

REPRESENTATION OF COMMUNICATION CRISIS IN THE FILM DON'T LOOK UP

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Abstract

A mass communication crisis occurs when the media fails to convey important information accurately, comprehensively, and responsibly to the public, especially in emergency situations. The film Don't Look Up (2021) provides a poignant representation of this phenomenon, presenting a critique of the failures of modern communication systems. This study aims to examine how the film represents the mass communication crisis through symbols, narratives, and visualizations of information conflict. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis technique and Stuart Hall's representation theory as theoretical foundations. The results show three main patterns of communication crisis: the rejection of science by political elites, media dysfunction in conveying critical messages, and the impact of disinformation on public polarization. The film highlights how communication crises stem not only from technical errors but are also influenced by socio-political structures that shape public opinion through biased and systemically politicized media.

Keywords: *Communication Crisis, Mass Media, Representation, Disinformation, Film*

INTRODUCTION

A communication crisis is a condition in which the process of sending and receiving messages is disrupted, resulting in incomplete, biased, or even incorrect information received by the public. In general, a communication crisis is often defined as a disruption in communication within an organization or between individuals. However, this study specifically focuses on communication crises in the context of mass communication, namely the failure of the media to carry out its function of disseminating accurate and objective information in the midst of an emergency situation. Barton (2001) and Dowling (2002, cited in Coombs, 2007) view crises as a serious threat to an organization's reputation because they can damage its image and affect interactions with various stakeholders. In the context of mass communication, this failure becomes even more crucial because its impact can spread to public opinion en masse and influence the community's decision-making process. Hardjana (1998, in Prastya, 2011) emphasized that in crisis situations, there is an extraordinary surge in information flow that unbalances the communication system, becomes emotionally charged, and is characterized by complex interactions between interpersonal communication and mass media. At the same time, public dependence on the media increases significantly. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between crisis communication, which focuses on organizational strategies in responding to emergencies, and crisis communication, which emphasizes the failure of mass media to convey messages effectively in critical situations.

The phenomenon of mass communication failure is illustrated illustratively in Adam McKay's film Don't Look Up (2021). The film tells the story of two scientists who discover a giant comet is about to hit Earth, but their efforts to warn the public are ignored by the media and government, who are preoccupied with pursuing political issues and commercial interests. In a crisis, the mass media is the primary channel that must be activated immediately to convey initial information. If speculation is left unclarified, rumors will more quickly be believed, influence public perception, and ultimately be perceived as truth (Syam et al., 2022). In this context, Don't Look Up serves as a relevant example of how mass communication failure can exacerbate an emergency. This film is not only popular, but also explicitly presents a narrative of mass communication failure packaged in satirical language. Satire throughout history has been used to raise public awareness of important issues. In the past, satire was only done by professional satirists or certain media outlets, but now it has developed into a popular genre that is in demand by a wide audience (Crittenden et al., 2011). In Don't Look Up, satire does not merely function as

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entertainment, but also becomes an instrument of criticism against media that prioritize sensational content over truly needed information. Satire makes an actually serious story more easily accepted by many people because it is packaged with humor and satire. The use of satire in this film also makes the issue of the mass communication crisis closer to everyday life, so that audiences can more quickly grasp the critical message intended to be conveyed. The popularity of this film is reflected in Netflix data which shows *Don't Look Up* is the second most watched film in the history of the platform, with a total of 171.4 million views and 408.6 million hours of watch time (Pulver, 2025). This fact shows that the representation of mass communication failure in films has succeeded in attracting the attention of global audiences.

More broadly, this trend aligns with factual data on the crisis of trust in the media. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2021) reported a significant decline in public trust across the globe: only 51% of global respondents still trusted traditional media, 41% corporate-owned media, and 35% social media (Edelman, 2021). This condition is known as information bankruptcy, a situation where people struggle to find reliable information, particularly during a crisis. Meanwhile, the Digital News Report released by the Reuters Institute in the same year noted that trust in news declined during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the report explained that after the pandemic peaked, public trust in news actually increased, with 44% of global respondents stating that they trusted most of the news most of the time (Newman et al., 2021).

The mass communication crisis depicted in the film *Don't Look Up*, reinforced by the global trend of declining media credibility, demonstrates that communication failure is not merely a technical issue or the professionalism of journalists. Furthermore, this issue is closely related to divided public opinion, public confusion in sorting information, and political and economic interests that influence message distribution. In the current context of information overload, the media has the potential to fail to fulfill its educational and clarifying role, thereby exacerbating the impact of emergencies. To help understand how the film *Don't Look Up* depicts the mass communication crisis, this study uses Stuart Hall's theory of representation. This theory explains that representation is not merely a reflection of reality, but an active process that shapes society's perspectives (Hall, 1997, in Alamsyah, 2020). Furthermore, this study uses Roland Barthes's semiotic approach to interpret the visual and verbal signs in the film.

In the context of the mass communication crisis depicted in the film *Don't Look Up*, an important question arises regarding how the media's representation of failure to convey critical information can influence public perception and response to a real threat. This research is important because, in the current era of information disruption, mass media is often the primary source for disseminating news and warnings. If the media fails to carry out this function effectively, the public can be lost in inaccurate or biased information, thereby exacerbating the crisis. By utilizing theories from Stuart Hall and Barthes's semiotics, this study attempts to unravel the representation of mass communication failure in the film, while also demonstrating its significance in constructing a picture of the importance of credible and responsible media during a crisis. This research is expected to contribute to an increased understanding of the role of mass media in managing communication during a crisis and the importance of effective communication in maintaining public trust.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to understand how the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) represents the mass communication crisis. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study does not aim to measure communication effectiveness numerically, but rather to explore symbolic, visual, and narrative meanings related to media failure in conveying information. According to Creswell (2008, in Raco, 2010), qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups give to a social issue. A descriptive approach is used because the research results will be presented as they are according to the findings, without overly broad generalizations (Thabroni, 2022). The object of this study is the film *Don't Look Up* by Adam McKay, released in 2021 with a duration of 138 minutes. This film presents a satirical story about two scientists who try to warn the public about the dangers of a large comet, but their efforts are ignored by the mass media and the government.

This study used two types of data sources: primary and secondary. The primary data source relied on was film, which provided a firsthand perspective through visual and narrative elements. Meanwhile, secondary data sources consisted of various previously published scientific journals, which served as references and theoretical foundations to strengthen the analysis. The data collection technique employed in this study was document analysis, which included a review of film documents and previous research. Film, as a form of documentation, provides rich visual and narrative insights, while previous research provides important context and references for the analysis. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic method for examining and evaluating documents, both printed and electronic. In this process, the researcher screened the film repeatedly to ensure

consistent observations. During the observations, the researcher examined scenes and dialogue within the film, described scenes that reflected failures in mass communication, and identified visual elements related to the research theme, such as disinformation, disregard for science, and politicization of messages. Furthermore, previous research was used to validate the findings of the film analysis. By referring to previously published results, researchers can compare and confirm the conclusions drawn from the film and strengthen the arguments put forward in this study. Previous research also provides broader context for the issues raised, making the analysis more comprehensive and informed. Furthermore, previous research is used to validate the findings found in the film analysis. By referring to previously published results, researchers can compare and confirm the conclusions drawn from the film and strengthen the arguments put forward in this study. Previous research also provides broader context for the issues raised, making the analysis more comprehensive and informed.

The data analysis method in this study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. According to Barthes, semiotics aims to uncover the meaning contained in visual and verbal signs that appear in the media (Kevinia et al., 2024). According to Sobur (2009, in Talani et al., 2023), Semiotics can be used to analyze visual communication in films, advertisements, or works of popular culture. The first step involves identifying scenes closely related to the dynamics of mass communication. These scenes are then classified based on the communication context, such as the presentation of scientific information, media framing of messages, and public reaction. From all the scenes, several are selected that are considered most prominent in representing the mass communication crisis for in-depth analysis. The limit on the number of scenes analyzed is set to maintain the focus of the study so as not to expand into less relevant aspects, while also ensuring an in-depth examination of the most representative scenes.

This research uses one main theory: Stuart Hall's representation theory, which states that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but an active process that shapes society's perspective. Hall (1997, in Alamsyah, 2020) explains that language, symbols, and images create specific meanings. This theory helps researchers understand how the film "Don't Look Up" constructs a picture of media communication failure. The data analysis stage was carried out in stages. First, researchers identified visual and verbal signs in selected scenes. Second, researchers read the denotative meaning of each sign. Third, the connotative meaning was interpreted by considering the film's social, political, and cultural context. The final stage was to match the findings with Stuart Hall's representation theory to explain how the construction of meaning about the mass communication crisis was formed in "Don't Look Up." Through this methodology, the research is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of how popular media such as films can shape society's understanding of communication issues during a crisis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) presents an intense representation of the mass communication crisis through eight key scenes rich in visual, verbal, and symbolic signs. This finding supports Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which states that media is not only a mirror of reality, but also an active construction of social meaning (Hall, 1997 in Alamsyah, 2020). At this stage, the 138-minute film was analyzed by dividing the storyline into several scenes that represent the dynamics of the mass communication crisis. This study identified eight main scenes, each of which reflects the failure of mass communication in conveying crisis information accurately and transparently to the public. These scenes were arranged based on the chronology of their appearance in the film, from the first minute to the climactic scene near the end.

a. Scene 1– Press Conference at the White House

Minutes 00:17:58 – 00:24:08

Scene description: Kate Dibiasky and Dr. Randall Mindy are present in the White House presidential suite. They present scientific data that a 9-kilometer-wide comet is certain to impact Earth in 6 months. On the table is a paper containing a graph of the comet's path approaching Earth. In the room, President Janie Orlean, her son, who is also the Chief of Staff, and several high-ranking officials appear more interested in political calculations than public safety. Jason, the Chief of Staff and the President's son, repeatedly mocks Kate's presentation. The President chooses to "wait a few weeks" before releasing the information to the public.



Figure 1. Atmosphere of the Presidential Room



Figure 2. President Carrying Paper



Figure 3. President Orlean



Figure 4. Jason's expression

Figure 1 shows the atmosphere of the White House presidential room where Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, assisted by Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe are presenting scientific data about a comet that threatens the earth, on the other side of the room are President Janie Orlean, Chief of Staff Jason who is also the son of the president and also several White House staff. Denotatively this scene shows a formal presentation that should be a crucial moment for decision making. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the attitude shown by President Orlean, Jason, and White House staff who seem to underestimate the issue discussed indicates a failure of communication at the highest level of government, in this case at the presidential level. Evidence that the President, Jason, and White House staff underestimate the issue is attached in figures 2, 3, 4, and also the dialogue that occurred while discussing the comet that threatens the earth. Figure 2 shows President Orleans holding a piece of paper containing a graph of a comet's trajectory, a visual representation of scientific data presented by scientists. One of the dialogues contains:

Dr. Mindy: "Using the Gaussian method for orbit determination and an average astrometric uncertainty of 0.04 arcseconds, we ask/" interrupted
 President Orlean: "What is that?"

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Jason: "I'm so bored, just tell me what it is! Seriously, stop it."

Denotatively, this scene depicts a valid scientific document being met with a negative response. This interaction connotatively suggests that the scientific evidence presented is being trivialized. The President's response, "What's that?", demonstrates his lack of understanding of the scientific terminology used. According to Metcalfe (2019), in *Science Communication*, this attitude reflects a rejection of the complexity of science, especially when it aligns with specific interests. In one scene, after Dr. Oglethorpe explains who Dr. Mindy and Kate are, a dialogue appears indicating that President Orlean and Jason are discussing the upcoming midterm elections, planning that news of this disaster could disrupt the midterm elections and disrupt Congress.

President Orlean: "Hey, all right. When are the midterm elections?"

Jason: "3 weeks."

President Orleans: "If this gets out sooner, Congress will be free. Then, there's nothing we can do."

Jason: "It will be a dead end."

President Orleans: "The times are terrible"

Denotatively, this dialogue suggests that President Orleans and Jason are planning their political strategy. They identify election timing as a crucial factor that could influence public response to news of the disaster. This reflects political interests trumping public safety concerns. This scene implicitly demonstrates how scientific issues are reduced to mere political tools. Through Stuart Hall's theory of representation, it is clear that the Orleans government deliberately crafted a narrative that shifted the focus from the real threat of the comet to a mere election issue. Hall (1997) in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* explains how powerful groups produce meaning to maintain hegemony—exactly what the Orleans government did. This demonstrates the mechanisms of power by which scientific facts are manipulated to serve political interests (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Figure 3 shows President Orleans, who, instead of focusing on the presentation, appears busy looking for his cigarette, exhibiting relaxed body gestures and a less serious facial expression. This is visual evidence of the president's lack of focus and disinterest. Disfocus or distraction to personal matters during important interactions can visually indicate a lack of engagement or different priorities. According to Peräkylä et al., (2023), by turning away from the speaker, one demonstrates active disengagement, actually doing something to divert one's attention and perception away from the speaker. Figure 4 shows Jason's expression, which appears to belittle and insult Kate's presentation, as indicated by the gesture of lifting one corner of his lips. This expression, according to Ekman & Heider (1988), is a hallmark of contempt, where the corners of the lips are pulled up and tightened either on only one side of the face or with varying intensity on both sides. Denotatively, Jason's facial expression is visual evidence of a negative judgmental attitude towards what Kate conveyed. This is in line with the findings of Benitez-Quiroz et al., (2016) that humans express negative moral judgments using one of three facial expressions: anger, disgust, or contempt.

Jason's dismissive gesture connotatively functions as an attempt to discredit the message and the messenger, because as Gillis & Nilsen (2017) explain, this kind of incongruity (dismissive gesture) creates ambiguity, which can make the speaker, in this case Kate, be perceived as a less credible source of information. In the context of power communication, as described by Burgoon & Dunbar, (2006), dismissive facial expressions and body language are nonverbal strategies often used to assert dominance while demeaning the interlocutor or information deemed undesirable. This shows that the rejection of scientific facts is not only passive, but also active through non-verbal intimidation efforts, creating an environment that is not conducive to the delivery of truth. This communication crisis is seen when this dismissive attitude hinders constructive dialogue and hinders a better understanding of the existing threat.

The White House press conference scene in *Don't Look Up* vividly represents a mass communication crisis rooted in the failure of the political elite to carry out their function of disseminating accurate and objective information in the midst of an emergency situation. Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, as scientists who bring crucial facts about the comet threat, are faced with dismissive attitudes, lack of focus, and condescending nonverbal expressions from President Janie Orlean, Jason (Chief of Staff), and White House staff. The President's response of not understanding scientific terms ("What is that?") and Jason's display of boredom and contempt ("I'm so bored, just tell me what it is! Seriously, stop it") connotatively indicates a rejection of science and an attempt to discredit the message and the messenger. This attitude, reinforced by the President's busy looking for a cigarette and Jason's dismissive expression, creates an environment that is not conducive to truth-telling and hinders constructive dialogue.

The communication crisis occurring here is not simply a technical error in information delivery, but rather a structural failure of politicized mass media. Political elites, who should be the bridge of information to the public, are instead blocking access to the dissemination of scientific messages in order to safeguard political interests and the image of power. This aligns with the focus of research on mass communication crises, namely the failure of the media to carry out their function of disseminating accurate and objective information in emergency situations. In this context, "media" refers not only to traditional communication channels but also to key actors controlling public discourse, including the government.

b. Scene 2 - Interview on The Daily Rip Talk Show.

Minutes 00:37:00 – 00:40:05



Figure 5. Scientists Bringing News



Figure 6. Kate Dibiasky's Emotions

Scene description: After being ignored by the White House, Dr. Mindy and Kate Dibiasky are invited onto the popular morning talk show, *The Daily Rip*, hosted by Brie Evantee and Jack Bremmer. They hope to deliver an urgent message to the public. However, the hosts are more interested in celebrity gossip and making jokes about comets, ignoring the urgency and seriousness of the information the scientists are conveying. Kate Dibiasky eventually explodes in frustration. The scene in Figure 5 denotatively shows a cheerful morning television show segment, where Dr. Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, two scientists who bring very important news, are being interviewed by two hosts, Brie Evantee and Jack Bremmer. The TV studio is filled with bright colors, cheerful background music, and the hosts' relaxed attitude, even appearing to throw out a joke, this is seen in one of the dialogues.

Dr. Mindy: "Comet Dibiasky, that's its official name. It's about 6-9 km wide. So it's going to destroy the planet, not just one house."

Jack Bremmer (host): "Okay, so as for the destruction, is it going to affect this one house on the New Jersey shore? My ex-wife's house. Can we make that happen?"

Brie Evantee (host): "You and Shelly have a great relationship. Stop it."

The dialogue shows that news that should have been considered important is instead downplayed and distorted by the host's personal interests, distracting the audience from the main discussion: that a major disaster will befall the earth. This is inconsistent with one of the functions of mass media, which is to provide accurate and educational information to the public. Instead, the interaction in this scene creates the impression that the issue raised is nothing more than a joke. In this context, the media serves as a distraction from the threatening reality, which should be the main focus. According to McQuail, one of the functions of mass media is as a socialization agent tasked with conveying important information and educating the public (Moqasa, 2012). All of these elements connotatively create the impression that the media prioritizes entertainment and sensationalism over conveying urgent information. This semiotic representation demonstrates how the mass media, in order to gain ratings and popularity, often trivializes serious issues. According to Przepiorkowski et al. (2025), the mass media often dramatizes coverage of important issues, which can actually create misperceptions and obscure public understanding of what is truly an emergency. Jack Bremmer's joke is not just a joke, but also a sign that

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connotatively demonstrates the media's tactic of diverting public attention from pressing scientific issues to more engaging discussions. This kind of incident creates a condition called information bankruptcy, a situation where the public has difficulty obtaining information about the crisis (Edelman, 2021).

Kate Dibiasky's emotional outburst in figure 6, which is visualized through her angry and disappointed facial expressions and is seen in the dialogue that contains:

Kate Dibiasky: "Sorry, was that unclear? We were trying to convey that the whole planet will be destroyed."

This was made worse by the reaction of the presenters who thought they were just joking.

Brie Evantee (Host): "You know, we're used to this, bad news made light."

Jack Bremmer (Host): "Yeah, it helps with swallowing the medicine." (Joke)

This scene depicts a semiotic representation of how scientific information can be entertaining rather than accurate, as explained in research that shows that infotainment styles emphasize sensation and entertainment, thus displacing crucial scientific substance (Davis et al., 2022). Through this presentation, the film actively shapes the audience's perception that the media has failed to fulfill its educational and clarifying functions during a crisis. This aligns with Stuart Hall's thinking, which states that media is not merely a mirror of reality but also contributes to the creation of social reality.

c. Scene 3- Kate Dibiasky Goes Viral on Social Media

Minutes 00:40:06 – 00:49:40



Figure 7. Response to Kate's Appearance



Figure 8. Scientists



Figure 9. About Kate



Figure 10. About Kate

After her emotional outburst on *The Daily Rip*, Kate Dibiasky's video went viral on social media. Figure 7 shows a graph showing that the response to Kate's television appearance was mostly directed at her showing her emotions. In Figures 9 and 10, Kate was dubbed a "crazy woman" and became the object of memes, but on the other hand, Dr. Mindy also received a positive response from the public. However, in another context, in Figure 8, Dr. Mindy was called "AIAT" which means "The Scientist I Want to Sleep With", or in one tweet by internet users called her "The Seductive Doomsday Predictor". The denotative meaning of this scene refers to what is directly depicted in the film. After Kate Dibiasky's emotional outburst on *The Daily Rip*, the video of her performance went viral on social media. Figure 7 shows a graph that records a significant spike in public response when Kate openly expressed her emotions on television. In Figures 9 and 10, Kate is labeled a "crazy woman" by netizens and becomes the object of various derogatory memes. In contrast, in Figure 8, Dr. Mindy receives a positive response, such as being nicknamed "AIAT" (The Scientist I Want to Sleep With) and "The Seductive Doomsday Predictor." These are all forms of visual representation that convey explicit information—namely, how social media reacts to two scientists who both deliver bad news but in different styles. These contrasting reactions demonstrate that public response on social media is not only influenced by the content of the message, but also depends heavily on who delivers it and how their identity is socially framed, as explained by Taylor et al., (2024) that audience perception and engagement in social media are more influenced by the identity markers of the speaker than the content of the communication.

Meanwhile, the connotative meaning of this scene implies an imbalance in how the public and the media interpret gender-based communication expressions. The emotional Kate is negatively positioned and symbolically harassed through memes and taunts, reflecting the phenomenon of hostile sexism in the digital space, a form of sexism that demeans women, viewing them as inferior, overly emotional, or perceived as using sexual attraction to manipulate men (Glick & Fiske, 1997). In contrast, the calmer Dr. Mindy receives a positive response, albeit in the form of seemingly friendly but sexualized compliments and positions her as a gender-ideal figure, reflecting a form of benevolent sexism—an attitude that appears positive toward individuals based on their traditional roles, but subtly reinforces gender stereotypes and inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 1997). This phenomenon exacerbates the mass communication crisis because society no longer judges the content of a message based on how important or true the information is, or on how credible the person delivering it is. Instead, judgments are more influenced by factors inherent in the speaker, such as gender, physical appearance, or the way they speak. Kate's emotional actions also prompted a more public reaction on social media.

d. Scene 4— Government Announcements and Chaos on Social Media

Minutes 00:55:32 – 00:55:53



Figure 11. Scandal



Figure 12. Comments



Figure 13. Information



Figure 14. Confidence Level

Following a series of events that occurred after information about the comet disaster spread, the government decided to take action to deal with this disaster, the government immediately held a press conference to explain their plan to handle the disaster. However, when planning this press conference was being carried out, it turned out that there was another reason the government wanted to hold this press conference immediately. A few days earlier, President Orlean was caught in a pornography scandal with one of the Supreme Court candidates. President Orlean was afraid that the scandal would cause him to lose the midterm elections, so he planned the press conference as soon as possible. Not only that, President Orlean also used scapegoats as an excuse for why the new government was acting on this comet. President Orlean also added that there would be people called "heroes" in this disaster response mission, the word hero is used to dramatize the government's efforts in dealing with the disaster. After the press conference, social media exploded in a chaos of information.

Mobile phone and computer screens were filled with various posts about fears that they would die, and dark memes about the certainty of the apocalypse ("We are all gonna die"), short videos blaming Kate Dibiasky with the hashtag #BlameKate. On the other hand, public confidence in President Orleans actually soared, ironically after he was caught up in a pornography scandal, demonstrating how easily public opinion can be swayed by sensationalism and dramatized narratives. Online news articles with provocative headlines questioned the veracity of the comet, further muddying the waters. This chaos created an environment where fact and fiction mixed, and emotion dominated rationality. The scene "Government Announcement and Chaos on Social Media" denotatively depicts two interconnected main events: a government press conference led by President Orleans, and the subsequent explosion of information on social media. The visualization of mobile phone and computer screens filled with various posts, memes, and hashtags directly demonstrates the impact of the government announcement on the digital space.

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Connotatively, this government press conference was not merely an attempt to address the crisis, but rather a political maneuver driven by President Orleans's personal interests. Figure 11 shows that news of the pornography scandal involving him was the main trigger for the accelerated announcement, demonstrating how political agendas and personal image can override the true urgency of a crisis. As Bright (2017) points out, when the media agenda is dominated by political events, crisis communication is hampered and efforts to obtain recovery resources are also hampered. President Orleans' use of "scapegoats" to explain the government's delay in action is a communication strategy aimed at shifting responsibility and blaming others. This is in line with the view that organizations and their members tend to seek to avoid and shift blame to avoid punishment or social sanctions (Roulet & Pichler, 2020).

Following the announcement, social media was filled with a chaotic mix of information. The meme "We are all gonna die" reflected public cynicism and despair, mixed with dark humor—a form of dark humor that often emerges as a coping mechanism in crisis situations. According to Manly (2022), for some, memes can be a means of providing meaning and alleviating psychological stress in threatening situations (Colombo, 2022). However, this use of humor can also create an emotional distance from reality, making the public less alert to real threats. The viral hashtag #BlameKate demonstrates society's tendency to seek out targets of anger and blame individuals, especially those who bring bad news, rather than focusing on the core issues. This scapegoating phenomenon often occurs when the public feels powerless and seeks simple explanations for complex issues, a dynamic reinforced by social media algorithms that favor emotional content. As an analysis by The New Inquiry explains, social media functions as a machine for horizontal desire and competition, creating an environment where tension is transferred to "innocent victims" through sharing, retweeting, and hashtagging (Shullenberger, 2016).

The surge in public trust in President Orleans following his scandal demonstrates how easily public opinion can be influenced by dramatized and sensational narratives, even when they contradict logic or morality. This underscores society's vulnerability to information manipulation and post-truth politics. In a post-truth society, objective facts become less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs (Popescu-Sarry, 2024). Online news articles with provocative headlines questioning the veracity of the comet further exacerbated the situation, creating an environment where facts and hoaxes are questioned by all. This scene comprehensively represents a mass communications crisis caused by the manipulation of information by political elites for personal and strategic interests. Instead of conveying accurate and transparent information, the government exploits the crisis as a means to project a positive image and divert public attention from key issues. This chaos is further exacerbated by the role of social media, which has become an open space for the spread of disinformation, blame games, and sensational content. This situation has led to a decline in public trust in the veracity of information and official institutions. This situation reflects a systemic failure in mass communications, where scientific objectivity is sacrificed for narratives that benefit those in power, leaving the public trapped in a stream of conflicting and difficult-to-verify information.

- e. **Scene 5**— President Orlean's meeting with BASH CEO Peter Isherwell, and White House staff
Minutes 01:08:33 – 01:10:47



Figure 15. Joint Notification



Figure 16. Information

After the failure of the government's disaster relief mission, President Orleans held a meeting with Peter Isherwell, CEO of the giant technology company BASH, and White House staff. BASH is a technology company with sophisticated algorithms and great influence. In this meeting, Isherwell convinced the President and White House staff, including Dr. Mindy, that the comet was not a threat, but a trillion-dollar business opportunity due to its rare mineral content. From this, it was learned that the mission to destroy the comet was not a failure, but was canceled in favor of the mining plan by the BASH Company. The scene "President Orleans Meeting with BASH CEO Peter Isherwell and White House Staff" denotatively depicts a formal meeting in which a world leader discusses with a major technology company CEO and government staff. The visualization of a serious meeting room and the presence of important figures indicates a crucial decision-making moment.

Connotatively, this scene serves as an important illustration of how economic and corporate interests can directly influence and even undermine communication during a crisis. Many corporations during the pandemic prioritized communications emphasizing "security, partnership, and image" over prioritizing public risk awareness. They frequently utilized strategies such as "apologia" and an emphasis on harmonious relationships, potentially minimizing the urgency of the crisis and concealing responsibility (Metcalf, 2019). Isherwell's statement assuring the President that the comet was a "trillion-dollar business opportunity" rather than a threat demonstrates an attempt to reframe the crisis narrative from an existential threat to an economic opportunity. This is a classic example of how corporate actors with significant economic power can manipulate public information and policy for financial gain (Stiglitz, 2019). This is illustrated in the dialogue:

Peter Isherwell: "How thrilled we were at BASH when our astrogeologists discovered, and then determined, that this comet hurtling towards us from deep space contains at least \$32 trillion worth of vital matter." This scene denotatively depicts a business negotiation process. However, connotatively, it serves as a crucial illustration of how economic and corporate interests can directly influence and even undermine communication during a crisis. Isherwell's conversation with the President and White House staff suggests that they prioritize profit over public safety. This situation demonstrates that communication crises arise not only from media errors, but also from vested interests deliberately manipulating information for personal gain. These behind-the-scenes forces create false narratives that are then disseminated through the mass media. The film sharply constructs the corrupt relationship between political and corporate power, which actively shapes the public narrative for financial gain, eroding trust in accurate information. The cancellation of the comet destruction mission in favor of the mining plan by BASH, previously described as a "failed disaster relief mission," implicitly reveals that the failure was the result of deliberate decisions, not technical incompetence. This highlights the systemic corruption in which political and corporate power collude to prioritize profit over public safety.

This scene clearly demonstrates how a mass communication crisis can arise due to the interference of parties with economic interests, particularly large corporations, in the public decision-making process. As a result, crucial information about the comet threat is manipulated and directed toward a narrative that benefits business, while the real danger is ignored. This demonstrates a serious failure of the mass communication system, as truth and public safety are sacrificed for profit. The opaque collaboration between the government and corporations also creates an information vacuum or even the deliberate dissemination of misinformation, preventing the public from receiving accurate explanations and ultimately unable to respond appropriately to the situation.

f. Scene 6– Dr. Mindy's emotional outburst on The Daily Rip talk show
Minutes 01:29:26 – 01:33:12



Figure 17. Expression

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Following her encounter with Peter Isherwell, where she witnessed firsthand how economic interests trump scientific truth, Dr. Mindy was invited back onto The Daily Rip. This time, she was expected to support the government and BASH's optimistic narrative about the comet mining plan. However, her pent-up frustration and anger finally exploded on air. She could no longer restrain herself from delivering the manipulated truth, lashing out at the host and the media for consistently downplaying the urgency of the situation. The scene "Dr. Mindy's Emotional Outburst on The Daily Rip" denotatively depicts Dr. Mindy in a highly emotional situation, where she is faced with pressure to deliver a message that contradicts her scientific beliefs. This is illustrated in her dialogue, which includes:

Dr. Mindy: "Stop pretending to be nice! Sorry, but not everything has to sound smart, or charming, or likable. Sometimes we need to be able to talk to each other, we need to listen. Let's establish once again, there's a huge comet headed toward Earth. The reason we know there's a comet is because we've seen it, we've seen it with our telescopes. Oh my gosh, we took pictures! What more proof do we need? If we can't at least agree that a giant comet the size of Mount Everest hurtling toward Earth is not a good thing, what's wrong with us?" Connotatively, this scene reflects the deepening conflict between science and economic interests. Dr. Mindy, who previously sought to convey scientific truth, is now caught in a situation where she is expected to support a narrative that is not in line with the facts. Prioritizing economic interests over scientific truth can have disastrous consequences, especially in times of crisis (Brossard & Lewenstein, 2009). Her emotional outburst on live broadcast is a manifestation of her deep frustration with a system that prioritizes profit over public safety. This reflects the phenomenon of "marginalized science," where scientists' voices are often ignored or manipulated for political and economic gain. When distorted information is disseminated through the media, it can lead to a decline in public trust in experts. Social media-based misinformation can threaten public health by spreading misleading information and undermining trust in experts and credible institutions (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025).

This scene also highlights the role of the media in shaping public narratives. Hosts who downplay the urgency of the situation reflect a media attitude that is often more interested in sensation than substance, which can contribute to misinformation and disinformation. Media that focuses on sensation can hinder public understanding of scientific issues, making critical issues difficult to understand correctly and fully (Barsoum, 2014). This scene clearly depicts the mass communication crisis that arises from the clash between scientific facts and economic interests, and how the media plays a role in shaping public opinion. Dr. Mindy represents the voice of scientists who strive to convey the truth, but must face narratives controlled by political and corporate forces. Her emotional reaction demonstrates the importance of honest and open communication, especially in critical situations where the public desperately needs accurate information. Unfortunately, the media fails to provide adequate space for credible scientific voices, resulting in conflicting information and leaving the public confused about what is factual and what is merely a narrative crafted for certain interests.

g. Scene 7– "Don't Look Up" vs. "Just Look Up" Campaign (Polarization of Public Opinion and the Role of the Media)

Minutes 01:38:41 – 01:41:11



Figure 18. Panic



Figure 19. Announcement News

As time passed and the comet became more visible, society split into two politicized camps: "Don't Look Up" supporters who believed the government and media narrative that downplayed the threat, and "Just Look Up" supporters who believed the scientists. This campaign involved opposing pop songs, merchandise, and mass demonstrations. The scenes of the "Don't Look Up" and "Just Look Up" campaigns denotatively depict the social dynamics that emerged in response to the comet threat, where society was divided into two main streams of views. Representations in the form of public demonstrations, popular songs, and various merchandise products from each camp demonstrate how major issues can enter the realm of popular culture and become part of collective expression. This phenomenon demonstrates that a public issue, including a scientific one, can undergo a politicization process when framed in the form of symbols that are easily accessible to the wider public. According to (Bay, 2018), popular culture debates on social media are often politicized, even with strategic objectives that are not always directly related to the substance of the issue. This confirms that media and popular culture can be important tools in forming public opinion, as well as a space for contesting the meaning of an ongoing issue.

Connotatively, this division reflects the phenomenon of polarization that often occurs in modern society, where supposedly objective information is distorted by political and media interests. In this context, President Orleans stated, "Do you know why they're telling you to look up? Do you know why? Because they want you to be afraid. They want you to look up because they're looking down on you." This statement reflects how the government narrative attempts to distract the public from real threats by creating fear and uncertainty. Politicized and polarizing news tends to lead the public to follow political figures more than scientists, creating a public communication space tainted by ideological bias and widening divisions in values and beliefs (Hart et al., 2020). On the other hand, the "Just Look Up" campaign, which trusts scientists, reflects an effort to restore focus to scientific facts and truth. This campaign demonstrates how communities can organize and fight for the truth, despite facing significant challenges from dominant narratives. Public engagement with science has been shown to improve the public's scientific literacy, particularly in crisis situations such as pandemics. This shows that participation in science-based movements can strengthen individuals' abilities to recognize and counter disinformation (Gu & Feng, 2022).

This scene depicts the mass communication crisis that arises from the polarization of information and the strong influence of media and political forces in shaping the public narrative. The division of society into two opposing camps reflects how the voice of science is marginalized, while the issues raised are instead framed according to certain interests. When scientific facts are no longer the basis for forming a common understanding, disinformation becomes easier to spread and makes it difficult for the public to distinguish between true and misleading information. Through these two contrasting campaigns, the film actively constructs how different narratives can divide society, shaping the audience's understanding of the dangers of information polarization. The "Don't Look Up" and "Just Look Up" campaigns not only symbolize ideological differences, but also show how differences in perspective can create communication chaos and undermine collective efforts in facing real threats.

h. Scene 8– Mining Mission Failure and Mass Panic (Consequences of Disinformation and Collapse of Trust)
Minutes 01:56:46 – 02:03:34



Figure 20. News in the Media

The BASH comet mining mission failed miserably, causing the comet to break into several pieces, still destined to impact Earth. The media, which had previously heralded the mission's success, suddenly reported on the failure and mass panic. A previously divided society was plunged into fear and chaos. The scene "Mining Mission Failure and Mass Panic" denotatively depicts the consequences of the decisions made by the government and BASH. The visualization of the failed mission and comet fragments heading toward Earth created an atmosphere of tension and panic. The previously optimistic media now reversed course, reporting the failure with a tone of panic. Connotatively, this mission's failure reflects the impact of decisions based on economic interests rather than scientific truth. When the mining mission, promised as a solution, failed, the previously divided society became united in fear. As explained by Berger et al. (2021), policymakers often ignore sound scientific foundations and misinterpret situations in complex contexts, resulting in inappropriate decisions with potentially detrimental consequences. The media, which previously played a role in constructing an optimistic narrative, now functioned as a spreader of panic. The media, which previously played a role in constructing optimistic narratives, now serves as a spreader of panic. This demonstrates the media's significant role in shaping public perception, as media framing has been shown to directly influence public behavior, depending on the cultural context and prevailing social situation (Hutagalung, 2024). The resulting mass panic also reflects how society can react emotionally to changing information.

This scene depicts a mass communication crisis that arises from the failure of decision-making that is not based on science and inconsistent information dissemination to the public. The failure of the BASH company's comet mining mission shows how economic interests can override public safety, while the media contributes to panic through the uncontrolled dissemination of information. This situation creates confusion and fear among the public, worsening an already urgent situation. Overall, the film dramatically constructs the ultimate consequences of a communication crisis and, through its narrative, shapes the audience's understanding of the importance of accurate information, transparent communication, and the role of public trust in dealing with a crisis.

Discussion Analysis This study found that the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) presents an intense representation of the mass communication crisis through eight key scenes rich with visual, verbal, and symbolic signs. This finding supports Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which states that media is not merely a mirror of reality but an active construction of social meaning (Hall, 1997 in Alamsyah, 2020). In this film, three main patterns emerge that indicate a communication crisis and exacerbate the emergency situation. First, the systematic obstacles faced by scientists in conveying messages; second, the role of mass media, which tends to dramatize and simplify messages; and third, the impact of this crisis on society, which becomes polarized and trapped in disinformation.

First, there are the systematic obstacles scientists face in conveying crucial scientific information. Dr. Randall Mindy and Kate Dibiasky, as messengers of truth, are consistently confronted by a dismissive political bureaucracy, a biased media, and corporate interests that dismiss facts for profit. Their frustration and helplessness in the face of a system unwilling to listen to scientific truth is a powerful illustration of how vital information can be distorted or ignored at the highest levels of power. The scene at the White House, where President Orleans chooses to "wait and see" despite irrefutable scientific evidence, connotatively demonstrates the politicization of the message and the rejection of science for short-term political gain. This attitude, as Metcalfe (2019) explains in *Science Communication*, reflects a rejection of the complexities of science, especially when it aligns with particular interests. Furthermore, this scene also demonstrates the mechanisms of power where scientific facts are

manipulated to serve political interests, as described in Nyhan & Reifler's (2010) research on biased political understanding. The prioritization of economic interests over scientific truth, evident in President Orlean's meeting with BASH CEO Peter Isherwell, can have disastrous consequences, especially in times of crisis (Brossard & Lewenstein 2009). Dr. Mindy and Kate Dibiasky's frustration reflects the phenomenon of "marginalized science," where scientists' voices are often ignored or manipulated for political and economic gain. Second, the role of mass media, which tends to frame messages with sensationalism, oversimplification, and political interests. The film sharply criticizes media that prioritize ratings and popularity over their responsibility as conveyors of objective information. An interview on *The Daily Rip* is the most obvious example, where the urgency of the comet threat is reduced to jokes and celebrity gossip. The cheerful television studio and relaxed host, despite discussing the potential apocalypse, semiotically illustrate how mass media, in order to gain profits, often trivializes serious issues and creates a situation of "information bankruptcy," a situation where important truths are drowned out amidst a flood of shallow and irrelevant information.

This film explicitly shows that the media no longer plays a role as an objective conveyor of information, but rather as a party pursuing business profits or certain political agendas. This phenomenon is reinforced by research by Przepiorkowski et al. (2025), which states that mass media often dramatize coverage of important issues, which can actually create false perceptions and obscure public understanding of emergency situations. Furthermore, Barsoum (2014) also highlights how media that focuses on sensationalism can hinder public understanding of scientific issues, making critical issues difficult to understand correctly and comprehensively. This condition of information bankruptcy is also noted by Edelman (2021) as a situation where the public has difficulty finding reliable information, especially during a crisis. This is in line with one of the functions of mass media, which should be to provide accurate and educational information to the public, as explained by (McQuail in Moqasa, 2012).

Third, the impact of the communication crisis on society, which is left confused, polarized, and struggling to distinguish fact from fiction. The viral Kate Dibiasky social media story and the information chaos following the government's announcement demonstrate how digital platforms, despite their rapid dissemination, also serve as fertile ground for disinformation, cyberbullying, and divisive opinions. The "Don't Look Up" versus "Just Look Up" campaigns dramatically illustrate the polarization of public opinion fueled by the politicization of information, where truth becomes relative and society is divided. This is exacerbated by narratives that shift the focus from scientific substance to physical appearance or scandal, undermining the authority of science and making the public vulnerable to manipulation. This polarization of public opinion aligns with the findings of Hart et al. (2020) who explained that politicized and polarizing news tends to lead people to follow political figures more than scientists, creating a public communication space polluted by ideological bias. Furthermore, Popescu-Sarry (2024) also suggests that in a post-truth society, objective facts become less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs. The phenomenon of scapegoating, as seen in the hashtag #BlameKate, often occurs when the public feels powerless and seeks simple explanations for complex problems, a dynamic reinforced by social media algorithms that rely on emotional content (Shullenberger, 2016).

Through these scenes, Roland Barthes's semiotics helps us understand the visual and verbal signs that shape the meaning of the communication crisis. Each sign has complementary denotative and connotative meanings. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach (Kevinia et al., 2024; Sobur, 2009), the film displays visual and verbal signs that construct critical meaning. Visuals such as a cellphone screen filled with contradictory comments, the scientists' frustrated expressions, and the glamorous television studio setting simultaneously convey denotative and connotative meanings. Scenes such as Jack Bremmer's deliberate diversion from the main threat to irrelevant issues illustrate how media and politics play a role in the strategy of "distracting," so that the main message becomes obscured, manipulated, and ultimately loses its urgency. Denotatively, the scenes depict things like the White House briefing room, a lavish television studio, image-conscious politicians, anxious scientists, and a divided public. The dialogues directly convey information about comets, political direction, or superficial media commentary. For example, in the scene "The Daily Rip," we literally see two presenters and two scientists talking on television. However, the connotative meaning of these signs is actually deeper and more critical. The glamorous TV studio with the presenters always smiling even though they are discussing a major disaster shows how serious issues are trivialized. This depicts a media that prioritizes entertainment and image over its responsibility to provide important information.

The frustrated expressions on Dr. Mindy and Kate Dibiasky's faces demonstrate the tenuous position of truth in the face of power. Humor and satire, embodied in memes or pop songs about comets, also highlight how serious issues can be transformed into commercial entertainment, diminishing the public's perception of their importance. Other visual cues, such as phone screens filled with conflicting comments or people divided between the "Look Up" and "Don't Look Up" camps, illustrate how public opinion is divided and difficult to reach

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consensus in an era of information overload. Barthes's semiotics, which aims to uncover meaning in visual and verbal signs (Kevinia et al., 2024), is highly relevant in analyzing visual communication in film (Sobur, 2009, cited in Talani et al., 2023). From the perspective of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the film *Don't Look Up* not only shows the crisis of mass communication, but also actively creates a certain perspective in the minds of its audience. This film uses language, symbols, and images to instill the meaning that the media has failed to carry out its function. In this context, the film *Don't Look Up* uses Stuart Hall's reflective representation model. This model argues that meaning already exists in the real world, and language (in this case, film as a form of visual and narrative language) functions to reflect or reflect that meaning. However, Hall also emphasizes that representation is not a passive reflection, but an active process that shapes society's perspective (Hall, 1997, in (Alamsyah, 2020).

The film reflects the realities of communication crises occurring in the real world, such as government failure to respond to threats, media sensationalism, and the polarization of public opinion. Scenes such as the White House press conference that belittles science, the entertainment-focused interview on *The Daily Rip*, and the "Don't Look Up" vs. "Just Look Up" campaign are all reflections of phenomena we frequently see in society. While reflective, the film does more than simply present raw facts. Through satirical narrative and dramatization, the film actively shapes the audience's perspective on these issues. The media's shallow, ratings-hungry, and easily influenced by political or corporate interests is not merely a reflection of reality but is deliberately constructed to critique and raise public awareness. The film "reflects" reality in a way that is amplified and framed to highlight certain issues, thus influencing the audience's interpretation.

Furthermore, the use of satire also reinforces how the film critiques media behavior while raising audience awareness. The use of satire in this film is an important tool in the process of constructing meaning. With satire, the film can convey sharp criticism of media that prioritizes sensation over truly needed information, but still in a way that is easily understood by the audience. Humor and satire make the theme of the mass communication crisis feel closer to everyday life, making its message more easily accepted. Crittenden et al. (2011) also note that satire has developed into a popular genre that is sought after by a wide audience to raise public awareness of important issues. This film also indirectly encourages viewers to be more critical of information sources, question the narratives they consume, and recognize that many interests outside of journalism can influence the dissemination of messages. Thus, this film not only represents the communication crisis, but also seeks to build critical awareness in its audience about the phenomenon.

The results of this study demonstrate significant implications in helping us understand how the mass communication crisis occurs today. The film *Don't Look Up* can be seen as a powerful form of social criticism because it shows that communication failure is not just a matter of technical errors or a lack of journalistic professionalism. This problem also relates to the division of opinion in society, the confusion people have when it comes to distinguishing between reliable information, and the influence of political and economic interests that influence how messages are disseminated. The film clearly demonstrates a condition known as information bankruptcy, a situation where people have difficulty finding reliable information, especially during emergencies. Furthermore, the connection between the film's story and the trend of declining public trust in the media worldwide in 2021, as recorded in the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021), makes this film even more relevant. Although a work of fiction, *Don't Look Up* successfully captures the essence of the communication challenges facing modern society, where the media sometimes fails to fulfill its educational and clarifying functions. As a result, the crisis can worsen. Therefore, this film is not only intended to entertain, but also to shape the public's perspective on communication issues amidst the rapid flow of information, while also encouraging the audience to be more critical and more aware of the various interests at play behind the mass media.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the representation of the communication crisis with a focus on mass communication in the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Roland Barthes's semiotics. The main findings of this study consistently show that the film successfully represents the mass communication crisis as a complex phenomenon rooted in three main patterns: systematic obstacles in the delivery of scientific information, the role of mass media that tends to frame messages with sensationalism and political interests, and the impact of polarization and information confusion on society. The film effectively depicts how scientists' efforts to convey the scientific truth about the comet threat are ignored and manipulated by political elites for short-term interests, both political and economic. This representation is reinforced by the disdain for science and disinformation efforts carried out by those in power, which is in line with the concept of manipulating scientific facts to maintain political interests. Furthermore, the film sharply depicts the failure of mass media to carry out its educational and clarifying functions amidst the crisis. The media is depicted as prioritizing ratings and sensationalism, reducing crucial issues to mere entertainment, ultimately creating a state of information bankruptcy

where the public struggles to distinguish accurate information from biased narratives. This depiction is consistent with criticisms of media that dramatize news and ignore scientific substance for the sake of popularity. The impact of this communication crisis on society is also clearly depicted, namely the emergence of polarized public opinion and difficulties in sorting information. Society is depicted as divided, vulnerable to manipulation, and inclined to follow dramatized narratives rather than objective facts. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the role of social media as fertile ground for disinformation and scapegoating, which erode public trust in credible sources of information. Through the use of Stuart Hall's reflective representation model, *Don't Look Up* not only reflects the reality of the existing communication crisis but also actively shapes the audience's perspective on the issue. The film uses satire as an effective instrument of criticism, enabling the audience to be more critical of information sources and aware of the various interests that influence the distribution of messages in the mass media. Thus, the film serves as a powerful social critique, highlighting that the failure of mass communication is not simply a technical problem, but rather a reflection of the division of opinion, the confusion of information, and the influence of deep political and economic interests in modern society.

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