Chapter Two brings these theoretical issues into the practical realm, asking: what does environmental humor look like? If it works (which is no small discussion itself), exactly how does it do so, and how does humor centering around environmental issues differ from other political and/or controversial forms of humor? At its core, this chapter examines not only humor's efficacy in communicating environmental messages, but also how the

underlying frameworks of humor (discussed in Chapter One) may provide solutions to several failures of mainstream environmental communication. This chapter ends with a rough taxonomy of environmental humor, briefly sketching out each type's form and function, as well as a relevant case studies.

Chapter Three provides a necessary historical background to environmental humor, focusing on U.S. examples. The overall question behind this history is where has all the environmental humor been? Why has mainstream environmentalism been resistant to adopt environmental humor? Building on Chapter Two's taxonomies of humor, Chapter Three characterizes historical trends in environmental humor's use and form. Importantly, the chapter also puts environmentalists in conversation with environmental comedians and communicators. Does self-critical humor strengthen or bolster the environmental message?

Through an extensive literature review of several theoretical approaches to humor and climate communication, these first three chapters aim to establish what environmental humor is and how it works by application of theory and exploration of case studies. Chapter Four refocuses attention on this thesis' policy dimension: the efficacy of humor in environmental messaging. Through a series of interviews conducted over zoom and by phone broken down into six lingering questions in the field, the first half of Chapter Four puts expert knowledge from science communicators studying humor to work. The second half, also a summary of a series of interviews, attempts to engage with the experiential knowledge of several climate comedians. How is environmental humor crafted, and what does it mean, from the analytical or creative side, to be well-crafted climate humor? Using

these lenses, Chapter Four attempts to answer whether climate humor can offer a productive intervention on environmental issues.

The chapter also attempts to put these two sources of knowledge together and into dialogue with each other. Climate comedians and science communicators tend to have very different opinions and goals; is there common ground for the two groups to work together? What can climate comedians do to make their jokes more effective?

Alternatively, what can science communicators learn about joke-telling and joke-craft to inform their theories on humor? If humor is to be more widely adopted to communicate environmental messaging, these groups will have to work together and learn from each other.

Finally, the conclusion attempts to summarize and answer the question: what can climate humor do for us? Throughout our systematic approach to climate humor, what overarching strengths of communicating climate messaging through comedy can address mainstream environmental communication's weaknesses? This last chapter enumerates the most important benefits and consequences of communicating environmental messaging with humor. What can be gained from environmental humor, how can we best gain it, and how do we reconcile different actors involved in its creation?

When done well, environmental humor seems perfectly crafted to respond to some overwhelming problems with environmentalism and mainstream environmental communication within the U.S. Samuel Clemens, better known by his pseudonym Mark Twain, once wrote, "For [the human] race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really



effective weapon--laughter."<sup>21</sup> At the very least, this great weapon needs to be explored.

Perhaps learning how to laugh at the end of the world may be one way of preventing it.

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<sup>21</sup> Clemens, S. (1915) *The Mysterious Stranger* [Unpublished manuscript]

Chapter One  
Humor Theory: An Overview

What's so funny, or, for that matter, what is *funny*? It seems intuitive. After all, we learn how to laugh without being taught how, but despite millennia of treatises and philosophical musings deciphering humor and the comic effect, the question of what is funny remains unresolved. Progress has been made; theories posited (and rejected). Perhaps, it is because humor is so subjective, or perhaps it is because analyzing humor is rarely as fun as humor itself. Author and co-creator of the influential *The Elements of Style* E. B. White and his wife, acclaimed *New Yorker* editor Katherine White, tackled this question in a 1941 essay published in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, concluding:

Analysts have had their go at humor, and I have read some of this interpretative literature, but without being greatly instructed. Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind.<sup>22</sup>

By requirement, this thesis powers through this inevitable, formaldehyde-stinking “ickiness” because, like the frog, humor is complicated and deserving analysis. This chapter intends to sketch some of the overarching trends in humor theory throughout history, especially those with relevance to climate communication. How do philosophical theories from thousands of years ago inform modern humor theory? Can humor be separated from its historical association with violence, and, if so, can humor do good work?

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<sup>22</sup> White, E. B., & White, K. S. (1955). *A Subtreasury of American humor*. Pocket Books.

Still, so much is left off the dissection tray. One could label the organs, separate them out, put them under the microscope, and loosely speculate what leads where and how the clockwork fits together, but no self-respecting herpetologist would claim this explains how a frog works. This chapter's analysis works in a similar way. It creates an incomplete overview of humor, that pulls together several thinkers from the fields of anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and psychiatry, but it does not capture the full picture. The first thing that is lost, George Bernard Shaw suggests, may be the humor itself: "There is no more dangerous literary symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humor. It indicates a total loss of both."<sup>23</sup>

Many of the early vivisectionists of humor in Classical philosophy fell neatly into Shaw's critique, choosing to dissect humor without any intention to preserve the remains. In tangents during his dialogues, Plato depicts humor as an extension of scorn, a self-ignorant and hypocritical scorn based in a misplaced feeling of superiority. "Taken generally," Plato claims, "the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice."<sup>24</sup> This sinfulness Plato associated with humor was connected to humor's effect. Whatever work humor did, it did it too well, and Plato saw laughter as a step on the path toward violence. Plato's ideal society would prohibit all comedy: "No composer of comedy, iambic or lyric verse shall be permitted to hold any citizen up to laughter, by word or gesture, with passion or otherwise."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Eastman, M. (1921). *The sense of humor*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>24</sup> Morreall, J. (2020, August 20). *Philosophy of humor*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

<sup>25</sup> Morreall, J. (2020, August 20)

Although Plato wrote thousands of years ago, something of this classical humor theory persists today, especially in the hyperviolent language that surrounds humor. A joke can be described as “scathing,” or a remark as “biting.” But what early thinkers found particularly pernicious was humor’s ability to override our self-control, that “ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction.”<sup>26</sup> Humor denies the rational mind, and our experience of laughter is out of our control. This should be intuitive to anyone who has ever laughed at something or someone they really should not have, especially English speakers. After all, in English, we “make someone laugh”; this construction implies an imposition of will on someone else, as well as an involuntary reaction.

As Professor of English literature Robert C. Elliott calls attention to in *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, and Art*, ancient societies often attributed this over-riding nature of humor to the supernatural.<sup>27</sup> The Twelve Tables, the legislation at the foundation of Roman law, considered satire akin to other occult crimes, making it difficult to “separate satirical destructive language from magico-religious destructive language.”<sup>28</sup> As Marcus Tullius Cicero, the famous Roman rhetorician, wrote in *On the Republic*, “Though our Twelve Tables attached the penalty of death only to a very few offenses, yet among these few this was one: if any man should have sung a satire against someone, or have composed a satire

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<sup>26</sup> Plato, F., F. G. R., & Griffith, T. (2017). *The republic*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, R. C. (1966). *The power of satire: Magic, ritual, art*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Compton, T. (2006). “Wounded by Tooth that Drew Blood”: The Beginnings of Satire in Rome. In *Victim of the muses: Poet as scapegoat, warrior, and hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European myth and history*. essay, Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University.

calculated to bring infamy or disgrace on another person. \_Wisely decreed.”<sup>29</sup> The satirical poet suffered poetic justice – being beaten to death by clubs.<sup>30</sup>

For those familiar with Cicero’s career, the comments above may have some historical irony. The past was by no means a humorless time; after all, Cicero gained recognition and power in the Roman senate, along with the love of the Roman populace, through his trademark satirical polemic. But Cicero still met the abrupt end of many a historical humorist: proscribed, beheaded, and posthumously desecrated (according to Cassius Dio, Mark Antony’s wife Fulvia stabbed Cicero’s tongue repeatedly with a hairpin).<sup>31</sup> In several ways, Cicero’s life embodies uncertainties at the core of humor theory of the ancient world. How can humor be both a source of such societal harm and good? Where does humor come from, and can we understand it mechanistically beyond the alchemical or magical? In 1804, “Bonaventura” (believed to be a *nom de plume* for theater director August Klingermann) brought together several of these ancient themes in a passage from *The Nightwatches of Bonaventura*: “Laughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily accepted it. Then laughter cast away its mask and looked at man and at the world with the angry eyes of satire.”<sup>32</sup> Even thousands of years later, laughter maintains its supernatural origin, as well as its complicated two-faced nature: the surface level comic effect fueled by a burning, terrible rage.

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<sup>29</sup> Compton, T. (2006)

<sup>30</sup> Compton, T. (2006)

<sup>31</sup> Everitt, A. (2002). *Cicero: A turbulent life*. John Murray.

<sup>32</sup> Bonaventura, & Gillespie, G. (2014). *The Nightwatches of Bonaventura*. University of Chicago Press.

Modern Humor Theory:

Defining humor is hard. “To define,” after all, “is to exclude and negate” as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset originally proposed (with a dash of irony).<sup>33</sup> Intuition can only work for so long, and the rich variety of humor that exists only complicated the problem. In most languages, Professor of Psychology Willibald Ruch suggests in his essay *Psychology of Humor*, “we do have different terms to refer to humorous stimuli and events, such as witty, humorous, comical, hilarious, or droll.”<sup>34</sup> Ruch uses Maurice Charney’s 2005 *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide* to illustrate just how daunting humor can be to analyze: “Some [chapters about humor] are historical, some are defined by their audience, some by their medium, others by ethnicity, while still others added defined by country or login or by the techniques of the creators.”<sup>35</sup>

Modern humor theory attempts to bring a multidisciplinary approach to answer some basic questions about humor, how to define it and how to understand its basic goals and/or mechanisms. This integrated approach is because humor is not a purely psychological, cultural, or sociological phenomenon. As linguists and American literary scholars Alleen and Don Nilsen assume, only by forging ahead with these “seemingly unrelated areas and their methodologies” can progress be made.<sup>36</sup> Humor challenges

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<sup>33</sup> Davis, D. (2008). Communication and humor. *The Primer of Humor Research*, 543–568.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.543>

<sup>34</sup> Ruch, W. (2008). Psychology of humor. *The Primer of Humor Research*, 17–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.17>

<sup>35</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>36</sup> Nilsen, A., & Nilsen, D. (2008). Literature and humor. *The Primer of Humor Research*, 243–280.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.243>

experts to not only engage with new fields, but also with new ways of knowing: “Given the scientific recognition of ambiguity and subjectivity at the very core of [humor], there has been a slow shift in acknowledging merit in the study of concepts that don’t readily lend themselves to quantification of absolute answers.”<sup>37</sup>

One of the earliest discoveries regarding this multidisciplinary was that humor is born within a social context; nothing is intrinsically funny by itself. To quote Professor of Psychology David Viktoroff, “No one never laughs alone — laughter is always the laughter of a particular social group.”<sup>38</sup> Anthropologist Mary Douglas agrees that laughter happens within the context of the particular social group that created it: “All jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur. The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a ‘told’ joke.”<sup>39</sup> Douglas implies that humor can be read as a social artifact, which might be why humor is so easily lost in translation; without the identifiable social lead-up to the joke, an outsider will not know when to laugh.

The sociological framework of humor seems to place some of the burden on the audience themselves, but much more on the humorists, who must “know a good deal about this person or group,” namely their sensibilities, tastes, and taboos.<sup>40</sup> Getting this wrong can run the risk of “losing the audience” and make even the most adroitly crafted jokes fall flat. Sociologists use these insights to frame humor as Professor of English Paul

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<sup>37</sup> Davis, D. (2008)

<sup>38</sup> Carrell, A. (2008). Historical views of humor. *The Primer of Humor Research*, 303–332. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.303>

<sup>39</sup> Boykoff, M., & Osnes, B. (2019). A laughing matter? confronting climate change through humor. *Political Geography*, 68, 154–163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.09.006>

<sup>40</sup> Carrell, A. (2008)

Simpson originally did, as a social interaction between humorist, audience, and the surrounding social contexts that inform the humor.<sup>41</sup>

### Theories of Humor:

Understanding humor mechanistically has been complicated by the fact that, as Ruch notes, “humor seems to have different ‘flavors,’ such as bitter, salty or dark.”<sup>42</sup> This language may seem familiar, often the sense of humor is closely linked with the sense of taste. In the last decade, research on dimensionalities of the human palette has broken down complicated gustatory experiences into relevant groups and metrics.

Communications scholar and Professor Andrea C. Samson and Professor of Psychology Willibald Ruch attempted to do the same factor analysis work with humor, asking participants to judge 60 jokes based on 23 qualities.<sup>43</sup> These 23 humor qualities ultimately boiled down two meta-characteristics: “One dimension was more cognitive (subtle, ingenious vs odd, bizarre) and referred to more structural features of jokes and the other referred more to motivational qualities (stinging, macabre vs. droll, touching) presumable reflecting the impact of the content of the jokes and cartoons.”<sup>44</sup> Apparently, humor can mostly be characterized by structural and motivational considerations. Interestingly, “the perception of funniness was located exactly in the diagonal (subtle high, droll high) suggesting that both dimensions contributed equally to this perception.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Simpson, P. (2003). *On the discourse of satire towards a stylistic model of satirical humor*. John Benjamins.

<sup>42</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>43</sup> Samson, A. C., & Ruch, W. (2005). Perceptual qualities in humor: A 3WD Study. *Seventeenth International ISHS Humor Conference*.

<sup>44</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>45</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)



Sampson and Ruch's results seem to confirm that social humor can be best understood within the realms of (1) superiority theory and (2) incongruity theory. Superiority theory "in the tradition of a line of thinking that can be traced back to Plato" argues that humor works by ridiculing a target to reassert one's own superiority.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that superiority theory involves an imposition of power, but not always an imposition of violence; usually "being in on the joke" is enough to make you feel superior to everyone else or even former conceptions of yourself. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes summarized this position in 1651: "The passion of laughter is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of other, or with our own formerly."<sup>47</sup>

In the other dimension, incongruity theory applies to more structural aspects of the joke-telling. Incongruity theory describes how humor arises from "an incongruity between objects, between elements of an object, or between an event and an expectation."<sup>48</sup> It bears a striking resemblance to Kant's conceptions of the mechanisms of humor. Laughter, Kant claimed, was "an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expected into nothing."<sup>49</sup> As Ruch contextualizes, "That which is originally perceived in one (often serious) sense is suddenly viewed from a totally different (usually implausible or ludicrous) perspective."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>47</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>48</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>49</sup> Carrell, A. (2008)

<sup>50</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

Despite their often-contradictory nature in the literature, there is no reason to see these two perspectives as opposite, especially when viewed through a psychological lens. Following his work on dissecting and analyzing dreams, Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Subconscious* imagined humor as another expression of the repressed: a mediated and controlled way to release pent up violent and sexual energy.<sup>51</sup> As Ruch describes in his history of humor psychology, "the basic idea is that the Id is a pool for desires and drives. As society and parental influence do not allow the direct expression of sexual and hostile impulses, gratification can only be achieved in an indirect way."<sup>52</sup> Freud used this idea of the subconscious to layer several earlier theories of humor on top of each other; on the surface, there is incongruity, but, deep within our subconscious, there are the violent psychological generators of the joke.

Within this schema, incongruity and superiority theory meet perfectly in the middle at satire. Etymologically, this makes sense. Literary historian Gilbert Highet believes that satire comes from the Latin *satura*, a mixed meat dish that brought usually disparate elements together.<sup>53</sup> Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire* explores how modern satire still embodies this eclecticism: the superior irony that "[fuses] positive emotion (i.e., amusement or humor) with negative emotion (i.e., hostility or indignation) to critique the follies of a blameworthy target."<sup>54</sup> Despite or perhaps because of its increasing popularity in mass media, satire also often balances lofty rhetoric goals with a strictly superior,

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<sup>51</sup> Freud, S., Strachey, J., Freud, A., Strachey, A., & Tyson, A. (1968). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis.

<sup>52</sup> Ruch, W. (2008)

<sup>53</sup> Highet, G. (1972). *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>54</sup> Highet, G. (1972)

castigating tone. Describing the purpose of satire following the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Tim Parks of *The New York Review of Books* claimed: “If [satire] doesn’t point toward positive change, or encourage people to think in a more enlightened way, it has failed... The worst case is when satire reinforces the state of mind it purports to undercut, polarizes prejudices, and provokes the very behavior it condemns.”<sup>55</sup>

*Humor Theory and Social Impact:*

Tim Parks treats the deconstructive nature of satire as a foregone conclusion, but finding consistent humor theory to agree with him is difficult. Parks comment rests neatly at one of the core issues of modern humor theory: does humor fundamentally subvert or preserve? Two prominent thinkers, Mikhail Bakhtin and Umberto Eco, reached dramatically different conclusions about whether comedy is conservative. Humor, to Eco, ultimately reinforces rather than undermines.<sup>56</sup> No matter the joke, even if directed up the power hierarchy, because officialdom created the game and allowed this satire to happen, Eco argued that humor works for and not against extant social structures. Self-selecting audiences often shy away from challenging themselves, and humor reinforces our previously held beliefs and well-adopted social norms.

in his exploration of Rabelais and the carnival tradition of the Middle Ages, Bakhtin posited an opposite conclusion. He saw the folk humor on display at the carnival as “a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people

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<sup>55</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>56</sup> Eco, U., Ivanov, V. V., Rector, M., & Sebeok, T. A. (1984). The Comic and The Rule. In *Carnival!* (pp. 1–10). essay, Mouton.

participated more or less.”<sup>57</sup> To Bakhtin, the carnival was the inversion of the medieval world, a folk uprising that expressed socialist humor and flipped the status quo: “Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”<sup>58</sup> For most of time, social constrictions bind us, Bakhtin argued, but “the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” laid all things bare.<sup>59</sup> After all, as Bakhtin puts it in *Dialogic Imagination*, “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down the prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.”<sup>60</sup> By stripping away the sanctity of an object, political institution, or person, carnival opens the world to subversive rebellion and overwhelming change.

Eco and Bakhtin offer opposite if equally convincing conceptions of humor’s role in the larger social context. Does the right joke flip social institutions on their head, or only reinforce their predominance in social life? To this day, as Professor of Sociology Giseline Kuipers observes in *The Sociology of Humor*, the issue remains unresolved: “The debate on the subversive or conservative nature of humor is partly the result of underlying theoretical disagreement that cannot be resolved by empirical considerations.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. (2009). *Rabelais and his world*. Indiana University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. (2009)

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin, M. M. (2009)

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., & Bakhtin, M. M. (2017). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.

<sup>61</sup> Kuipers, G. (2008). The sociology of humor. *The Primer of Humor Research*, 361–398.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.361>

Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič offers a well-regarded work around for Eco's objections. Zupančič proposes there are other ways to be ironic, and, perhaps, these offer solutions that avoid the conservative/subversive crisis. Consider Hegelian "true comedy," which Zupančič explores in *The Universal at Work*. She describes how, in judgmental or "false" comedy, "The paradigm... is simply the following: the aristocrat... is *also* a man, who snores, farts, slips, and is subject to the same physical laws as other mortals. The emphasis is, of course, precisely on 'also': the concrete and the universal coexist, the concrete being the indispensable grounding of the universal."<sup>62</sup> True comedy, on the other hand, "does not try to seduce us into deceptive familiarity with the fact that His Highness is *also*, at the same time, or 'on the other hand,' as human as the rest of us."<sup>63</sup> It is in this way, and only this way, that ironic ridicule can be truly humanizing and truly socially transformative.

#### *Humor as a Cognitive Process:*

Stepping away from literary criticism, behavioral psychology suggests that humor may help effectively nudge an audience through several cognitive avenues. Humor's greatest impact may be its capacity to reach audiences on an emotional level, especially considering recent meta-analysis of communications research by Rode et al. that finds that "invoking emotion" offers a promising behavioral intervention on climate issues.<sup>64</sup>

Professor of Psychology Daniel Chapman suggests that emotional interventions are

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<sup>62</sup> Zupančič, A. (2008). *The Universal at Work*. In *The odd one in: On comedy*. essay, MIT Press.

<sup>63</sup> Zupančič, A. (2008)

<sup>64</sup> Rode, J. B., Dent, A., Benedict, C. N., Brosnahan, D., Martinez, R. L., & Ditto, P. (2020). Influencing climate change attitudes in the United States: A systematic review and meta-analysis. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/bjen5>

complicated, and more work needs to be done to formalize the field's understanding of how emotions motivate our actions: "Rather than treating emotions as simple levers to be pulled to promote desired outcomes, emotions should be viewed as one integral component of a cognitive feedback system guiding responses to challenging decision-making problems."<sup>65</sup> Rarely, in fact, do conscious emotional experiences match their underlying effects. For instance, "contrary to a simplistic view of anger as destructive, research shows that anger is typically the emotion most strongly associated with motivating individuals to rectify social injustices."<sup>66</sup> More work needs to be done to formally uncover the mechanisms by which emotions motivate our actions.

Outside of its emotional impacts, humor processes may be uniquely cognitively placed to change minds and behavior. Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies Lauren Feldman has conducted a series of studies which suggests that humor reduces counterarguing either (1) by "diverting the cognitive resources that would otherwise be used to counterargue to instead process the humor" or (2) through "message discounting, whereby audiences deem a comedic message as irrelevant to their attitudes and thus do not deploy counterarguing strategies."<sup>67</sup> Humor's cognitive position as a high-level process but perceived low-level threat means that it can avoid some of the standard psychic defenses. Additionally, as humor continues to be put front in center on "entertainment-oriented programs," Professor of Public Policy Matthew Baum's "gateway" hypothesis

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<sup>65</sup> Chapman, D. A., Lickel, B., & Markowitz, E. M. (2017). Reassessing emotion in climate change communication. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(12), 850–852. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-017-0021-9>

<sup>66</sup> Chapman, D. A., Lickel, B., & Markowitz, E. M. (2017).

<sup>67</sup> Feldman, L. (2017). Assumptions about science in satirical news and late-night comedy. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190497620.013.35>

suggests that the potentially divisive information being presented is “made more cognitively accessible, or top of mind, to entertainment audiences.”<sup>68,69</sup>

### Conclusion:

When asked whether he was optimistic about humor theory consolidating into a unified field, Professor of English D. G. Kehl replied:

No single theory has yet managed to explain all varieties of mirth. Nine tenths of what we laugh at answers to Bergson, another nine tenths to Freud, still another to Kant or Plato, and so on, leaving always that elusive tenth that makes each definition like a woman trying to pack more into a girdle than it will legitimately hold.<sup>70</sup>

A unified theory of humor seems out of reach, so instead, this thesis settles with “frankensteining” together several analytical lenses to understand how humor works. Many theorists approach humor with humility because humor is inherently so subjective. This thesis goes farther by suggesting that there is still something in humor that is magical. Not, perhaps in the traditional, folkloric sense, but rather as British science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke characterized magic in his well-known third law, that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”<sup>71</sup> As it did thousands of years ago,

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<sup>68</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011). The impact of The daily show and the colbert report on public attentiveness to science and the environment. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1838730>

<sup>69</sup> Baum, M. A. (2003). *Soft news goes to war*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>70</sup> Nilsen, A., & Nilsen, D. (2008)

<sup>71</sup> Clarke, A. C. (1982). *Profiles of the future: An inquiry into the limits of the possible*. Victor Gollancz.

humor's capacity surpasses our collective understanding; it is at once something so our own and something so beyond us. Just as the frog still possesses that animatic magic, so little of humor (and its potential capability) is understood. As E.B. and Katherine White claimed, humor "won't stand much blowing up, and it won't stand much poking. It has a certain fragility, and evasiveness, which one has best respect. Essentially it is a complete mystery."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> White, E. B., & White, K. S. (1955)



Chapter Two  
Environmental Humor Survey



Figure 2.1: President Obama and Luther (Keegan Michael Key) perform at the 2015 White House Press Correspondence Dinner. Modified from *The Chicago Sun Times*:  
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2015/4/26/18613648/obama-uses-key-peelee-character-luther-to-translate-his-anger>

Environmental humor is by no means an easy proposition. As climate catastrophes begin to have very real impact on people's lives, "toeing the line" is becoming increasingly difficult. This chapter will start by attempting to sketch exactly how humor would function in environmental communication. Critically, how can environmental humor not only avoid some of the problems of mainstream environmental communication, but also offer solutions to them? Then, this chapter will survey and subdivide types of environmental humor, applying some results from environmental communications and humor theory to characterize efficacy.

For an illustrative example of environmental humor in action, turn to the sketch comedy work of the comedic duo Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, in particular their

fan-favorite character Luther. To those unfamiliar, Luther (played by Keegan-Michael Key) is Obama's "anger translator." Despite the fact that "a lot of people out there seem to think [he doesn't] get angry," Jordan Peele's Obama character "gets angry a lot, just that the way that I express passion is different from most."<sup>73</sup> Luther, in everything from his demeanor to his diction, represents not only how many people "assume... black men display anger," but also "Obama's black conscience, embodying signs of blackness that are ... off limits to Obama."<sup>74</sup> The first breakout sketch for the comedy duo, Luther became so popular that it attracted the attention of its satirical target, the President himself.<sup>75</sup> President Obama invited Key to do a live performance of the character during his speech at the 2015 White House Press Correspondents' Dinner. During the performance, Obama, playing himself, and Luther, played by Key, discussed climate change:

OBAMA: But we do need to stay focused on some big challenges, like climate change...

LUTHER: Hey listen y'all, if you haven't noticed California is *bone dry*. It looks like a trailer for the new Mad Max movie up in there! Y'all think that Bradley Cooper came here because he wants to talk to Chuck Todd... he needed a glass of water! Come on!

OBAMA: The science is clear. The science is clear. Nine out of the ten hottest years ever came in the last decade...

LUTHER: Now, I'm not a scientist, but I do know how to count to ten.

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<sup>73</sup> Key and Peele. (2012, January 11). *Key & Peele - Obama's Anger Translator - Meet Luther – Uncensored* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv7k2\\_lc0M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv7k2_lc0M)

<sup>74</sup> Guerrero, L. (2016). *Can I live? contemporary black satire and the state of postmodern double consciousness*. *Studies in American Humor*, 2(2), 266. <https://doi.org/10.5325/studamerhumor.2.2.0266>

<sup>75</sup> Porter, R. (2015, July 8). *Ranking 'Key & Peele's' 10 Best Recurring Characters*. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/key-peeles-10-best-recurring-807231/>.

OBAMA: Raising seas... more violent storms...

LUTHER: You've got mosquitos... Sweaty people on the trains stinking it up... it just *nasty!*

OBAMA: I mean look at what's happening right now! Every serious scientist says we need to act. The pentagon says it's a national security risk. Miami floods on a sunny day, and instead of doing anything about it, we got elected officials *throwing snowballs in the Senate!*

LUTHER: Okay... I think they got it, bro...

OBAMA: It's crazy! What about our kids?! What kind of stupid, short-sighted, irresponsible bull-

LUTHER: Oh woah, woah! hey –

OBAMA: What?

LUTHER: All due respect, sir. You don't need an anger translator – you need counseling!<sup>76</sup>

The true punchline of the Luther character only makes sense in the larger context of the show. For nearly all his appearances throughout the run of *Key and Peele*, Key's furious Luther is reined in by Peele's stoic Obama. But when Luther is played against the real Barack Obama, their roles become reversed. The skit escalates to Luther backing away from the president in distress, saying, "You don't need an anger translator – you need counseling." Associate Professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies Lisa Guerrero puts it bluntly: "Performative black anger is funny and acceptable, but real black anger is crazy and threatening."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> C-SPAN. (2015, April 25). *CLIP: President Obama's Anger Translator (C-SPAN)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkAK9QRe4ds&t=2s>

<sup>77</sup> Guerrero, L. (2016)

Several presidents have engaged with American satire of themselves in the past, but never to such a degree as Obama. Theodore Roosevelt read the Mr. Dooley satirical column to gauge public opinion at cabinet meetings.<sup>78</sup> President Johnson called the president of CBS to complain following a Smothers Brothers sketch mocking him.<sup>79</sup> Former Vice President and presidential hopeful Al Gore's handlers used the SNL debate sketch to get him to stop sighing so much.<sup>80</sup> But Obama chooses to participate directly in the satire, and this choice cannot be ignored. While Luther may primarily be a commentary on how society views Blackness, it is climate change that really causes Obama to "get angry."

Why climate change, and, of all venues, why the Press Correspondents' Dinner? Given that humor is a highly directional tool, no creative decision can be overlooked. If there is anything genuine in the president's frustration, it may be that when it comes to climate change, none of these problems are new, none of the data is seriously contested, but it is somehow still an issue of political gridlock. This is a bleak outrage that all environmentalists have felt from time to time, as writer Jonathan Franzen articulated in an op-ed for the *New Yorker*: "The goal (of halting climate change) has been clear for thirty years, and despite earnest efforts we've made essentially no progress toward reaching it."<sup>81</sup> To paraphrase Franzen's sentiment: "we have the proof, we have the technology, but we lack the political will." With Franzen's framing, it is hard to separate the joke from its

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<sup>78</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016). *The Evolution and Importance of News Satire* [Unpublished BA thesis]. Robert D. Clark Honors College

<sup>79</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>80</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>81</sup> Franzen, J. (2019, September 8). What If We Stopped Pretending? *The New Yorker*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>.

intended audience, which makes it seem as though the President places some of the blame on the room full of professional communicators who did not care enough to get the message out there.

The Press Correspondents' Dinner skit highlights the tensions inherent in using humor in climate communication. There is the President's scientific and grim plea, and on the other side, there is Luther's cartoonishly over-the-top translations, the creative and emotional underpinning of the more logical message. This dichotomy may sound all too familiar within the scope of climate communication. Professor of Environmental Biology and Global Change at Stanford University Stephen H. Schneider provides a description of the dual identities occupied by scientists that in many ways echoes the skit:

On the one hand, as scientists we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but... On the other hand, we are not just scientists but human beings as well... [, s]o we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have.<sup>82</sup>

In order for environmental humor like this sketch to work, both sides need each other: you cannot have self-seriousness without levity, just as you cannot have the comic without the rule or the straight man without the funny man. Both have their place and their merits, and

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<sup>82</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019). *Creative (climate) communications: Productive Pathways for Science, policy and Society*. Cambridge University Press.

the role-reversal at the end of the sketch almost seems to imply that they are almost interchangeable.

It is not entirely clear if Key and Peele offer a workable solution to the problems that they poke at. Neither the hyper-rational Obama's nor the hyper-emotional Luther's approaches seem to work. Because of climate change's overwhelming scale, both an information overload and perceived "climate doomism" can lead to the same path of climate inaction as climate denial.<sup>83,84</sup> Senior Advisor to the Future Earth Project Amy Leurs argues that the ongoing challenge in climate communication is to "stop viewing global change as yet another opportunity to apply our existing tool kit."<sup>85</sup> This thesis follows Leurs' advice and asks the broader questions of whether environmental humor can work, and if so, how.

In theory, the early results seem positive. Maxwell Boykoff, author of *Creative Climate Communications* and producer of the *Inside the Greenhouse* climate humor show out of the University of Colorado, claims that "comedy and humor – as a pathway to emotion, affective visceral and experiential ways of knowing – are increasingly looked to as potentially useful vehicles to meet people where they are on climate change."<sup>86</sup> He explains that this does not mean "dumbing things down," but rather exploring alternative

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<sup>83</sup> Norgaard, K. M. (2011). *Living in denial: Climate change, emotions, and Everyday Life*. The MIT Press.

<sup>84</sup> Mann, M., Hassal, S. J., & Toles, T. (2017). Doomsday scenarios are as harmful as climate change denial. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/doomsday-scenarios-are-as-harmful-as-climate-change-denial/2017/07/12/880ed002-6714-11e7-a1d7-9a32c91c6f40\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/doomsday-scenarios-are-as-harmful-as-climate-change-denial/2017/07/12/880ed002-6714-11e7-a1d7-9a32c91c6f40_story.html).

<sup>85</sup> Leurs, A. (1999). *An editorial essay - sciencepolicy.colorado.edu*. Climatic Change. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from [https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/students/envs\\_4100/morgan\\_1999.pdf](https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/students/envs_4100/morgan_1999.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

and creative avenues to communicate to the audience on a more personal level.<sup>87</sup> Boykoff correctly identifies how comedy and humor can psychologically connect to an audience. Humor can make the climate problem more accessible; increase retention of climate change information; provide relief; and bridge difficult topics, overcoming polarized discussion in nonthreatening ways.<sup>88</sup>

Humor communication certainly carries its own risks. Principally, does humor communication undercut the urgency of environmental issues? Certainly, the answer is sometimes yes, but, done-well, humor may convey urgency in more actionable ways, helping ground the existential threat of core environmental issues in our shared humanity. Filmmaker Jesse Ribot, who has used comic films to open up conversations about forestry in Senegal, explains, “Scholarly work does not seem to make headway. So, we turned to humor ... Humor [is] real – more palpably real than cold scholarly analysis. Humor works where it states the obvious but unspeakable.”<sup>89</sup> Science, Technology, and Society Professor Sherry Turkle identifies “democratic deliberation” at the core of humor messaging. She suggests that humor communication may not only be more real but more human, forcing us “to remember who we are – creatures of history, of deep psychology, or complex relationships. Of conversations artless, risky, and face-to-face.”<sup>90</sup> Humor communication recognizes and frames climate change rightly as a “human problem,” and, given humanity’s

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<sup>87</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

<sup>88</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

<sup>89</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

<sup>90</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

long-standing use of humor to discuss and overcome controversy, it seems to offer a very human solution.

It should be clear that Obama, like the scientific community, can no longer rely on the “transmission” model, where facts are allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, as Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies Lauren Feldman, scientists must, like Luther, serve “as translators, communicating science in ways that make it more accessible and relevant to ordinary Americans.”<sup>91</sup> This includes both forms of translation within the sketch, Luther’s anger translation, and comedy as an act of translation. In his Ted talk “Comedy in Translation,” American comedian Chriss Bliss characterizes comedy’s dramatic, almost alchemical impact on an audience: “It takes the base metal of our conventional wisdom and transforms it through ridicule into a different way of seeing and ultimately being in the world.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011). The impact of The daily show and the colbert report on public attentiveness to science and the environment. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1838730>

<sup>92</sup> Bliss, Chriss. (2011, December)



*Environmental Humor and the Audience Crisis*

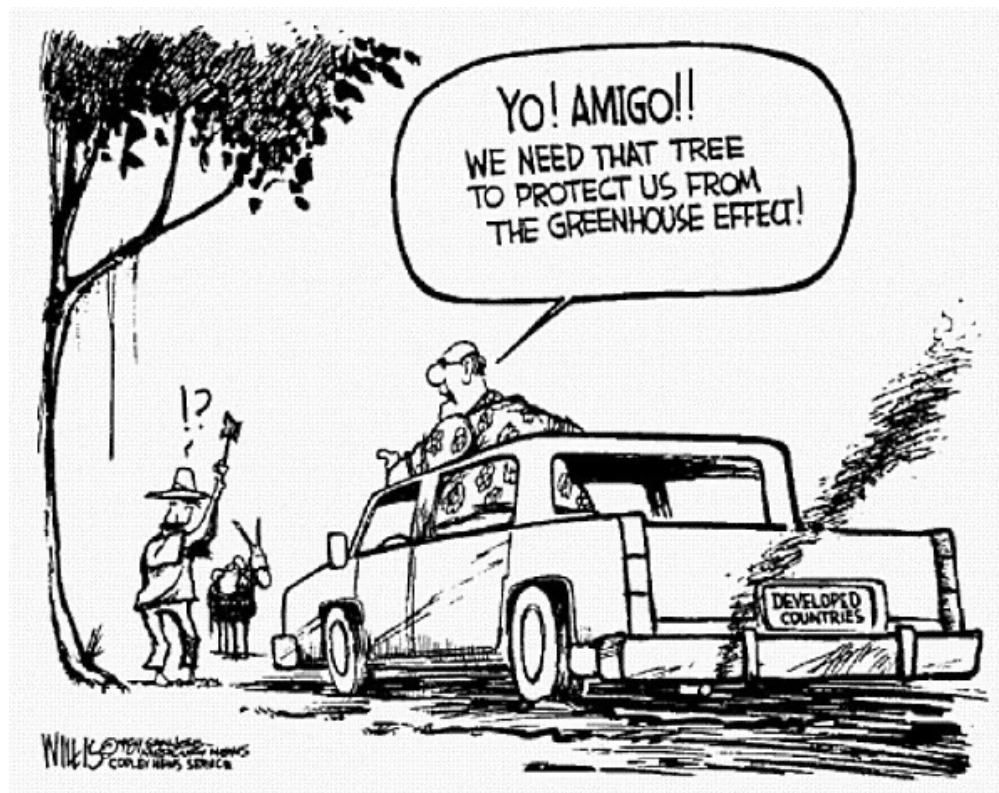


Figure 2.2: Willis' "Yo! Amigo!!" cartoon depicts Developed Countries accosting Developing ones  
Modified from the Humanity Development Library 2.0

Environmental communication is not without its problems, particularly with regards to how it imagines itself and its audience. At the very least, these uncertainties hamper environmentalism's ability to communicate; as journalist Richard Black argues, "Effective [communication] always begins with the audience."<sup>93</sup> At its worst, environmentalism defines itself by exclusion and troubling social narratives. Nicole Seymour, a professor of English specializing in environmental cultural studies, explains that environmentalism often "threaten[s] to put all of humanity into one homogeneous lump, as does the widely

<sup>93</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

circulated but widely criticized concept of the ‘Anthropocene.’”<sup>94</sup> In this way, it ignores the nuances of the audience issue, and it also ignores how long-standing societal effects of race and privilege shape those audiences.

Consider Scott Willis’ “Yo! Amigo!” cartoon (Fig. 2.2), which first appeared in an August 1991 issue of *Boiling Point*. Like most jokes, it can be read in a variety of ways, but this thesis chooses to focus on the cartoon’s satire of mainstream environmental communication. The gas-guzzling developed countries are taking the moral high ground, accepting their self-proscribed role to protect the rest of the world from itself. Driving past, the stereotypical American patronizingly adopts slang: “Yo! Amigo!! We need that tree to protect us from the Greenhouse Effect!” But who is “we,” and who is “us,” and, most importantly, who is being left out?

Willis is referencing problems at the core of the environmental movement: who is allowed to speak about environmental issues, and who is allowed to participate in environmentalism. Even though lower income and ethnic minority groups disproportionately suffer from environmental catastrophes and hazards, they have systemically been underrepresented in environmental organizations, especially in leadership positions.<sup>95</sup> This is most likely a consequence of the fact that, as Boykoff explains, “For a lot of people right now, the environment is an issue for the privileged and the issueless. People who feel they are becoming extinct care less about the extinction of

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<sup>94</sup> Seymour, N. (2018). *Bad environmentalism irony and irreverence in the ecological age*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>95</sup> Pearson, A. R., Schuldt, J. P., & Romero-Canyas, R. (2016). Social Climate Science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 11(5), 632–650. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616639726>

owls and oak trees.”<sup>96</sup> Environmentalism needs to be more inclusive and reach a wider audience.

Additionally, it is important to remember that “climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the specter of a new future and more like the experience of *Déjà vu*.”<sup>97</sup> It is not just that we are perpetuating unjust, colonial systems, but we provide these same systems as the solutions. Political ecologist Adeniyi Asiyebi offers up one mainstay of mainstream environmentalism as an example: “the normalization of white savior mentality by celebrity conservationists [projects] images of unpeopled idyllic landscapes and the heroic white conservationists ‘saving’ these landscapes.”<sup>98</sup> The environmental movement has excluded minority voices and reinforced socially unjust power structures.

How can humor offer solutions to this inclusivity problem? Humor has historically been a powerful space for the representation of minority voices, but it also has been a powerful catalyst for minority activism. Professor of Communications Joanne Gilbert explores this phenomenon in the history of stand-up comedy in *Standing Up, Speaking Out*: “the performance of the comic marginal identity is ‘an exercise in power negotiation,’ one that enlightens as it entertains, transforming... through communal laughter.”<sup>99</sup> Of course, jokes can be done wrong. Jokes can lend themselves to “false” rather than “true comedy,” as Zupančič defines them, and they can reinforce rather than undermine unjust power

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<sup>96</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

<sup>97</sup> Seymour, N. (2018). *Bad environmentalism irony and irreverence in the ecological age*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>98</sup> Asiyebi, A. (2019, August 7). *Blog: Decolonising the environment: Race, rationalities and crises*. Blog. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://biosec.group.shef.ac.uk/2019/08/08/blog-decolonising-the-environment-race-rationalities-and-crises/>.

<sup>99</sup> Meier, M. R., & Gilbert, J. (2017). Response: Laughing at Others. In *Standing up, speaking out stand-up comedy and the rhetoric of Social Change* (pp. 57–67). essay, Routledge.

structures. But new voices in humor are almost never a bad thing. As with Willis' cartoon, new perspectives can draw attention to valuable critiques that fly under the radar.

With more people treating non-traditional sources as reliable sources of scientific information, climate humor may provide a valuable mechanism to engage new voices with new audiences.<sup>100</sup> Creative communication has engendered a powerful epistemological development within climate communication, Boykoff argues, enlarging our understanding of climate change into “aesthetic, affective, emotional, visceral, tactile and experiential ways of knowing” and prompting “a democratization of who are... expert voices in the public sphere.”<sup>101</sup> Within this system, humor's universal accessibility has allowed new types of communicators to spread funny, effective environmental messages. Humor can not only critique the flaws in mainstream environmentalism (and mainstream environmental communication), but it also offers solutions to environmentalism's inclusivity problem.

### *Categories of Environmental Humor*

There are no perfect categories for humor. It should follow that there are no perfect categories for environmental humor. For the sake of future analysis, however, this thesis attempts to provide a rough taxonomy, based on both method and effect. To characterize humor in the environmental space, this thesis considers the two humorous dimensions from Chapter One (based in superiority and incongruity theory) and additionally an intentionality dimension. This final dimension attempts to capture the

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<sup>100</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011).

<sup>101</sup> Boykoff, M. T. (2019)

essential relationship between the humorists, the audience, and the larger social context of. Their message. Following these criteria, I propose dividing environmental humor into three distinct categories: two-sided environmental humor, “Aquaman” environmental humor, and “bad environmental” environmental humor. The following table represents the general differences between the types of humor in message styling and intention. Some potential types of environmental humor have been left out by necessity. These three are most relevant to our discussion.

Types	Incongruity Theory	Superiority Theory	Intention
Two-sided Environmental Humor	X		To open a dialogue between two sides of a debate
“Aquaman” Environmental Humor	X	X	To mock the other side of a position, show how ungrounded (hypocritical) their scientific claims are
“Bad Environmental” Humor	X		To humanize rather than deride, promoting change without shame (a satire that disengages from superiority)

Table 2.3: Types of Environmental Humor, broken down by their theoretical and practical differences

### 1) Two-sided environmental humor

In two-sided environmental humor, both sides of the climate change debate are presented, and the humor, similarly, intends to poke fun at both sides of the debate. A *prima facie* theoretical argument may present this approach as productive. After all, it allows for an immediate comparison of alternative approaches without presenting sections of the audience as misinformed. This argument seems to match past research, which

suggests that competing information from multiple sides of an issue can motivate individuals into information-seeking behavior and interpersonal discussion.<sup>102</sup> This is exactly what Randy Olson's 2008 mockumentary *Sizzle* intends to do, present both sides of the climate debate, highlight incongruities, and leave judgement up to the audience.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately, information-seeking behaviors are not motivation enough. As referenced above, the environmental communication problem is not an educational or informational problem, according to Professor Susanne C. Moser. She argues that climate change is not an issue of "knowledge gaps" but rather deeply rooted psychological and ideological issues.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, presenting both sides of the debate makes the same mistake that the traditional media makes. Two-sided environmental humor tends to be the most welcoming framework, but it gives equal footing to skeptical opinions and may do more harm than good. To environmentalists, this approach can seem at least unfocused on the environmental message and at worst dissonant with it. American non-fiction environmental writer Emma Faris criticizes this feature of Olson's *Sizzle*: "At the end of the film, Olson heads off to the editing studio to make a coherent story out of his footage. If only we had got to see that version."<sup>105</sup>

Here, we set a distinction between two-sided environmental humor and two-sided environmental satire. Two-sided environmental humor, for instance how the Weather

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<sup>102</sup> Anderson, A. A., & Becker, A. B. (2018). Not just funny after all: Sarcasm as a catalyst for public engagement with climate change. *Science Communication*, 40(4), 524–540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547018786560>

<sup>103</sup> Olson, R., & Njoku, I. (2008). *Sizzle*.

<sup>104</sup> (Moser, S. C. (2009). Communicating climate change: History, challenges, process and future directions. *WIREs Climate Change*, 1(1), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.11>

<sup>105</sup> Marris, E. (2008). Climate comedy falls flat. *Nature*, 454(7202), 279–279. <https://doi.org/10.1038/454279a>

channel jokes about different theories regarding climate change, has a light tone that avoids harsh criticism.<sup>106</sup> Two-sided environmental satire, as expertly done on shows like *South Park*, has opposite intentions. *South Park*, according to *Washington Post* writer Travis M. Andrews, is the ultimate “#bothsides show,” but it does not seek to subtly (or even politely) point out ironies and inconsistencies on both sides of the debate.<sup>107</sup> It derides and castigates everyone. *South Park* co-creator Matt Stone put it best in a 2005 interview: “I hate conservatives. But I really... hate liberals.”<sup>108</sup> Time and again, the show has savagely attacked both sides of the environmental debate, more on this later.

## 2) “Aquaman” Humor:

“Aquaman” humor seems to be the most dominant form of environmental humor on the internet, particularly among environmental organizations. Professor of Sociology Bronislaw Szerszynski defines “Aquaman” environmental humor as a “‘corrective’ irony... Movements reveal situational ironies [to] shame their targets into repentance... [These tactics position] the ironist an outside observer of the irony, on the moral high ground looking down, rather than implicated in it.”<sup>109</sup> These shame-based critiques are never distinct enough from the doom and gloom of mainstream environmental communication.

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<sup>106</sup> Anderson, A. A., & Becker, A. B. (2018)

<sup>107</sup> Andrews, T. M. (2018, October 17). How ‘South Park’ became the ultimate #bothsides show. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2018/10/17/how-south-park-became-ultimate-bothsides-show/>.

<sup>108</sup> VerBruggen, R., Smarick, A., Hafer, T., & Anderson, B. C. (2019, February 14). ‘I hate conservatives, but I really... hate liberals’. Manhattan Institute. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/i-hate-conservatives-i-really-hate-liberals-0911.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Szerszynski, B. (2013). *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*. Wiley.

It is not that they are not funny, but rather that their approach to environmental messaging makes many of the same mistakes of mainstream environmentalism, failing to provide sufficient motivation and excluding valuable audiences.

“Aquaman” humor is best exemplified by British video creator Harris Michael Brewis, better known by his YouTube handle “hbombberguy” —indeed, the term is inspired by his 2019 video “Climate Denial: A Measured Response.” Most of the video is devoted to directly responding to climate skeptical arguments, including one now-infamous burn of conservative pundit Ben Shapiro:

BEN SHAPIRO: Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that all the water levels around the world raise by let’s say five feet by the next hundred years, let’s say ten feet by the next hundred years. And it puts all the low-lying areas on the coast underwater. Let’s say all that happens. You think people aren’t going to just sell their homes and move?

HBOMBERGUY : Just one small problem. Sell their houses to who, BEN?!!! FUCKING AQUAMAN?!!!<sup>110</sup>

The joke, which went viral (the video currently has nearly four million views on YouTube), works well because of its simplicity. Brewis presents Shapiro’s opinion, but not as if it is equally valid.<sup>111</sup> His position is clear, and his target is sufficiently skewered.

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<sup>110</sup> Hbombberguy. (2019, May 13). *Climate Denial: A Measured Response* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLqXkYrdmY&t=326s>

<sup>111</sup> Hbombberguy. (2019, May 13)



Political scientist Ashley Anderson and communications scholar Amy Becker suggests that “one-sided sarcasm from sources such as *The Onion* can in fact encourage greater issue engagement, particularly among those who find climate change to be a less important political issue at the outset.”<sup>112</sup>

In the converse, this is often the form that climate skepticism humor takes. Briefly, an examination of the humor of Patrick Moore, a famous climate denialist, shows that it works in a similar way. Moore has frequently taken stances against environmental issues, often based on the misconception that carbon dioxide inherently cannot damage the atmosphere: “It’s like [comedian George] Carlin said, the reason people came into existence is because the earth wants plastic, and maybe the reason that people came into existence is because the atmosphere wants a little more carbon dioxide for the plants. Who knows?”<sup>113</sup> On another occasion, Moore tweeted in response to a Bill Nye appearance on *Last Week Tonight*, in which he set a globe on fire (further detailed in Chapter Four): “Many fire extinguishers are filled with CO<sub>2</sub>. The Science Guy could have put the fire out.”<sup>114</sup> Even though, as Brewis correctly points out, “CO<sub>2</sub> is not a magic turn-fire-off gas,” the symmetry remains.<sup>115</sup> Moore chooses to target the messenger rather than the message, and he attempts to use pseudo-scientific rationalization to shame his opponents and present them as irrational.

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<sup>112</sup> Anderson, A. A., & Becker, A. B. (2018)

<sup>113</sup> Hbomberguy. (2019, May 13)

<sup>114</sup> Moore, P. [@EcoSenseNow]. (2018, March 17). *Has anyone noticed the fire extinguisher on the table as the earth burns? Many fire extinguishers are filled with CO<sub>2</sub>. The Science Guy could have put the fire out* [Tweet]. Twitter.

<sup>115</sup> Hbomberguy. (2019, May 13).

“Aquaman” humor can certainly work and change behavior, but it is heavily structured in superiority theory. It is the kind of joke that motivates through shame and through exclusion, and, as this thesis has previously established, these motivators only reinforce climate change’s underlying sociopsychological issues.

### 3) “Bad Environmental” Humor:

“Bad environmental” humor is the kind of irony that cultural critic Nicole Seymour focuses on in *Bad Environmentalism*: “True irony... humble, not superior to the enemy, but based upon a fundamental kinship with the enemy.”<sup>116</sup> This definition evokes Zupančič’s definition of similarly dubbed “true comedy” discussed earlier. Seymour’s anthology of “bad environmental” works deal with this humanizing irony and “find nothing sacred – and, in fact, find sacredness to be part of the problem when it comes to environment and animals.”<sup>117</sup>

Seymour intentionally does not choose pieces that she believes are popular, arguing that this allows them to challenge us and gesture to “the dominant preference for environmentalism to be straight, white, clean, and neat, despite the queer, diverse, messy grossness of the world, not to mention of environmental politics.”<sup>118</sup> She concludes *Bad Environmentalism* with an example that illustrates how “bad environmental” humor can be both effective and restorative: the stand-up comedy of Simon Amstell, in particular his 2017 mocumentary *Carnage*. Amstell, a British comedian, is known for his satirical wit,

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<sup>116</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>117</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>118</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

speculative comedy, and strong stances on environmental issues such as veganism. These three aspects come together to form his unique comedic voice, perfectly exemplified by the following bit:

Do you remember when people got upset when their pets died, but when other animals died, they ate them? Do you remember when food became so processed and unnatural that certain food became labeled “organic,” like it was a luxury to not consume poison? And what about when religious people failed to remember that God is nature –there is nothing more all-encompassing than Mother Nature– and atheists forgot that science is the study of nature? And then they both remembered and had amazing sex by a tree?<sup>119</sup>

In *Carnage*, Amstell takes these questions to their logical extremes, presenting a faux documentary set in 2067, where meat eating is banned, and veganism is the status quo. This is a world where, in Amstell’s own narrative words, “Empathy, climate change, and improvements in [vegan] nut cheese could no longer be ignored.”<sup>120</sup> Movie critic Brett Mills explains that *Carnage* “comes out of the tradition of ‘future’ documentaries that use the frame of a fictional future in order to encourage audiences to engage with debates about the real present.”<sup>121</sup> Similar in tone to Matt Groening’s *Futurama*, and in spirit to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal Pitch “A Message from the Future,” *Carnage*

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<sup>119</sup> Simon Amstell: *Do Nothing Live 2010 • Comedy*. (2013). *Youtube*. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4mH6E0hMbl>.

<sup>120</sup> Amstell, S. (2017). *Carnage*. *BBC iPlayer*. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p04sh6zg/simon-amstell-carnage>.

<sup>121</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

works diligently to shift our focus forward, make the impossible history, and abstractly critique the current system.<sup>122</sup>

Near the end of *Carnage*, a support group of elderly, reformed meat-eaters chants, “No shame, no shame,” while revisiting their past carnivory.<sup>123</sup> It is this sentiment that brings to the forefront everything that is novel about Amstell’s approach. According to Seymour, this “is a particularly notable vision considering how vegan discourse – in addition to health discourse... and mainstream environmental discourse more broadly – regularly engages in shaming and judgement.”<sup>124</sup> This shamelessness contrasts mainstream approaches exemplified by the epitaph of Carol J. Adams’ manifesto *The Pornography of Meat* (2004): “Meat is like pornography; before it was someone’s fun, it was someone’s life.”<sup>125</sup> Where Adams weaponizes shame and concepts of deviant sexualities to construct a strict narrative, Amstell’s humor does the opposite, which allows it to “generate multiple, shifting meanings, and then implicate [his] audiences, for better or worse, in the process of sorting those meanings out.”<sup>126</sup>

“Bad environmental” irony provides two key solutions to some of the larger problems with environmentalism. First, as American author Lauren Berlant and cultural studies scholar Sianna Ngia suggest, “[‘bad environmental’ irony] helps us test and figure out what it means to say ‘us’” and it pushes “us” into the more inclusive direction.<sup>127</sup> For

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<sup>122</sup> “A Message from the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. (2019). Youtube. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9uTH0iprVQ>.

<sup>123</sup> Amstell, S. (2017). *Carnage*. BBC iPlayer. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p04sh6zg/simon-amstell-carnage>.

<sup>124</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>125</sup> Adams, C. J. (2020). *The pornography of meat*. Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

<sup>126</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>127</sup> Boykoff, M., & Osnes, B. (2019)

this reason, “bad environmental” humor, as the only one that directly corrects for long-standing problems within environmental communication, is the most desirable of these three alternatives. “Bad environmental” humor pushes inclusively forward without pushing exclusively back.

### Chapter Three

#### *Environmental Humor History*

Previous chapters have shown that types of environmental humor can not only be effective at communicating environmental messages, but also at addressing substantial issues within mainstream environmentalism. But, if environmental humor is effective, then where has it been? Why has mainstream environmentalism not adopted environmental humor as a rhetorical technique? To answer this question, this chapter employs two main threads of analysis. First, it provides historical context for environmental humor. Second, it applies the theoretical contexts from previous chapters regarding environmental humor and humor theory to historical case studies of environmental humor. In doing so, it seeks to determine what we can learn from the successes and failures of these cases, and how these analyses can inform future environmental humor.

While this chapter presents important historical context and background regarding environmental humor in the U.S., it does not claim to be an exhaustive history. To provide such a history would be both a novel academic endeavor and outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, this chapter examines the relationship between environmental humor and environmentalism, through presenting pivotal moments in environmental communications history and how humor has been used to respond to each. These cases were chosen to illuminate specific aspects of humor communication, particularly moments where new actors entered the conversation. Yet these moments are not (and perhaps cannot) be tied into a neat narrative, nor does this chapter seek to present a comprehensive trajectory of the evolution and development of environmental humor. Indeed, this may not even be

possible, given that environmental humor seems to progress along a path of punctuated equilibrium. As this chapter will show, because humor is inherently reactionary, the history of environmental humor is often one in which external stimuli, such as policy crises or key moments in environmental communication, serve to push environmental humor dramatically forward.

Historical Context:

American comic essayist David Gessner claims that the search for environmental humor is the search “not for wilderness, but for wildness. For freedom. For sloppiness.”<sup>128</sup> For Gessner, transgression defines environmental humor, pushing against the boundaries of what society and what genre says are conventional. This may lead to the assumption that we do not see environmental humor because it is inherently transgressive. Although this is certainly part of environmental humor’s absence, historical context suggests that this is not the whole story. This thesis argues that outside pressures, both from environmentalists and comedians, are the underlying contributing factors to what defines transgression and the exclusion of environmental humor from the mainstream environmentalism.

In his essay *Sick of Nature*, Gessner provides a humorous take on the earliest environmental writing, quipping, “Perhaps one reason for the retreat to Walden, unexplored by most critics of American Romanticism, was to have more time and freedom

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<sup>128</sup> Gessner, D. (2005). *Sick of nature*. Dartmouth College Press.

for masturbatory binges. We'll never know."<sup>129</sup> Further pushing his roast of Thoreau, Gessner notes that he certainly did enjoy some of the most "underrated aspect of nature appreciation: pissing outside," quoting from *Walden*, he adds: "I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and nettle tree."<sup>130, 131</sup> However, Gessner's mockery of Thoreau is rooted in the continued resonance that *Walden* has on nature writing. Transcendentalism, while awakening many to the wonders of nature, also arguably began the American tradition of writing about the natural world as something separate, sacred, and self-serious. Gessner argues that in this vein, writing about nature is writing with restraint, "without being able to say the word 'shit.'"<sup>132</sup> For the most part, mainstream environmentalism has followed the example of its historical literary roots. As Gessner notes, the big voices in the American proto-environmental movement have often been disappointingly sober:

Throw an imaginary kegger and fill the room with nature writers throughout history and you'll get the idea. Henry Beston, looking dapper if overdressed, alternates tentative taco dabs at the cheese dip with Aldo Leopold; Barry Lopez sits in the corner whispering to Thoreau about the sacredness of beaver dams; Joseph Wood Krutch stands by the punch bowl and tells Rachel Carson the story of how he first came to the desert as Carson listens earnestly. In fact, everything is done earnestly; the air reeks with earnestness.... You might think Ed Abbey could spark the party to life, but until the booze to blood ratio rises, he remains painfully shy.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Gessner, D. (2005)

<sup>130</sup> Gessner, D. (2005)

<sup>131</sup> Thoreau, H. D. (2020). *Walden*. Flame Tree Publishing.

<sup>132</sup> Gessner, D. (2005)

<sup>133</sup> Gessner, D. (2005)



Certainly not all the fault rests with Thoreau's literary "auto-chastity." Gessner argues that the continuing trend toward self-serious reticence when writing about the natural world has been shaped by how neatly "rationalist, science-based epistemologies 'go hand in hand' with 'moral earnestness.'"<sup>134</sup>

Historically, the main mode for popular environmental communication has been, for better or for worse, the lecture. This format only exacerbates the sense that environmentalism is an exclusive club. Professor of English and environmental critic Nicole Seymour argues that these elitist narratives serve to further separate the natural world from human experience.<sup>135</sup> In a similar vein, Professor Timothy Morton, whose work focuses on the intersection of politics, race, gender, and ecology, claims, "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what the patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration."<sup>136</sup> In both cases, humans and nature are presented as separated by an uncrossable divide.

For the most part, modern environmental writing seems to be more didactic than enjoyable. Professor of Political Studies and Environmental and Resource Studies Douglas Torgerson explains, "There is an anxious concern to get things right... the idea of... play hardly enters the picture. As the crisis unfolds, the doomsday machine rushes toward the abyss, there is no time for frivolity."<sup>137</sup> By standardizing its form and how it imagines itself,

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<sup>134</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>135</sup> Seymour, N. (2018)

<sup>136</sup> Morton, T. (2009). *Ecology without nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>137</sup> Torgerson, D. (1999). *The promise of Green Politics: Environmentalism and the public sphere*. Duke Univ. Press.

environmentalism has blockaded against humorous interpretations of its message. As we have seen in previous chapters, this may not benefit of environmentalism or the environment itself since audience responses to messages are varied and complex.

Perhaps environmentalism is so stoical because the environmental movement has had very little to laugh about. In their famed essay *The Death of Environmentalism*, Journalist Michael Shellenberger and American author Ted Nordhaus lay out the disappointing history of the movement:

If you consider the drought of real policy achievements since the 1970s, and the long string of global warming defeats under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the environmental movement's approach to problems and policies hasn't worked particularly well.<sup>138</sup>

"Today," Shellenberger and Nordhaus continue, "environmentalism is just another special interest."<sup>139</sup> Some of this fault rests on the policy end, and some of it rests with the scientific communicators. Professor of Philosophy Susanne C. Moser explains, "The majority of early communicators of climate change, however, were physical scientists and environmentalists—professional groups not necessarily familiar with such social science scholarship."<sup>140</sup> Yet despite a series of interviews with environmentalist leaders, Shellenberger and Nordhaus repeatedly found that "there is nothing about the behavior of environmental groups... that indicates that we as a community are ready to think

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<sup>138</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004). *The death of environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world*. Verlag nicht ermittelbar.

<sup>139</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004)

<sup>140</sup> Moser, S. C. (2009)

differently about our work.”<sup>141</sup> Environmentalism has been and still is unwilling to engage with social communication and education scholarship. Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue that mainstream environmentalism has ignored how “the entire landscape in which politics plays out has changed radically... yet the environmental movement acts as though proposals based on ‘sound science’ will be sufficient to overcome ideological and industry opposition.”<sup>142</sup> They depict environmentalism as stalwartly opposed to new forms of communication, either because environmentalists believe their solutions are working or that it is too late to invest in new approaches. But this has left the door open for misinformation, apathy, and doubt.<sup>143</sup>

For mainstream environmental humor to become an effective tool, both environmentalists and comedians need to work together, yet environmentalism does not seem to lend itself to humor. Barriers include the long history of approaches to nature writing with a lecturing (sometimes pedantic) tone, marked by a conscious creative choice to omit humor. In addition, as Shellenberger and Nordhaus highlight, lofty self-serious commitments and counterproductive intransigence have prevented environmentalism from developing new modes of communication and action. Further, as Joseph Meeker wrote in his seminal work on literary ecology, *The Comedy of Survival*, humor, “with little guilt over the past and little expectation from the future ... seeks its fulfillment from the present.”<sup>144</sup> This focus on “the now” offers challenges for comedians attempting to

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<sup>141</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004)

<sup>142</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004)

<sup>143</sup> Gifford, R. (2011)

<sup>144</sup> Meeker, J. W. (1974). *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in literary ecology*. C. Scribner.

conceptualize the climate crisis and make the substantive changes required for climate humor.

The following sections will provide several case studies, drawn from relatively recent moments in environmental humor that at least some portion of climate communication academia identify as “effective.” The first case deals with adult animation’s responses to the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and how this moment offered comic reinterpretations of what the figure of the environmentalist was. The second case unpacks several well-studied examples of environmental humor on satirical news shows, such as *The Daily Show*. This section focuses on how comic creators and science communicators approach the concept of “effective” environmental humor very differently. Finally, the third case study briefly examines environmental humor on social media and how changing modern platforms for comedy are transforming environmental humor.

#### *An Inconvenient Truth in Comedy:*

Al Gore’s 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* was a turning point for mainstream environmental communication. Earning \$24.1 million dollars at the box office and an Academy Award for Best Documentary, the documentary principally featured a slideshow talk presented by the former vice president alerting the world to climate change.<sup>145</sup> *The New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott called it “a necessary film,” “a good place to start, and to continue, a process of education that could hardly be more

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<sup>145</sup> Welk, B. (2020, October 7). *15 top grossing documentaries at the box office, from 'an inconvenient truth' to 'fahrenheit 9/11' (photos)*. TheWrap. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.thewrap.com/top-grossing-documentaries-box-office/>.

urgent.”<sup>146</sup> Yet Shellenberger and Nordhaus (along with other media experts) believe that the documentary was at least a misstep for the environmental movement, and possibly a mistake. They argue that Gore’s position as a well-known Democrat needlessly brought political elements into the environmental debate. Shellenberger and Nordhaus also argue that the film fell short on offering hopeful solutions; instead, the film’s “tragic narrative [positioned] humans as fallen.”<sup>147</sup> They add, “There was nothing in the movie... aimed at helping viewers or readers imagine a brighter future for themselves and their families.”<sup>148</sup>

Yet the film is not completely devoid of humor. In a moment of levity, Gore incorporates a scene from an episode of Matt Groening’s *Futurama* into his documentary. Entitled “Global Warming or: None Like it Hot,” the segment parodies 1950s-style PSA cartoons, in which “Mr. Sun Beam” is beaten to death by leather-clad greenhouse gases which leave his “rotting corpse [to heat] our atmosphere.” Fortunately, the narrator explains, “Our handsomest politicians came up with a cheap last-minute way to combat global warming: ever since 2063, we just drop a giant ice cube in the ocean every now and then.” Unsurprisingly, the clip is perfectly in line with Gore’s message and plea for real, immediate climate action. Yet like *An Inconvenient Truth*, the clip also seems to fall short. “Of course,” the narrator continues, “It takes more and more ice each time. Thus solving

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<sup>146</sup> Scott, A. O. (2006, May 24). Warning of Calamities and Hoping for a Change in 'An Inconvenient Truth'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/24/movies/24trut.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012). *Enviro-Toons: Green themes in animated cinema and television*. McFarland.

<sup>148</sup> Shellenberger, M., & Nordhaus, T. (2004)

the problem once and for all – ONCE and for ALL!”<sup>149</sup> As with Gore’s documentary, the clip (humorously) fails to offer forward-thinking solutions.

Although only a brief segment, “None Like it Hot” represents much of the humor at the core of the *Futurama*. First airing in 1999, *Futurama* is set in “New New York” in the year 3000. The show repeatedly uses a sci-fi perspective and setting to criticize the wanton disregard for the environment in the 20th and 21st centuries: the show’s past and our present. Gore has made several appearances throughout the series as a disembodied head in a jar (a common fate for historical figures in the series’ universe) and has called *Futurama* his favorite television show.<sup>150</sup>

But *Futurama* was not alone in parodying Gore’s message. Responding to the environmental moment and increased public engagement, both *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, television shows that use animation to reach an adult audience, have taken humorous aim at *An Inconvenient Truth*. This is in keeping with humor’s immediate focus on real-world events and issues. As comedians and co-authors of *Truth in Comedy* Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson remind us, “the truth is funny. Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention.”<sup>151</sup>

In 2007, *The Simpsons* writing team tackled Gore’s message in *The Simpsons Movie*, the show’s first and only feature-length film.<sup>152</sup> According to *Simpsons* and *Futurama* show creator Matt Groening, environmentalism has always been a central theme for *The*

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<sup>149</sup> David, L., Bender, L., & Burns, S. Z. (2006). *An inconvenient truth*.

<sup>150</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012). It should be noted that Gore’s daughter Kristin is a writer for the series.

<sup>151</sup> Halpern, C., Close, D., & Johnson, K. (2011). *Truth in comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*. Meriwether Pub.

<sup>152</sup> *The Simpsons* began in 1989, and, at 32 seasons, is the longest-running TV series in U.S. history.

*Simpsons*. Groening explains, “Homer works at a nuclear power plant... he causes ... meltdowns every week in the main titles. So, we knew that the environment was going to be at the core of the movie, because it’s at the core of the show.”<sup>153</sup> Several of the show’s episodes feature environmental storylines, especially those where local activist Lisa Simpson is at odds with some of the less progressive members of the Springfield community. Groening believes that *The Simpsons* tends to approach these issues with impressive nuance: “They’re kind of disguised as goofy animated sitcoms, but... are... pretty sophisticated. And if you don’t get it, it’s OK... but if you’ve gone to college... you can appreciate the shows on a much more satisfying level.”<sup>154</sup>

*The Simpsons Movie* doubles down on this clever environmental humor. Following the hyper-pollution of Lake Springfield by family patriarch Homer Simpson and his pet Plopper the Pig, Springfield (the Simpson family fictional hometown or indeterminate state) becomes the most polluted city in America. The Simpsons struggle to save their city from not only themselves, but also an overblown, comically corrupt Environmental Protection Agency. Despite her willingness to lecture them on “An Annoying Truth” (an obvious reference to Gore’s work), *The Simpson’s Movie* is not Lisa Simpson’s environmental journey, but rather Homer’s. It focuses on Homer’s relationship to the environment and forces him, as a comic hero, to overcome his self-destructive behavior and consider the consequences of his actions.

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<sup>153</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

<sup>154</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

Indeed, Associate Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication Diedre M. Pike argues that Homer “is the anti-Gore.” She explains:

When his wife Marge confronts him, [Homer] admits that he just doesn’t consider the consequence of his actions: “I don’t think about things, I admire people who do but I just try to make the world not hurt so much until I get to crawl in [bed] next to you again.”<sup>155</sup>

While Homer certainly does not become a stand-in for Gore, he does ultimately realize that he needs to think beyond himself: “Other people are just important as me... without them, I’m nothing. In order to save myself, I have to save Springfield!”<sup>156</sup> Pike describes Homer’s epiphany as the realization that “individualism does not, ultimately, work... To save ourselves, we must take responsibility for our communities, humbly acknowledging our self-interests and accepting our limitations.”<sup>157</sup> Although ultimately agreeing with Gore regarding the importance of environmental issues, *The Simpsons Movie* seems to critique his approach. His documentary is left as a witty visual gag, but his environmental approach is presented as less effective and transformative than Homer’s. This hints at the fact that comedians may have a very different idea of what constitutes an environmental hero.

Meanwhile, in the small town of South Park, Colorado, Al Gore informs the students at the local elementary school that “the biggest threat to our planet, which threatens our very existence and may be the end of human existence as we know it: ManBearPig.” Airing just a few weeks before the release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, “ManBearPig” also parodied

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<sup>155</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

<sup>156</sup> Brooks, J. L., Groening, M., & Jean, A. (2007). *The Simpsons movie*. Australia; Fox.

<sup>157</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)



Gore's message and personality. Pike describes this imagining of Gore as "a pop culture environmental celebrity, [...who] lacks intelligence, and [Gore's] work to warn the public about the dangers of global warming – a fantasy not unlike ManBearPig – is motivated by his need to be the center of attention."<sup>158</sup> During his quest to hunt down the "half man, half bear, and half pig" —and, more importantly, receive praise for capturing ManBearPig— this caricatured, buffoonish Gore endangers the lives of the four young protagonists of *South Park*.

Debuting in 1997, *South Park* opens every episode with a disclaimer that reads "the following program contains crude language, and due to its content, it should not be watched by anyone."<sup>159</sup> Throughout its run, the show has often tackled environmental issues. In the 2006 episode "Smug Alert!," self-congratulatory hybrid car owners cause environmental disaster by over-appreciating the smell of their own farts.<sup>160</sup> In a 1999 episode titled "Rainforest Shmainforest," *South Park* students travel to Costa Rica as part of an ecotourism experience and find themselves trapped in the dangerous rainforest until they are rescued by brave American loggers.<sup>161</sup> Adopting show-creator Trey Parker's personal opinions on the Costa Rican rainforest, the episode savagely lampoons the environmental insistence that the rainforest needs to be saved.<sup>162</sup> During the credits of the episode, a satirical factsheet presents the viewer with facts about the dangers of the rainforest. Parodying the facts usually found in environmental documentary, it declares:

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<sup>158</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

<sup>159</sup> Parker, T., & Stone, M. (n.d.). *South Park*. whole.

<sup>160</sup> *South Park Archives*. Fandom. (n.d.). Retrieved November 12, 2021, from [https://southpark.fandom.com/wiki/South\\_Park\\_Archives](https://southpark.fandom.com/wiki/South_Park_Archives).

<sup>161</sup> *South Park Archives*. Fandom. (n.d.)

<sup>162</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

“Each year, the Rainforest is responsible for more than three thousand deaths from accidents, attacks, or illnesses,” adding, “There are over seven hundred things in the Rainforest that cause cancer.”<sup>163</sup>

Media critic Toni Johnson Woods argues that the best way to interpret the humor employed in *South Park* is by connecting its “potty mouth humor” with the folkloric tradition of Bakhtin’s carnival.<sup>164</sup> The carnival celebrates the grotesque, and so does *South Park*. Pike explains, “*South Park*’s ‘anti-animation’ appears absolutely amateurish... the animated sitcom done through a detournement of children’s drawings, collage, kitsch, photography, Pop Art, and underground comics.”<sup>165</sup> *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone indulge in the carnivalesque, choosing to “[demolish] fear and piety... before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact... Laughter is a vital factor in laying down the prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically.”<sup>166</sup> *South Park*’s crude humor basks in its own irreverence and challenges environmentalists to see inconvenient truths in themselves.

These three responses to *An Inconvenient Truth* demonstrate that comedians can have very different notions of what constitutes effective environmental humor. While the excerpt of *Futurama* within *An Inconvenient Truth* obviously remains largely consistent with Gore’s priorities and messaging, *The Simpsons Movie* offers an alternative approach to environmentalism, reframing the environmental crisis as the personal struggle of a comic

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<sup>163</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

<sup>164</sup> Johnson-Woods, T. (2007). *Blame Canada: South Park and popular culture*. Continuum.

<sup>165</sup> Pike, D. M. (2012)

<sup>166</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., & Bakhtin, M. M. (2017)

hero. Meanwhile, *South Park* chooses instead to poke fun at Gore and his environmental message. Based on a rather different understanding of what constitutes productive humor, *South Park* co-creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone satirize the figure of Gore and environmentalism in a way that holds both up to ridicule.

Here, adult animation often approaches what constitutes effective environmental humor in remarkably different ways than the mainstream environmental message provided by Gore. As Executive Director of the George Foster Peabody Awards Jeffrey P. Jones and Professor of Communication and Media Ethan Thompson argue in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, satire, particularly environmentally constructive satire, may not lend itself to the medium of TV: “While satire need not be funny, television networks [and] producers generally expect it to be, seeing it as another form of “comedy” that should be comprised of the same textual features and produce the same audience reactions as... a sitcom.”<sup>167</sup> Television writers’ rooms struggle to balance environmental ideologies with their own comedic priorities. This may be driven in part by the fear that, in the words of journalist Peter Keighron, “if you stop being funny for a single moment [the] audience will have reached for the remote.”<sup>168</sup> This next section will explore this struggle in more detail.

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<sup>167</sup> Gray, J., Jones, J. P., & Thompson, E. (2009). *Satire Tv: Politics and comedy in the post-network era*. NYU Press.

<sup>168</sup> Gray, J., Jones, J. P., & Thompson, E. (2009)

### Satirical News:

Traditional news media was not designed to explain climate change. STS Scholar John Durant argues, “The extended time-scale of scientific inquiry does not... sit easily alongside the compressed time-scale of the news media. Equally, the complexities and uncertainties of much scientific research do not always lend themselves well to the sloganizing... of so much journalism.”<sup>169</sup> Changes to the globalized news media industry has only reinforced these problems. Moser claims that “continued media consolidation, loss of science or environment ‘beat’ reporters, and a narrowing of the news agenda” have ensured that environmentalism continues to be pushed to the fringes of most media coverage.<sup>170</sup> This is further exacerbated by the time constraints of new broadcast; a Pew Research Center study found that the average television news package is 142 seconds.<sup>171</sup> To put it simply, within traditional news media, there seems to be neither enough time, nor enough people, to discuss climate change.

This unique situation allowed non-traditional media to take a more prominent place in the global information sphere, particularly humorous or satirical news sources like long-running American late-night comedy standard *The Daily Show*. Running continuously since 1996, *The Daily Show* was designed to parody traditional newscasts with changing hosts making humor out of recent news and political figures, and its unique comedic take began

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<sup>169</sup> Durant, J. (1999). Participatory technology assessment and the Democratic model of the public understanding of science. *Science and Public Policy*, 26(5), 313–319.  
<https://doi.org/10.3152/147154399781782329>

<sup>170</sup> Moser, S. C. (2009)

<sup>171</sup> Jurkowitz, M., Mitchell, A., Santhanam, L. H., Adams, S., Anderson, M., & Vogt, N. (2020, May 30). *The changing TV news landscape*. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2013/03/17/the-changing-tv-news-landscape/>.

to have real world consequences. “Since [Jon] Stewart took over *the Daily Show* in 1999,” journalism scholar Alexandra Wallachy explains, “There have been claims that the show influenced national policy, elections and even a visual association between Mitch McConnell and a turtle.”<sup>172</sup> Jon Stewart, who got his start as a stand-up comedian and hosted *The Daily Show* from 1999-2015, seemed to connect with American audience. In fact, according to a Pew Research Center report from 2007, Stewart was a more admired journalist than several *actual* journalists.<sup>173</sup> Rather than the 142 seconds of traditional news media, Stewart used the medium of comedy to focus on single issues, often devoting up to eight minutes on a single topic.<sup>174</sup>

Whatever Stewart was doing, it seemed to be working. In a 2004 poll by the Pew Research Center, 21% of respondents in the age range 18 to 29 indicated that they got their news from comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*.<sup>175</sup> Professor of Global Communications and Public Policy Matthew Baum has suggested that by “piggy-backing political content on entertainment fare,” programs like *The Daily Show* provide a “gateway” that helps make political information more easily accessible to audiences.<sup>176</sup> Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies Lauren Feldman further suggests that this affect is most prominent among less politically engaged audiences. *The Daily Show* was politically activating a younger generation of viewers.

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<sup>172</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016). *The Evolution and Importance of News Satire* [Unpublished BA thesis]. Robert D. Clark Honors College

<sup>173</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>174</sup> Baum 2005

<sup>175</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>176</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011).

*The Daily Show* also began placing more of a focus on environmental journalism than most of its contemporaries. According to the Pew Research Group, “In 2007, *The Daily Show* devoted a greater percentage of its news hole to science/technology and environmental stories than did the mainstream news media.”<sup>177,178</sup> Global warming received as much as twice as much coverage as in the mainstream press. In fact, in 2007, global warming ranked in the top five most covered stories on *The Daily Show*.<sup>179</sup> Here again, *The Daily Show* took advantage of Baum’s “gateway” hypothesis: “When science is discussed on *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* it becomes complementary to, instead of in competition with, popular culture and entertainment. This increases the benefits of engagement while decreasing the costs.”<sup>180</sup>

Stewart focused his satirical attention on those he felt responsible. Professor of Communications Paul R. Brewer explains, “The program castigated specific Republicans for waging a ‘war on science’ while also satirically undermining Republican efforts to politicize, manipulate, and disparage science and scientific research.”<sup>181</sup> The most frequent targets of climate change-related humor on *The Daily Show* were conservatives, Republican politicians, and climate skeptics; nearly half of all climate change segments focused on these groups.<sup>182</sup> In an interview with Director of the Peabody Media Center Jeffrey P. Jones, Jon Stewart explained that the philosophy behind his work was not politically motivated in

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<sup>177</sup> Wiktionary.org defines “news hole” as “The amount of space in a newspaper or broadcast news show that remains for journalism after advertising has been placed”

<sup>178</sup> Pew Excellence in Journalism 2008

<sup>179</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011)

<sup>180</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011)

<sup>181</sup> Brewer 2013

<sup>182</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

the way most viewers thought it was: “I represent the distracted center. My comedy... comes from feeling displaced from society because you’re in the center. We’re the group of fairness, common sense, and moderation. We’re clearly the disenfranchised center... because we’re not in charge.”<sup>183</sup> This point of positioning is interesting because it potentially changes how Stewart would fit into our humor taxonomy (is he directionally mocking Republicans as an “Aquaman” humorist, or is he doing something else entirely?).

In 2005, *Daily Show* correspondent Stephen Colbert started his own spin-off show, *The Colbert Report*, that, despite a different tone, took a similar approach in representing science and politics. Stylized as a parody of conservative outrage shows like Fox News’ *The O’Reilly Factor*, Colbert portrayed a fictionalized version of himself, which he heralded as the world’s most fearless purveyor of “truthiness.” Colbert often discussed political/scientific topics and interviewed progressive guests. Even though he spouted conservative ideals and anti-environmental messages through his satirical, boorishly outraged persona, his intention was the opposite. Like Jon Stewart, Colbert used his medium to prioritize science. For example, astrophysicist and science communicator Neil deGrasse Tyson appeared on the show seven times, the most appearances of any guest.<sup>184</sup>

The Stewart era of *The Daily Show* and the runtime of *The Colbert Report* marked a golden era for comedic science communication on television.<sup>185</sup> In a *USA Today* article in 2010, journalist Dan Vergano claimed, “Comedy Central – the home of *The Colbert Report*

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<sup>183</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>184</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011)

<sup>185</sup> The Stewart era of *The Daily Show* was from 1999-2015. *The Colbert Report* ran from 2005-2014.

and *The Daily Show* – has become *the* place for science on television.”<sup>186</sup> Sean Carroll, a physicist who appeared on *The Colbert Report* in March 2010, reached a similar conclusion, and quipped that “Comedy Central is *it*, as far as science goes.”<sup>187</sup> *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* not only covered scientific issues, but also did so in a scientifically literate way. Feldman found that 70% of segments dealing with climate change on *The Daily Show* and 64% on *The Colbert Report* explicitly asserted the existence of global warming.<sup>188</sup> Many environmentalists enjoyed the coverage too. Professor of Media Studies Geoffrey Baym and Associate Professor of Computer Science Chirag Shah analyzed the online trajectory of ten environmental clips from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* through multitiered online issue networks. They found that environmental activists used the clips to communicate externally to articulate concerns and solutions but also internally to connect with allies.<sup>189</sup>

John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in many ways continued the tradition established by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Premiering in April 2014 on HBO, the show, often abridged as *Last Week Tonight*, starred former *The Daily Show* correspondent John Oliver but moved away from several established tropes within satire news. With no correspondents and no commercial breaks, Oliver’s show flips the format. Where Stewart or Colbert may have spent eight minutes on a longer subject, Oliver regular

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<sup>186</sup> Zapper, Z. (1970, January 1). *Comedy Central Channel - Best Science on TV?* Comedy Central Channel - Best Science On TV? Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://physicsandphysicists.blogspot.com/2010/03/comedy-central-channel-best-science-on.html>.

<sup>187</sup> Feldman, L., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. W. (2011)

<sup>188</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>189</sup> Baym, G., & Shah, C. (2011). Circulating struggle. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(7), 1017–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2011.554573>



devotes 10 to 20 minutes for his so-called “long rants” of what media historian Robert Thompson has dubbed “investigative comedy.”<sup>190, 191</sup> Despite frequently choosing esoteric or bureaucratically complicated topics, Oliver finds ways to engage viewers and motivate them toward advocacy. Feldman argues that all of Oliver’s rants fall within the framework of “here’s the issue, here’s why it matters, and here’s what you can do about it.”<sup>192</sup>

Weighing in on the debate on climate change, Oliver invited famed science communicator Bill Nye “the Science Guy” to participate in “a statistically-representative climate change debate,” physically representing the consensus by having 97 scientists argue against three skeptics.<sup>193</sup> More recently, to underscore the importance of drastic action regarding climate change, Oliver once again had Nye appear on the show. During this appearance, Nye lit a globe on fire, explaining, “By the end of this century, if emissions keep rising, average temperature on Earth could go up another four to eight degrees. What I’m saying is the planet’s on fucking fire!”<sup>194</sup>

Several communications experts point to *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Last Week Tonight* as examples of how to effectively communicate climate issues through humor, but all three were not without problems. Despite often being viewed as an alternative traditional media outlet, the 2008 Pew Center analysis found that “*The Daily Show* also shared many of the problems as traditional media outlets.”<sup>195</sup> While most

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<sup>190</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>191</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>192</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>193</sup> Avery, K., Carvell, T., & Gurewitch, D. (2014, May 11). Climate Change Denial. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. episode.

<sup>194</sup> Gurewitch, D., Maurer, J., & O'Brien, D. (n.d.). Green New Deal. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. episode.

<sup>195</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

coverage of the environmental crisis asserted that climate change was real, but some also intentionally or unintentionally undercut its disastrous consequences. Feldman explains: “More than a third of segments covering climate change included explicit statements that trivialized the consequences or importance of the topic, portrayed the issue as easily solvable, or treated it as a positive phenomenon.”<sup>196</sup>

Most concerning, these satirical news shows often run the risk of being misinterpreted and being taken at face value. For example, in a study that focused on biased message processing of *The Colbert Report*, communications scholars Heather LaMarre, Kristen Landreville, and Michael Beam found that politically conservative viewers often interpreted Colbert’s satire as sincere.<sup>197</sup> LaMarre et al explain this in part by using superiority theory, arguing that since no one wants to be in the out-group, audiences may intentionally ignore ironic messaging in order to feel superior. Similarly, Feldman et al. frame this as a critical consideration when creating satirical news, since communicators need to consider how “the satirical tenor... detracts from the perceived importance or seriousness of the scientific and environmental issues that they cover, while at the same time increasing attentiveness to these issues.”<sup>198</sup>

Moving past these negatives, Feldman suggests that it is unclear how to best deploy satirical news to communicate environmental messages, noting that deliberately doing so “may undermine the perceived authenticity of the satire and in the process undercut the

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<sup>196</sup>Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>197</sup> LaMarre, H. L., Landreville, K. D., & Beam, M. A. (2009). The irony of satire. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14(2), 212–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208330904>

<sup>198</sup> Feldman et al.

resonance of the message with audiences.”<sup>199</sup> After all, “Hosts, writers, and producers of satiric news programs likely operate on the basis of their own values and interests, mining news content for humor, and not necessarily intending to inform or persuade.”<sup>200</sup>

Popular science communication theory often likes to frame *Last Week Tonight*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Daily Show* as viable alternatives to traditional news sources, but the comedians themselves do not think this comparison is tenable. Despite the show’s several awards, Oliver does not consider what he or what *Last Week Tonight* does to be news. In an interview with *The New York Times*, he draws a hard line between his work and scientific knowledge communication:

We are making jokes about the news and sometimes we need to research things deeply to understand them, but it’s always in a service of a joke. If you make jokes about animals, that doesn’t make you a zoologist. We certainly hold ourselves to a high standard and fact-check everything, but the correct term for what we do is comedy.<sup>201</sup>

“You can’t build jokes on sand,” Oliver continues, “You can’t be wrong about something — otherwise that joke just disintegrates... You try to be as rigorous as you can in terms of fact-checking because your responsibility is to make sure that your joke is structurally sound.”<sup>202</sup> Oliver’s attention to detail might set him apart in an era which has seen

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<sup>199</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>200</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

<sup>201</sup> Wallachy, Alexandra. (2016)

<sup>202</sup> Feldman, L. (2017)

increasing distrust of the media and decreasing standards in fact-checking, but his primary goals are still oriented toward comedy and entertainment.

In a 2019 *New York Times Magazine* interview, Colbert voiced similar reservations regarding the higher purposes media critics often attach to his work: “I have never ever claimed that [my comedy] has any effect. I have never had any illusion that what I am doing is changing the world. We do it late at night, and maybe you sleep better because of it.”<sup>203</sup> While Colbert is not ignorant to the fact that his show has had a powerful effect on his audience; he does not necessarily want this weighty responsibility. Referencing his favorite literary series, *The Lord of the Rings*, Colbert describes himself and Stewart as “like Frodo and Samwise. We’re trying to throw the damn ring in the volcano. It doesn’t occur to them that we don’t want to use it.”<sup>204</sup> Colbert claims that he and Stewart both understand that they are being held up as news icons and moral (and sometimes scientific) authorities, but they both disapprove of this conceptualization of their work and reject its responsibilities; instead, they both seem to imagine their work as just “making poop jokes.”<sup>205</sup>

### What do you Meme?

Beyond television and film, the emergence of social media as a significant cultural force in the last few decades has also impacted environmental humor. Social media offers unique challenges as a medium for communication. Of particular interest is the emergence

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<sup>203</sup> Marchese, D. (2019, May 31). Stephen Colbert on the political targets of satire. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/03/magazine/stephen-colbert-politics-religion.html>.

<sup>204</sup> Marchese, D. (2019, May 31)

<sup>205</sup> Marchese, D. (2019, May 31)

of “echo chambers” surrounding the topic of climate changes, spaces on the internet where individuals tend to primarily engage with like-minded other and reinforce their previously held beliefs.<sup>206</sup> Professors of Political Science James Druckman and Mary McGrath have found a similar phenomenon in more traditional media, that “certainty about global warming at one point in time led individuals to later select significantly less conservative media (which tends to be skeptical of climate change) and more non-conservative media.”<sup>207</sup>

The overwhelming presence of social media in the political sphere within recent years has led to new forms of humorous scientific communication being adopted, namely the meme as communicative medium. A meme, also known as an internet meme, is an idea, behavior, or style spread through the Internet, particularly on social media platforms. Memes come in many forms, but the most prominent type of meme is the image macro, an image with superimposed text.<sup>208</sup> Several theoretical components of the meme lend themselves to humor; Professor of Early Childhood Development and Education Bingbing Zhang and Professor of Communication Juliet Pinto identify “playfulness [...] that invites others to participate in creating and sharing memes [, ...] incongruity [...][, and... ] superiority[, the] feeling of primacy over others.”<sup>209</sup> Internet memes have taken on a

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<sup>206</sup> Williams, H. T. P., McMurray, J. R., Kurz, T., & Hugo Lambert, F. (2015). Network analysis reveals open forums and Echo Chambers in social media discussions of climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 32, 126–138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.03.006>

<sup>207</sup> Druckman, J. N., & McGrath, M. C. (2019). The evidence for motivated reasoning in climate change preference formation. *Nature Climate Change*, 9(2), 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0360-1>

<sup>208</sup> Zhang, B., & Pinto, J. (2021). Changing the world one meme at a time: The effects of climate change memes on civic engagement intentions. *Environmental Communication*, 15(6), 749–764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2021.1894197>

<sup>209</sup> Zhang, B., & Pinto, J. (2021)

variety of issues, such as social movements and environmental issues like climate change.<sup>210,211</sup> Professors of Environmental Sciences and Technologies Miriam Kaltenbacher and Stefan Drews have showed that these simple humorous messages can critically raise awareness of environmental and climate change topics.<sup>212</sup> Yet Professor of Psychology Lorraine Whitmarsh suggests that alarming climate-related memes, which are “prevalent in popular media,” might be doing more harm than good as they foster “mistrust and lead to a shallow understanding of the issue.”<sup>213</sup> The polar bear floating on some ice may promote empathy, but funnier memes may offer a more sustainable solution.



Figure 3.1: Humorous environmental meme adopting the iconic “bear on a block of ice motif.”  
Modified from <https://www.jokejive.com/topic/climate+change>

<sup>210</sup> Zhang, B., & Pinto, J. (2021)

<sup>211</sup> Zhang, B., & Pinto, J. (2021)

<sup>212</sup> Kaltenbacher, M., & Drews, S. (2020). An inconvenient joke? A review of humor in climate change communication. *Environmental Communication*, 14(6), 717–729.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2020.1756888>

<sup>213</sup> Kaltenbacher, M., & Drews, S. (2020)

Interestingly, memes suffer from the same potential audience confusion associated with the Colbert. Poe's Law, an adage that has arisen regarding Internet culture, which states that parody is essentially impossible to achieve on the Internet, because no viewpoint or statement can be so extreme that everyone will understand that it is meant as a joke.<sup>214</sup> Some portion of any meme's audience will misinterpret parodical statements as literal. Non-environmental actors participating in online humor and meme culture only exacerbates this problem. *Grist*, a news outlet which focuses on climate change, reported on several Russian trolls using humor that expressed climate skepticism to "stoke the flames of American cultural divides."<sup>215</sup> Just as with other media, memes offer opportunities for both climate activists and skeptics to get their message out there.

As demonstrated by both the televised case studies above, late-night and adult animation comedians seemed to have very different understandings of what constituted effective environmental humor than the mainstream environmental message. To a certain extent, memes, by democratizing (and anonymizing) creative control of environmental humor, allow us to ask whether this assumption holds true in the case of the general comedic mode. Therefore, it is fascinating the memes still exhibit the telltale behavior (the potential for a marked difference between comedic reading and authorial intent) that we have identified in other comedic forms. This implies that comedy and environmentalism

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<sup>214</sup> Ellis, E. G. (2017, June 5). *Can't take a joke? that's just Poe's law, 2017's most important internet phenomenon*. Wired. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.wired.com/2017/06/poes-law-troll-cultures-central-rule/>.

<sup>215</sup> *Russian trolls shared some truly terrible climate change memes*. Grist. (2021, April 7). Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://grist.org/article/russian-trolls-shared-some-truly-terrible-climate-change-memes/>.

work together to create environmental humor and that both sides' unwillingness to make substantive change or compromise significantly makes environmental humor more difficult and scarcer.

Even in cases when environmental humor has been successful, we must consider who defines what success is. Both environmentalists and comedians like satirical news — but for substantially different reasons. For environmental humor to sustainably grow as a form of environmental messaging, comedy, and activism, more work needs to be done to unpack the relationship between comedians and scientific communicators. Conflict between these two groups explains the historical scarcity. For environmental humor to communicate climate change effectively, more work needs to be done to conceptualize how climate comedians and science communicators conceptualize themselves and interact with others within the environmental movement. This is precisely the focus of the following series of interviews.



## Chapter Four

### *Science Communicator and Climate Comedian Interviews*

Through two independent but related series of interviews, this chapter will engage with expert knowledge about climate communication, both from the scientific communicators and the climate comedian. The goal is to characterize consensus (if possible) on several issues related to climate communication on both sides and then to attempt to place these experts in dialogue with each other. Because the scientific communicators interview series was more extensive, investigatory questions often relate to how scientific communicators imagine climate comedians to act and behave within environmental narratives? Alternatively, how do climate comedians react to advice or guidelines provided by science communicators? This two-directional inquiry means to capture what future interactions between these two groups might look like if more resources are used to communicate climate change comedically.

#### *Interviews with Science Communicators:*

Interviews were conducted over zoom (with one phone call interview) and recorded with the permission of experts. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, with most questions being treated as a jumping off point for further discussion. Interviewees had a wide range of different experiences and relationships with climate communication (although all of them wrote, spoke, or created humor). The final list of interviewees included Professor Randy Olson, YouTube personality Adam Levy, radio host Matt Hoisch, improv communicator Brian Palermo, Professor Steven Pinker, Professor Beth Osnes,

Professor Maxwell Boykoff, Doctor Courtney Howard, Professor Tony Leiserowitz, and Professor Nicole Seymour.

Each of the science communicators fell into neat subgroups. Professor Randy Olson and Brian Palermo work closely together, teaching the ABT narrative framework for science communication created by Olson.<sup>216</sup> Professor Beth Osnes and Professor Maxwell Boykoff also work closely together in the *Inside the Greenhouse* initiative. Through their program out of UC Boulder, they challenge students to engage with humor and environmentalism through sketches and stand-up performances. To contrast them, Professor Steven Pinker, Doctor Courtney Howard, Professor Tony Leiserowitz, and Professor Nicole Seymour offer more traditional approaches to science communication. Finally, YouTube personality Adam Levy and radio host Matt Hoisch provide a younger take on science communication in practice.

A literature review from several fields, including psychology, sociology, and anthropology, was conducted to compile together a list of questions for the interview. Questions were designed to be as impartial as possible, allowing for the most authentic opinions from the science communication experts. Here is the list of interview questions:

- 1) Some studies have found that environmental humor resonates more with younger audiences than with older audiences. Do you agree, and, if so, why?
- 2) Particularly with emotional messages, the credibility of the speaker plays a huge role. Does humor undercut trust in people conveying scientific messages, or

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<sup>216</sup> ABT stands for “And, but, therefore” – an approach to storytelling that Olson believes could make science communication more engaging

does it do quite the opposite? *Is it better to have a humorous scientist or a scientific humorist?*

- 3) A joke can be “too soon” or go “too far.” Are there topics off-limits to environmental humor when discussing catastrophe, and how does that shape its practicality as a messaging format?
- 4) Can environmental humor bring new people to the table, or does it only resonate with people who essentially already agree with environmental messaging? Similarly, – can humor help make this space more inclusive?
- 5) Given the politicalized discourse of climate change in America, will humor aid or hurt the clarity of the environmental message? Is climate humor an effective way to combat climate skepticism?
- 6) Given the rise of fake news and media distrust, does climate communication through humor become more complicated? If so, how?

Overall, interview questions addressed two overall goals: to 1) gain expert opinion on environmental humor’s potential as a policy and 2) characterize “consensus” within the field of humor climate communication. Question 1 characterizes how science communicators would respond to other work in the field and capture their opinions on climate humor and audience segmentation. Question 2 and Question 3 were structured around audience specific considerations surrounding humor. Do these constraints apply to environmental humor, and, if so, how can that inform policy? Question 4, Question 5, and Question 6 were attempts to characterize the goals of environmental humor

communication, especially in response to challenges faced by the mainstream environmental movement.

Interviews broke down into several overarching themes. First, even given the opportunity to be conversationally concise, most science communicators tended not to follow their own advice. Most agreed that the public had a difficult time understanding scientist's refusal to take a definite stance, but, ironically at the same time, often couched their language in a quandary of "maybe this, maybe not." (Almost) none of them took a firm stance on any of the questions. Responses (particularly to questions 2 and 3) were usually based in conditionals, and the interviewees provided this as a further motivation for their prescriptive hesitancy. Without a firm understanding of when and what types of humor work, most left it up to the humorists. Second, the science communicators expressed some hesitancy about the environmental movement's response to environmental humor. Environmentalists are perceived as "uptight," and the movement, as well as audiences, may need to confront this stereotype if environmental humor is going to work. Third, environmental humor only works so far as its goals are clearly stated. No one seemed to think that environmental humor would be good at confronting or convincing climate skeptics. Being practical in measuring out its possibility is imperative to communicating climate messaging effectively with humor.

- 1) *Some studies have found that environmental humor resonates more with younger audiences than with older audiences. Do you agree, and, if so, why?*

This question references a handful of studies, particularly one conducted out of the Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State University, which seem to imply that age is a divisive factor in determining an audience's response to environmental comedy. Researcher Christopher Skurka found that humor has increased efficacy in engaging 18- and 24-year-olds politically.<sup>217</sup> The majority of the science communicators, prompted by the findings of "some studies," seemed to feel that this was the case, citing psychological and social divides between younger and older people. However, a minority, rather than disagreeing with Skurka's findings, offered a skeptical view, arguing that nothing in humor, or environmental humor, is dependent on age.

Many theorists began with the anecdotal psychological argument. As we develop, change, and grow older, the argument goes, so does our sense of humor. Older audiences, who often have different lived experiences and perspectives than younger audiences, tend to find different subjects humorous. Matt Hoisch and Brian Palermo, for instance, seemed to agree with this anecdotal perspective, but they disagreed on the specifics of the mechanisms at hand. Hoisch, who suggests that the "wow, we are so fucked" nihilistic tone may be one of the reasons that younger audiences prefer environmental humor, believes that "younger people tend to take climate change more seriously than older people... [they know that] this is [...] so bad that all we can do is laugh at it."<sup>218</sup> Palermo also believes that dark environmental humor is skewed younger but for different reasons: "Younger

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<sup>217</sup> Skurka, C., Niederdeppe, J., Romero-Canyas, R., & Acup, D. (2018). 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*, 68(1), 169–193. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx008>

<sup>218</sup> Interview with Matt Hoisch, June 17, 2021

audiences are a little bit more open minded, a lot more plasticity with what they're taking in. Older audiences are a little more calcified."<sup>219</sup>

Other interviewees identified social, rather than psychological, differences between younger and older audiences that could be contributing factors. Perhaps, younger audiences have adopted environmental humor because, as Professor Steven Pinker suggests, "younger people have less power, and that the anti-establishment tends to go with youth."<sup>220</sup> Alternatively, perhaps young people are more receptive to humor due to recent changes in our information infrastructure. Nicole Seymour cites the daily show thesis or effect, "young people are okay... to learn about issues through modes like comedy, social media, imagery, radio, rather than the classic newspaper."<sup>221,222</sup> Whether this is cause of effect of an increased interest in environmental humor, Seymour's point is unperturbed. Younger people have grown up in a world where scientific humor is increasingly available and acceptable.

Of course, not everyone agrees. Maxwell Boykoff, who runs the *Inside the Greenhouse* initiative out of the University of Colorado, rebuts, "I'm not sure audience segmentation along age is what comes in mind. Younger people are definitely more receptive, doesn't mean that older people aren't receptive."<sup>223</sup> As Boykoff points out, *Inside the Greenhouse*, a comedy competition that encourages college students to find

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<sup>219</sup> Interview with Brian Palermo, June 24, 2021

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Steven Pinker, June 16, 2021

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>222</sup> Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2006). The daily show effect. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x05280074>

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Maxwell Boykoff, July 1, 2021

creative and humorous ways to communicate climate issues, reaches a wide audience:

“Students have been willing to engage meaningfully with comedy. But with the shows, a bunch of older folks came.”<sup>224</sup> Beth Osnes, who works with Boykoff at *Inside the Greenhouse*, was highly skeptical of Skurka’s findings: “It’s difficult to make sweeping statements, so I’m very suspicious of this claim.”<sup>225</sup> Tony Leiserowitz, whose *The Six Americas* theory of audience segmentation disregards age, agrees, “There’s nothing in humor itself that says it has to be younger people, [and] nothing inherently in climate change that is funnier [for] younger people.”<sup>226, 227</sup>

Tailoring environmental messages with humor could be an incredibly valuable communicative approach to get right, but, unfortunately, the experts have not reached a consensus. Although not a majority, Leiserowitz, Osnes, and Boykoff’s objections cannot be ignored as these experts do work closest with younger people and audience segmentation. Still, though, all experts seem to agree that different audiences can experience environmental humor (and environmental messages in general) in different ways. This implies careful adjustments need to be made to any humorous message depending on the audience. Additionally, when all the experts were prompted by “some surveys have found,” many prominent theorists called these results into question. This suggests that, within the field of climate communication, building theoretically upwards can be blockaded by different underlying theories of how humor works.

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<sup>224</sup> Interview with Maxwell Boykoff, July 1, 2021

<sup>225</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>226</sup> Leiserowitz’s *Six Americas* theory of climate audience segmentation groups the American audience into six rough categories: the alarmed, the concerned, the cautious, the disengaged, the doubtful, the dismissive. Leiserowitz’s theories are particularly popular in climate campaign advertising.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

- 2) *Particularly with emotional messages, the credibility of the speaker plays a huge role. Does humor undercut trust in people conveying scientific messages, or does it do quite the opposite? Is it better to have a humorous scientist or a scientific humorist?*

Credibility will play an important role in any climate communications policy, especially given the context of increasing public distrust in scientific institutions. The theorists mostly saw this question as a jumping off point, an opportunity to discuss public perceptions of environmentalists as “uptight.” These perceptions cast environmentalists as credible but sanctimonious, and, in turn, they cast the environmental movement as a special interest group. Credibility, of course, is a privilege and so is the perception of being funny. Society does not allow everyone to be credible and everyone to be funny. Some environmentalists may have to fight against other stereotypes to communicate with humor effectively.

“How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? That’s not funny.”<sup>228</sup>

Several interviewees referenced this joke from the 1980s, drawing a parallel between the perceived “uptightness” of feminists and environmentalists. Science may be on the side of reason, but most audiences do not see science and scientists as down to earth, and even fewer see environmentalists as such. When the environmentalist is part of the joke, they most often play the role, like the feminist above, as the heel.

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<sup>228</sup> Interview with Steven Pinker, June 16, 2021



Given this “uptightness,” is it even possible to be an environmental humorist?

Randy Olson, filmmaker and creator of the climate mockumentary *Sizzle*, does not seem to think so. “There isn’t any such thing as environmental humor... There’s a reverential element to environmentalism – to make fun of it is sacrilege.”<sup>229</sup> Olson puts the blame for this uptightness on the environmentalists themselves. How can environmentalists make a joke when they cannot even take a joke?

Olson provides an important backdrop for perceptions that environmentalists and environmental comedians would be struggling against. Despite Olson’s concerns and self-admitted embitterment, most theorists saw humor as an important throughway for environmentalists to bolster credibility. Humor is incredibly digestible, or, as Professor Tony Leiserowitz puts it, “humor is [...] similar to fiction. For the sake of narrative, we’re willing to put aside all of our cognitive faculties.”<sup>230</sup> An audience willing to suspend its disbelief is willing to place more trust in the speaker.

Still, so much of humor is subjective and up to interpretation. People look for different things in their humor and look for different things in their communicators. Dr. Courtney Howard describes this fine line: “You may not want your expert to be funny. You want your expert to be austere and starch and commanding. It has to do with different models of leadership.”<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021

<sup>230</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>231</sup> Interview with Courtney Howard, June 25, 2021

But not all speakers are the same. As Nicole Seymour questions, “Who’s allowed to be funny?” Seymour continues,

I think the question has [to do some feminist and critical race theorizing –] who is the speaker? Who’s allowed to be funny? [I read a study about] two different university professors’ attempts to use humor in the classroom (male versus female professors, English was or wasn’t their first language); [ultimately,] the students distrusted [the female professor’s] authority, her attempts to use humor would often backfire. Depends on who the speaker is...<sup>232</sup>

Both the environmental movement and comedy have long excluded specific identities and voices, and this certainly complicates the assumption that adding humor may make a speaker more credible or approachable.

Despite these important qualifications, Professor Nicole Seymour remains positive. It might work, and it might not. But that is not enough of a reason to not pursue it. Seymour lays out a central theme of her book *Bad Environmentalism*: “When the scientists were being very serious..., we didn’t want to believe that. It is unseemly for a scientist ... to communicate through comedy, but it didn’t work so well when they weren’t using comedy, so [... why not?]”<sup>233</sup>

A repeated sentiment among interviewees was that humor is not easy, to study or perform. Beth Osnes reiterates, “If we’re going to study comedy honestly, we can’t pretzel it into a rigid way.”<sup>234</sup> To look for a simple answer to a complicated issue, a systemic

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<sup>232</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

doctrine about humor in scientific messages, would miss the subtlety of the point. As Osnes claims, the question above is “an incredibly slippery question, [and we’re] doing a disservice to our study if we don’t acknowledge.”<sup>235</sup>

*3) A joke can be “too soon” or go “too far.” Are there topics off-limits to environmental humor when discussing catastrophe, and how does that shape its practicality as a messaging format?*

Crafting environmental humor can be tough. The topic of climate change can often be in poor taste, especially when climate humor approaches the touch-y subject of catastrophe. Consistently, the science communicators depicted environmental humor as an uphill battle but one that was worth it. Humorists will have to fight against potentially unsettled audiences and a “too serious” environmental mainstream, but well-crafted humor can be an important way to process climate doom and tragedy. Several theorists suggested practical workarounds that might help humorists toe the line of going “too far,” but, for the most part, most refused to be too overly proscriptive. After all, they were not comedians. Finally, given that multiple comedians referenced this popular comparison from the literature, some opinions sketching a comparison between 9/11 and climate change humor were explored.

Of the science communicators, Olson was perhaps the most familiar with this line that comedians walk. Describing the reception of his movie *Sizzle* by “mainstream

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<sup>235</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

environmentalists,” Olson commented, “If they [believed in environmental humor], they would have supported something of what I do. I was there ready to work on the climate movement, mostly they just shit on the movie *Sizzle*. This issue is too serious for us to make fun of.”<sup>236</sup> Repeating his opinion that “there is no environmental humor,” Olson argues a point with which all comedians are familiar – what goes “too far” or is “too soon” is largely dependent on a given audience. At the very least if your audience is “Obama’s Science Advisor John Holdren at the Woods Hole Film Festival,” you’ll be fighting an uphill battle to paradoxically both validate and poke fun at the scientific establishment.<sup>237</sup>

The problem, Olson believes, is with environmentalism. He described a 2005 Dinner for Oceana with Hillary Clinton as the guest of honor. The host, Bill Maher, opened the night by politely asking everyone to “please stand up and take the stick out of your ass.” Olson remembers that “absolutely nobody laughed.”<sup>238</sup> Unable to laugh at themselves, environmentalists are too sensitive to be receptive to effective environmental humor, Olson believes.

Critics often claim that jokes are “too soon,” but several of the science communicators saw well-crafted (if edgy) humor as central to the healing process. Both Seymour and Osnes, rather than being concerned about jokes going “too far,” saw the merit in using comedy to break traditional boundaries and taboos. Osnes argues that comedy can be a form of reclamation: “People get it, they know. That emotional

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<sup>236</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021

connection, transformable experience, people disengage when they feel ashamed and fearful. Comedy's potential to associate positive emotions with these issues."<sup>239</sup> Humor removes negative and often paralyzing associations, Osnes argues, which is a first step in an actionable response to calamity.

According to the environmentalist pushback, climate change is too serious to be treated playfully and/or as frivolous. To this accusation of frivolity, Seymour responds, "I live in a country where many people think that health care and education is frivolous. Maybe instead of denying, we should celebrate the frivolous. And maybe we should refuse their devaluation [sic] of what is frivolous."<sup>240</sup> In other words, the audience can choose to treat the frivolous as serious, and that our denial to do so only impairs us from moving forward.

Most theorists seem to think that Olson's sweeping statements are more subjective. Pinker clarifies, "Whose limits are you talking about. As we know in realms other than the environment, what is off-limits to certain people is not off-limits to others."<sup>241</sup> So much, after all, is audience-dependent, but Courtney Howard sees this more as an opportunity to connect rather than a roadblock. "So much," she claims, "[... is] speaker dependent and audience dependent. Things I would say to one audience and not to another. [But] people have an ability to absorb humor."<sup>242</sup> Figuring this out, weighting potential humor with transgression, is the comedian's job it would seem. When it comes

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<sup>239</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>241</sup> Interview with Steven Pinker, June 16, 2021

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Courtney Howard, June 25, 2021

running the risk of joking “too soon,” Osnes explains, “Comedy is an art, and with art there are rules. You don’t just wait two weeks.”<sup>243</sup>

Good comedy tends to break or stretch the rules, so how best can some leeway on the “too far” issue be achieved? One atypical avenue identified by Palermo is the unscripted communication of improvised comedy:

[In] improv as a performance, the audience knows that its spontaneous and collaborative, they know those parameters, and they have a lower expectation (and a higher appreciation). With stand-up, you’re presenting to the audience, you’ve observed and worked out your routine, they expect more.<sup>244</sup>

A performer out of the Groundlings, Palermo identified how the freeform, free-flow space of improv comedy can help get past even an uptight audience’s defenses.

Seymour also discussed a mechanistic way that potentially offensive humor either works or does not. Referencing theorist Professor of Sociology Bronislaw Szerszynski’s definition of thoroughgoing irony, Seymour describes how the most effective humor does not seek to just punch up or down, but also “horizontally.” The humorist makes fun of themselves, their own fallibility (without losing the audiences respect), which allows them to put other faults. As Seymour puts it, “These vegan comedians can’t just be making fun of non-vegans, they have to be making fun of vegans.”<sup>245</sup>

In general, the climate communicators shied away from writing up “the comedy rulebook.” Despite the simplest of rules being what jokes comedians should and should not

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<sup>243</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Brian Palermo, June 24, 2021

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

tell, almost all the theorists felt like that this was not their place, or that comedy was too subjective for a hard and fast rule. After all, controlling the comedy, exerting control over the creative process and the audience seems antithetical to the point. Nicole Seymour pointed out this inherent irony, “It starts to feel a little icky to get too prescriptive; all the sudden we begin to sound like the environmentalists we want to make fun of.”<sup>246</sup> Olson agrees, referencing a podcast appearance where he spent a good hour making fun of *The Journal for Comedy Studies*.<sup>247</sup> Just because environmentalism forces the humorist to engage with potentially over the line subject matter, that does not mean that the humorist needs to resign themselves to the (often hypocritical) self-seriousness that plagues the environmental movement.

This is not to say that the science communicators have a sense of humor about everything. Several reference recent tweets making fun of young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg as “not funny to them.”<sup>248,249</sup> To a certain degree, the environmental celebrity is being put on a pedestal.

Several humor theorists establish a comparison between comedy surrounding climate change and comedy surrounding 9/11. The root of this is perhaps that catastrophe, particularly highly publicized catastrophe, seems antithetical to comedy of any kind. After 9/11, late night shows all took a serious episode to mourn (even though some writers for

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<sup>246</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021. Olson is referencing his appearance on Professor Rod Lambert’s *The Wholesome Show*, self-described as “a science podcast for the people in the back of the class”

<sup>248</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Courtney Howard, June 25, 2021

the show thought that even this was in poor taste).<sup>250</sup> This only ended when head of *Saturday Night Live* Lorne Michaels asked then New York-mayor Rudy Giuliani, “Is it okay to be funny again?” Giuliani quipped, “Why start now?”<sup>251</sup>

Like many other historical tragedies, 9/11 humor is still seen as a taboo. What we learned from humor post-9/11 can inform how we experience and understand climate humor now, the argument goes. Matt Hoisch frames this comparison: “Things are off limits; there’s a period when things are still solidifying around tragedy. In the midst of 9/11 when things are unknown, comedy is less effective. Who is responsible? What are the impacts?”<sup>252</sup>

But, when asked follow-up about this comparison, none of the interviewees thought that it held much merit. Hoisch immediately responded, “[We] can’t compare climate change to 9/11; climate change is unlike anything we’ve ever experienced in the history of humanity.”<sup>253</sup> Tony Leiserowitz echoed this sentiment, noting, “Climate change is very different than 9/11 [, which was] concentrated in time and in space [...] Climate change is not like that, it’s an ongoing and accelerating and dispersed event... it’s kind of an invisible event [...] faceless.”<sup>254</sup> The big takeaways from this 9/11 comparison: 1) lingering tragedy can present itself in a variety of ways, and 2) climate change, which stands out as

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<sup>250</sup> Nesteroff, K. (2016). *The comedians: Drunks, thieves, scoundrels, and the history of American comedy*. Grove Press.

<sup>251</sup> Nesteroff, K. (2016)

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Matt Hoisch, June 17, 2021

<sup>253</sup> Interview with Matt Hoisch, June 17, 2021

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021



“the policy problem from hell,” a problem for which “we couldn’t design a worst fit for our underlying psychology,” is unique amongst catastrophes as a subject for humor.<sup>255</sup>

- 4) *Can environmental humor bring new people to the table, or does it only resonate with people who essentially already agree with environmental messaging? Similarly, – can humor help make this space more inclusive?*

Most of the theorists seemed to agree that humor can work to bring new people to environmentalism and make the space more inclusive, although, as with every question, these answers came with qualifiers. Largely, the science communicators saw humor’s structure and taxonomy as a significant contributing factor to whom it resonated with. The question of inclusivity was, unfortunately, left mostly untouched by the theorists with no clear result.

All interviewees agreed that the people on the fence were the most important people to reach and that humor was uniquely structured to best reach them. Atmospheric physicist Adam Levy (better known by his YouTube name “Climate Adam”) explains the motivation behind using humor in his videos: “For the people on the fence, humor gives people a way in, and access to the topic.”<sup>256</sup> Finding ways to make sure humor reaches this middle ground audience is incredibly important in maximizing the utility of a humorous message. Pinker agrees with Levy about the impact of humor: “That would be its value. You

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<sup>255</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>256</sup> Interview with Adam Levy, June 24, 2021

don't want to convince people who are already convinced. The undecided are the most important, and they would be [most] persuaded by well-crafted humor."<sup>257</sup> This does not need to all happen at once, Pinker elaborates: "Just a little bit over time is how the consensus changes."<sup>258</sup>

Some of this depends on the structure of the humor. Osnes argues that humor "definitely can [reach the middle audience, but] satire is the opposite —not that many people respond well to being made fun of."<sup>259</sup> Osnes identifies important considerations when crafting diplomatic humor: "What's the endgame? What the goal? [Are we just making] fun of environmentalists for plastic bags?"<sup>260</sup> Without forethought, environmental humor may have disastrous consequences.

All of these are risks with any form of communication. Howard understands that mistakes can and have been made with environmental communication, but also that environmental humor, as a relatively new medium, could offer solutions. As Howard emphatically states (and encouraged me to quote her on), "We've been absolutely SHITTY at being audience-centered within the environmental movement."<sup>261</sup> If humor can meet audiences halfway, then communicators need to put the work in. Howard continues, "They need to know what we know, it's been about us and our information, as opposed to who is this person, where are that at in their life."<sup>262</sup> Obviously, this is never "going to be perfect,"

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<sup>257</sup> Interview with Steven Pinker, June 16, 2021

<sup>258</sup> Interview with Steven Pinker, June 16, 2021

<sup>259</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>261</sup> Interview with Courtney Howard, June 25, 2021

<sup>262</sup> Interview with Courtney Howard, June 25, 2021

Boykoff explains, adding that in order to solve climate communication problems, “we need to be trying on multiple fronts, [looking for] ‘the silver buckshot.’”<sup>263</sup>

The interviewees had a difficult time weighing in on the second part of the question: can humor help make the space more inclusive? Across the board, the answer is “perhaps.” Palermo believes so, stating: “Probably so, even if it’s only two percent better. Laughter is a universal human element. Everybody laughs across at all cultures.”<sup>264</sup> Unfortunately, even though laughter is universal, that does not necessarily mean that the joke is. Seymour provides an excellent counterexample in the Nature Rx commercial picked apart in *Bad Environmentalism*. The commercial depicts the merits of nature as a pharmaceutical, causing Seymour to comment, “[The actors in the commercial] are all white; clearly it thinks it’s funny. It’s still very smug and very white. Can humor be more inclusive? Maybe... also maybe not.”<sup>265</sup> Seymour’s theoretical approach challenges us to ask tough questions about the joke: “Is it sort of like a self-congratulatory humor? And what does it think is funny?”<sup>266</sup> Beyond this, it is critical to look at who is and is not “in on” the joke? Only through this deeper analysis of the target and methods of the humor can we unpack whether the in-groups and out-groups that coalesce around the joke are inclusively or exclusively structured. Failure to find more definitive answer to this question of inclusivity is highly concerning, especially considering the overall lack of diversity in the environmental movement.

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<sup>263</sup> Interview with Maxwell Boykoff, July 1, 2021

<sup>264</sup> Interview with Brian Palermo, June 24, 2021

<sup>265</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>266</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

5) *Given the politicalized discourse of climate change in America, will humor aid or hurt the clarity of the environmental message? Is climate humor an effective way to combat climate skepticism?*

This question got the most immediate backlash. Climate communicators are not kidding themselves. Climate humor may help clarify the environmental message, but it will not effectively reach skeptics, and it probably should not. Climate humor has a great emotional capacity to reach those in the middle, and certain types of humor may be more effective than others. An important principle in understanding climate humor politicization is understanding the other side of the coin, climate skeptic humor. What work is this humor doing, and how are these opposites similar and different?

Osnes leaves nothing unsaid about using environmental humor to “combat climate skepticism”: “Let’s not even waste our time. You could dedicate your life to change one mind; no one in climate communication is trying to change someone’s mind. I don’t care what you’re using, you could use a bulldozer!”<sup>267</sup>

Until a bulldozer is a more viable alternative, Leiserowitz discusses this mistake in how environmentalists experts often choose to expend their energy: “It’s not a debate, it’s a jury trial. And the public are the silent jury, that’s the audience you’re trying to convince... Too often scientists try to convince the people they’re arguing against.”<sup>268</sup> When John

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<sup>267</sup> Interview with Beth Osnes, June 22, 2021

<sup>268</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

Oliver makes fun of Republican senators who deny climate change is happening, who is the intended audience? This is not an effective way to nudge the middle ground, Leiserowitz argues: “Given the Six Americas framework, they aren’t convincing the dismissive. They don’t trust John Oliver. They’re just going to react against it, and it get even more firmly set in their views.”<sup>269</sup>

Regarding the clarity of the message, Seymour hit home the refrain of her book *Bad Environmentalism*: “It’s no longer about facts anymore, we’ve gone so far beyond that. The clear, sober telling of the truth wasn’t interesting. More interested with jokes? Probably not. [But] There’s [...] no reason not to try.”<sup>270</sup> Whatever the clarity of the message was, “when the scientists were being very serious and warning us about climate change, we didn’t want to believe that.” So why not learn from past mistakes and strike clear emotional messages rather than hyperrational ones?<sup>271</sup>

In fact, as Boykoff offers, some types of comedy may be able to reach across political boundaries or at least toward the middle ground; despite the fact that

the most common form we see in U.S. culture, Satire [, which] can alienate certain groups[, we may be able to reach moderate conservatives through] good natured comedy [...] a flavor of comedy that doesn’t make fun of people[, and points out how] funny [it is] that in the face of climate change we do all silly things?<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>270</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>271</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

<sup>272</sup> Interview with Maxwell Boykoff, July 1, 2021

Climate skepticism has its own handful of comedians and style of comedy. When describing climate skeptic and lobbyist Mark Morano, who appeared in his documentary *Sizzle*, Olson says, “He has a really good sense of humor. I did not support anything [he] said politically, [but we] spent a lot of time laughing our asses off over the stupidity of environmental humor.”<sup>273</sup> Morano, the author of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Climate Change*, is not alone. Leiserowitz notes that “Ben Shapiro [and other] conservative commentators love to make fun of people like Leonardo DiCaprio.”<sup>274</sup> Leiserowitz describes how they are “trying to be funny, and doing so in a mocking way, in an *ad hominem* attack, not attacking the message, but the messenger. As old as propaganda and communication itself.”<sup>275</sup> Conservative comedy serves to entrench often misleading claims about climate change and functions with its own mechanisms deserving of analysis.

Leiserowitz may belittle these “conservative comics” for their willingness to disconnect from the factual world, but, as Seymour notes, “It’s the same on the left. How many times have you fallen for some news story on the left that matches your worldview, that fit into our emotional narrative that we have preset, this is the way that the world is.”<sup>276</sup>

6) *Given the rise of fake news and media distrust, does climate communication through humor become more complicated? If so, how?*

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<sup>273</sup> Interview with Randy Olson, June 11, 2021

<sup>274</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>275</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>276</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

Of all the six questions, this last one got the least of the interviewees time and attention, perhaps because of its similarity to previous questions. Without a clear resolution, theorists framed the rise of media distrust as both a negative and positive thing for humor communication.

Leiserowitz, concerned with climate communications in a distrusting media system, approached the issue at hand with a historical perspective. He describes how Walter Cronkite ended the evening news in America with the phrase “And that’s the way it is,” explaining, “In 20 minutes, he gave you the truth on what’s going on in the world.”<sup>277</sup> Now, Leiserowitz elaborates, “The emergence of echo chambers [has] people [...] increasingly getting the ability to choose to have the ability to pick what they want you to hear.”<sup>278</sup> Climate humor, as well as climate messages in general, will have a hard time effectively reaching their audiences without being politically tarnished.

But others were more hopeful. Boykoff argues that humor “has endured through all kinds of circumstances, comedy can still be successfully executed in these circumstances.”<sup>279</sup> Seymour takes it a step farther. Environmental humor, she claims, will both endure and thrive in this post-truth information ecosystem: “It’s no longer about facts anymore –we’ve gone so far beyond that.”<sup>280</sup> The capacity of environmental humor to create a legitimate and positive emotional connection is its greatest strength, which, as

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<sup>277</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>278</sup> Interview with Tony Leiserowitz, June 25, 2021

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Maxwell Boykoff, July 1, 2021

<sup>280</sup> Interview with Nicole Seymour, July 19, 2021

Seymour argues, may be independent of “the facts.” But what happens to the environmental message when we detach ourselves from the facts? How can we make a deeper impact than skeptics who are doing the same thing?

More work needs to be done to answer the above question. In the past, political satire has been repurposed as misinformation on website that intentionally provide no context. Would satirical climate humor be vulnerable to this harmful rebranding? If climate humor grows into a more dominant artistic form, it will be interesting to see how it functions within the larger information ecosystem.

### *Interviews with Climate Comedians*

During the months of October and early November 2021 (after the first round of interviews with science communicators), this second round of interviews was conducted with climate comedians. Procedurally very similar to the other interviews, these interviews were designed with two other goals in mind. First, discussion of humor communication is remarkably devoid of the humorist. Several questions were designed to put their experiential knowledge in contrast with the more academic knowledge of science communication experts. Second, questions were intended to address comic climate communication from a practical standpoint. How are these types of jokes generated, and what goals do climate comedians gravitate toward?

Because of time considerations, only three interviews will be included within this section. The comedians that were chosen, although sharing a subject matter, come from a range of backgrounds and perspectives. David Gessner (discussed earlier) is best known for



his work as a comedic personal essay writer, often approaching academia with a comedic tilt. Professor Michael Branch does similar work to Gessner; his recent work *How to Cuss in Western* attempts to use humor to reclaim the natural beauty of the American Southwest. Rollie Williams works in the opposite direction of these two. After a career as a stand-up comic in New York, Williams has reached a rather sizable audience through brief comedic explorations of climate issues on his YouTube channel ClimateTown. His most recent video, “Fast Fashion is Hot Garbage,” has more than 927,000 views.<sup>281</sup> In choosing Williams, the hope was that, as a comedian pursuing a graduate degree in environmental policy, he might approach the environmental movement (academic and otherwise), in a markedly different way. Conducting more interviews will be a goal of further research.

Questions were chosen largely to encourage a dialogue between science communicators and climate comedians and frame how these two groups imagined each other. To be anthropologically rigorous, if we were comparing answers, we would ask the same questions. That is not the goal here. Limited time made it so that different questions directed toward project priorities made more sense. Here is the list of the interview questions:

1. How do you differentiate yourself from science communicators? What do you see as your role in environmental narratives?
2. Have you experienced challenges as a comedian in the environmental space (the larger community of people who are talking about environmental problems)?

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<sup>281</sup> Williams, R. (2021, September 23). *Fast fashion is hot garbage | climate town*. YouTube. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6R\\_WTDdx7I&t=547s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6R_WTDdx7I&t=547s).

3. Have you ever been told that something is off limits and over the line? If so, what did you do in response to that?
4. What's your process of generating environmental humor like? What are your inspirations, and what are your goals? (If there's time?)

Each question was specifically designed around bringing creative comedic experience into dialogue with academic understandings of environmentalism and the problems facing environmental humor. Question 1 allows comedians to place themselves within (or outside of) the climate change discussion. Question 2 is largely a continuation of Question 1 but goes farther in opening a dialogue about potential challenges in the environmental space. A consensus opinion from the last round of interviews was that environmentalism was “uptight.” How does this translate into comedy’s reception within the movement? Question 3 is the only recreation of a question from the first round of interviews (“A joke can be “too soon” or go “too far.” Are there topics off-limits to environmental humor when discussing catastrophe, and how does that shape its practicality as a messaging format?”). This question was intended to ground discussions of potentially bad taste humor, what it looked like in practice, and how comedians would respond to audience criticism. Question 4 is largely procedural, attempting to communicate the experience of writing environmental humor (and how it may be different than writing other forms of humor). Question 4 also asks about inspirations and goals to graft our humorists and their works within the environmental humor history of the previous chapter. Who do they emulate, and what do they prioritize in their messaging?

Interview responses tended to involve four overarching themes. First, despite their recognition of their inspirations, all the interviewers considered themselves and their work unique. This “untrodden snow” idea was critical to how they imagined themselves and their goals within the environmental movement, that they were bringing something new to the table. Second, interviewees largely agreed that the environmental community has been remarkably open to their comedy. Contrary to Olson’s doomism, the environmental movement may not be as “uptight” as the science communicators imagine it to be. This result is also in stark contrast with historical expectation; what about the environmental space or the humor provides this openness? Finally, environmental humor is logistically more challenging than other forms of humor. This seems to result from two complications: 1) heavy information and time costs on generating environmental content, and 2) environmental comedians being forced to balance a set of often contradictory priorities. In general, these interviews depict environmentalism as open to environmental humor and comedians as open to taking on environmental issues but with an acknowledgment that the energy currently required to generate climate humor may, for some, be too creatively costly.

1. *How do you differentiate yourself from science communicators? What do you see as your role in environmental narratives?*

This question plays two important roles. First, it allows comedians to contextualize themselves within the environmental movement (in contrast to our other speakers).

Secondly, it provides an early distinction between how scientific communicators view comedian's roles within environmental narratives and how comedians view themselves.

Williams does not "see himself as a science communicator," adding, "I like to talk about stuff that's interesting to me," which happens to be climate change and policy.<sup>282</sup> Williams made sure to state that climate change is not even his "favorite topic to talk about," that he'd rather do "stuff about billiards" (the basis of a podcast he's working on right now that he recommended to me).<sup>283</sup> Compared to other climate communicators and other comedians, Williams sees his role as "education on the central problems, specifically corporate malfeasance" through a comedic lens.<sup>284</sup>

Gessner, who has written extensively about how his work pushes against traditional environmental writing and environmental narratives, seems to reiterate some of those points here. Gessner describes his work, "Science writing, environmental writing, none of these things fit while I'm trying to write environmental issues. It's emphatically, first person because it's my experience."<sup>285</sup> In response to his contemporaries, Gessner wants his writing to be "scary, but I don't want to scare off readers with facts and states. Trying to communicate in a personal human way about these issues." Gessner claims that he's a student of the "Monty Python dog shit theory" of comedy, that he's "looking at the stars, stepping in dog crap."<sup>286</sup> This humble approach, detaching himself from the uptightness

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<sup>282</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>283</sup> The podcast is called "Your Average Pool Player"

<sup>284</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>285</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>286</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

and engaging with the messy practicalities of environmentalism, has the potential to pull more people into the environmental movement.<sup>287</sup>

Gessner feels that what he does is the opposite of science communication. He explains, “I have friends who are scientists, whereby definition, the way they’re trying to write is the antithesis of the personal essay, [which is meant to] reveal quirks and personality.”<sup>288</sup> After working with them for many years, it is hard to break this habit Gessner claims. These results imply that making environmentalists more humorous may be harder than making humorists more environmental.

“The world is full of environmental scientists, providing all the data we need to not be dumb asses,” Branch reminds us. Branch inserts himself within “the gap between what science knows and how we behave” and “lay[s himself and his] work down as a bridge between what science knows and how we think.”<sup>289</sup> His role is cultural translator, and his tool is laughter. Branch and Gessner both know the problems with mainstream environmentalism and are attempting to use environmental humor to ameliorate them.

All three humorists separate themselves from science communicators and other existing communicators within the environmental space. Where they seem to agree with science communicators is that humor can be a powerful tool in communicating effectively to an audience. Some of the science communicators attached altruistic motives to the comedians and humorists. The comedians, it would seem, do not follow suit. They see

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<sup>287</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>288</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>289</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

themselves as alternative educators, reaching new potential environmentalists, talking about and joking about what interests them, because it is what they do.

*2. Have you experienced challenges as a comedian in the environmental space (the larger community of people who are talking about environmental problems)?*

The overwhelming answer seems to be no. This admittedly defies several expectations set up by our environmental humor survey, historical background chapter, and interviews with scientific communicators. This description of the environmental space as open to climate humor makes adopting more climate messaging seem promising.

Williams “had difficulty for a long time [, since it’s] not that sexy of a topic,” but he feels like he’s overcome these challenges through creative effort.<sup>290</sup> He describes his experience in the environmental space as less of a challenge and more of an opportunity. Williams is walking on “untrodden snow, not a lot of comedians are doing this stuff.”<sup>291</sup> The hard part is unrelated to the environmental space, Williams argues, but in the creative production of the comedy: “getting people to care and watch it is sometimes difficult. Capturing the audience is the hard part.”<sup>292</sup> More on this later. Interestingly, Williams qualifies success here (and elsewhere) not in communicative effect, but audience reaction.

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<sup>290</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>291</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>292</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

The challenges he experienced reaching an audience and making them laugh, he believes he has largely overcome.

Gessner, who originally did not define himself as a comedian, has welcomed it with open arms. Environmentalism, Gessner believes, needs comedy “because it’s so missing from the odd hush or coldly scientific way of talking about the natural world. People are hungry for it.”<sup>293</sup> This is especially surprising in how critical Gessner is of the environmental space and his role in it. Describing what he is after in his writing, Gessner claims that “[environmentalists] are all hypocrites, we drive, we fly. We let hypocrisy be an excuse not to do anything. We need fighting hypocrites.”<sup>294</sup> The only pushback he has experienced is from the publishing world, not within environmentalism but in how non-environmentalist perceive environmentalism. Gessner describes how publishers “want their science to be told in these big book report type books, try to squeeze [the humor and quirks] out.”<sup>295</sup> This publishing seems to result from attempts to categorize Gessner’s work (along with environmental humor in general) into existing genres, bringing with it the existing stigma and stereotypes surrounding “uptight” environmental writing.

Branch disagrees, and, interestingly, he cites Gessner as someone who has experienced challenges as a comedian within the environmental space. Comedy, Branch claims, “is a risky proposition... [which is] about boundary crossing and boundary testing.”<sup>296</sup> People like Branch, or like Gessner, use humor “to build community, endure

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<sup>293</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>294</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>295</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>296</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

hardship, [and] survival,” but it is not without risks.<sup>297</sup> Branch claims that the risk of comedy is not altogether unlike “the main risk you run in scholarly work[, which] is boring the hell out of people.”<sup>298</sup> Boring the audience or unnecessarily upsetting them both dilute the environmental message.

Both Gessner and Williams identify outside audiences (not within the original environmental space) as the primary impediment to their work. Branch raises objections, but he frames these objections within humor theory. Getting the audience on their side, getting the audience to understand that Williams and Gessner are not “lecturing at them” and are bringing something new to the table is the perpetual challenge they both face. Despite Branch’s objections, the environmental space is characterized as exceptionally open to the work that these comedians do, ready for new ideas and new ways to communicate their messaging.

*3. Have you ever been told that something is off limits and over the line? If so, what did you do in response to that?*

Neither Williams nor Gessner had ever received feedback that they went over the line, or at least, not feedback that they remembered. Both seem to think that such criticism was misguided, missing the point of what they were trying to do creatively.

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<sup>297</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>298</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021



Williams claims that if he received this kind of feedback, he would do nothing in response. “People are always wrong,” he explains. “People who say something us off limits are not comedians.”<sup>299</sup> He compares telling a comedian what is or is not funny to telling a fighter pilot how to fly.<sup>300</sup> The fact that Williams feels that he has never “gone too far” is certainly interesting, but his hypothetical response is even more so. He characterizes the potential dissenting audience as misinformed, which seems to give him leeway in his choice of material.

Gessner has also never experienced his work going “over the line.” In fact, Gessner describes how “people came to [me] to go over the line.”<sup>301</sup> Gessner implies that within environmentalism, there is an understanding that lines need to be crossed, and his ability to use humor to cross them in a tactful way resulted in his success. Gessner explains, “When I started writing these types of pieces, there weren’t a lot of people doing them. Bringing the tools to the genre [and trying to push boundaries], that was my way in.”<sup>302</sup> Gessner frames “going over the line” as exactly his purpose as a climate comedian.

Yet Branch cites several examples of his work crossing lines. He chuckles about a time he made fun of *The Sound of Music* with, unbeknownst to him, several Von Trapp descendants in the audience.<sup>303</sup> In general, however, objections come in what he dubs “the fiddling while Rome burns argument,” that “if you were a real environmentalist... if you really cared about what’s happening to the environment, you wouldn’t joke about that

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<sup>299</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>301</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>302</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>303</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

stuff.”<sup>304</sup> Branch describes this as the “one thing that drives me batshit: this idea that humor can’t do serious work.”<sup>305</sup>

Branch always frames his response to these objections in the same way, claiming that he “just [tries] to gently point that we use humor in every other part of our life” and that “nothing is off limits to comedy.”<sup>306</sup> Still, Branch is “a little bit willful,” and he admits that he does not do much in response to criticism.<sup>307</sup> As a writer, Branch is “coming from a place that is first and foremost dedicated to my readers and what I’m enjoying. I’d want to know about it, but I don’t think it would bend the arc in the way I construct my narratives.”<sup>308</sup>

From the original rounds of interviews, no science communicator argued that nothing would be “over the line.” But, here, neither Williams nor Gessner can cite this as part of their experiences within the environmental humor space. In fact, both interviews argue that environmental humor has already and may continue to play an important role in communicating subjects that can make audiences uncomfortably, regardless of how “over the line” they might be. This highlights a significant discrepancy between how science communicators imagine comedians approaching controversial subjects and how comedians do so in practice. Furthermore, all comedians did not seem open to criticism about how transgressive their material was. This raises certain concerns about how effective reining in certain types of environmental humor may be and about whether limiting the scope of

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<sup>304</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>305</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>306</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>307</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>308</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

environmental humor (which makes sense from a policy perspective) may taint its effectiveness as a comic communicator.

*4. What's your process of generating environmental humor like? What are your inspirations, and what are your goals?*

This last question admittedly started from personal curiosity but still has important application to this thesis. How does one write environmental humor? What examples inspire future generations of environmental humorists? This question, less in relevance to the other set of interviews, compares interviewed climate comedians against historical environmental humorists and environmental humor theory.

Williams advises that there is a right and a wrong way to do environmental comedy. "Any time you're lecturing at people, you're playing a losing game," he says.<sup>309</sup> Branch agrees, "When I'm using humor in my environmental writing, when I start out preaching or lecturing, I can feel my audience shut down."<sup>310</sup> But it is also about the comic targets. Williams believes that environmental humor will not work if you are trying to make people feel ashamed, or if you talk down to them, instead "you've gotta come in low [and make fun of] people who have actively harmed [the audience]."<sup>311</sup> Good environmental comedy works, Williams argues, for two reasons. First, humorists need to be "really

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<sup>309</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>310</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>311</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

knowledgeable.”<sup>312</sup> But that is not sufficient. Like with all comedy, Williams explains, “you’ve got to really think it’s funny yourself. In your heart of your heart... just be yourself. Throw out the stuff that doesn’t make you laugh.”<sup>313</sup>

What makes Williams laugh? He is a self-admitted Jon Stewart fan, which is obvious from the get-go to viewers on his channel ClimateTown. Williams wants to help “put laws in place to fix climate change enough to do other kinds of comedy.”<sup>314</sup> His creative preferences are at odds with what he believes is his moral duty –that “the world is not going to end, [and] we have a duty as people to act right and not a bunch of assholes.”<sup>315</sup> During the interview, Williams describes an incident where someone recognized him on the street and told him that they divested from Exxon Mobile because of his videos. Williams cites this to say that “he’s reaching some people” and that feels good.<sup>316</sup>

Branch explains that his process for writing humor is substantially “different than the kind of writing you would do in a writer’s room or for a late-night comedian.”<sup>317</sup> Although, like Williams, Branch “start[s] with a topic, observation, or a place that I care about,” not everything he writes ultimately becomes humorous.<sup>318</sup> That must develop naturally. Humor, Branch claims, is discovered during the drafting, which can sometimes produce surprising results. Branch describes how “funny things don’t always become

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<sup>312</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>313</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>314</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>315</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>316</sup> Interview with Rollie Williams, Oct 14, 2021

<sup>317</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>318</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

humorous, and tragic things can become humorous.”<sup>319</sup> The jokes pop out in the reworking, and he tends to write the kind of humor that undermines environmental pretention, those “weird fantasies of self-importance [at the core of environmentalism]. No, we’re not that great, [nor] our struggles are... that epic.”<sup>320</sup>

Gessner wants to accomplish similar work to Branch within his writing. Gessner believes that he has a great “natural tendency to satire, but he also pull[s] short because of empathy in the human aspect,” describing these two competing natures at war inside of himself.<sup>321</sup> He utilizes this internal combustion “To write about climate change in a way that I don’t think is being done yet, not just grim warnings or factual pilings but in a way that is more complex that includes the fact that most of spend our days thinking about lunch rather than climate change, how does that fit in the fact that this summer saw record heat?”<sup>322</sup> Gessner purposely undercuts his satire to give his work a humanizing voice, not entirely unlike the “bad environmental” humor that Nicole Seymour defines.

In many ways, Gessner’s writing has been shaped by his rigorous academic background. Gessner references Edward Abbey, Dostoyevsky, and Thoreau as impactful on his style of nature writing.<sup>323</sup> Gessner has a particular fondness for Thoreau. His most recent book begins with an anecdote about taking his daughter to Walden Pond, pointing to where the cabin used to be, and saying “that’s where the man lived when he ruined your daddy’s life.”<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>320</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

<sup>321</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>322</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>323</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

<sup>324</sup> Interview with David Gessner, Oct 21, 2021

Gessner and Williams have different understanding of how to write environmental humor and what they are writing for. This makes some intuitive sense. They engage in very different forms of environmental humor. What is more interesting is how both seem to think that their bringing something new to the table, something that the environmental community (counter to the expectation of the interviewed science communicators) is begging for. They characterize the movement as not nearly as “uptight” as it is commonly understood, even though they both express that this lingering stereotype is detrimental to people bringing comedy into the environmental space.

As with most questions, Branch differs from Gessner and Williams. His process perhaps provides some insight into this. Branch understands humor as a means to an end, a tool that he can effectively use to reach his goal, but it does not have the same primacy it has for Gessner and Williams. Branch is a writer first and a humorist second, but he still identifies something critical: environmental “uptightness” (where it does exist) does not limit but rather fuels environmental humor. It provides valuable context for humor to push against, and when humorists are willing to make fun of themselves, valuable purchase for “bad environmental” jokes.

Several science communicators suggested policy considerations that might make adopting environmental humor difficult, but all three of the comedians would agree that creating well-crafted environmental humor is the major challenge. Environmental humor is substantially different than other forms of nature writing, but it is also different from most comedy. It is hard work, and it places heavy expectations on the comedians who generate it. At the very least, this suggests that, for comic climate communication to be adopted by

more mainstream sources, more work needs to be done to unpack and offer potential solutions for this creative obstruction.

Similarly, the science communicators offer valuable insight into what goals environmental humor should have and how environmental humor might work best, but, repeatedly, the comedians seem to push back against all these recommendations. At its core, the interview chapter suggests that science communicators have very different visions for the purpose of environmental humor than the comedians do. The conclusion attempts to resolve this central issue of climate humor communication.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion: A Better World for Nothing

During a question-and-answer session, American ecocritic, writer, and humorist Michael P. Branch was asked what his goals were as a writer. Branch, after thinking for a moment, responded, “I want to make readers laugh. And I want to make them think. But I’m happiest when I help them to do both at the same time.”<sup>325</sup> These are admirable goals. By themselves, promoting laughter and promoting thought are difficult and valuable feats; doing them both together is another challenge entirely. Much of this thesis attempts to piece out how humor communication of environmental issues balances both modes. Later, however, Branch added the following addendum to his journal: “I also want to help readers think about laughing. And, in a perfect moment, I would also get them to laugh about thinking.”<sup>326</sup> These loftier goals are where this thesis and climate humor in general should both intend to go.

This thesis has approached the problem of environmental humor from a theoretical and historical perspective, showing that climate humor can be an effective way to communicate climate change, and an effective way to make people think and laugh. Climate humor not only reaches valuable audiences, but, when paired with the theoretical and sociopsychological approaches outlined in Chapter One, seems to outcompete many alternatives. These alternatives are not equally successful, and some types of environmental humor still struggle with the same issues of mainstream environmental

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<sup>325</sup> Branch, M. P. (2018). *How to cuss in western: And other missives from the High Desert*. Roost Books.

<sup>326</sup> Branch, M. P. (2018)



communication, as was taxonomically laid out in Chapter Two. Chapter Three examined the history and consequences of past environmental humor, highlighting that climate comedians and science communicators have vastly different priorities when approaching environmental humor. Chapter Three is intended, to borrow Branch's framing, to force the reader "to think about laughing," and "to laugh about thinking." It challenges an existing assumption in the field that treats environmental comedians and science communicators as similar and their goals as easily reconcilable, instead showing that both actors can have independent visions for and readings of environmental humor.

Chapter Four attempts to parse out the different approaches used by science communicators and climate comedians regarding policy-relevant issues surrounding humor and climate change. How can these disparate views hinder the growing field of comic climate communication? By putting experiential and academic knowledges in dialogue with each other, can both fields be improved to make for better comic climate communicators?

Chapter Four hit home the point that scientists and comedians approach the problem of climate communication with very different perspectives, goals, and definitions of success. Some critics of climate humor might point to this as a flaw within the framework, or, at the least, a deep logistical complication. This thesis puts these two actors together as an essential part of the solution. Progressing climate change has revealed a lot about the underlying framework of our society, specifically how some self-imposed boundaries between people do not hold substantive value. Perhaps comedians and climate scientists have been doing the same work all along. Bill Nye the Science Guy seems to think so. Both, he argues, are ideally about making audiences "figure it out for him or herself,

you don't want to give him or her the answer if you can help it." Nye, who started his career in entertainment with mild success as a stand-up comic and Steve Martin impersonator, believes that whether comedy or science, "Having someone do it for themselves is worth being told about it 1,000 times."<sup>327</sup> Framed in this way, climate comedians and science communicators do share some underlying similarities.

Branch offers an alternative solution to how these two groups can work together, a solution which lies in "thinking about laughter." In his introduction to *How to Cuss in Western*, he claims:

Humor, like love, is fundamental to our humanity. It allows us to understand ourselves in a new way, to bond with other people and with the more-than-human world, to embrace with genuine humility the natural forces over which we exert no control. Most important, laughing matters because we recognize laughter something essentially restorative and uplifting.<sup>328</sup>

Perhaps, at its core, this is why environmental humor can bring two disparate fields of knowledge together and accomplish its goal. Whether it is the comedic scientist or scientific comedian, both parties are essentially doing the same work, revealing our underlying humanity. The way forward seems to be to "laugh about thinking," to approach scientific thought not only with a certain humility, but also with a sense of humor. To quote Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, "As soon as you have made a thought, laugh at it."<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Nye, Bill. (2012, March). *Bill Nye on Teaching Science like Comedy* [Video]. BigThink. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqCytRZRNg>

<sup>328</sup> Branch, M. P. (2018).

<sup>329</sup> Interview with Michael Branch, Nov 3, 2021

Branch's claims ring of poetic truth, but they lack empirical specificity. After all, solving a problem like climate change requires a dramatic reimagining of existing systems, networks, and their interplay. While not disagreeing with Branch's conception, this thesis suggests that environmental humor can do good work for the environmental message in three interrelated ways.

First, climate humor seems to reach valuable age demographics, particularly those that also seem to require the least activation energy on climate issues, more effectively. As discussed in the interviews section, Skurka et al. found that climate humor interventions can be best utilized to motivate younger people, particularly those in the age range of 18-24 years old, toward behavioral action.<sup>330</sup> These same demographics have been shown to be more politically engaged on climate issues.<sup>331</sup> Climate humor may be an important tool in promoting generational activism, but more work needs to be done to unpack why this group is most open to climate humor. What can we change about our climate messaging to either push this block toward political activism or reach out toward other demographics?

Second, climate humor may allow communicators to reimagine and reframe existing conversations surrounding climate change. Humor provides an excellent avenue to unearth and reconsider underlying social assumptions. For climate communication to make progress, the status quo needs to be challenged. What constitutes an environmental

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<sup>330</sup> Skurka, C., Niederdeppe, J., Romero-Canyas, R., & Acup, D. (2018). 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*, 68(1), 169–193. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx008>

<sup>331</sup> *Do younger generations care more about global warming?* Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. (2019, June 12). Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/do-younger-generations-care-more-about-global-warming/>.

taboo? As climate catastrophe becomes a larger part of our lives, humor provides a valuable avenue to approach potentially “off-limits” topics and tragedies in healthy ways. Theater reviewer Daniel Lim claims that “a sense of humor to me is the ability, desire and willingness to sieve through all the tragedy and suffering, and recognize the little pockets of optimism and hope. It is like panning for gold.”<sup>332</sup> Humor may not only provide a psychologically healthy approach to environmental suffering, but also valuable insight into the underlying causes of the suffering (and the social causes of the taboo). The right kinds of humor, “bad environmental” humor, can push against both taboo and social exclusion. If climate humor can effectively bring minority voices into environmental conversation, then climate humor may also make climate change more important for new people.

Third, climate humor also seems to be an effective way to generate climate salience. Climate humor strongly encourages audiences to engage with climate change in psychologically and sociologically new ways. Climate humor may not be the only way, but it seems to be one of the best ways to narrow the gap between belief and behavior. As American humorist Erma Bombeck once quipped, “When humor goes, there goes civilization.”<sup>333</sup> We need humor, as we have always needed it, to help collectively process and solve the environmental catastrophe.

There are problems in how environmentalism communicates itself. Well-crafted environmental humor offers valuable (but certainly not flawless) solutions. This thesis

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<sup>332</sup> Lim, D. (2001). *Slava's SnowShow review*. The Flying Inkpot Theater Reviews. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://inkpotreviews.com/oldInkpot/01reviews/01revslavsnow.html>.

<sup>333</sup> Newbury, D. (2018, September 9). *The idle american: When humor goes, there goes civilization*. Caleb and Linda Pirtle. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.calebandlindapirtle.com/idle-american-humor-goes-goes-civilization/>.

argues that climate humor acts as an effective message to increasingly important audiences, challenging their inactions and motivating more environmentally conscious behavior. But climate humor is not easy. That is exactly why it needs more funding, and it needs to be treated as a serious component of mainstream environmental communication. How can any progress be made in fighting climate change when the American public does not think that climate change matters? Environmentalism has always been performative – from personal, well-publicized online choices to flashy protest marches. This thesis recommends addition rather than subtraction: why not crack a couple jokes?

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