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Meme-ing while the world burns: Climate change news on Reddit and the cultural politics of platform participation

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Benjamin Litherland¹**  **and Rachel Wood²** 

Abstract

This article makes a case for the value and urgency of a cultural study's contextual approach to researching how climate change news events are interpreted by audiences. Research that applies a classically cultural studies 'bottom-up' approach to studying climate media audiences in the spaces and contexts where they encounter and negotiate meaning is surprisingly sparse in the scholarship on climate news reception. The article draws on a case study: a qualitative thematic analysis of Reddit discussion threads in which users responded to images and videos of New York City obscured by smoke from Canadian wildfires in June 2023. Analysis of the threads demonstrates how Reddit users drew upon popular culture references to films, television, video games and other media to articulate the strange and shocking nature of the images; expressed a range of ambivalent affective states from detachment to despair, anger and fear, but not hope, and shared knowledge and advice in the humorous, geeky, authentic and authoritative discursive and affective registers valued on the platform. Taking a contextual approach to researching climate media audiences reveals how the social and cultural context in which climate news stories or images are encountered plays a fundamental role in shaping understanding and feeling, and how this comes to underpin the kinds of climate politics and futures that are imagined as possible or impossible.

Keywords

Audience research, climate change, contexts of reception, fandom, popular culture, Reddit

¹Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

²Keele University, UK

Corresponding author:

Benjamin Litherland, Manchester Metropolitan University, Grosvenor East, Manchester M15 6BX, UK.

Email: B.Litherland@MMU.ac.uk

Introduction

On 7th June 2023, the skies of New York turned orange, and the air became hazy as smoke drifted over the East Coast of North America from Canadian wildfires, causing the worst day of air pollution in the US on record to that date (Oladipo, 2023). Global news stories and images of wildfires and other extreme weather events have become troublingly familiar in recent years, attributed by climate experts to anthropogenic climate change (Oladipo, 2023). Given the culturally iconic nature of the Manhattan skyline, images and video of the smoke-covered city were particularly widely shared and commented on by users across social media platforms.

This research sought to understand how online participatory interpretative communities shape how a climate news story such as this one is made meaningful by users. It is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of discussion threads on the social media platform Reddit where users responded to images and videos of New York City covered in wildfire smoke. Analysis of the case study provides insight into an experience which has become increasingly routine: encountering distressing news and scenes of climate crisis through the mediated spaces of everyday social media feeds. In the case of popular Reddit threads, on a platform known for its masculine ‘geek’ culture and gamified platform affordances (Massanari, 2015), the news and images were immediately interpreted through a lens of popular culture references and jokes, drawing on a shared cultural lexicon of films and television, video games, mediated news stories and comic books. Through and alongside this deep well of references, users also expressed and negotiated a wide range of feelings, from anger to anxiety, fear, worry or resignation, and discussed knowledge and information about the causes and impact of the disaster. This article examines how this platformed participatory culture shaped not only understanding and feeling about the wildfire smoke, but also the wider climate crisis of which this disaster was a part. We demonstrate how the reception context shapes the conditions for an overall ambivalent and bleak climate politics and future imagined by Reddit users.

One pillar of climate change strategies and solutions – spanning academic research, policy, journalism and activism – is that communication is a vital vector not only for informing the public about the causes, nature and solutions to the crisis but also for driving change in terms of climate conscious politics and practices. This informs an emphasis in research on climate *messaging*, suggesting that communication messages should and can be tailored to be more persuasive and impactful (Bolsen and Shapiro, 2018; Wong-Parodi and Feygina, 2021). This article’s central intervention is that meaning and knowledge about climate change is not generated only or even primarily from ‘top-down’ messaging but instead should always be situated and understood in the *contexts* where reception takes place. The context of reception – the social spaces, communities and cultures, online and off, where media is consumed, discussed, participated in and made meaningful – is not merely a backdrop or sidenote. Context fundamentally shapes the conditions for the generation, reproduction or contestation of climate ideologies, politics and imaginaries.

Our emphasis on the contexts and practices of reception follows long-established audience research traditions in which researchers take audience cultures and practices seriously. In an era where media consumption increasingly takes place through

participatory digital platforms, platform infrastructures and affordances and platform norms and practices also play crucial roles in shaping contexts for reception. In addition, the fragmentation and organisation of users into loose networks and groupings on and across platforms, centring around various aspects of their identities, interests and affiliations, also significantly contributes to the context for the production and sharing of meaning. In the case of Reddit, as with much of the Internet more widely, fandom continues to be a fundamental pillar of this social organisation. It is impossible to understand how the 2023 wildfires were understood without taking seriously both platform norms and cultures on Reddit and the social organisation around various identities and dispositions on the platform, including fandom. The data reveal that Reddit users' *lingua franca* encompasses fannish in-jokes, memes and references, and that these coalesce around, interact with and shape users' affective and political orientations towards climate disaster.

While the case study is specific, the experience of consuming, interpreting and participating in climate change news and events through the contexts and dynamics of everyday social media environments is not. Without dismissing the value of researching 'top-down' media messaging in climate change communication, this article emphasises that the context of consumption is just as important for understanding climate meaning making and politics. Despite this, audience context has received almost no attention in research (Ballantyne, 2016; O'Neill and Smith, 2014) in comparison to the breadth of climate reception scholarship that takes a behavioural and instrumental approach. Cultural studies as a discipline is well equipped to research the specific contexts of platform spaces and cultures and examine how they shape the conditions of possibility for encountering, understanding and negotiating climate change events. Not only do we have the tools to do this, but if we understand cultural studies as field borne of the need to respond to our current conjunctural politics, we also have an obligation to do so given the scale and urgency of the climate crisis (Ang, 2006; Miller, 2020; Pezzullo, 2016).

In the following two sections, we review the dominant communications approach to climate reception and outline the cultural studies audience research tradition the article aligns itself with before setting out the Reddit based research methodology. We then explore three themes from the Reddit analysis that evidence the importance of understanding platform contexts and cultures in studying climate news reception. The first theme, 'popular culture references', explores how references to apocalyptic, dystopian, science fiction and other texts brought ideological meanings to bear in the interpretation of wildfire images. The second theme, 'ambivalent affect', argues that the experiential senses and feelings in users' comments veered between detachment, sadness and anger, contributing to an overall sense of hopelessness and resignation particular to Reddit's platform culture and politics. Third, in 'knowledge flows', we examine how knowledge, information and advice about the wildfires were valued only when expressed through the 'affective-discursive' register of Reddit's platform culture: humorous yet sincere, authoritative and authentic. In the conclusion, we reflect on the value and urgency of re-centring cultural studies audience research theory and methods in contemporary climate reception research.

Climate news audiences in platform contexts

Research on the cultural politics of climate change has demonstrated that knowledge, meaning and feeling about ‘the environment’ is culturally constructed and mediated through various contexts (Cox, 2010; Doyle, 2011). This scholarship has shown the role of mediation in enabling and precluding formations of climate politics, (in)action and struggle (Goodman et al., 2022; Pezzullo, 2016). Despite the breadth of cultural studies scholarship, empirical research that explores audience participation and practices from the ground up remains scarce. Little has changed since reviews by O’Neill and Smith (2014) and Ballantyne (2016), which highlight that climate change media audiences are comparatively under-researched, and the research which does exist is social science communications focused rather than ethnographic. The prevailing research paradigm here focuses on measuring the effects of ‘top-down’ media messaging on audience understanding, intentions and actions, rather than understanding audiences on their own terms. Such research aims to make actionable recommendations to improve the efficacy of climate messages and thus improve public perceptions and behaviours.

Existing research is concerned with the ‘framing’ of climate news, referring to how elements of a news story are presented, interpreted, selected and/or emphasised. Research identifies frames such as scientific consensus, economic consequences or ethics and morality, and examines the effects of these different framings on audiences (Bolsen and Shapiro, 2018). Other studies focus on specific frames such as humour (Kaltenbacher and Drews, 2020), personal stories (Gustafson et al., 2020) or hope (Feldman and Hart, 2018; Ojala, 2012), and seek to correlate these to environmental awareness and/or pro-environmental behaviour intentions (Ojala, 2012). ‘Positive’ and ‘negative’ framings are seen to have different emotional effects (Wong-Parodi and Feygina, 2021) which will then impact environmental attitudes and behavioural intentions. There is acknowledgement within this scholarship that not every person will respond to media messages in the same fashion, with studies identifying audience ‘segmentation’ and exploring how to tailor and match different messages to audience segments (Hine et al., 2016; Holmes, 2020). In terms of methodology, many studies seek to isolate factors in media texts or behavioural interventions, and gauge their effects on participants (Meijers et al., 2022; Wong-Parodi and Feygina, 2021; Zhang and Pinto, 2021) to quantify their impact.

While this research has good intentions and potential for impact on climate interventions, it does not capture the complexity of how people use media in the context of their lives, instead seeking to isolate, control, measure and ‘nudge’ audience response. News and other media about climate change, however, are not consumed in a vacuum (or a lab). A rich tradition of cultural studies audience research, with well-developed theoretical and methodological approaches, has comprehensively demonstrated that media reception takes place in the multi-faceted contexts of everyday social and cultural lives, from family to work to leisure spaces, and now on social media, where ideological meaning is embedded, generated, negotiated and resisted (Ang, 1991; Jin and Morley, 2011; Livingstone and Das, 2013). Research has long demonstrated that awareness, knowledge and feeling about news issues and events is actively negotiated and constructed by audiences in these everyday contexts (see Conover and Miller, 2018). On social media platforms this active engagement with news has become ever more visibly and normatively

participatory – reflecting the dominant social, cultural and economic infrastructure of the Internet – meaning that comments and other user generated content like memes and videos are folded into the spectacle of news production and reception (Chadwick, 2017; Highfield, 2017). Indeed, for many audiences, the participatory, social contexts of media platforms have become the primary space of news consumption, over and above traditional broadcast, print and web news sources (Ofcom, 2023).

Research, though, that applies a classically cultural studies ‘bottom-up’ approach to studying climate media audiences in the spaces and contexts where media is actually made meaningful, whether on social media platforms or elsewhere, is sparse, and potentially non-existent. This is not merely a methodological gap but a political one. For cultural studies audience researchers, audiences are not merely instruments that respond to the ‘right’ ‘top-down’ messages and framings with the ‘right’ behaviours, they are a core part of a circuit of culture in which hegemony is secured and contested. As we reflect further in the conclusion, the theoretical and methodological tools developed and honed by cultural studies audience researchers are urgently needed to shed light on how climate issues and events are made meaningful. As noted by Grossberg (1997), one of cultural studies great legacies is showing the value of context, not only as background, but as ‘the very conditions of possibility of something’ (p. 255). Cultural studies audience and/or user research can reveal how the social and cultural context in which climate news stories or images are encountered plays a fundamental role in shaping understanding and feeling, and how this comes to underpin the kinds of climate politics and futures that are imagined as possible or impossible.

Researching Reddit

This article is based on a thematic analysis of seven Reddit threads, comprising a total of 6809 comments and replies, responding to images of New York City wildfire smoke in June 2023. Reddit is just one space in which people participate in and negotiate meaning around a climate news story, but it makes for a rich case study through which to explore the climate politics that are constructed through a highly gamified platform environment. Bogost (2023) describes Reddit’s persistent ‘ethos of dorky behaviour’, in which discussions on almost any topic, no matter how serious or trivial, are liable to descend into ‘dumb jokes, sneers, and sexual innuendo’. This ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess, 2006) draws on a distinct online set of practices, orientations and expressions that are highly referential, imitative, memetic and ambivalent (Phillips and Milner, 2018). This playful, unserious form of interaction, and its contingent politics and values, is far from niche. Indeed, over the last decade, they have become an increasingly normative and mainstream hallmark not only of Internet culture but of political discourse more broadly (Bogost, 2023; Massanari, 2024). This form of communication underpins ways of understanding and thinking about climate politics.

The culture of Reddit can largely be attributed to its distinctive platform structure and users. The site is organised into ‘subreddits’ grouped around topics or themes, often oriented towards media, pop culture, political, fan interests and identities. ‘Redditors’ contribute posts, which may contain links, images or video, and form ‘threads’ made up of user comments. Redditors are usually anonymous, identified by a username and avatar,

but data show that users are 74% male, 64% between 18 and 29 years old and 48% come from the United States (Dean, 2023). A key feature of Reddit is the ability to ‘up vote’ or ‘down vote’ both posts and comments, with the most up voted comments being visible at the top of the threads.

Research has explored how platform affordances, such as up and down voting on Reddit, govern and shape participation. Affordances refer to the technological capacities of a platform which enable and promote certain uses while preventing and warding off others in line with platform business models (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). These capacities are neither only technological nor deterministic but relational, meaning they are only actualised and made meaningful through historical, cultural and social user practices that can change over time and across contexts (Rand and Stegeman, 2023). While platforms facilitate, incentivise and govern particular forms of participation through affordances, the cultural norms, logics and practices of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ participation which develop are equally dependent on the social contexts and participatory practices of users (De Kosnik, 2012).

Reddit’s affordances, along with its role in shared Internet culture, contribute to shaping a gamified platform space that boosts the visibility of forms of knowledge and expression that are valued by other users. Both Massanari (2017) and Marwick (2017) have pointed to the centrality of ‘geek’ identity on Reddit, where perceived expertise is valued in popular topics related to pop culture, fandom, science and technology. While Marwick (2017) argues that this facilitates the circumscription of ‘geek’ culture within normative white, middle-class masculinity, Maloney et al. (2019) argue that Reddit spaces are not homogeneous and are characterised by contestation and a battleground for ideas. There is also significant variation across subreddits which have their own distinctive ‘norms and cultures, as well as moderation practices’ (Proferes et al., 2021: 1). Reddit culture is far from static, then, and has seen significant continuity and change over time as it is actively moderated, maintained, produced and challenged by users who enter, learn, contribute, manage, leave or are banned (Linkevicius de Andrade and Vasques Filho, 2022; Squirrel, 2019).

The seven threads analysed below were selected from a range of subreddits, including those from those in the top 20 most active subreddits with broad topics including news, video gaming and images or video, to those with less subscribers focused on relevant political or local topics. Selection of the sample was purposive (Morse, 2004) following keyword searches via Reddit’s search functions and browsing of popular or potentially relevant subreddits, guided by a desire to capture a sample of lively threads from across the spectrum of Reddit’s ecosystem. Each full thread was captured using NCapture via NVivo, with both authors using NVivo to collaboratively code data into a codebook of 31 themes which were distilled into the analysis below. Reflexive thematic analysis was used, in which the ‘subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 5) compiles codes that appear to share core ideas and themes. Although the Reddit threads are publicly accessible, to protect users’ possible expectations of privacy, textual data have been lightly edited to ensure it is not searchable, and the names of Redditors and subreddits are not given.

'Bladerunner vibes': popular culture references

The most evident trend in the Reddit responses was popular culture references. Users drew on an always-to-hand shared visual and narrative lexicon of popular films, television, video games and memes to make sense of the events. It would be easy to interpret this use of references as minimising or making light of the wildfires, and there was undoubtedly a sense in which Redditors rushed to participate in the gamified system of gaining upvotes by posting recognisable humorous references about a serious issue. But the use of popular culture is, we maintain, more significant and complex than a reading of minimisation would suggest.

References were predominantly based on aesthetic associations whereby users drew comparisons between a smoke-covered New York City and visually similar film, television or video games, leading to extensive repetition across the seven threads. The texts referenced broadly fell into two categories: first, those with (post)apocalyptic, dystopian or other science fiction themes; and second, those with settings outside the United States. The science fiction text that received the most references was *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), a film that depicts a dystopian future city seen through the hazy orange glow of pollution. References to 'Bladerunner vibes', 'New York 2049' or 'Bladerunner 2023' appeared repeatedly in post titles and top up voted comments, to the point that some Redditors began sarcastically to ask, 'has anyone mentioned Bladerunner?'. Aesthetically similar dystopian and science fiction films such as *Mad Max*, *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings* ('We're living in Mordor') were also referenced. Video games including the post-nuclear apocalyptic game *Fallout* and dystopian future game *Cyberpunk* were another common reference point.

Images of a hazy Times Square featuring a billboard advertisement for the forthcoming dungeon crawler game *Diablo* with tagline 'Welcome to Hell' were widely riffed on in comments, with some Redditors joking that the game's creator Activision Blizzard staged the wildfires for marketing purposes: 'these advertising campaigns are getting out of hand'. Users wrote that they could have believed the images or video were promotional stills or trailer clips from upcoming films and games that were among those being referenced. The other set of popular texts drawn upon less frequently, but still extensively, were American films and television dramas that make use of hazy orange cinematography filter effects to signify a setting outside the United States. Most often repeated were references to the scenes of the drug-themed television drama *Breaking Bad* set in Mexico, with other references pointing to Hollywood films centring on conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and films set on Mars.

This slew of references could be interpreted as shallow visual comparisons, but we wish to contend that the meanings of the popular texts referenced are significant and play an important role in making sense of the event. The shared vocabulary of popular media fandom comes already loaded with ideological meaning and perspectives, which then focus as a lens for events like this one. Scholarship examining the relationship between fandom, news and politics has highlighted various intersections between popular and political communication, exploring how fannish and political identities and practices are increasingly interconnected (Dean, 2017; Hinck, 2019; Jenkins et al., 2020; Sandvoss, 2013). It is not only the case that, as research has noted, everyday platformed contexts in

which users participate – oriented around their social, cultural and political interests and identifications, including fandom – provide the context for encountering news (Chen and McCabe, 2024; Graham, 2010; Graham et al., 2015; Rajadesingan et al., 2021; Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). Rather, the meanings and values borrowed and deployed in popular cultural references by users in these spaces intersect and merge with the original wildfire smoke news images, and the discussion thread of references and jokes becomes impossible to untangle from the original news story in shaping how users come to know about and interpret what is happening.

The dystopian, science fiction and post-apocalyptic texts drawn upon by Redditors point to the fact that the ‘end of the world’ has its own, popular and commercially successful, visual iconography, themes and ideas. This forms a lexicon that can be drawn on to make sense of disaster in the here and now. Comments in the threads described the scenes as ‘unreal’ and ‘surreal’ with one user saying the hazy sky looked like a ‘filter over reality’. This suggests that references to dystopian or apocalyptic texts enable an articulation of what feels strange, shocking and scary about an emblematic city scape transformed by a large-scale climate event. On the one hand, this kind of popular culture imagery reflects how climate change discourse is so often characterised by continuous temporal deferral to a future time (Lamb et al., 2020). On the other, drawing on apocalyptic texts and imagery to describe current events speaks to the increasingly common narrative that irreversible climate breakdown is already here, and nothing can be done to stop it (Cassegård, 2024). Finally, narratives and imagery of the ‘total crisis’ of apocalyptic destruction, often drawn upon across fictional and factual media representations of the climate crisis (Ibarra-Rius and Pons, 2024), serve to isolate the crisis from ‘present, proximate, and specific threats’ and solutions (Morris, 2021: 10). Taken together, these narratives have a potentially paralysing and defeatist element, the affective and political dimensions of which we discuss further below.

The use of what was referred to by some Redditors as the ‘Mexico filter’ in film and television visually reproduces the American centric stereotypical imaginary of not only Mexico but also other countries in the Americas, Africa and the Middle East (Ullmann, 2020). As Ullmann (2020) notes, the way that these cinematographic effects are deployed to signify ‘somewhere else’ – somewhere seen through a ‘third world aesthetic’ lens constructed as poorer, dirtier and less ‘advanced’ than the United States – often prompts cynicism and mockery among film and television fans. Redditors’ references to these effects in response to the wildfire smoke bring complex ideological meanings to bear in the interpretation of the images. Comments like ‘who turned on the Mexico filter?’ suggest not only a humorous visual reference familiar to fellow pop culture aficionados but also an implicit articulation that the images look unfamiliar and strange, as if New York City has become ‘somewhere else’ or even ‘somewhere inferior’. The myth of American exceptionalism, superiority and uniqueness is undoubtedly at play in the use of yellow and orange toned cinematography as a lazy signifier of ‘other’ places in film and TV, and these meanings come to interact with the news story. As Morris (2021) argues, ideologies and myths of American exceptionalism are frequently drawn upon in US climate change news coverage and political rhetoric by comparing the crisis to perceived historical American triumphs and resilience through historical events. The role that national borders play in climate change news stories like

these was also riffed on by Redditors referencing the *South Park* comedy song ‘Blame Canada’ to point to the origin of the smoke.

While the apocalyptic narratives have a function in deferring and catastrophising the images, the cinematography references appear to displace them. Both sets of popular culture references articulate the strange and shocking nature of the news coverage through the lens of ‘not now’ or ‘not here’. The potential for such references to defer or displace the impacts of climate change did not always go uncontested in the Reddit threads, particularly from those living in impacted areas of North America. Responding to a reference to *Fallout*, one commentor pushed back against the perceived distancing mechanism at play in referencing a post-apocalyptic video game, saying ‘this isn’t a far off future or fictional, it’s literally what we went to work in’. This indicates that some Redditors are aware that popular culture references bring potentially contentious ideological and political meanings to bear when used to interpret a climate event.

‘Don’t feel great looking at that’: ambivalent affect

More than just clever visual associations, the popular culture texts that users drew upon in the threads were a way to capture a complex set of feelings generated by the experience of viewing the smoke-covered city. ‘Affect’ is a useful framework for examining the experiential atmospheres of social media and the range of feelings and pre-conscious ‘affective states’ that are generated for and by users through the experience of scrolling and interacting (Coleman, 2018). In this section, we turn to the often-striking range of disparate and diverse affective responses in the threads, from detachment to anger, sadness and resignation. We argue that the fast-paced churning dynamic between diverging affective states meant the threads overall had a deeply *ambivalent* affect.

The relational affordances and participatory contexts of social media platforms further shape and complicate these ambivalent affective expressions. Spaces like Reddit are characterised by a constant ‘aliveness’ and state of anticipation (Koivunen et al., 2024) generated by continuous scrolling of the newest stories, posts or memes. This constant emerging affect contributes to ambivalent, elusive and hard to pin down forms of expression and engagement which shape the landscape for reception of climate issues online (Hautea et al., 2021). Research on climate affect points to the complexity of the relationship between *feeling* and pro-environmental *actions* and *behaviour* and the need to take contextual factors into account (Pihkala, 2022). The ambivalent affect in the Reddit discussions demonstrates the difficulty and futility of attempts to pin down affect as an instrumental tool to prompt changes in behaviour, as the feelings expressed are disparate and messy and do not cohere into a clear measurable expression, much less any tangible drive to climate related action or change.

As explored earlier, the use of popular culture references in the Reddit threads sometimes generated distanced and alienated expressions. A handful of comments understood the photos and videos through a *purely* aesthetic lens without reference to wider cultural texts. By saying how ‘cool’, ‘beautiful’, ‘amazing’ and ‘badass’ the pictures looked, users appeared utterly detached and distanced from the news story. Interspersing these responses, however, were comments about being heartbroken, angry, scared or anxious about the scale of the current crisis, the reasons behind it and the likelihood of its

escalation in future. A frequent form of affective expression was anger and frustration. This was sometimes expressed using the communicative norms of the platform, such as by Redditors who ended their posts with ‘/s’ to indicate sarcasm and one who used a mocking meme text format with random irregular letters to write ‘CLiMatE ChANge IsNt ReAL’. Users’ anger appeared scattered towards multiple targets of blame, from climate change deniers driving cars through the smog to advertisers whose billboards appeared in the images, politicians not taking action and fossil fuel industries.

There was also a sense of nihilistic resignation and fear, shaped in part by the apocalyptic and dystopian imagery referenced, with Redditors speaking about how ‘frightened’, ‘nervous’ or ‘terrified’ they felt about the future and warning others that things are ‘only going to get worse’. The fear and resignation seemed to originate from a perceived lack of solutions and action in response to climate crisis, as from the user who described the scenes as ‘hell on earth’ and lamented ‘we are not really responding. . .it is frightening!!’. Elsewhere users expressed feelings of loss and sadness by mourning the trees being destroyed and asking, ‘how much more can our earth take?’. One user wrote that ‘my heart is broken right now’ because ‘my kids are experiencing this’.

Perhaps the one thing uniting these disparate and ambivalent responses is a lack of sustained engagement with narratives and politics about what kinds of change might be necessary or possible to mitigate the impact of wildfires or the climate crisis more broadly, or put more simply, an absence of hope. This reflects broader socio-political patterns of climate ‘doomerism’ that position climate change as inevitable and impossible to solve and posit surrender as the only viable response (Lamb et al., 2020). In their analysis of climate change activists’ videos on TikTok, Hautea et al. (2021) note a tendency towards ‘ironic acceptance’ of climate crisis, whereby users deploy the memetic and imitative affordances of the platform to acknowledge the severity of the problem while seemingly resigning themselves to the impossibility of anything being done. However, these platform cultures of resignation to climate crisis are not universal. Wood’s (2023) research on Instagram sustainability influencers finds a feminised platformed participatory culture of positivity and hope that celebrates individual agency and action through lifestyle change and collective transformation of practices of consumption. The relational affordances of Reddit and Instagram and the political will, gendered sensibilities and cultures of those who use them, combine to facilitate different forms of climate affect and (in)action. In this case, the response to the smoke over New York City can only be understood through the platform culture of Reddit, where an implicitly masculine, detached, humorous, angry, sometimes sincere and, above all, *ambivalent* affect reigns.

‘Thank you for the science’: knowledge flows

In this section, we explore how sharing of knowledge about the wildfire smoke, and in particular the types of knowledge expression that appeared to be valued, was also deeply shaped by Reddit’s platform norms and contexts. As research on Reddit emphasises, expertise, particularly in ‘geek’ topics from science and maths to fandom (Massanari, 2017), has long been highly valued on the platform. But Reddit is also known for its advice subreddits on topics ranging from relationships to parenting, health and addiction,

where users share personal experiences and seek support (Francisco, 2024). The data included users relaying various forms of knowledge: personal information about how the crisis had impacted users' environments; practical advice on how to mitigate the impact of the smoke; and meteorological and geographic knowledge about the factors causing the wildfires and the spread of smoke. Both scientific facts and personal experience and advice appeared to be equally valued in the threads, but only when they were conveyed and expressed in particular ways.

There was an affective dimension to how knowledge was exchanged and valued in the threads. Online knowledge flows are increasingly shaped by affect, which drives political mobilisation and movements (Papacharissi, 2015) and the circulation of, and attachment to, information, whether true or otherwise (Akbar et al., 2021). Affective truth – ideas that are felt and experienced as true – has ever greater currency compared to scientifically validated truth (Topham and Smith, 2023). Alongside this, 'evidence' in the form of statistics, studies, news stories, links and screenshots are routinely discursively deployed by actors and groups to advance a political or ideological agenda, for good or ill (Rothermel, 2023). Rothermel (2020) uses 'affective-discursive' to express the intertwined character of these knowledge flows, where discursive deployment of narratives and explanations combines with expressions of feeling and experience to construct and circulate knowledge. The sharing of knowledge in the threads was 'affective-discursive' in ways particular to the Reddit context, with users clearly valuing knowledge that was shared with humour, sincerity, authority, authenticity or a combination of these.

The size of the fires themselves, the area covered by the smoke and the factors impacting this were key areas of information discussion. Information that was shared in an entertaining or humorous way appeared to attract more upvotes, meaning that deployment of numbers to capture the size and scale of the forest fires often became playful. Several comments used equivalent numbers of football fields to describe the footprint of the fires which was over nine acres. In response to this, one increasingly surreal chain of comments saw users asking others to calculate and express the space in ever more absurdist equivalent numbers of items, such as bathtubs, bananas and beers, mocking attempts to portray the scale of vast spaces in this fashion.

Redditors signalled various forms of authority to share information in their posts. More traditional forms of expertise were expressed, such as by the user who stated they were a Canadian wildfire operations specialist and another who started their post, 'atmospheric chemist here'. Interestingly however, the latter post was down voted, perhaps because it shared only didactic information with a link to an air quality checking website. By contrast, users who framed their authority through personal familiarity and experience of wildfire smoke in the area in which they lived, for example Californians and Australians, tended to receive a more positive response. Indeed, the fact that Americans living on the West Coast had more direct experience of wildfires than East Coast New Yorkers became a running joke in the threads, with a top up voted comment reading: 'California: first time?'

Users' anecdotes and stories about their experiences of the smoke were presented as giving an authentic insight into the embodied and affective experience beyond the images. Several Redditors spoke about the impact on their physical health including trouble breathing, burning eyes and blocked sinuses. Others commented that photo and

video could not ‘do justice’ to the reality of seeing the scenes with one’s own eyes, described as ‘more ominous’ and ‘really unnatural feeling’. These kinds of posts generate intimacy and immediacy with other users, reflecting the value of authentic, embodied experience and feeling as a trusted and valued source of knowledge in social media contexts (Topham and Smith, 2023).

There were also many comments where Redditors issued advice to others about how to deal with the smoke by minimising harmful physical impacts. Some advice was sought out by users asking questions, such as the person who posted asking whether it would be safe to turn on air conditioning, but much of it was unsolicited. One typical post was a list of clear and detailed edicts issued with absolute certainty, telling users to wear an ‘N95 or better properly fitted to your face. 100% cotton mask overtop. Sunglasses or safety glasses . . . All clothing goes into a bag the minute you go indoors. Saline eye rinse. Saline nasal rinse. Shower’. Advice was routinely expressed in this way: confident, strident and assured practical instructions. Some but not all these lists of advice were interspersed or concluded with expressions of care such as ‘my thoughts are with you’ and ‘much love’. Reflecting the ‘affective-discursive’ knowledge flows of Reddit, the detailed, confident, assertive and sometimes also caring, tone of the advice appeared to be of equal importance to the content.

The ‘affective-discursive’ flow of knowledge through a combination of humour, sincerity, authority and authenticity shows how the flow of information about a climate news event is fundamentally shaped by the platform culture and context. Importantly, the threads evidence a common theme in social media knowledge construction whereby feeling, experience and discursive authority are valued more than traditional forms of scientific expertise and information. Although mis- and disinformation about the crisis was not obviously present in our dataset, these ‘affective-discursive’ epistemological conditions would not necessarily be hostile to the proliferation and growth of conspiracy thinking and problematic information sharing that frequently happens in other contexts (Rothermel, 2023; Topham and Smith, 2023).

Conclusion: climate change, cultural studies and contextual audience research

In June 2023, Reddit users responded to shocking images of New York City obscured by smoke that had drifted from acres of destructive wildfires attributed to anthropogenic climate change. Their response tells us something about how a climate disaster is made meaningful, and the climate imaginaries and politics such meanings make possible. Redditors referenced popular cultural texts that were not only visually similar but articulated the strangeness of the images by drawing on settings that were ‘not now’ and ‘not here’; expressing a range of ambivalent but largely hopeless affective states of detachment, anger or sadness, and exchanging knowledge and advice in a shared ‘affective-discursive’ register that was by turns playful, assured and authentic.

If, as argued earlier, context provides the conditions for possibility (Grossberg, 1997), Redditors appear to be looking to a future in which they witness or experience increasingly disturbing climate events while sharing memes and references, expressing their grief, anger, fear or detachment and giving and receiving advice on how to mitigate any

harmful effects that might impact them on an individual level. The horizons of political possibility appear to be bounded by an overarching sense of resignation and powerlessness: things will only get worse from here, but that's a good reference, have my upvote. This isn't to say that users who posted in or read the threads do not participate elsewhere in climate actions or activism with the hope of bringing about political or environmental change, but that the possibilities engendered by the platform context don't appear directly to support this. The politics of hope in the context of climate change are complex, with scholars noting that hope of averting or minimising crisis is not necessarily the only driver of climate activism and action. Naively putting faith in false hope, for example that offered by simplistic technological solutions that do little to change the current harmful system, is often seen by activists as politically counter-productive (Cassegård, 2024).

Without contributing to a simplified narrative about the need for climate hope, then, this article has shown that the fairly *hopeless* politics of climate change that are reproduced and made possible on Reddit are deeply shaped by the participatory platform culture and context. Since June 2023 countless climate crisis disasters have been, and sadly will continue to be, mediated through news, images and social media platforms like Reddit and beyond. As these crises come in and out of view for audiences, filtered through their mediated social and cultural milieus, research into their practices of participation and meaning making is urgently needed if we are to understand emergent climate politics.

This study demonstrates that any study of climate change audiences needs to hold social, cultural and technological *contexts* central to the frame of analysis. Cultural studies scholars are well placed to take on the challenge of meeting audiences where they are, affording them dignity and subjectivity, and thinking about how culture and politics can transform. This article focuses on one climate issue on one social media platform at one moment in time, but the scope for radically contextual climate audience studies research is vast. Researchers need to deploy the well-honed tools we have available to us to meet people in all the spaces, digital or otherwise, where climate media is made meaningful, and use these tools to understand the political possibilities that a range of contexts engender. In the time that has elapsed since our first submission of this article, two other articles on how fandom communities on Reddit construct meaning around climate change have been published (Hellmann, 2025; Sels et al., 2025), both finding similar conditions whereby participatory platform contexts interact with and shape environmental political imaginaries. Reddit studies like theirs and ours are important, but we need to continue to grow the scale and ambition of cultural studies climate audience research, both online and offline. Moreover, the need for this research is pressing, particularly in a climate communications field where the approach to reception is largely focused on the instrumental and behavioural efficacy of climate messaging. We need more research that sees audiences not as receivers of one-way messages who can be nudged in the direction of small individual changes, but as part of a circuit of culture where ideology is reproduced and politics are made possible.

This is not to argue that all cultural studies audience researchers should down tools and pivot to studying climate change. Rather, for scholars of media audiences across any number of contexts, we do not need to look very far to find meaning making about the climate crisis happening in and through the spaces, practices and communities of media

and cultural consumption and reception we already study. It is now not possible, if it ever was, to demark popular culture and communication from politics, and this includes climate change. Rather than ceding the floor on climate audience research to scholarship that views audiences only as receptacles who can be nudged by well framed ‘top-down’ messages, we should ask: how can we use our empirical and theoretical training to illuminate how ideologies, politics and imaginaries of climate crisis are reproduced and contested in the wide range of culture we research? It is not hard to imagine any number of cultural contexts – anywhere from Taylor Swift concerts to BDSM meetings, travel tips Facebook groups to weight-lifting group chats – where climate events and issues are shared, discussed, negotiated and understood. What kinds of climate politics become possible in these contexts, and what kind of politics do they preclude?

ORCID iDs

Benjamin Litherland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3735-354X>

Rachel Wood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0053-2969>

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Consent to participate

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Biographical notes

Benjamin Litherland is a senior lecturer in film and media and a cultural studies researcher whose work explores the intersections of popular and political culture, with a focus on audiences, users and fans. He is also the co-host of Ill Effects, a podcast examining media influence and effects.

Rachel Wood is a senior lecturer in Media at Keele University, United Kingdom, who researches mediated femininities in digital consumer culture. Her recent work has explored ethical, sustainable, and anti-consumerism on social media including Instagram and YouTube, and the affective labour of feminine practices of beauty and body work. Her work has been published in journals including *Social Media + Society*, *New Media and Society*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*, and she is the author of the Routledge monograph *Consumer Sexualities: Women and Sex Shopping*.