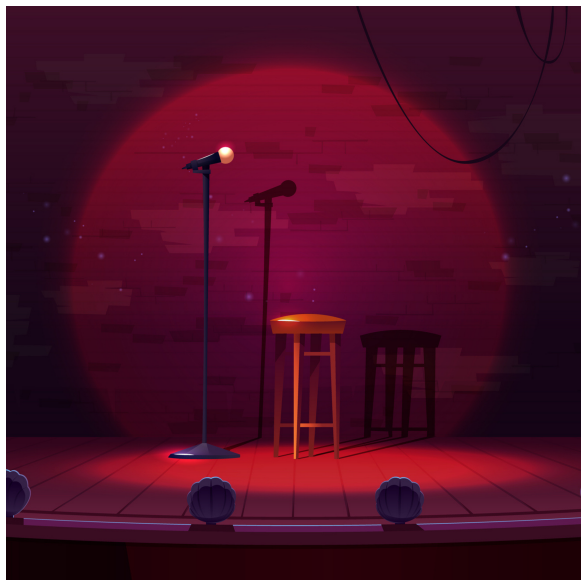


Is This a Joke? Comedy and Climate Communication

<https://www.climateone.org/audio/joke-comedy-and-climate-communication>

Recorded on October 27, 2023



Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of automated software and human transcribers and may contain errors. Please check the actual audio before quoting it.

Ariana Brocious: Greg, I have a climate joke for you: how do you think the U.S. will address this year's record high temperatures?

Greg Dalton: ...By going to the beach or a lake?

Ariana Brocious: By switching from Fahrenheit to Celsius!

Greg Dalton: (groan) Okay, I have one for you. We haven't found a solution for climate change yet, but we're definitely getting warmer!

Ariana Brocious: Oh man, that's bad.

Greg Dalton: Yeah, and not true. This is Climate One, I'm Greg Dalton.

Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious. And today we're digging into climate comedy, and maybe we should leave the comedy to the professionals.

Greg Dalton: That's probably a good idea. I like to laugh as much as the next person, but putting aside our bad opening jokes found on the internet, I actually find it pretty tough to joke about climate. I mean, it's a serious existential issue, and I worry about the jokes being at the expense of real people and human suffering.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, I know what you mean. And I also think a good laugh can help, even when things are dark, unpredictable and scary. It's a way to release some of the tension we carry. It also helps you connect with people who might be experiencing the same thing.

Greg Dalton: Good comedy is often on the edge of things that are socially unacceptable.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, but good comedy gets at that tension. It calls out things that are hard.

Greg Dalton: Yeah, I hear Chris Rock say things that are funny, and oh man, you can say that?? Kind of at that painful, uncomfortable edge. It's why they're funny.

Ariana Brocious: And as we'll hear from today's guests, some people are using comedy as an agent of change to educate and activate people around the climate crisis.

Greg Dalton: So climate is serious, and this is usually a serious show, but today get ready to laugh. First up, my conversation with Rollie Williams, creator and host of the digital comedy series Climate Town. It's informative and funny. He's a comedian and also holds a degree in climate science and policy from Columbia University. He gave us the story of how his two passions came together.

Rollie Williams: I moved to New York to pursue comedy and I was doing shows at night and, I was tutoring during the day. Sometimes I worked for digital media companies, video editing during the day and every night I would go out to comedy theaters and I would try to perform 2-3 shows a night if I could. And, eventually, I established a relationship with a couple of comedy theaters, and one of the theaters had a cancellation, and they said, Hey, Rollie, can you put up a show? We have a show, like, a night, and we don't have anything to fill it. Will you do a show? And so I, I pitched, I was like, Oh yeah, I got a show. No problem. Don't even worry about it. And then the next day I was trying to figure out what the show could be about. And I was in a Barnes and Noble and I saw on the shelf a copy of Al Gore's, An Inconvenient Truth, the book, which he made, I guess, after his incredibly powerful documentary popped off. And, you know, he like became a bit of a household name again after losing the 2000 election. And so I thought, oh, that would be interesting if Al Gore was sort of on like an I Told You So tour about climate change, because it was about 2015 at this point, or maybe 2016. And so I, I pitched the show as like, Oh, it's an inconvenient truth 2, listen up, you fugly idiots, was like kind of the premise of the show. And it would be Al Gore kind of yelling at you. And that show was bad. It was not a terribly good show, but they let me put it up another time. And then another theater picked it up. And eventually I got to performing this on a monthly basis and it sort of morphed into a talk show. It was just a comedy show. It was intended to be a comedy show where I played Al Gore through the, you know, like did a whole talk show through the lens of kind of like a crotchety grandpa character who like was also in a polyamorous relationship with a bunch of celebrities. That was kind of a runner. And then eventually, it just got to the point where I was having enough climate experts on the show as a joke, and then I got to know them as people, and they were all really smart and worried about climate change. And eventually, I realized, like, oh, I should, I should actually double down on climate change. And so I decided, oh, how do I make my show really good? Well, I guess I can go back to school, and I went back to grad school. Columbia for a climate science and policy degree to make the show better. And then through that, I sort of merged my comedy and climate expertise together.

Greg Dalton: I have to ask, can we hear your Al Gore impersonation?

Rollie Williams: Oh, it's bad. It never got better, but I'll do it. Yeah, it's, um, um, Well, you know, my wife, Tipper Gore, and I like to go out every night and, uh, furiously make out on the stage of the democratic national convention. And it's, uh, if you played it right next to an Al Gore clip, it would be like, that is completely different. There's almost no crossover, but I just didn't put any real effort into doing that impression very well, and as a result, it was a terrible impression.

Greg Dalton: But it worked well enough, I guess, to get you to where you are now. So I gotta admit, when I first came across you, I thought that you were, a climate policy person who taped, you know,

painters tape with a lapel mic to your shirt and walked around and did this dorky scientist thing. I thought you went from policy to comedy, but you came the other way from comedy to policy.

Rollie Williams: Yeah. Now, Greg, I won't take offense to that, but it hurt a little bit to hear you say those things. Um, no, I, I'm coming at this from a purely, from a, from a comedic background. I find a lot of humor in the hypocrisy of, you know, oil companies declaring net zero and that sort of thing. And so I'm like trying to explore the comedy that is implicit, I think, in the subject matter. But before I could really good at that, I had to first learn the subject matter. So that took me back to school.

Greg Dalton: And it's pretty clear that some of the deep research you do from, you know, finding the court cases where GM, you know, sued public transit agencies. And so, you know, the, the BP actual advertising campaign, which we'll get to in a minute. So you're able to make a living as a climate comedian, that's pretty, you know, impressive. What does that say about the appetite for what you do? Cause climate is often so dark, not seen as a funny conversation at all.

Rollie Williams: Yeah. Yeah. I think it says that people are, you know, people are aware and people are clued in, but it's just a tough sell to be like, Hey, watch this two hour long documentary that is going to make you feel bad. And then have not a lot of upside at the end of it. It's just a tough, especially in today's media landscape when, like, there's a hundred billion videos people could be watching. And if you're not funnier than, like, half of them, why would somebody want to watch a video that you, like, what, what's the special thing that you bring to the video? And for me, I'm, I, I'm coming at this from a comedic perspective. That's my one tool in my toolbox. So when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail when you have like a comedy background and you're bad at everything else, like that's basically the only thing you can you can foist upon your audience.

Greg Dalton: I remember when the Daily Show became really popular with Jon Stewart and people were concerned like oh my gosh, that's comedy. It's not the news, but you had to understand the news to get the jokes. You have to be somewhat informed to get the jokes. So what were you some of your comic role models and what are you trying to do with your comedy, your climate comedy?

Rollie Williams: I mean, Greg, you kind of nailed it. My big OG role model is Jon Stewart. I remember the first ever time I saw an episode of The Daily Show. And it just changed my understanding of like, media. Because it wasn't, it wasn't just like a goofy comedy guy, it was a dude, point by point, going through an argument, and then refuting it, like with perfect, logical judo. And also, it was funny the entire time. And it was just this incredible, like, confluence of things that I like, which are like, comedy, media, and being technically correct about stuff. And that group of items really made me love Jon Stewart. I also like John Oliver. Uh, I guess if you're a comedian named Jon, you're really getting a step up. George Carlin, I thought a lot of George Carlin's material was really, really funny. It's important to be both funny at the thing and also saying something interesting. And that's why I liked, you know, those particular people so much.

Greg Dalton: Right. Let's talk about a couple of videos you've made starting with your carbon footprint is BS. In the video, you play the British Petroleum ad where they bring the term carbon footprint to a mass audience and push the burden of emissions reduction from the oil company to everyday individuals. Can you walk me through that story of the personal carbon footprint?

Rollie Williams: So this was originally research, I think that was unearthed by Dr. Jeffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes. So these are two, and by the way, like I'm doing, when I say I like researching stuff, I'm basically going to a suite of journalists who are actually doing the making phone calls and interviewing and like digging up documents. And I'm like following along behind them, picking up their breadcrumbs and like, making comedy videos about them. So they are the absolute heroes that I couldn't make a video without them. Just FYI. So yeah, the story goes a little something like

this. People are worried about carbon emissions. Carbon emissions are fueling the carbon concentration in the atmosphere, and it sort of feels like some kind of regulation might slam down and affect companies that are mostly responsible for supplying the fossil fuels that are getting burned and turning into carbon emissions. And so a lot of these fossil fuel companies who were, by the way, doing a lot of research into climate change before it was common knowledge and, and actually knew about it way early and have a ton of internal documentation talking about, like, how do we cover this up? Like, what, what are we going to say? How do we like, kind of emphasize a doubt that that's in the minds of our scientists that wasn't really there.

Greg Dalton: Doubt is their product, right? They got that from tobacco.

Rollie Williams: Yeah. It's, it's just a good tactic, right? If you can kind of. Break the problem down and say, Oh, it's not a corporation. It's everybody's individual demand that's forcing us to supply them with oil. We can't be held accountable for what these people are demanding from us. And simultaneously, if you kind of move the conversation from "should corporations reduce their emissions" to "should people reduce their emissions," then you don't have a problem. And you don't have a lot of regulations coming down the pike for corporations. It's more like, how can we reduce our personal carbon footprint? It's, we shift the blame onto the individual person and kind of take the onus off of the corporations who have obviously the highest levers of power to reduce their emissions. Like the last place you want to look is all the way downstream when you have to change a billion people's individual behavior, when you could effectively just change like basketball court sized group of people's behavior and cut off emissions at the stem.

Greg Dalton: So what's the funny part of that? How did you make that funny?

Rollie Williams: For me, the funny part is going into the documentation and seeing BP's original ads that were much less nuanced. And, and I don't think it was clear to early BP that all the footage that they were producing was going to be on the internet forever, right? The internet wasn't really a thing. It wasn't a known quantity. So they would put out ads that they didn't realize were going to be just available to some future man in 2022 to like look up and analyze and see like, oh, right, you're like, systematically asking people on the street, like what their carbon footprint is, and then asking them to go calculate it. And then you've also got an internal memo that talks about downplaying the corporate responsibility. And when you put it together with the benefit of hindsight, it's, it's like, I guess it's, it was funny to people who watched it, I think.

Greg Dalton: In another exposé on the oil industry, you made a video about the Exxon executive who revealed how the company lies to the public and influences legislators. This has been well documented by Naomi Oreskes, who you mentioned and others, a historian of science at Harvard. Let's start with the confessions you thought were most important. First is the admission that Exxon worked with shadow groups. Let's listen to that clip of Keith McCoy, Exxon's former senior director for federal relations.

KEITH MCCOY: Did we join some of these shadow groups, uh, to work against some of the early efforts? Yes. That's true. Did we aggressively fight against some of the science? Uh, yes. You know, we were looking out for our investments. We were looking out for our shareholders.

Greg Dalton: That's Keith McCoy, Exxon's former senior director for federal relations. He thinks he's in a job interview there. It's actually Greenpeace fronting as an employer.

Rollie Williams: I mean, this is one of my favorite ever things caught on camera right up there with like the OG viral videos of like grape stomp lady and like Charlie bit my finger and Keith McCoy speed confessing to a bunch of crimes that Exxon committed because he hoped to get a job with this

other company. For me, the confession, the fact that he kept on reframing the question as part of the answer, as if he was like, I think they must have asked him to do that so that they could show it to whoever was going to watch it. But it just created this moment where he would say, did now, did we do this? And then you'd expect him to be like, no, of course not, to deny it. Cause that's what Exxon is famous for doing. And then he said, now, did we do this? Yes. Okay. Yes. We did fight against some of the science that we knew is real. But did we do, did we work with shadow groups? Yes. Again, of course we did do that. Um, and just like the fact that for once they caught an Exxon insider without their guard up and they got so much information out of him like 30 years of it wasn't me is, you know, up in smoke in one zoom call, right?

Greg Dalton: And I think he's separated from the company recently and see after that. And Exxon CEO Darren Woods disavowed, uh, what Keith McCoy said. Let's listen to another clip of Exxon lobbyist Keith McCoy that outlines Exxon's thinking on political influence, this time specifically around the infrastructure bill as it was being drafted.

KEITH MCCOY: We're playing defense because President Biden is talking about this big infrastructure package and he's going to pay for it by increasing corporate taxes. On the Democrat side, we look for the moderates on these issues. So it's the Manchins, it's the Testers. Joe Manchin, I talk to his office every week. Um, he is the kingmaker, uh, on this because he's a Democrat from West Virginia, which is a very conservative state, who's up for reelection, so you can have those conversations with them because they're a captive audience. They know they need you and I need them.

Greg Dalton: Yeah. So what do you think when you hear that now, considering how the infrastructure bill turned out, um, and Manchin's role in, in the IRA?

Rollie Williams: Yeah, I mean, it, it, sadly and depressingly, it kind of broke right along the lines that Keith McCoy was mentioning, where it was originally pitched as something like a 2 trillion or 1.9 trillion-dollar infrastructure plan that got whittled down to around a 500 billion-dollar plan, which is almost precisely, even numerically what he was pitching in this call. And I think just the fact that he so clearly articulated this a little bit open secret in American politics that you just like never say it. Corporations just never say that they have this kind of influence over politicians and they just caught him just just saying the quiet part loud, which I think was just and so so perfectly phrased where every moment when it's as if you were to write a script where what you would want What you would want an Exxon lobbyist to actually say and then he just kind of stumbled into it. And I think you mentioned that, you know, he is no longer with the company, but he was still employed by Exxon for multiple months after this story broke. his LinkedIn page was "employed by Exxon" for, I think, up to six months after this moment. And my whole point was like, if, if you disown this man, if you're like, oh, everything he's saying does not represent us, this, we don't even know, we don't even know this guy that well, like, yeah, he was working with us, but like, I, I don't, I never liked him. Like, if you're saying that, and then you don't fire him immediately. What does that say about how much you actually don't align with what he was saying? Like, how could you keep him on for six more months if he speed-confessed to crimes? It's just, it's crazy to me.

Greg Dalton: Today, a conversation with climate comedian Rollie Williams.

Ariana Brocious: Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. You can also help by sending a link to this episode to a friend.

Greg Dalton: Coming up, trying to measure the impact of climate comedy on the internet:

Rollie Williams: Are people, like, changing their behavior and changing what they're doing based on new information that I learned, thought was important and so I put into a video.

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. Today we're chatting with comedian and climate policy guy Rollie Williams.

Ariana: A recent video of his focused on how much our lives are influenced by parking - a subject we recently covered on Climate One with our interview with Henry Grabar.

Greg: Rollie Williams says most of his videos focus on corporate malfeasance, but parking is a different story.

Rollie Williams: Parking in America, at least, didn't become a huge problem because of a corporation scheming to make it that way. We kind of walked our way, we sort of backwardly, blindly walked our way into it. In America, there's like between four and eight parking spots for every car. We are a nation of pavement. Some huge percentage of urban area is dedicated to parking. The city streets are, you know, like you can imagine 300 square feet in a city, like to own 300 square feet of real estate in a city would cost you like, you know, 1,000 a month or something. Some like large price, but every single city street is free parking in most of America. So, like, we are subsidizing parking because that's just the way we've built our cities. We've built our cities around cars. So I wanted to get into parking lots specifically and why we keep overbuilding parking lots. And it turns out there are these rules in city zoning contracts that are called minimum parking requirements that literally force companies, no matter how much parking they think they're going to need, no matter how much parking they actually need, it forces a new building to build X amount of parking based on this weird, archaic, and mostly arbitrary series of tables and charts that will just force American companies to overbuild parking in almost every scenario. And so we keep on developing our cities into these weird, like, low, one story, boxy stores, like chain stores, and long roads, and just cracked pavement. And it's just like a real never ending cycle.

Greg Dalton: Right. And some cities, San Francisco in particular, have decoupled housing development from parking that you don't have to have that minimum or you don't have to build any new parking. And so some jurisdictions are going the other direction. And the other thing I thought was interesting in that video was how you showed how the early days there was like horses and then cars, just like there was no place to park. You just like parked on the sidewalk and in France and some cities, Paris these days, they still have the kind of little spikes to make people not park on the sidewalks. And then cities developed parking garages and they thought pretty quickly realized that's expensive. How about if we have companies and private developers pay for parking so the taxpayers and cities don't, and then you get to the minimum parking requirements. So that's the sort of the world seeing through parking, which is a pretty interesting lens. And then you turn to gas stoves and another video on Climate Town where you highlight the slogan cooking with gas and it's accompanied by an interesting song. Let's take a listen to cooking with gas.

Rollie Williams: Can't wait.

GAS RAP: Cooking with gas. Gas, cooking with gas. We all cook better when we're cooking with gas. Gas, gas is so hot it's not on when it's not. It's the only way to cook. That's what we, that's what we were taught.

Rollie Williams: That's what we were taught.

Greg Dalton: So that's, yeah. Right. I mean, that's clever. So what's the impact of that? And who's, who's, who's doing that?

Rollie Williams: Yeah. So, I mean, I had the just pleasure of going back through the archives of all these old gas utility ads and gas company ads, and they were just having fun with it. Like, that's one thing that I actually do appreciate about gas companies. Like they did not care. No bad ideas in brainstorming. Like, If you can dream it, we can do it.

Greg Dalton: I'm seeing mad men sitting around with their cocktails.

Rollie Williams: It's even like crustier than that. It's like dudes who rolled in, hung over and are trying to get out by two that day to pick up their kid. You know, it's like, it's like, uh, what if we have a guy who's like trying to take a shower, but he opens the shower and there's like a Chinese guy in his shower and they're like, Gary, that's a genius idea. That's the ad now. And like, that's literally an ad that they did. Um, and it, it, it, it's, it's all based around the idea that like gas is good. Gas is fast. Electricity doesn't work and it does work, but it's expensive. And like, it's just so fun to like go back to these ads, but the best gas. Piece of media out there, I think is the, rapping with gas. It's that hook cooking with gas. They have the hook cooking with gas dozens of times, and then they name the song rapping with gas because they forgot the hook of the song. It's all insane, but it's these gas utilities that are just sort of trying to promote the idea of like, oh, hey, gas stoves, don't you love a gas stove? Gas stoves are great, and part of the reason why they're trying to promote this despite gas stoves being like, 5 percent of any given household's gas usage, which is like the smallest fraction. It's mostly, uh, heating and cooling. But the fact that people have a relationship with their gas stove. So these gas companies know that if they can keep that relationship alive, the relationship people have to their gas stoves, then they've got an in, their gas line's already going into the house, it's much easier for them to accommodate a gas furnace or something like that.

Greg Dalton: Right. People don't see the blue flame in their furnace or their water here. They see the blue flame cooking their eggs and they romanticize it. And it shows you how effective that campaign was because cooking with gas is sort of infused in our culture. Now they're updating their tactics with social media. So what are they doing now? Because gas stoves have been dragged into the culture wars. How's the industry using social media to respond?

Rollie Williams: Yeah. I mean, they're seeing that influencer marketing is effective in other walks of life. And so they're reaching out to influencers and asking them to kind of promote the concept of gas stoves. And, and it's not like, Hey, this is a Michelson's Gas Stoves on central street in Maine. It's like, don't forget we cook on gas stoves just to sort of keep the idea of gas stoves in people's brains. Like without even really just the idea that gas stoves still exist. Is enough for them to say, uh, influencer marketing campaign might be helpful in proliferating gas stoves in people's houses. And the fact is, like, gas stoves are a huge contributor to childhood asthma. Uh, it's an open flame in your house, you know, it's like not a safe thing and, and it is a, like constantly leaks, like methane leaks are a huge problem.

Greg Dalton: Benzene, which is, yeah, benzene, which is a carcinogen. So are you dragged into the culture wars because you've taken on gas in homes?

Rollie Williams: I'm not dragged into a culture war because I kind of just like put the video out and then I'm I I clap my hands like a blackjack dealer leaving his shift and I just walk out like that's my I don't think you know, I think a lot of talking heads on fox news and MSNBC kind of want that because there's a 24 hour news cycle and all they want to do is talk about whatever the culture war

is. And I just make like one video a month and a podcast or two a month and like, that's my, that's my output.

Greg Dalton: And you have hundreds of thousands of views. Some of your videos are viewed on Climate Town over a million times.

Rollie Williams: What? How do you? What if I, what if I didn't know? I was like, Oh my God!

Greg Dalton: Congratulations!

Rollie Williams: Jeez! I gotta call my mom!

Greg Dalton: How do you measure your impact, other than your mom being proud of you, um, how do you measure your impact?

Rollie Williams: Well, it is, number one, is my mom proud of me. I'm glad you picked up on that. Judy Williams, shout out one time Judy Williams, Dick Williams is my dad, Marnie Williams is my sister. They're all, I think they're all proud of me. Um, I kind of measure my impact in, like, how many comments I get that are about people telling me they're, like, going back to grad school to study sustainability or renewable energy or something. How many, and which is, I'm not, not to say that it's, like, a million comments like that. My impact is, like, how are people, like, changing their behavior? and changing what they're doing based on new information that I learned thought was important and so I put into a video. Um, and it's, it's a little bit of an imperfect science because, uh, they don't always comment or like find me on the street and say like, hey man, thanks for doing those videos. I just enrolled at, uh, you know, Evergreen University in forestry management or something. Um, but when I hear that, it's like, oh, this is, you know, something's working, something's clicking with people.

Greg Dalton: Yeah. It's one thing to change a cooktop, you know, your induction cooktop or a heat pump or electric water heater or something like that. It's a whole nother thing to change your career. What do you think that comedy can do that other forms of communication can't?

Rollie Williams: Yeah, I think there's some scholarship, uh, around this, but mostly, you know, this is information. These are facts for the most part, and they're not always like fun to intake, you know, I think I was thinking about this the other day. Your TikTok feed is not people reading from a textbook at you. Your TikTok feed is not just like stats. It is people. You know, uh, people putting together a log cabin it really fast or people creating a new lightsaber out of parts or something like these are, these are interesting ways to integrate information and that is the new premium of entertainment and I don't know how to build a lightsaber or a log cabin so I've got a comedy. That's kind of my angle. I also think there's sort of a bit of a guard people have at all times just because of how, I mean, I'm going to be the first to say this: America is more polarized than ever. Um, but you know, people are, people are polarized. They're ready to, to see something political and just turn their brain off if they don't agree with it or like take the information in if they do. I think comedy maybe allows people a couple of extra seconds of watch time before they decide how they feel about it. And if I convince them early enough to keep watching, regardless of their political affiliation, they'll sometimes, uh, watch the rest of it and then change their opinion.

Greg Dalton: Climate is a difficult conversation. It's often not approachable as we've talked about. People kind of steer clear of it. Uh, it can be heavy to think about the research once you really dive into the numbers and the graphs, as you did at Columbia for your your work, uh, what is, you know, how do you handle the personal load of, how do you handle the personal weight of knowing what you know about the science? And does comedy, you know, give you relief and escape from that?

Rollie Williams: Yeah. You know, I think I had this conversation with Emily Atkin a couple of years ago, who's got a great newsletter called heated. Definitely go subscribe to that. It's fantastic. If you're working on a problem, I think it alleviates some of the anxiety you feel about that problem. So I think getting to come in every day and all day research and call experts and cross check evidence and call other experts and put scripts together, this sort of alleviates some of the anxious feeling that I used to have about climate change. And I think you actually get that same alleviation if you are getting involved in a local level, if you are, you know, starting an organization or better yet joining an existing organization, or if you're working on, uh, you know, letter writing campaigns or protesting, it actually helps change your, your emotional stress load if you're actually out there doing something about it.

Greg Dalton: Right, and it sounds like you're saying that the comedy can also even a sort of gallows humor can also provide some relief. So if i'm walking along the San Francisco bay and I say well in a few years we'll need to have you know gaiters on here to be walking here of some kind of you know, uh, sea level rise joke that's okay? Like sometimes I feel a little icky making climate jokes because it's not so funny....?

Rollie Williams: Yeah, I think the general thought is like, Oh, it's all gallows humor because it's a depressing subject, but I've kind of found like, that's not that effective of a tool for me personally, it might work really well for you and, and especially it sounded like it had a little bit of a physical comedy element to it when you're walking along and you could maybe You know, really, really lean into the sell the gaiters on the legs thing-

Greg Dalton: But I don't, I don't find it funny though. I guess I, I guess I'm not as funny as you are, which is why you do what you do and I do what I do, but it's, I have, I have a difficulty finding humor around climate when so many people are suffering. And, and, um, you know, I don't know that there are some places obviously more human that it's humorous, more so than, you know, I don't know, making fun at EVs or making fun at windmills, that's okay. If it's not kind of a human.

Rollie Williams: Yeah, I think, you watch any great standup set and it's about their pain, not their joy, you know, like comedians are able to alchemize these awful moments and create moments of levity out of them. I'm not on their level, you know, like I'm not a, uh, Eddie Murphy or, you know, I'm not a Donald Glover or something, but I am trying to make make levity out of understanding a topic deeply enough and finding moments that are ironic or getting sarcastic about a thing that somebody that I don't that that is acting facetiously said it's like it's kind of about punching up and I think gallows humor actually weirdly tends to be about punching down where you're sort of you're sort of giving up or capitulating to an inevitable future that I don't really think you need to capitulate to. So I think once you, once you really get into the research and start uncovering some of these documents and some of this evidence, jokes kind of naturally, organically spring out of them that aren't at the expense of the human capital.

Greg Dalton: Rollie Williams of Climate Town. Thanks for coming on Climate One.

Rollie Williams: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Ariana Brocious: Part of writing and creating good comedy is knowing what makes it work. For that we turn to Caty Borum, Executive Director of the Center for Media and Social Impact and Provost Associate Professor at American University.

Greg: Her career has included work in strategic communications and documentary films, and now she's focused on studying the underpinnings of comedy for social justice.

Ariana: She explains what makes comedy an effective form of communication, one that helps us remember information better than other means.

Caty Borum: When a joke is funny, and particularly a joke about a serious civic, public health, or social issue, you actually have to boil down a whole bunch of factual information, a whole pile of facts, say, or like the reality of something, and you have to boil it down into a kind of cultural reality that is recognizable to an audience. And then the joke, the punchline is turning that situation into a different way of seeing it. So really it's the incongruity of the situation. So to actually make the joke funny in the first place, you actually can't wade around in the complexity of that issue. And that's what usually loses us in terms of our attention, right?

Ariana Brocious: So comedy requires a level of simplification that helps people digest and retain the information, is what you're saying.

Caty Borum: I think it's translation, but I think it's a lot. It's also establishing cultural commonality and cultural context. It's saying that, listen, you and I may actually both not understand this thing or maybe we don't agree about it. But here's a really simple way to think about it and to find some contextual cultural commonality where we can at least start from a place where we both recognize what I'm saying, right? And the reason that is especially valuable when it comes to the climate crisis is because it is heavily science based and many, many people either don't understand the climate science or at this stage of the movement are definitely not going to admit that out loud because they might sound stupid. But if a good joke or a set can kind of bring you into something and at least spark your interest and maybe you go look it up or maybe you say out loud, I didn't know that thing, That can all be really helpful, kind of admitting that we don't know.

Ariana Brocious: Right. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me, this idea that first you have to find a place of common understanding that's helpful, and I think you're right that there are people who don't want to admit not knowing the intricacies of climate, which can be pretty wonky, I would like to play a clip now that I think exemplifies both some of the success of a good bit, but also the overwhelming in my mind, the overwhelming preponderance of common experience that's tied to environment or climate that people can relate to. This is Marc Maron.

MARC MARON: Certainly it's been ending environmentally for a long time, and we've all kind of known it, we knew it. But I think on a deeper level, the reason we're not more upset about the world ending environmentally, is I think, you know, all of us in our hearts really know that we did everything we could. You know, we really, right? I mean, we really did. I mean, think about it. We, you know, we... We brought our own bags To the supermarket. Yeah, that's about it.

Ariana Brocious: It's, it's so on point, right? So it's getting to what you're talking about. Help us having just heard that help us understand why that's effective.

Caty Borum: Marc Maron is hilarious actually, so you, you picked a good one for, to play for me. There are a couple of different things going on. So first, if you notice, he gets the laugh before he even gets to the punchline because the cultural commonality is so obviously established. The cultural commonality is we're not more upset because we really all knew that we just did everything. I mean, it's kind of amazing. That you can hear audible laughter at that point because everyone is like, Oh, we definitely all know that's a bunch of bulls***. Right? So, um, so he's establishing that commonality. But then he's pointing out kind of one of the big lies that we've been sold, you know, the idea that only individual behavior is going to get out of the climate crisis. And of course, we know from decades of science that that's not correct. And then he's a little bit doing a little bit of gentle public shaming like we might walk out of that and say, you know, we're not really doing very much right we in our individual house or whatever. But he's also doing a pretty good setup for the

fact that actually it's giant companies that need to change entire ways of being and doing. Certainly our consumption matters and all of that, so yes, individual behavior. But he's doing a pretty good setup for the fact that actually this is a really big structural issue with a great deal of institutional responsibility that, yes, we need to participate in, but even if you and I, Ariana, completely use our recyclable Whole Foods bags only, that's not the same thing as completely divesting of fossil fuels and a number of other structural changes that need to be made.

Ariana Brocious: Right. And this idea of structural issues is one I want to explore because some of your work has dealt with other big, , difficult matters that we're struggling with as a society. And so we've talked a bit about climate. We'll talk more about climate, but how has comedy handled other social issues effectively and what lessons maybe could we take from that and then apply to climate comedy?

Caty Borum: So comedy does lots of things, including allowing us to talk about taboo issues that sometimes otherwise cannot really be addressed. This one I actually think is particularly important when we're talking about really tricky public health and, uh, issues of poverty, the kind of frame shifting that can be meaningful in that work is really valuable. Comedy attracts attention, comedy is much more likely to be shared, comedy has to what we think of as a sleeper effect, which is a term that comes from psychology, which basically means that, for a couple of different reasons, we actually hold on to messages when they're delivered through comedy a little bit more easily than, you know, more serious forms of delivery. So if it gets people to shine a little flashlight into their own thinking and put a little crack in our kind of what we think of as our really rote understanding of really the social construct, construction of social issues and what we do about them, that's actually really valuable because when you think about social justice writ large, it requires us to move beyond the status quo about how issues have been told to us. How they have been shaped for us by narrative, by lots of different actors doing that work. Social justice really requires us to be bold enough to see that there is another way of looking actually, and thereby perhaps some radical ways of solving problems or seemingly radical because we just haven't seen them before. And I think comedy is valuable in all of that because it is so deviant, because comedy comes in and dares to make something really funny or playful about something that might be otherwise difficult for us to understand or perhaps too painful for us to talk about.

Greg Dalton: Coming up, it may seem strange to laugh about something as scary and huge as the climate crisis. But Caty Borum says it's necessary:

Caty Borum: If we don't allow some way to build up our resilience and catharsis and let in little slivers of light and hope, and my most favorite: play. How will we have the energy to keep going?

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Let's get back to Ariana's conversation with Caty Borum of American University.

Ariana Brocious: In keeping with the sort of, um, strategies behind joke telling, how important is a joke's point of view in order for it to be an effective agent of change? So for example, say someone's telling a joke about climate deniers. Is that likely to prompt someone who's a climate denier to feel differently about it?

Caty Borum: I work with many, many comedians. I also produce a lot of comedy in relationship with and collaboration with human rights organizations and, um, also run other programs that really are designed to work with comedians who are telling stories and creating comedy about things that matter. So I'm a really, really big fan and proponent of artistic freedom and creative freedom just in general. But that said, when you are doing comedy about issues that really, really need our attention

for lots of different reasons, I do think it is important that creative people are well versed in the topics. You have to do some research or talk to some people, go out of your way to really learn about it. So the climate deniers example is a really good one, because as we know, over the decades, the idea that some people and politicians deny climate science is real. We know that has become a really effective political lever. It is partisan with a capital P. It is such an effective tool of political warfare that we almost can't even see past it, right? So, it still, however, does not describe the majority of public opinion. And of course, public opinion is a beautiful thing because it does shift over time. So 20 years ago, I'm sure this was not the case, but we know from public opinion data from Yale and Pew and other sources, that the broad majority, at least of American people, now believe that climate change is real and that it is at least partially caused by human behavior, human action.

Ariana Brocious: And that we should do something about it.

Caty Borum: Exactly right. So going back to your point, if we then decide to make a series of jokes about climate change denial, First of all, that's actually not even helpful because that's not where the issue is anymore, we might find it funny if we're like sort of smugly. Calling climate change deniers idiots or whatever, we might privately think that's a pretty funny joke, but I would say if we actually really care about this issue, it's not terribly responsible, right? So what happens that we know from other scholars research, that when we message and do comedy on climate change denial. What we actually do is just send people deeper into their ideological camps and, and, and sort of encourage them to hold on to those beliefs even stronger. I'm not really sure, um, the utility of that. And it's not to say, comedy, by the way, should not be burdened with the utility of the humor. Comedians should be funny first. But if you're going to do climate change comedy, you should at least... Not want to do harm, right?

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, and I think, I mean, elsewhere in this episode, we talk with Rollie Williams, who I would say is trying to do both simultaneously. He wants to be funny. That's his tool and his platform, but his goal is climate information and, you know, getting people kind of more engaged. So I'm hearing from you is that it really matters to be smart about how sketches or bits are written and meeting people in the moment we're in the cultural moment, as you've been saying. Let's hear another bit of climate comedy from comedian Michelle Wolfe.

MICHELLE WOLFE: Climate change, it is a real big deal. And everyone says Mother Nature. And I do believe nature is a woman, because she's trying to kill us in the most passive aggressive way possible. It's not some sort of immediate fire or flood or a cool explosion, she's just like, "what? I raised the temperature a little." Are you uncomfortable? Well maybe I wouldn't have if you'd taken out the recycling like I asked! I'm fine.

Ariana Brocious: So another really funny bit, though, I have to say, I'm, uh, I think classifying all women as passive aggressive doesn't, doesn't meet my, uh,

Caty Borum: Right? Uh oh.

Ariana Brocious: opinion. No, but I, but I want to talk about what makes this effective, too, because I think it's really helpful to have you unpack something, you know, so we can, um, jump in and say, well, yeah, we know that the, the, there's the temperature bit, but I'll let you do the work of helping us understand why we think this is funny.

Caty Borum: So that's a funny joke, and we're going to remember it, right? Because she's playing on, first of all, shared cultural competence. I do agree with you, Ariana, I'm not sure all women are passive aggressive, but she's making, actually, the unspoken point that the kind of, you know, Uh, cartoonishly masculine is also not great, which is like, I'm just gonna blowtorch you, right? I mean,

that's also not true, right?

Ariana Brocious: Right, and she's poking fun at, like, the cultural idea of woman-ness, right?

Caty Borum: Yes. And she is still pointing out that the absurdity of it without talking about climate change denial in the joke of we were going to do real quick rhetorical analysis of this semiotic analysis or whatever we would say, look, she is actually reminding us a little bit about the science of climate change, which is for everyone who says, You know what? I don't know what you're talking about. It's colder than it's ever been in my neighborhood. To point out that the gradual shifts are actually not the same thing. She is reminding us that the, uh, that the science, what we know is the gradual shifts that actually are happening much more quickly. So I like that she uses the funny gender cues and it's important to also say, look, to be big, good comedy fans, we do have to always be willing to laugh at ourselves a little bit. So I would definitely agree that not all women are passive aggressive. I've worked with plenty of men who are passive aggressive, but it is funny. And like, there's enough cultural context where we understand why we should be laughing. If we are the women as the butt of the joke there, hopefully we can laugh at ourselves a little bit in her new special, by the way, she makes a lot of really funny jokes about, um, white women responding to crises. And, uh, I'll just name that I am a white lady and I found those jokes hilarious and, uh, kind of true. So...

Ariana Brocious: I think that's some of the most effective right when it really gets you and you feel seen and also a little criticized, but it's it's it's a good sort of like, Oh, right. Yeah.

Caty Borum: Yes.

Ariana Brocious: When doing research for this episode, it seemed that there isn't actually a large body of climate comedy. So why do you think that is? Why is climate maybe a topic that a lot of comedians stay away from?

Caty Borum: I think the really obvious answer is that it is so technologically difficult, and I think it can be really hard to find a way in comedically unless you're doing what I would call the tired old jokes of climate change denialism, which there are plenty of jokes about that, but I just think that's too easy, right? Not only is it not effective, it's just, it's like maybe not helping at all. Right. So I think it's just technocratic. And I think that also a lot of climate change messaging for many decades, hasn't really talked about humans as much as some of the science. I mean, the real hard science, the numbers, the environmental issues, of course, all of that.

Ariana Brocious: It's been like polar bears maybe or ice cap.

Caty Borum: Exactly. And so, you know, we're hoping to change that a little bit with our climate comedy cohort, which is really talking a great deal about things like clean energy solutions and trying to encourage people to kind of adopt different behaviors along those lines. The other thing that I would say, when you think about communities of people, professional communities. So let's think about climate scientists on the one hand, let's imagine them, right? And comedians on the other hand, yes. These don't feel like groups of people that hang out together, right? How would they meet one another and exchange tools of their trade? Like, how do you do what you do? No, how do you do what you do? So when it comes to sheer knowing one another, if I was just an emerging comedian, how would you even know as a comedian how to access a climate scientist to actually get enough information that really makes sense to you so that you can create comedy out of it? So actually one of the major interventions here, and this is what we're doing with our climate comedy cohort, an actually really simple intervention, but a really thoughtful and meaningful one is actually bringing those communities together so that they can genuinely learn from one another. Simply

putting communities together that actually work wildly differently is actually really, really important and I don't think that we think about that enough.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. I think that's an excellent point because it goes back to this idea of having to have enough understanding both of the performer and then the audience to be able to grasp what's the funny thing, right? the climate crisis has very real, very deadly consequences that we're beginning to experience increasingly with increasing frequency. But we have this history of using comedy to get through difficult times and difficult issues. So why is it important to find humor in something so serious and heavy?

Caty Borum: In one piece of research that we did, Lauren Feldman and I for our first book, we interviewed a lot of people in social issue work, including climate change, the people who actually were working with comedy about really daunting issues, including, for example, gun violence. Really, really talk about the terribly traumatic, painful issue. And we said to them, more or less, when you choose to work with comedy, why do you do it? Your issue is so hard. And what we heard over and over again was not only do people need hope, but people need a reason to keep mobilizing in the face of daunting odds. We know this from a really intuitive place, all of us do, that do work like this. We understand that because we all find a way to keep going with social issues that are hard. Those of us that really work in it. But if we don't allow some way to build up our resilience and catharsis and let in little slivers of light and hope, and my most favorite play. How will we have the energy to keep going? So the same is true when we're talking about public engagement and social challenges. We need comedy and play desperately, and we should honor and respect its place in that work as not luxury or extra, but as actually essential.

Ariana Brocious: Caty Borum is Executive Director of the Center for Media and Social Impact and Provost Associate Professor at American University. She's also author of *The Revolution Will Be Hilarious*, *Comedy for Social Change* and *Civic Power*. Caty, thank you so much for joining us for this great conversation on Climate One.

Caty Borum: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.

Greg Dalton: Climate One's empowering conversations connect all aspects of the climate emergency. Talking about climate can be hard-- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. You can also help by sending a link to this episode to a friend.

Ariana Brocious: Greg Dalton is host and executive producer. Brad Marshland is our senior producer; Our managing director is Jenny Park. Ariana Brocious is co-host, editor and producer. Austin Colón is producer and editor. Megan Bisciegia is our production manager. Wency Shaida is our development manager, Ben Testani is our communications manager. Our theme music was composed by George Young and arranged by Matt Willcox. Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, the nonprofit and nonpartisan forum where our program originates. I'm Ariana Brocious.