

Apocalyptic Rhetoric and Subversive Framing in "The Uninhabitable Earth"

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By applying theories of rhetorical criticism to the arguments in the viral, and controversial, New York Magazine cover piece "The Uninhabitable Earth" by David Wallace-Wells, this study evaluated the dominant frames, appeals and persuasive narratives utilized in the article. In vivid brush strokes, "The Uninhabitable Earth" painted eight scenes of apocalyptic horror that climate change will bring to our civilization, from toxic smog that will smother cities, to deadly heat waves that could kill thousands near the equator, and even total societal collapse because of the economic cost of climate change. The article became an overnight and controversial success, and shortly after publishing,

New York Magazine reported the piece had become the most read article in the history of the publication. Capturing the public's attention with messages of climate change is immediately important in the face of the threat of global warming. As science communicators and climate scientists struggle to effectively communicate the risks of climate change to the general public, a cross-disciplinary understanding of exemplary communication events is essential to furthering the field of climate change communication. The analysis drew conclusions to the research question: is "The Uninhabitable Earth" a persuasive apocalyptic climate change narrative? The rhetorical evaluation of this prominent article added another dimension of understanding of climate rhetoric in the emerging field of science communication. The apocalyptic narrative, metaphor and appeals of the article were effective, and have been used in similar climate change communication to the same end.



Excerpt from "The Uninhabitable Earth"

"The Earth has experienced five mass extinctions before the one we are living through now, each so

The Doomed Earth Catalog

complete a slate-wiping of the evolutionary record it functioned as a resetting of the planetary clock, and many climate scientists will tell you they are the best analog for the ecological future we are diving headlong into. Unless you are a teenager, you probably read in your high-school textbooks that these extinctions were the result of asteroids. In fact, all but the one that killed the dinosaurs were caused by climate change produced by greenhouse gas. The most notorious was 252 million years ago; it began when carbon warmed the planet by five degrees, accelerated when that warming triggered the release of methane in the Arctic, and ended with 97 percent of all life on Earth dead. We are currently adding carbon to the atmosphere at a considerably faster rate; by most estimates, at least ten times faster. The rate is accelerating. This is what Stephen Hawking had in mind when he said, this spring, that the species needs to colonize other planets in the next century to survive, and what drove Elon Musk, last month, to unveil his plans to build a Mars habitat in 40 to 100 years. These are non specialists, of course, and probably as inclined to irrational panic as you or I. But the many sober-minded scientists I interviewed over the past several months — the most credentialed and tenured in the field, few of them inclined to alarmism and many advisers to the IPCC who nevertheless criticize its conservatism — have quietly reached an apocalyptic conclusion, too: No plausible program of emissions reductions alone can prevent climate disaster."

Wallace-Wells, D. (July 2017). "The Uninhabitable Earth." New York Magazine.

When will the planet be too hot for humans? Plausibly within our children's lifetimes. By DAVID WALLACE-WELLS

Special thank you to Dr. Olmsted Undergraduate Communication Honors Thesis Rhode Island College 2018