

Humor and Risk: Exploring a new tool for communication and engagement

FOREWORD

Risk communication has started to develop a foothold in the disaster risk management (DRM) field, increasingly being recognized as an important component in any DRM activity that involves the public. We, at the Labs team of the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), have explored a variety of unconventional tools that may be useful and effective at communicating risk. These tools, such as art, data visualization, storytelling, and simulation games, are all part of the ever-growing risk communication and engagement toolbox. They can be used in concert with each other, or as a separate tool altogether. Humor is our latest exploration, and we believe that it is worthy of inclusion in the toolbox. We have learned that humor can supplement rigorous disaster and climate risk information to help highlight key points or support better engagement. It may seem on its face to be a highly unusual tool to harness in disaster and climate risk management, but we have evidence that humor is worth investigating.

Our exploration of humor is not one we take lightly; we are aware that there are valid concerns in using humor for risk communication, especially if used without adequate caring attention. Primary among the concerns are: humor may trivialize risk issues; it may distract the audience from the main message; and, given the cultural differences in humor, it may lead to misunderstandings at best or offending people and derailing processes at worst. Historically, in fact, humor was specifically discouraged in risk communication principles.¹

More recently, however, scholars and practitioners alike have begun demonstrating that, in the right context, properly designed humor can be highly effective in communicating risk. In particular, researchers have found that humor can: raise awareness through cartoons and memes², help audiences psychologically cope and deal with negative emotions³, foster greater involvement⁴, influence perceptions and beliefs⁵, help audiences overcome awkward or taboo risk issues⁶, function as a learning vehicle⁷, and influence positive behavior changes⁸.

One earlier example of humor in risk communication comes from a 2011 public awareness campaign from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The low-budget campaign, "[Zombie Apocalypse](#)", was launched at the start of hurricane season to promote awareness of emergencies and preparedness actions. By combining credible

¹ Ferrante 2010

² Ross and Rivers 2019

³ Murthy and Gross 2017

⁴ Becker and Anderson 2019

⁵ Brewer and McKnight 2017

⁶ Browne 2016

⁷ Boykoff and Osnes 2018

⁸ Skurka *et al.* 2018

preparedness actions with a humorous take on an emergency situation—zombie apocalypse—the CDC saw huge increases in engagement with the campaign, including from teens and young adults, a group typically more underprepared than most. The reaction to the campaign was so strong that it went viral and the CDC’s website crashed from the additional traffic.⁹ Of course, awareness does not necessarily lead to behavior change, but it is a first step toward creating a more resilient public. Lack of engagement guarantees failure to improve behavior.

While the Zombie Apocalypse and other examples can be amusing, the goal of humor for risk communication is not to amuse, but rather to use that amusement as part of the process in achieving higher-level policy objectives, such as raising awareness, changing behavior, or having difficult conversations about critical topics. Crucially, and like all risk communication messages, humor for risk *must* be evaluated to ensure that the intended goal is achieved, as well as to make sure that the message is culturally appropriate. By using humor effectively to alter the process of engagement, we can create more meaningful discussions and approach audiences in new, and possibly more effective, ways.

Our exploration of humor for risk communication and engagement has primarily been focused on cartoons for a few reasons: visual humor in the form of cartoons is already culturally prevalent around the world to address complex issues; they are used frequently in PowerPoint presentations during risk-related events; they require no performative talent or courage on the part of the person presenting it with the intent to provoke thought (as opposed to telling a joke or stand-up comedy, which can fall flat in their intent to provoke laughter); and they are easily reproducible through print and online platforms. Through cartoons, we are able to infuse disaster and climate risk management activities with humor that is natural to our collaborators at Cartoon Collections, the team of professional humorists who, as you’ll see in these pages are also experts at communicating what can go wrong. It is this meeting of the minds that creates a tool worth pursuing. Without our collaborating cartoonists, we would likely miss the mark.

Like in other technical professions, it is important to have professionals steering the ship. Which is why, in the following pages, you will find a mixture of humor and credible messages. We hope that this publication provides some answers and raises interesting questions around why humor, how it works, and how it has supported disaster and climate risk management activities. We ultimately believe that we must do better at connecting with communities as we try to create a more resilient world, and it is our hope that humor becomes another tool in a toolbox that society so desperately needs.

Emma Phillips
Senior Disaster Risk Management Specialist
Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR)
World Bank

⁹ Kruvand and Silver 2013.

SECTION A - WHY HUMOR & RISK

Note: graphic design & layout will establish that

- Neutral “voice” is presented using a ‘neutral font (like arial)
- Bob’s “voice” is presented using a more NewYorker-like font (Georgia for these purposes)

[Neutral Voice]

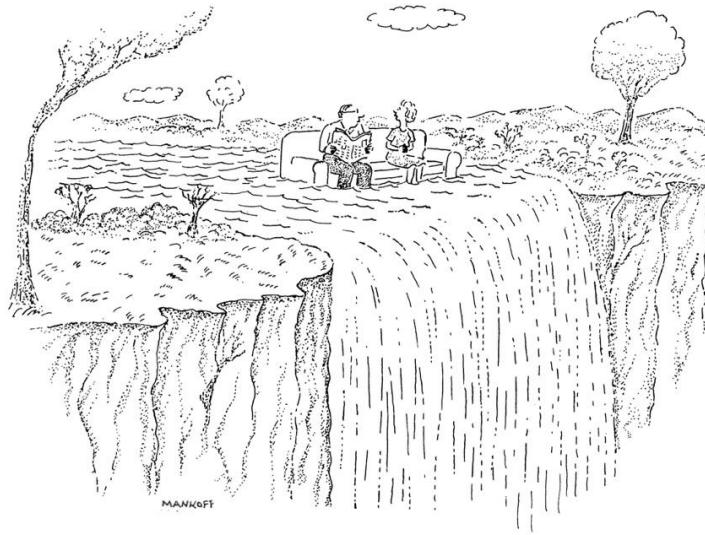
Risk is everywhere. And yet, we often fail to address that risk until it is too late. Why? Managing risks is, at its core, about noticing and confronting the gap between *what is* and *what could be*. Unfortunately, it looks like we’re not good enough at communicating how serious and how big that gap is...

But we have good news: you know what else is about that gap between *what is* and *what could be*? **Humor**. And, when used intelligently and responsibly, humor can help our risk messages to be heard and our risk management solutions to be implemented. Everyone has experienced humor. Humor is an essential element in every culture - and yet we don’t understand it, or take it seriously, as the powerful tool of communication it can be.

Humor Works.

At this point you may be thinking: What?!? “*Humor and Risk*”? If you picked up this publication, you must be curious about humor, its intersection with risk, and more specifically, “why humor for the field of risk?” Well, dear reader: Welcome to this seriously humorous exploration!

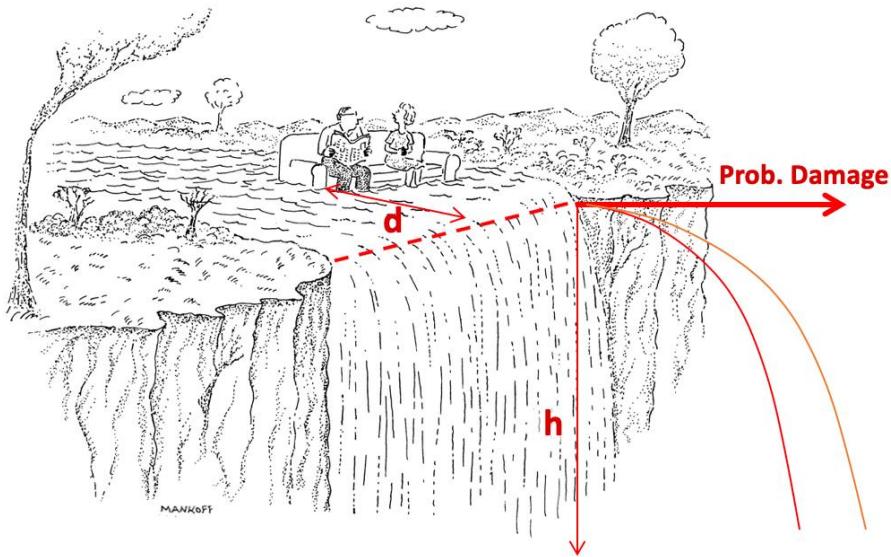
Let’s start with this cartoon:



[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

This drawing may at first confuse you - as good humor often does... (Brace yourself: in subsequent pages we may intentionally bring you to the tolerable edge of confusion!) While seemingly absurd, the cartoon depicts with remarkable precision the relationship between humanity and disaster risk. Things often change gradually, until they change abruptly. We, as risk managers, often see and understand that there is a cliff out there - and we’re heading for it. Indeed, not one but many types of shocks are expected to materialize in our lifetimes - often

sooner than people think. And we go about explaining risk using important, but complicated probabilistic risk modeling tools. Allow us to illustrate:

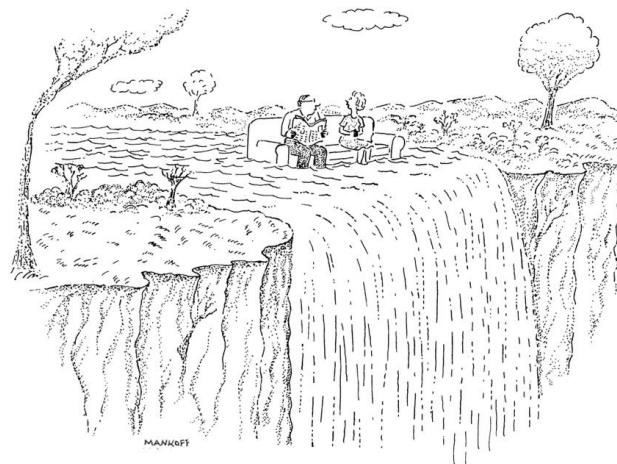


In this figure, "h" represents ~~height~~ HELL: How Horrible can it get?

"d" stands for ~~distance~~ DENIAL: Do we Dare admit how close we are to Dangerous Damage?

Of course, this depiction of probabilistic "damage" is much simpler than the actual graphs, maps, equations, and complex statements involving real-world risk models, taking into account, for instance, population change, migration patterns, climate projections.

Let's now see the original artwork, by cartoonist Bob Mankoff, with its original caption:



"Brad, we've got to talk."

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://BobMankoff/CartoonStock.com)

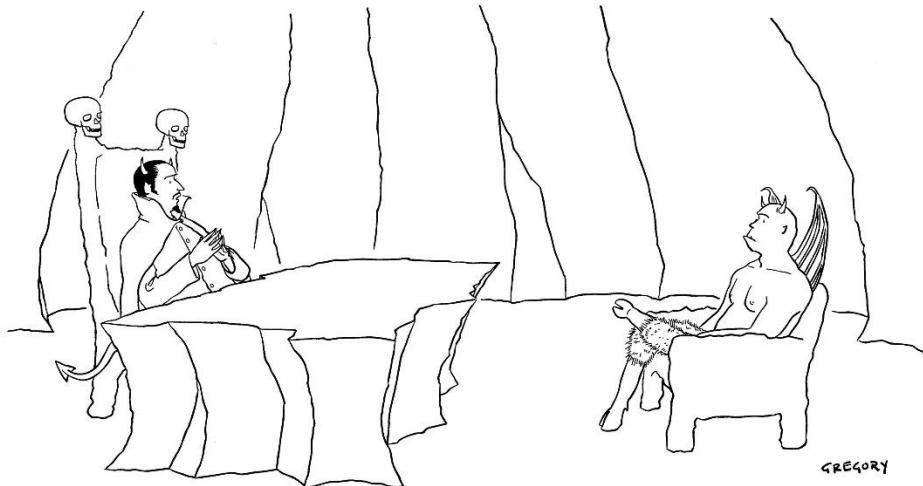
Indeed, *we've got to talk*. We, and the people we serve, are that couple sitting on the couch in denial about risk: a changing climate, disease outbreaks and pandemics, extreme events and extreme inequality, a wide range of unprecedented disasters... The list of risks goes on. We are trying to warn communities, policymakers, funders, and others about the big cliffs ahead, and yet the message we deliver is so meek in comparison to the enormity of the threat, or not well suited to the audience, or coming from a not-fully trusted source, or... For lots of foreseeable reasons, we are failing to break through and our forecasts are not being heeded. That's why we've got to reexamine how we talk about risks.



<http://unfccc.int/meetings/items/2654.php/2860txtxtxt.php>

Could it be that our urgent messages fall not on deaf ears but on bored ears? This is a typical photo of a large event - it was actually used to *promote* an annual conference about risk. The traditional approach of PowerPoint after PowerPoint of facts, charts, data, and bulleted recommendations may be safe for presenters and organizers, but the audience experiences the grave danger of falling asleep or tuning out - simply because of how risk information is communicated. **DUMPED.**

We all know that a series of death-by-PowerPoint presentations followed by insufficient Q&A is the default mode of interaction, and it sometimes feels ~~tiring~~ like **TORTURE**.



"I need someone well versed in the art of torture—do you know PowerPoint?"

[©Alex Gregory/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Our events, workshops, and other engagement opportunities about disasters and risks seem intentionally crafted to make them devoid of humor - as if 'boring' were the way it has to be. Yet, if humor is killed, it's harder for good ideas to emerge. When was the last time you saw a risk management breakthrough emerge from a humorless meeting? Humor engenders creativity. Because we are approaching the precipice of that waterfall, we need creative solutions - right now.

Research shows that showing research doesn't work.¹⁰ We've got to challenge ourselves, go beyond our comfort zones, and together try new ways to deliver solutions - including seemingly strange ways, like humor.

We can harness humor to address risk.

Here's why:

- **Humor engages** the audience, breaking through resistance and boredom
- **Humor enables** new ideas to emerge
- **Humor invites** us to open our minds and change our frames of reference
- **Humor creates** a safe space to be candid and think outside the box
- **Humor helps us envision** how things can go wrong, and how things could be changed

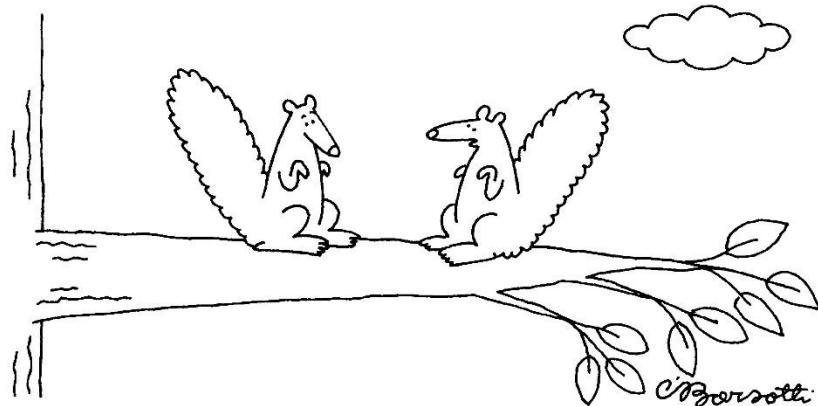
That's why we need humor for risk, and who better to make the case than Bob Mankoff. Bob is uniquely qualified to walk us through the serious uses of humor because he is not only a legendary cartoonist, he is also a world-renowned expert on humor, having shaped and crafted over two decades of cartoons for the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The New Yorker Magazine*.

[Bob's voice]

Imagine you're an allegedly legendary humorist and an email arrives asking for insights on using cartoons to talk about risk and saving lives. Wow, talk about pressure. Can't I just be funny?

¹⁰ Bavel *et al.* 2020.

Sure, but the truth is that humor and risk are not strange bedfellows but natural bunkmates. Humor needs a frisson of danger. And any time you tell a joke or draw a cartoon there's always the danger that it will fall flat, or worse offend. But hey, in cartoons as in life: no risk, no reward.

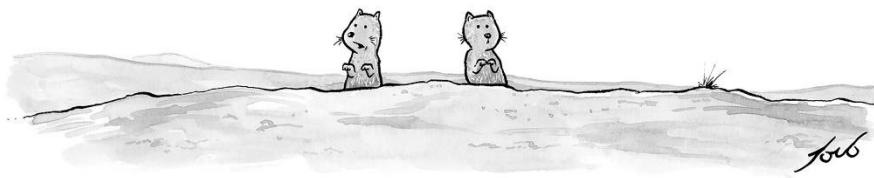
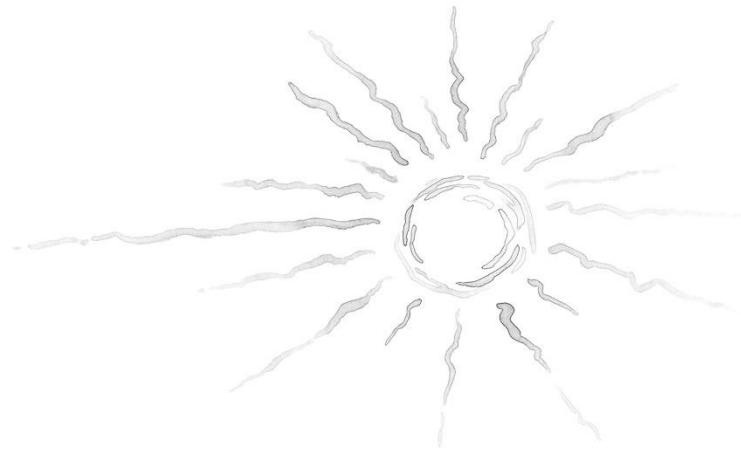


"How will you ever know whether you're a flying squirrel if you don't give it a shot?"

[©Charles Barsotti/CartoonStock.com](http://CharlesBarsotti/CartoonStock.com)

While risk is about what can go wrong, humor is about everything that *is* wrong.

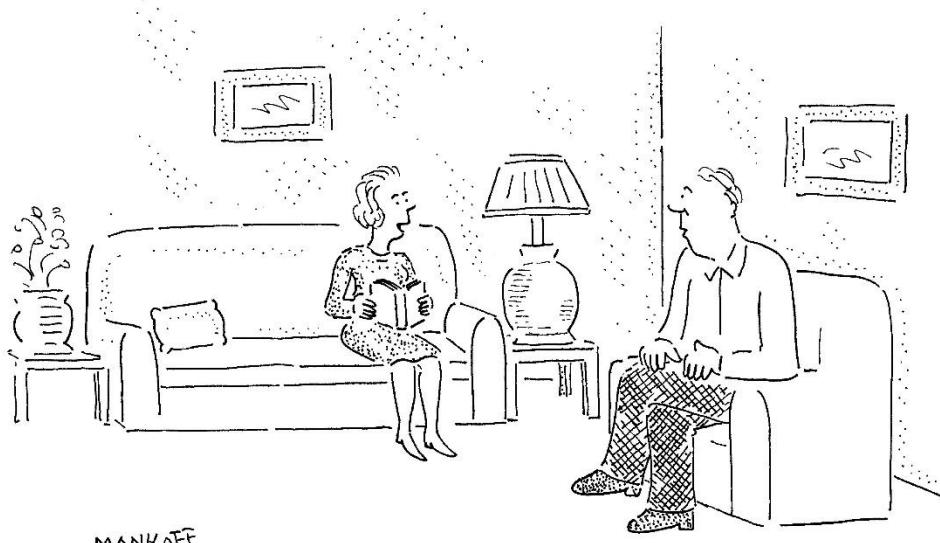
After all, there are no jokes about safe, beautiful days,



"Other than the constant looming threat of danger, it's a beautiful day."

[©Tom Toro/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

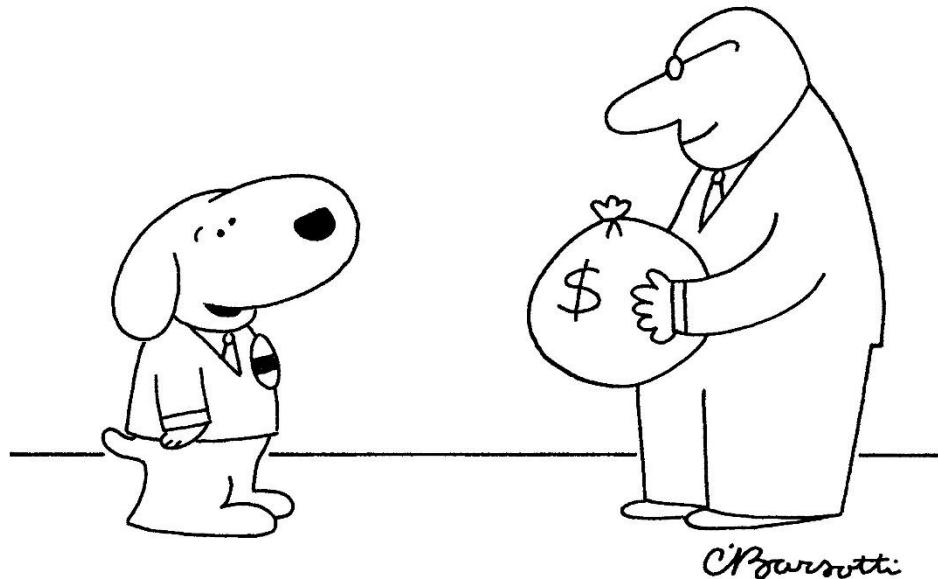
perfect marriages



"I'm sorry, dear. I wasn't listening. Could you repeat what you've said since we've been married?"

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

or honest politicians.



"Absolutely. When I'm elected, all you'll have to do is whistle."

[©Charles Barsotti/CartoonStock.com](http://CharlesBarsotti/CartoonStock.com)

Humor helps us deal with the wrong in life not by distracting us from it but by shining a spotlight on it. In fact, cartoons make us pay close attention to the things that are wrong around us and by doing so they help us cope with the stress and maybe even inspire change.

Unlike most of you risk managers reading this, I'm a humorist by training, inclination, and—amazingly enough—compensation.

These days, funny is money.

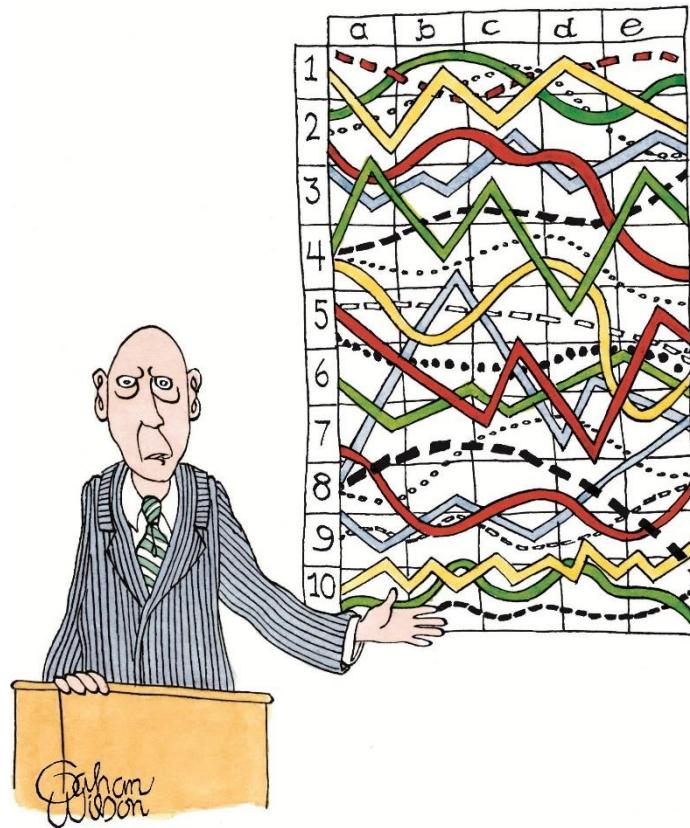
As the former Cartoon Editor of *The New Yorker* magazine and now President of Cartoon Collections and CartoonStock, I can attest to the power of cartoons to communicate as no other medium can. With a single image and a clever caption, or sometimes no caption at all, a cartoon cuts through the logical mind's resistance and today's digital, sensory overload to make its point heard.



"It sort of makes you stop and think, doesn't it."

[©Sam Gross/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

It's not an accident that a quarter of all ads use humor, or that every politician now has a gag writer as well as a speechwriter. That's because they understand that humor can do more than entertain. It can reinforce a message in the most pleasant way possible, with enjoyable, serious fun, even laughter. When someone makes you laugh while underscoring a serious point, their message becomes more persuasive, actionable, and memorable. Let this information sink in.



*"I'll pause for a moment so you can
let this information sink in."*

[©Gahan Wilson/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

[Neutral Voice]

Our risk information is too often falling into sinkholes. It's been said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Aren't we stuck in ways of working that don't work? Isn't it insane to keep honking our risk messages in the same old ways, expecting risk reduction to happen?



“Try honking again.”

[©Drew Dernavich/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Exponential honking is just not going to work. We have to shift gears. That's why we are proponents of the integration of humor and risk. Because serious stuff can break through to people not when they're just enduring an assault of (important but often boring) information, but when they are instead enjoying the discussion. Humor helps your audience hear hard truths.

Shift happens.

In our experience, humor can help us hear each other with disarming candor, especially when our interactions about risks are blocked by barriers to trust. Laughter creates a bond, making an audience receptive.

Communicating with humor engenders trust, and change happens at the speed of trust.

Humor isn't merely entertainment: it's smart, strategic communication. And, frankly... We all need to get smarter fast!

[Bob's Voice]

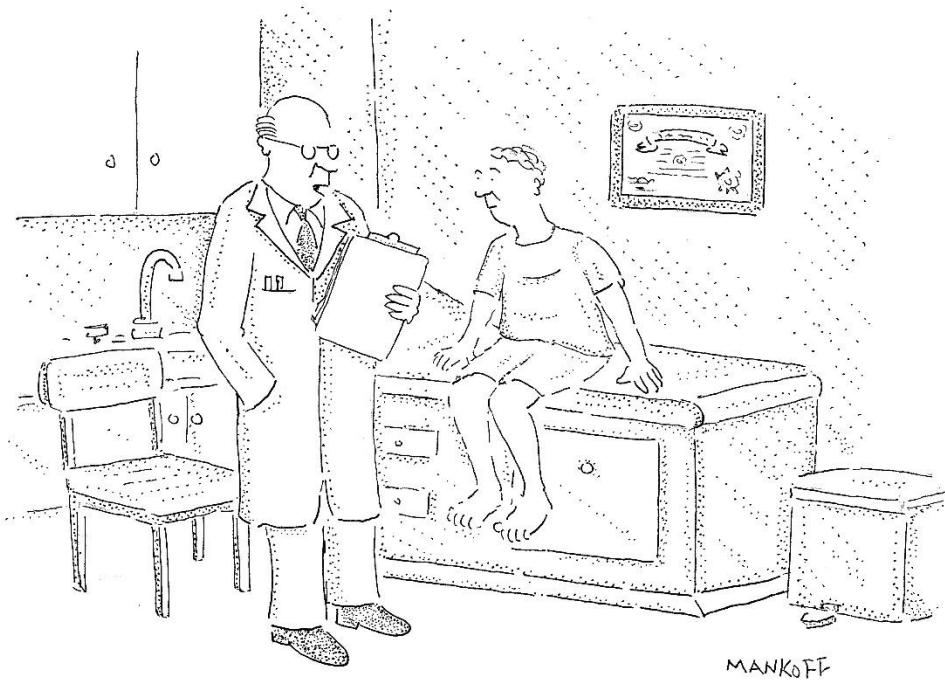
That's right. Smarter. Faster. Even though we've got to work with what we've got.



"It never ceases to amaze me what little brains people have."

[©P.C. Vey/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

We're not saying that humor is a magic pill. There are no magic pills and even if there were the drug companies would charge exorbitantly high prices for them (and insurance would probably deny you coverage).



"Uh-oh, your coverage doesn't seem to include illness."

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

But humor should be in your rhetorical toolbox because humor can help your message break through the inertia of daily denial, helping people to reframe situations they have learned to ignore.

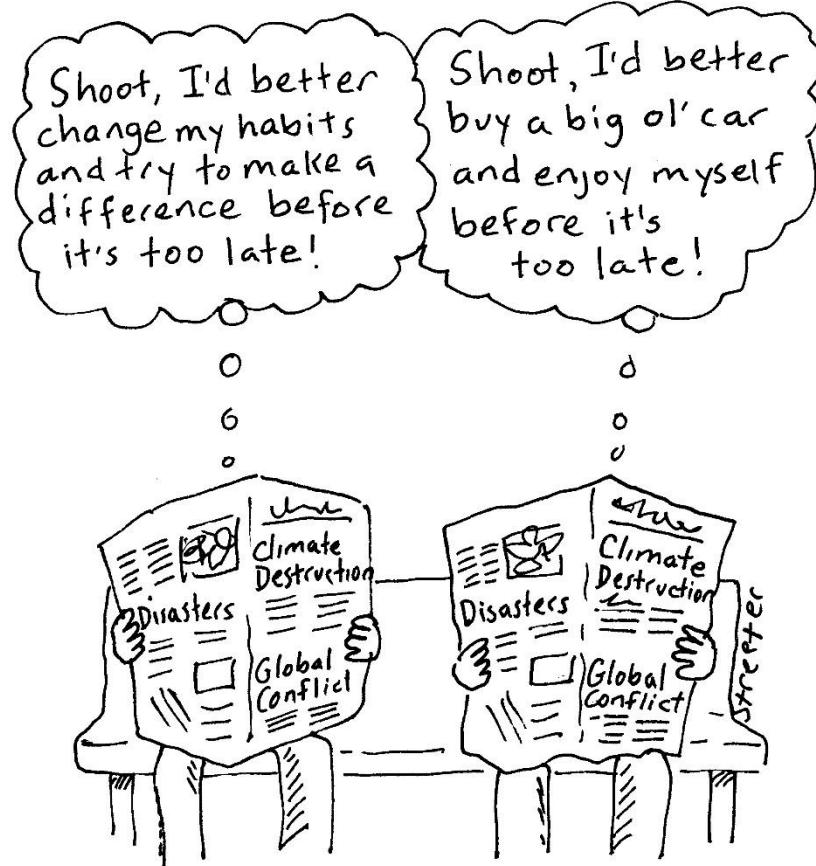


"I want you to play a bigger role in the day-to-day operations of ignoring the obvious."

[©P.C. Vey/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

By dissolving denial, humor enables decision makers and populations at risk to see their risky situations with fresh eyes.

Humans are not computers, they're emotional creatures. When exposed to 'clear and obvious' facts, the myriad conclusions they draw are often as unpredictable as the actions they are motivated to take. Humor meets them where they are, which is disarming.



[©Betsy Streeter/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/betsy_streeter/)

The cartoon above illustrates that no amount of facts can make your audience see the world the way you want them to. Instead, your listeners can't help but hear and see your facts through the lens of their own biases and proclivities. It's not personal... Or, more precisely: it *is* personal. It's human nature. And to deny the human nature of your audience is a losing proposition.

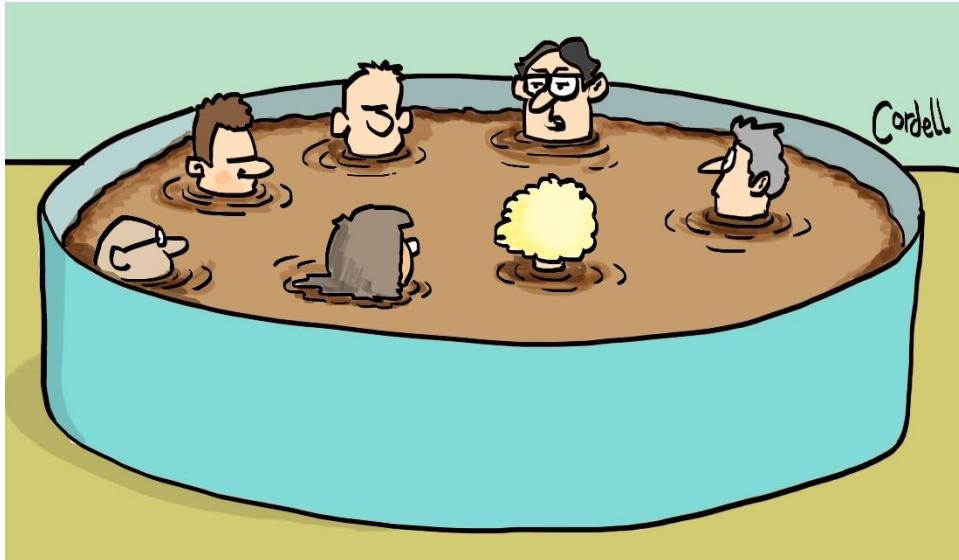
[Neutral Voice]

Disaster risk managers and other practitioners often fail to realize that not everyone is a professional risk assessor or thinks in a probabilistic, data-driven way. People at risk will think and act on what they want, based on their values, experiences, aspirations, and emotions. And so if we want to inspire actions that address risk, we must align with individual, community, or societal incentives and priorities.

[Bob's Voice]

I agree that aligning priorities is a priority. And one way of synching them is through humor. If we can get someone to laugh at any observed or desired shift in the risks we

face, that laugh means we have shared a realization. After recognizing we have something in common, there is a starting point for working together.



“Remember, we’re all in this together.”

[©Tim Cordell/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

It's been said that humans are the only animals that laugh or cry because they know the difference between what is and what could be. Let's figure out how to illuminate those differences by better understanding humor.

SECTION B – UNDERSTANDING HUMOR

[Neutral voice]

So, what is humor, and how does humor work? It turns out that the first documented instance of that research question emerged over two millennia ago, from Plato and Aristotle.¹¹ And the answers remain elusive.

Let's try something simple: What do you think of when you think of humor? Name one word. Chances are your word is somewhere on this word cloud:

WORDS WE ASSOCIATE WITH HUMOR



No apparent overlap between these words and the dead-serious work of many of us from the disaster risk management field.

Now ask this question of Bob Mankoff and other humorists and you know what you get?

WORDS THAT BOB MANKOFF ASSOCIATES WITH HUMOR



¹¹McGraw, P., & Warner, J. (2014). *The humor code: A global search for what makes things funny*. New York [etc.]: Simon & Schuster.

Professional humorists, when thinking about humor, think of words like *Conflict*, *Ambiguity*, *Contradiction*, *Incongruity*. These terms describe a most important portion of the reality that surrounds us, a reality that often creates *Risk* and *Danger*.

These words are central to the creation and experience of humor - and they are also central to the work of disaster risk managers.

Coincidence? Not really. There is actually fundamental overlap between the way humorists see the world and the way disaster risk managers see the world, because both disciplines grapple with the clash between the way things are and the way they could be. By teaming forces with humorists, risk practitioners can find new ways to get their messages heard and acted on by populations at risk.

So let's try to understand humor a bit better, courtesy of Bob Mankoff:

[Bob's voice]

Of all the things humans do, laughing may be the funniest, as in *funny-strange* rather than *funny ha-ha*. A friend tells a joke, relates an amusing anecdote, has a slip of the tongue or actually slips (without getting hurt) and the weirdness ensues: our eyebrows and cheeks rise, the muscles around our eyes tighten and the corners of our mouth curl up baring our upper teeth as our diaphragm moves violently up and down in spasms, expelling the air from our lungs in a staccato outburst of vocal sounds. If the joke really strikes us as hilarious, we might bend over and hold our stomachs. If we were drinking something just then, there's a risk it might end up coming out of our noses.



"Remember that time you made me laugh and people came out of my nose?"

[©Arnie Levin/CartoonStock.com](http://CartoonStock.com)

And funniest of all, in both senses of the word, is that this seeming physiological train wreck feels great! What seems so wrong can, in fact, be so emotionally and cognitively right. And this incongruous double essence, this mashup of wrong and right that is so omnipresent in the world of risk, is the essence of the phenomenon of humor.

Humor and laughter are universal human experiences occurring in all cultures, at all times and in nearly every kind of interpersonal relationship. But only in recent decades has decision science respected it as an essential, fundamental human behavior worthy of research and applications.

After decades of scholarship by very good minds in very good lab coats we have research to show that humor can be used to make ourselves and others feel good, and when we feel good, we are more flexible in decision making and more open to solving problems creatively.

As a coping mechanism, humor allows people under stress to step back from their immediate concerns, enabling them to gain insight, improve their health, and become more resilient, communicative, and collaborative - especially in the face of danger.



"And, while there's no reason yet to panic, I think it only prudent that we make preparations to panic."

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Both as a researcher with the International Society for Humor Studies and as a practicing humorist, I've learned how humor can be used as a force for positive change because it both engages and disarms. When you laugh, you lower your defenses and take a momentary step back from your habitual stress. When we share a laugh, we are also meeting on common ground, bonding over a shared experience. Humor refreshes our senses. The fresh perspective that humor brings can help us take in information better and evaluate it more dynamically.

[Neutral voice]

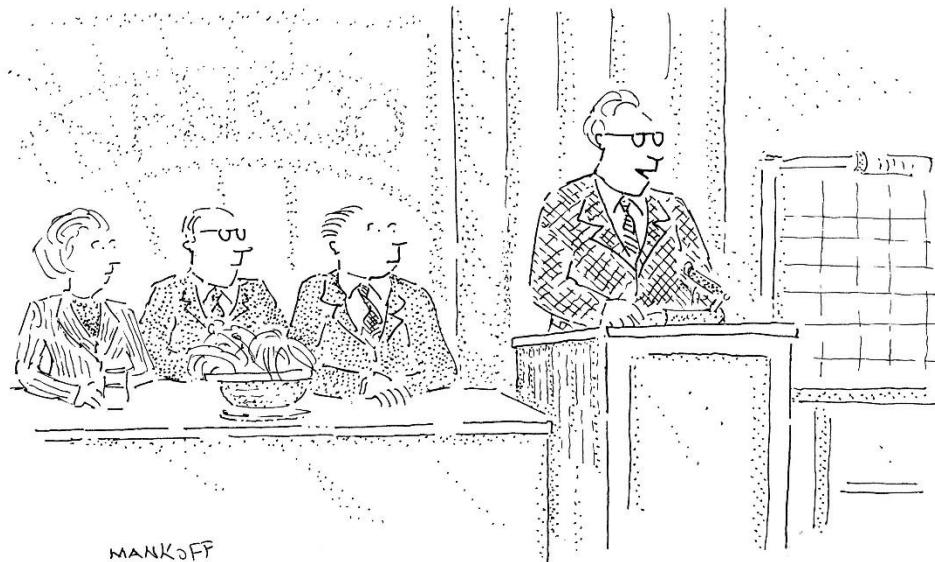
"Audiences who laugh with you quickly come to like you. And if people like you, they're much readier to take seriously what you have to say," according to The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking.

[Bob's voice]

I hear you out there saying: jokes? cartoons? It all sounds a bit risky. Is it wise to ask people in dire straits to find humor in their plight?

Rejection of humor is valid if the humor you're imagining is low humor, the kind that punches down. But the kind we're advocating is the kind that is speaking to and about reasonable, ordinary people; humor in which no one is being looked down on, but is instead being looked right in the eye by an equal.

If the kind of humor you employ invites everyone to acknowledge incongruities or contradictions that are otherwise hard to articulate, then you have used it to open a difficult conversation about causes and consequences of what matters.



"And so, while the end-of-the-world scenario will be rife with unimaginable horrors, we believe that the pre-end period will be filled with unprecedented opportunities for profit."

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://BobMankoff/CartoonStock.com)

Why is humor useful for your efforts communicating risk about disasters? To answer that, we need to understand how humor works: how it reframes our view of reality through new lenses. To illustrate the idea of humor as lenses I'll use, big surprise, cartoons.

Lens #1: *Surprise!*

The first lens through which humor reframes our experience is unsurprisingly, *surprise*. It's why no matter how funny a joke is, we can't tell it to ourselves.



[©Mick Stevens/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Surprise is essential to humor. It works by presenting something familiar and then flipping our expectations of the familiar on their head.

[Neutral voice]

How much does this echo our experience of risk? A community living on a fault line where there has been no earthquake for decades, learns over time to ignore the looming danger so they can get on with daily life. They learn to suppress the possibility of surprise. When we can't conceive that disaster can intrude on the ordinary, we are vulnerable. Humor brings the surprise back to the front of our minds, allowing us to focus more on the uncertain surprise of disasters.

Similarly, when we attend presentations about risk, we almost never experience surprise: what is given to us is what we expect - we often know the script... and thus our attention dwindles in a swamp of predictability. In contrast, humor awakens.

[Bob's voice]

Humor's element of surprise makes it easier to accept that we don't always know what's coming next. But here is where the magic of humor happens, because when we guess wrong in evaluating real life scenarios we can get in trouble, sometimes serious trouble. But, when a cartoon leads us to guess wrong about what comes next, we laugh!

Surprise is often generated by a change in what cognitive psychologists call the "Script". A script is a stereotypical understanding of an object or event. It's how we expect things in the world should happen most of the time, based on our previous experience and beliefs. Scripting and flipping the script is part of what makes humor a powerful tool for

risk management because it echoes the unpredictable nature of life and invites us to re-examine our assumptions in a friendly way.

The ‘Doctor Script,’ for example, includes ideas like, is intelligent, serious, knows a great deal about medicine, and can be trusted to do no harm. This cartoon by Leo Cullum evokes that script, and disrupts the script’s expectation with a surprise vacation:



*“You’ll be awake during the entire procedure.
The anesthesiologist is on vacation.”*

[©Leo Cullum/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

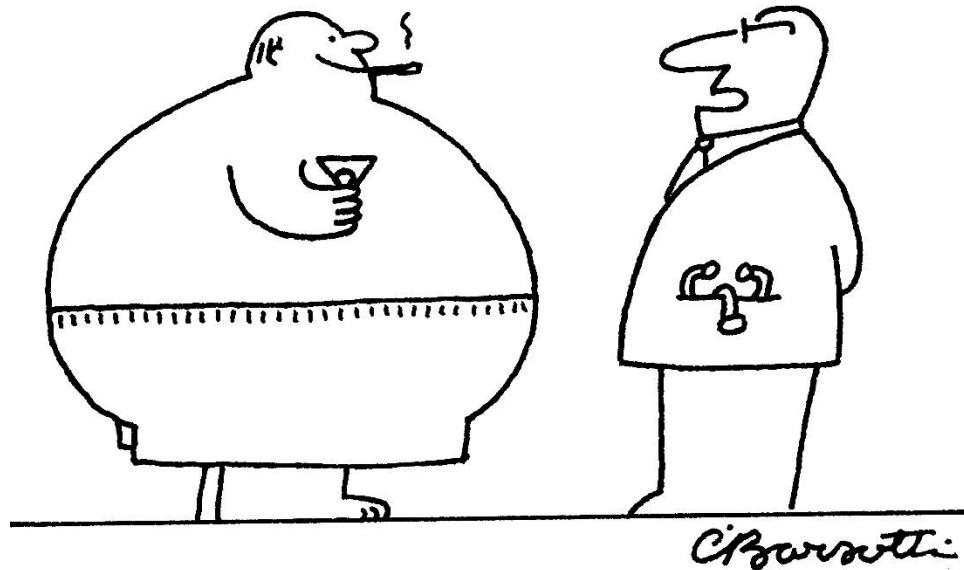
When humor flips the script on us, our being wrong doesn’t cost us anything. Instead, laughter gives us a rush of good feeling and relief. Surprise is how humor creates a safe place in which to be wrong. When there is no price to guessing wrong, we can collaborate and brainstorm on new ideas more effectively.

[Neutral voice]

As risk managers we fail to think that our disaster risk management advice and actions can lead to negative consequences. So many of our evaluation reports refer to “Lessons Learned” - which are often identical to what was published in previous reports.

[Bob’s voice]

Perhaps they should be called “Lessons Observed But Not Learned”?



*“All these years, and you haven’t listened
to a damn thing I’ve Said, have you?”*

[©Charles Barsotti/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/charles-barsotti)

[Neutral voice]

We will be wrong, repeatedly. Unless we create a safe space to explore how that can happen, we are less likely to learn how to avoid it.



*“You will make the same foolish mistakes you have made
before, not only once but many, many times again.”*

[©Gahan Wilson/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/gahan-wilson)

Box: “Surprise” applied to cartoons for risk:

Co-managed by the Global Resilient Cities Network and the World Bank, the *Cities on the Frontlines* weekly series helped cities respond to the pandemic crisis with resilience. The event held on June 11th 2020 was entitled “Cascading Shocks, Compounding Vulnerabilities: Urban Heat + Covid-19”. How to help urban stakeholders wrestle with the threat of extreme temperatures while containing the pandemic? One thing is clear: proposed solutions can lead to new problems, especially if we don’t make the effort to anticipate what can go wrong. Two cartoons were commissioned to support live discussion during the event, including this one:



We found a way to keep cool **and** practice social distancing.
Nothing can go wrong now.

[©Pat Byrnes/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Expecting that nothing can go wrong is, of course, a recipe for disaster. In this puzzle-like cartoon, humorist Pat Byrnes harnessed the power of surprise to convey a simple yet crucial message: Prepare for the consequences of your actions, so that cascading shocks don’t catch you by surprise.

[Bob’s voice]

Lens #2: Appropriate Incongruity

Appropriate Incongruity, also termed “bisociation”, is what happens when two usually separate and very different frames of reference are brought together because there is some area where they can be connected. In that overlap, a new idea is born.



"You'll see, this is going to cause real trouble."

[©Charles Barsotti/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/charles_barsotti)

This cartoon is a clear example of appropriate incongruity between the iconic portrait of bags of money constituting a solution, and the comic depiction of a deity that punishes humanity from above by sending them lightning bolts and other disasters. The bag of money may at first seem to not belong in the hands of a deity determined to punish those below.... This cartoon puzzles over the overlap of money and trouble: Do risk managers acknowledge that some forms of funding can be disastrous?



-We have no funding for disasters that have not yet happened...

[©Paul M. Bisca/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/paul_m_bisca)

[Neutral voice]

What inappropriate incongruities are risk managers failing to notice now? Surely we are not perfect... Surely we are not seeing all that the data can show. Humor can shed the appropriate light on what we process and on what we suppress.



[©Larry Lambert/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/larry_lambert)

[Bob's voice]

In his 1964 book, “The Act of Creation” Arthur Koestler explains that humor is born from two incongruous elements: their juxtaposition forms a third idea within the viewer’s mind. That process illuminates...and enlivens the mind!

Here’s a perfect example. This classic cartoon of mine is demonstrating the incongruity of two opposing concepts – politeness and rudeness:



“No, Thursday’s out. How about never—is never good for you?”

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://CartoonStock.com)

Our expectations are defied. The syntax of good manners collides with the brusque message, mashing up two things that don’t belong together: he’s being both polite *and* rude. Haven’t we all experienced this emotional truth in the business of formality? The appropriate incongruity here reminds us that candor is not spoken out loud in formal settings. By inviting us to laugh at that incongruity we open the door to candid conversations, which is the basis for genuine collaboration and understanding.



*“Sometimes I think the collaborative process
would work better without you.”*

[©P.C. Vey/CartoonStock.com](http://www.cartoonstock.com)

[Neutral voice]

Collaboration is not easy in the complexity of risk. Incongruities are guaranteed to emerge when bringing together technical experts, government authorities, people in harm's way, funders, and myriad other key players. If the various frames of reference will inevitably collide, humor can help acknowledge the incongruities while helping us behave appropriately in pursuit of fair solutions.

Box 2: “Appropriate Incongruity” applied to cartoons for risk

So often in workshops or discussions in the field, we will hear some of the same buzzwords or catch phrases, and yet everyone smiles and nods as if saying it will make it come true, or that minimal effort is needed to create change. For instance, the phrase “stakeholder engagement”: During a Cartoonathon (see page XX), a cartoonist and humanitarian worker Rebeka Ryvola overheard this phrase being used repeatedly. By creating this cartoon she is able to highlight the inappropriate absurdity of questioning a stakeholder from a rural area for failing to engage in a process held in the urban center that proclaims inclusivity, but excludes.

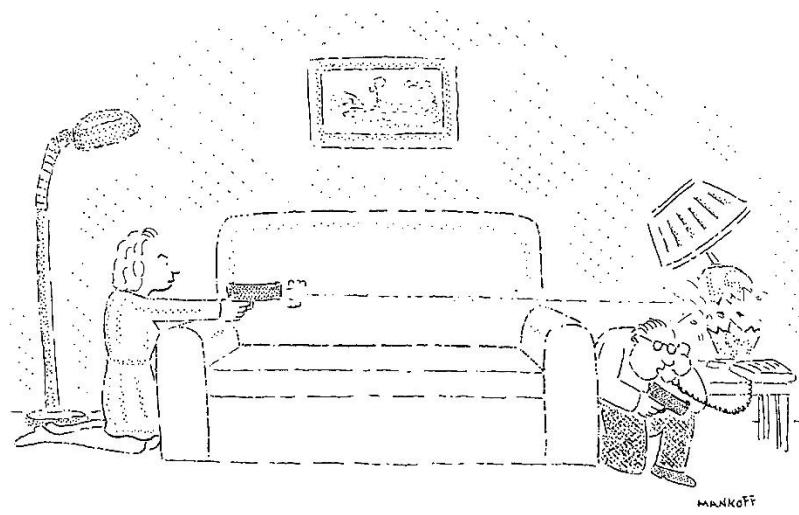


[©Rebeka Ryvola/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

[Bob's voice]

Lens #3: Exaggeration

For something to be funny it has to deviate from the normal. By absurdly exaggerating an everyday saying or situation, a kernel of truth blows up to expose an underlying deeper truth. Forcing that recognition often causes laughter.



"As a matter of fact, you did catch us at a bad time."

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

The more exaggerated the situation, the more absurd and therefore the funnier the cartoon. By exaggerating the situation, humor helps us better notice the sometimes nuanced anomalies that create danger. At the same time, the absurdity of the exaggerated portrayal becomes funny - enabling the recognition of a seed of truth: Something odd is going on.



Rule one: Never work without a net.

Rule two: Specify the *type* of net.

[©Mike Baldwin/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

[Neutral voice]

Risk practitioners treat misunderstandings as exceptions, but in fact they are the norm. Yet we fail to notice the consistently absurd mismatch between what we say and what people understand. By charmingly amplifying our failures through humor, the exaggeration lens can focus our view on communication shortcomings.

Box: “Exaggeration” applied to cartoons for risk

In the context of a rather turbulent year which led to many people and organizations becoming more attuned to the role of discrimination and privilege in shaping risks, the 2020 Understanding Risk Forum (UR2020) featured a series of sessions entitled [“Racism, Exclusion, and Risk.”](#) Carefully designed to establish a safe space for candor through the co-creation of humor, participants shared experiences on how mechanisms of differentiation based on race are determinant in the social construction of vulnerability and exposure, perpetuating systemic

patterns. Building on comments that emerged during the first session, humorist Felipe “Feggo” Galindo created the following cartoon:



Feggo / CartoonStock.com

[© Feggo/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/feggo/)

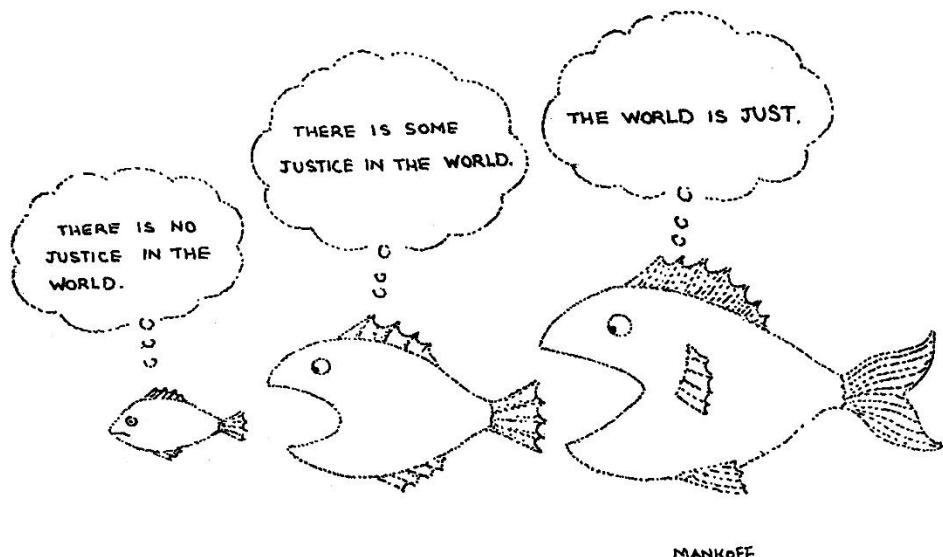
Many of us have experienced, or perhaps even perpetrated, various levels of denial with regards to risk, racism, and exclusion. While the depiction of this talking head is an exaggeration beyond plausibility, it served to illustrate the key point of the session: People and organizations that simply can't hear or listen often fail to notice racism, or anticipate the risks this can engender and entrench. We can and must initiate constructive conversations on this difficult, crucial matter.

[Bob's voice]

Lens #4: Counter-factualty.

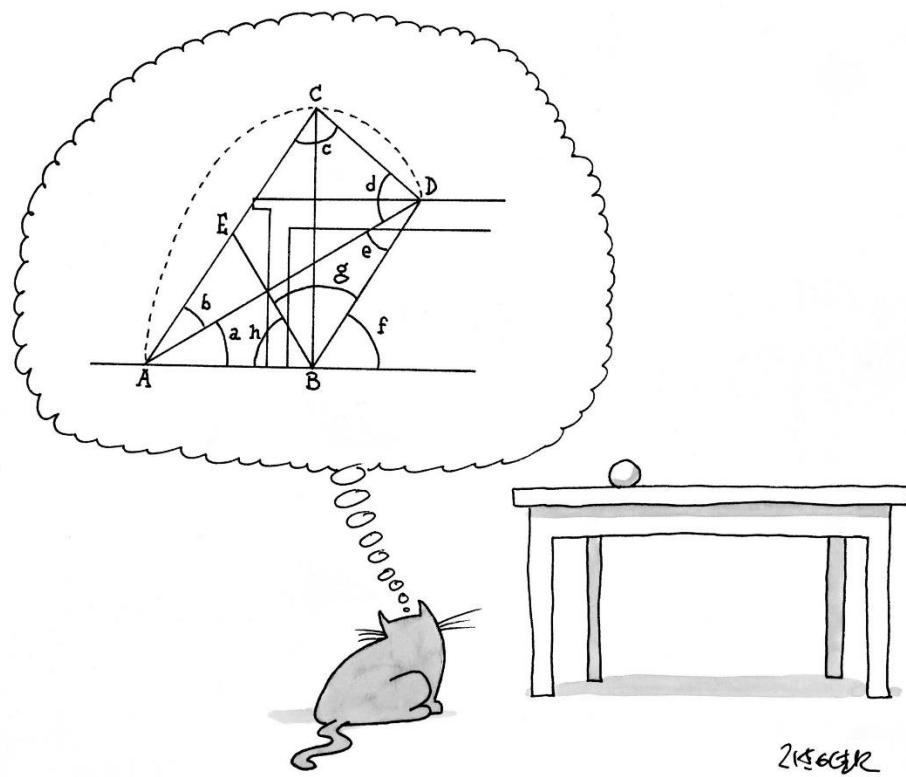
By *Counter-factualty* I mean creating a situation that is not an exaggeration of something that could happen but the creation of something that *couldn't* happen. It can also be combined with *Appropriate Incongruity* (associating things from different frameworks) to engender humor.

Counter-factualty is humor's “What if” lens to imagine alternate realities. What if fish were philosophers?



[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/bobmankoff/)

Or cats did math?



[©Jack Ziegler/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/jackziegler/)

[Neutral voice]

Real cats make plans and jump to action without attention to mathematical models. The same is often true of all of us who, through omission or commission, are socially constructing risk. The

counter-factual lens of humor can serve to amplify our imagination (and possible solutions to risk mitigation) as we explore alternative trajectories. What if dinosaurs had been smarter risk managers?



"All I'm saying is now is the time to develop the technology to deflect an asteroid."

[©Frank Cotham/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Box: “Counter-factuality” applied to cartoons for risk:

What if risk data actually, demonstrably, irrefutably saved lives? Can we imagine a scenario where the tons and tons of scientific papers, reports, maps, and graphs actually prevent losses from a flood? Well, cartoonists are experts at imagining alternative realities, so here's one option:



“We were saved by all that risk data, once we realized we’d forgotten to order sandbags.”

Pat Byrnes / CartoonStock.com

[©Pat Byrnes/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/pat_byrnes)

This cartoon was created during the InsuResilience Annual Forum 2020, during a session about decision making under uncertainty. Event organizers decided to integrate an intensely interactive component, whereby participants engaged with a tailor-made digital tool called “Headlines” to co-create imaginary good news and bad news from the future. One of the proposed headlines involved risk reports saving the world. Professional humorists then created cartoons in real time, inspired by those fictional headlines. The resulting cartoons enriched the annual report, and are now being used to support discussions about disaster risk financing.

[Bob’s voice]

Lens #5: *Benign Violation*

For something to be funny we have to think of it as both wrong in some way and okay at the same time. So, just the right amount of wrong.

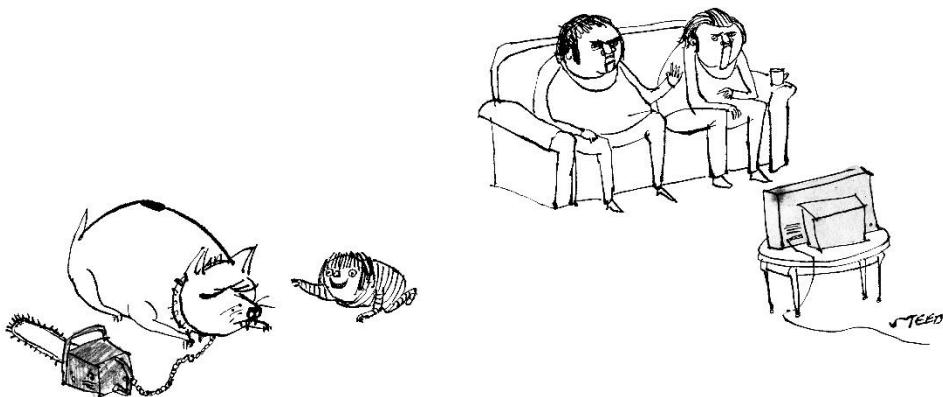
Benign Violation helps explain the kind of humor which invites the question, “Should we be laughing at this or should we be sounding an alarm?”

Two other examples, with direct implications on how risk is created:



“Let’s never forget that the public’s desire for transparency has to be balanced by our need for concealment.”

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)



“You have to let them make their own mistakes.”

CartoonStock.com

[©Ed Steed/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

Much of the punch from this kind of humor comes from the emotional conflict of simultaneously feeling something is “wrong” but also “ok”. This uncomfortable knife’s edge is where humor makes its strongest impact.

[Neutral voice]

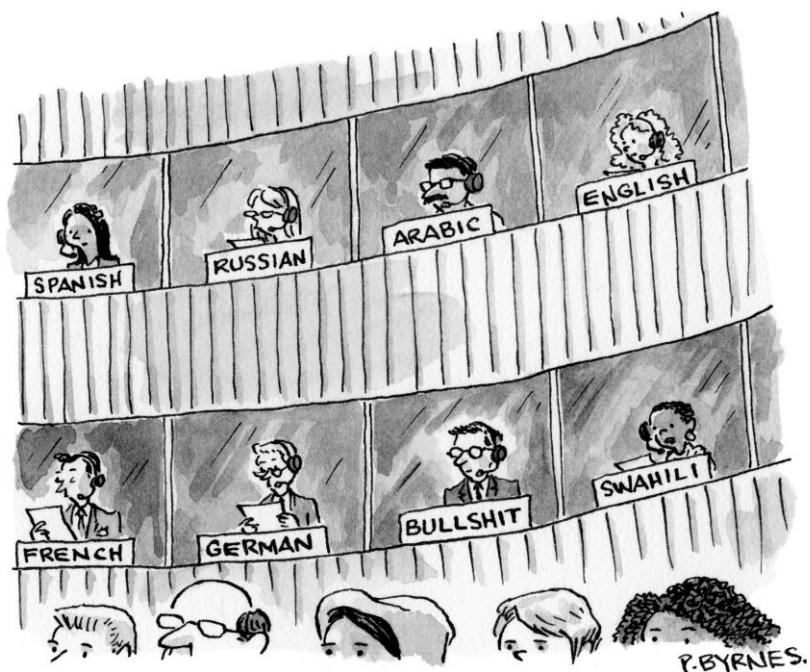
Interestingly, feeling that something is “wrong” but at the same time “ok” is the inevitable emotional conflict of anybody coexisting with risks, whether a fishing villager in a hurricane-prone island or a multilateral donor agency allocating billions of dollars to support national

government infrastructure in high disaster risk areas. Humor's ability to speak about danger while being in a safe space of commentary makes it a powerful tool through which to communicate risk.

Box: “Benign Violation” applied to cartoons for risk:

Building on its tradition for unconventional, creative approaches to learning and dialogue, the 2020 Understanding Risk Forum (UR2020) included a participatory session that brought together the humanitarian worker and professional humorist that crafted this publication you are reading, as well as a Senegalese chef and the scholar, Hayley Stevenson, who authored the journal article about reforming global climate governance in an age of bulls%*t (also known as B.S.).¹² That article builds on the analytically rigorous work by philosopher Harry Frankfurt, who defines B.S. as “indifference to truth” and argues that we must “heighten our ability to discriminate reliably between instances in which people are misrepresenting things to us and instances in which they are dealing with us straight.” The discussion during the UR2020 session shared five dominant flavors of B.S. in the risk sector (promissory, optimistic, whatevering, self-contradictory, and nonsensical B.S.) which explain the pervasive mismatch between intent, words, and actions. It also elicited insights on the value of setting up mechanisms for detecting and denouncing B.S. when it emerges.

What would it be like to set up translation services aimed at helping us all really understand what is really meant when indifference to truth is spoken during climate and risk events? Here's one such “what if” scenario: a counter-factual depiction tailor-made for the occasion.



[©Pat Byrnes/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

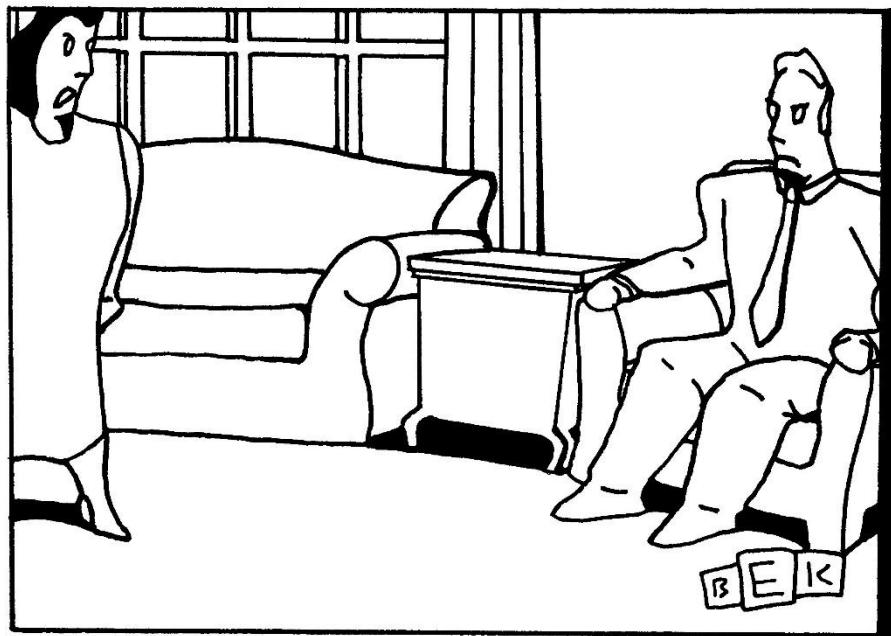
¹² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14747731.2020.1774315?journalCode=rglo20>

The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre is building on this analytically rigorous framework about B.S., aiming to promote candor in difficult conversations about changing risks. The humor-enriched UR2020 session was instrumental in helping create space for this unconventional line of work. Cartoons clearly established the “benign violation” being pursued: a sense of trespassing norms, building on good intentions to confront the unacceptable-yet-accepted pervasiveness of B.S. in the climate space.

[Bob's voice]

Lens #6: Conflict

Humor is social and usually involves some sort of dissatisfaction with what we are most often dissatisfied with—other people. From this comes the humor of interpersonal conflict.



“Let’s stop this before we both say a lot of things we mean.”

[©Bruce Eric Kaplan/CartoonStock.com](http://BruceEricKaplan/CartoonStock.com)

[Neutral voice]

In the field of risk management we do not know how to design and facilitate participatory processes tailored to deal with conflicting priorities, opposing worldviews, divergent styles of interaction, or sheer power imbalances. From allocating disaster preparedness budgets to deciding whether or not to set up coastal barriers, conflict with “the other” is inherent in risk-related decisions.

The careful and intentional use of humor allows us to surface those underlying differences that can lead to conflict, while establishing a “vibe” that enables fruitful discussions where people can say what they mean - instead of suppressing it.

[Bob's voice]

Sometimes the conflict is not me against you but us against them.

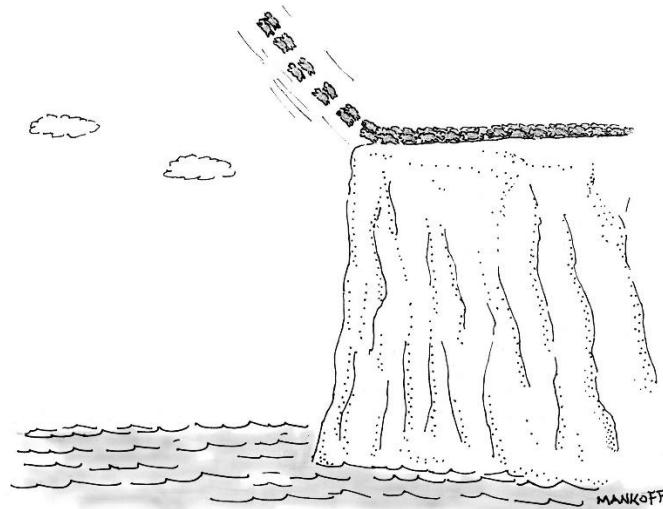


“I’m surprised, Marty. I thought you were one of us.”

[©Jack Ziegler/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

But as this cartoon points out, who is a “them” and who is an “us” is subjective and ambiguous.

Still other times the conflict is with the realities of existence itself.



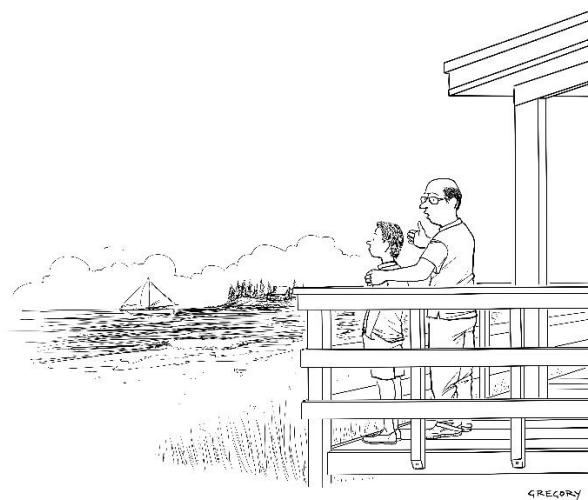
WHAT LEMMINGS BELIEVE

[©Bob Mankoff/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

[Neutral voice]

Both lemmings and humans make decisions based on what they believe will be the consequences of their actions. Risk modeling is failing to properly capture the complex realities of what people believe, and how beliefs shape the result of sharing information about hazards and vulnerabilities. Parachuting in with knowledge can come across as arrogant, creating opposition to even the best-intended messages. In a small Pacific island that treasures its ancestors, asking villagers to relocate due to sea level rise will clash with local beliefs about staying and caring for the places where loved ones are buried. Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Sometimes people don't believe what risk experts say. Other times, even if they believe the science, they don't take the actions needed to reduce potential harm to self and to others - including loved ones. Risk communication must address the conflicts in caring for others.

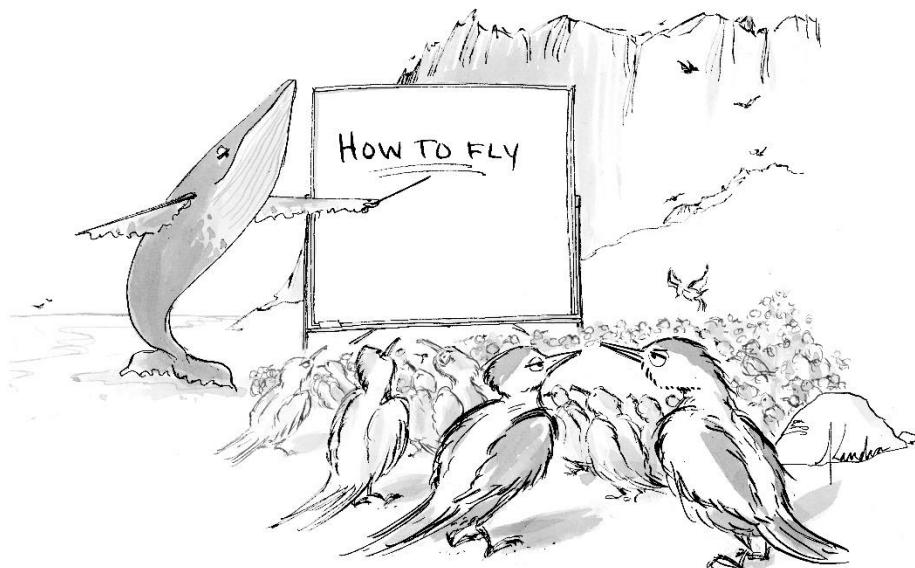


"Someday, son, this will all be yours—and underwater."

[©Alex Gregory/CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

Box: “Conflict” applied to cartoons for risk:

Of the teams dealing with risk management, few are as familiar with conflict as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), a humanitarian organization that helps people affected by armed violence. Can you imagine trying to promote disaster preparedness when surrounded by bullets and explosions? Their 2021 InspiRED event brought together staff members leading operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and beyond. It included a session entitled “Eyes on Innovation,” focused on both promoting innovation as well as anticipating potential obstacles, such as local resistance to external “experts” trying to make others change the way things are done through alleged user-based design (a typical “us versus them” scenario). The event organizers commissioned cartoons to nurture candor in small group discussions on various topics, including on the challenges of trying to invite others to change the way things are done through alleged user-based design. Here is one example:



Kendra Allenby / CartoonStock.com

[©Kendra Allenby/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/kendra_allenby)

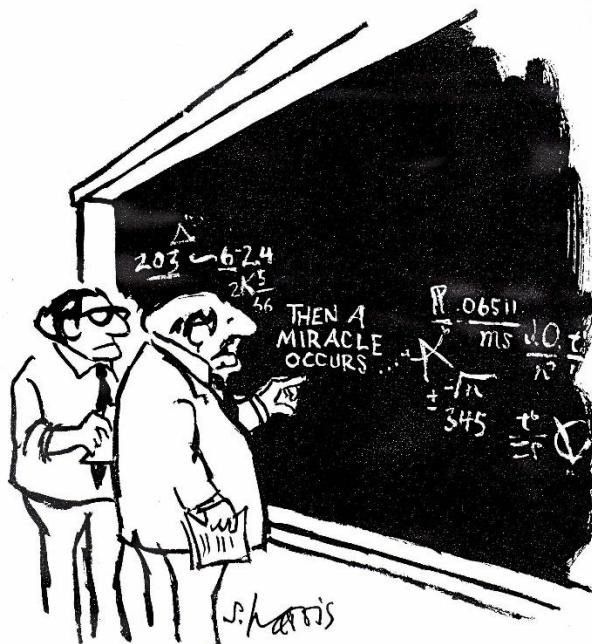
Since this cartoon, many of us have become keenly aware of how our large sporadic presence is likely to be perceived by the agile, understandably skeptical local experts.

SECTION C - HUMOR IN ACTION

[Neutral voice]

There are plenty of available examples showing humor that works in the context of disaster and climate risk management.¹³ We have all seen numerous presentations and publications that successfully enrich the audience's experience and understanding of the topic or message through cartoons. For example, in his book *How Change Happens*¹⁴, Duncan Green, an influential thinker in international development and humanitarian fields, sharply challenges the prevailing theories and practices of international development, challenging excessively simple theories of change.

He has a key point to make: they fail to consider a whole sequence of assumptions and conditions embedded in their $a \rightarrow b$ formulation about complex systems - essentially hoping for a miracle to occur in between proposed intervention a and desired result b . How does Duncan make this point? With his favorite cartoon:



"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

[©Sidney Harris/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

¹³ It is important to note that humor can be infused in disaster and climate risk management activities using multiple different mediums, not just cartoons. As explained in the foreword, this report focuses on cartoons - although its key insights are broadly applicable to many other approaches.

¹⁴ Green 2016.

[Bob's Voice]

When you should be more explicit, humor can help you make the first steps. Jesters could speak hard truths to kings like nobody in the royal courts. Gandhi was a master at using humor to name, and challenge, the unacceptable foundations of British rule in India. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “humor is most important in getting at truth, getting people to understand, and often to rise above the despair which can surround them.”

[Neutral voice]

Over the next pages we will share some explorations in harnessing the power of cartoons to enrich risk communication in the following ways:

- Cartoons to distill what matters
- Cartoons to structure narratives of what can go wrong
- Cartoonification of webinars
- “Cartoon Talk”: Enabling dialogue about difficult topics
- “Cartoonathon!”: Co-designing visual humor to confront risk

Cartoons to distill what matters

All too often in this field, reports produced are filled with jargon and scientific data. And while the information contained is certainly important to the more technical among us, the key messages can be lost to our target audience. Cartoons, we have found, can help to punctuate and emphasize the key points of technical documents, enabling them to break through and be heard.

A case in point: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its 700-page [Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere](#).

[Bob's Voice]

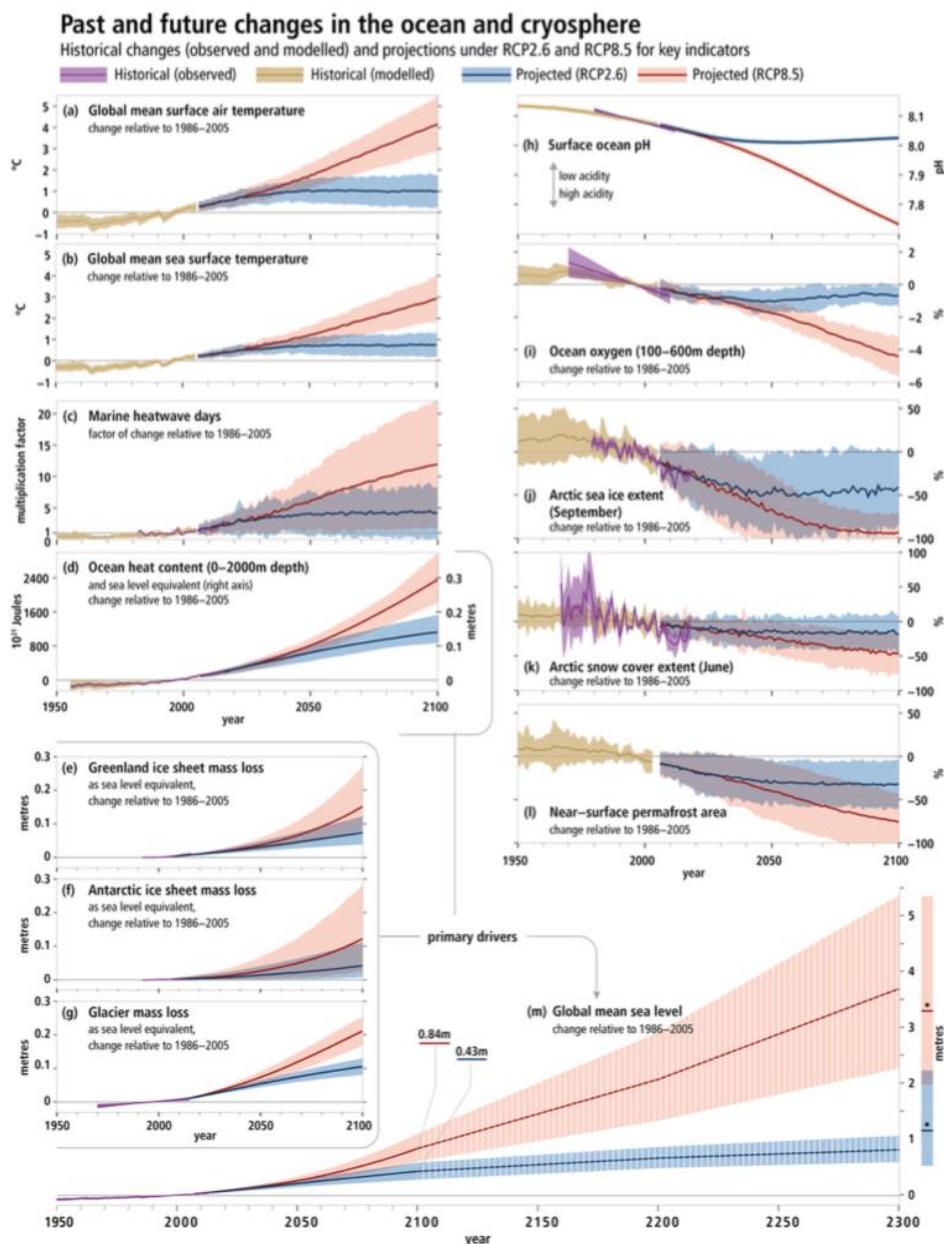
Note that the “cryosphere” is not the earth’s layer of people crying away their tears due to climate grief; it is a technical term that most humans and many scientists have never heard of - the planet’s portion made of frozen water. Unfortunately, that cold report contains no explicit reference to hot evidence: experts need to communicate science more effectively.

[Neutral voice]

Both the technical summary and the summary for policymakers were 35 pages, containing graphs, tables, maps, and paragraphs of important information. But its contents are not exactly accessible for all relevant decision makers such as humanitarian workers, intelligent people who may be capable of absorbing the parts of the summary report that are communicated clearly to non-experts, but their time is too precious to decode cryospheric jargon.

So, to capture the attention of disaster risk management practitioners and better drive the messages home, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre created an unconventional document to highlight the key messages for the humanitarian sector. Carefully chosen cartoons gave visual structure to this 9-page [tailored communication document](#), accompanied by paragraphs that synthesized key points and data.

These graphs:



Were distilled into this message:

The world's oceans will never be the same.

Marine heatwaves have become more common, and these drastic increases in ocean temperatures will be 20 to 50 times more frequent by the end of the century (depending on how quickly we reduce greenhouse gas emissions). The oceans are rapidly becoming more acidic and are holding less oxygen. Almost all warm water coral reefs will continue to decline, along with the food, protection, and tourism they provide.



"That can't be good."

[©Danny Shanahan/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

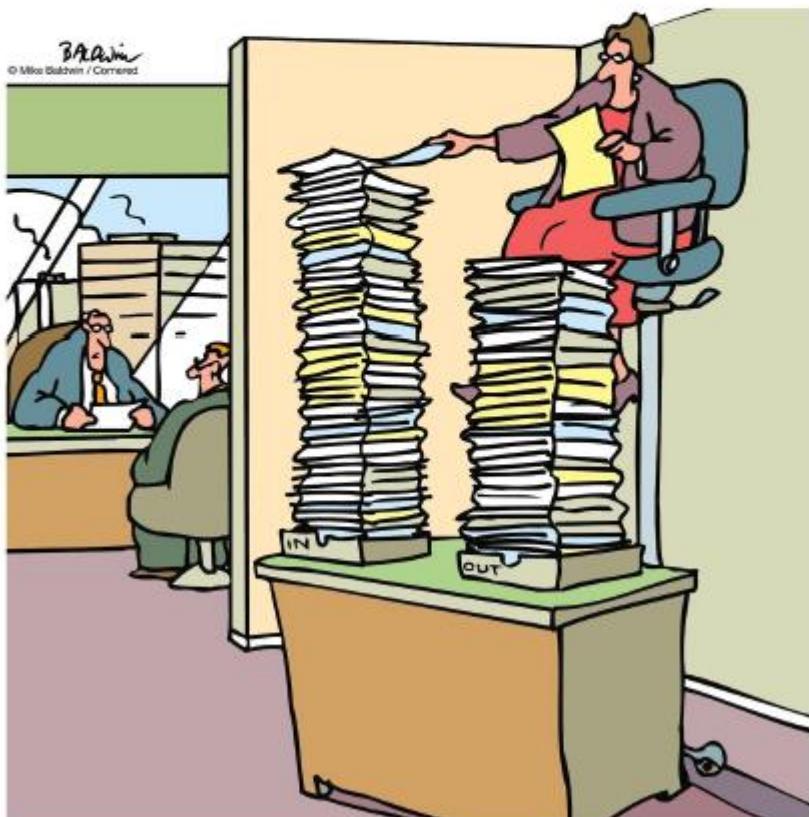
If you are like us, when looking at this key message from the report, we read the bolded phrase first and then jump immediately to the cartoon and caption. Instantly we understand the message: it isn't good that the oceans will never be the same. Of course the sun setting not behind the horizon but *inside the ocean* is not a scientifically precise depiction of what's going on with climate change... But it is emotionally true, simple and effective in communicating the bottom line. Now as we read the passage about ocean temperature we are primed to absorb it in context of the bigger picture. The cartoon itself uses principles of good humor (see section B) and, coupled with some key information derived from the report, it is effective.

Take this other key message: read the bolded title and allow your eyes to land on the cartoon.

What can we do about this?

One option is to invest in expensive hard barriers, such as dikes around coastal cities. Ecosystem-based adaptations can also be effective for low levels of warming, but there is limited evidence on the benefits vs the cost of these options. In order to protect ecosystems, we can reduce non-climate stressors (e.g. invest in sustainable fisheries management).

Beyond protection, people can accommodate the “new normal” (e.g. by flood-proofing buildings). However, this works only for small amounts of sea level rise, and many governance systems are too fragmented to address large and cascading risks.



“We look for people who can quickly adapt to changes in the workplace.”

[©Mike Baldwin/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com/artist/mike-baldwin/)

Chances are you came to an idea that is around “we need to quickly adapt to change.” You are now primed to better absorb the more detailed messages of the actual adaptive action that we can take, as detailed in the Climate Centre’s text (although already extremely shortened from the IPCC summary).

Humor has helped communicate key scientific messages in a way that is more understandable, relatable, and ultimately memorable.

[Bob's Voice]

Humor can make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange... And climate change is both familiar and strange.

Cartoons to structure narratives of what can go wrong

[Bob's Voice]

All humor contains a little frisson of danger, something that might go wrong. Where is the danger going to be? How are you going to manage it? Well, it turns out that nobody likes to be told “what you’re doing can go wrong.” People filter out incongruities, and being wrong is often an inconceivable incongruity. Humor highlights the incongruity that exists, and can make ‘being wrong’ conceivable.

[Neutral voice]

It's tough to think about and plan for the bad things that can happen. In fact, we as humans are bad predictors of the future simply *because* we don't like to think rigorously about bad things happening; in other words we are unrealistically optimistic - especially about the consequences of our own actions and inactions. Yet we as risk managers must think about what can go wrong with our own endeavors, while also communicating it in a way that is palatable and opens up conversation around how we can do things differently.

To that end, the Climate Centre turned a forecast-based financing report into a [cartoon-annotated document](#) to highlight what can go wrong when linking early warnings and early action through financial preparedness. We posit that this humor-infused approach allows the reader to tackle “what can go wrong” in an embraceable way, making it easier for people to see themselves in the lead-up to future bad outcomes, and imagine ways to avoid those less-than-ideal outcomes.



Act in vain

In Madeupsville, the disaster managers evacuated several villages based on a cyclone forecast, but, then the cyclone took a sharp turn, hit a different region. The people of Madupsville got really mad because they'd evacuated "in vain" and accused the mayor of squandering city funds.



Too complicated

Even though the meteorological service of Madeupsville developed a high-tech model with the most amaaaazing data, the system went offline and no one knew that a disaster was forecasted!

Actions are not taken in time

The FbF system triggered while the Madeupsville disaster manager was away. Logistics staff had only one vehicle and couldn't get goods to the neighborhoods in time to help. Early action came too late!

The money doesn't arrive

The next time they got the alert, Madeupsville Red Cross was ready to go! But, they had to wait 2 weeks for the fund transfer, and by that point the disaster had occurred.

**FbF stands for Forecast-based Financing, a program that enables access to humanitarian funding for early action based on forecast information and risk analysis.*

Cartoonification of webinars

Even before COVID-19 changed how we go about our daily lives and business, there were webinars. These online events try to capture the attention of the audience for ~60 minutes to share knowledge from different speakers and perspectives, followed by a Q&A. It's tough to keep a participant's attention for that long, and one way of making attention and participation shift is through cartoons.

For the speaker series, "[Cities on the Frontline](#)", the World Bank and the Global Resilient Cities Network have employed cartoons to amplify various messages and key points from the speakers. Starting at week 13 of the webinar series, cartoonists were commissioned to create

two cartoons that represented the theme of that week. Using the concept note and presentations from the speakers, the cartoonists created poignant, provocative cartoons that capture and engage webinar participants in a new way. Here is one example from a session about urban waste management, building on a speaker's statement about the extreme vulnerability of waste pickers, who offer essential services to cities.



Thanks for doing this essential work. In exchange we'll keep giving you no salary, no pension, no healthcare and no respect. Sound good?

[©Kendra Allenby/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

The International Finance Corporation has also employed this approach for their “Sustainability Exchange” event. After receiving the filmed presentations of two elected officials and one scholar, the cartoon artists wove key messages through visual humor. Their cartoons were shared in plenary just before the Q&A portion of the webinar session, which became even more animated as a result.

“Cartoon Talk”: Enabling dialogue about difficult topics

[neutral voice]

To augment serious discussions about risk, cartoons are used to create an environment of candor, support meaningful engagement, and provide a safe space for respectful disagreement. These pre-existing cartoons are carefully selected with guidance from the event organizer and

then infused within more technical and serious aspects. Participants usually begin the event in their typical “serious” mindset, then, during breakout sessions, participants open an envelope to reveal a cartoon.

The surprise of the cartoon certainly invokes some smiles and bonding opportunities, but the important work happens next: participants are invited to reflect on how the cartoon may be related to the topic at hand, as was the case during the 2019 InsuResilience Global Partnership Forum:



Another such workshop with the [World Bank Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance Program](#) and the Government of Afghanistan used “Cartoon Talk” to bring more meaningful discussion to the conversation with ~15 participants. This photo shows H.E. Ms. Naheed Sarabi, Deputy Minister of Finance of the Government of Afghanistan, during the workshop.



In the background, the *Try Honking Again* cartoon (found on page 11) displays the annotation added by a participant: "Let's create another project/program like the one we created years ago and which also failed". Such unlikely candor in the presence of a senior government official illustrates a key fact: Humor lays the groundwork for engendering trust.

Since that first endeavor, a diverse range of organizations have used “Cartoon Talk”, addressing complex topics from disaster insurance to transboundary water management to geoengineering: the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), Harvard University, the Stockholm Environment Institute, and the UN Climate Conference.

“Cartoonathon!”: Co-designing visual humor to confront risk

You've probably seen an illustrator at the back of the room in some events; the illustrators synthesize content from sessions on giant paper, a type of graphic event proceedings. In taking inspiration from this idea, plus combining it with the "hackathon" concept, the "cartoonathon" was born.

A “cartoonathon” is a creative space of focused dialogue that allows stakeholders to have critical, revealing conversations. Participants share the challenges or complexities they are facing, while the cartoon artists listen carefully for hidden nuances and emerging tensions to create draft cartoons. The participants then engage with these drafts, make suggestions and comments, and thus co-create the final versions.

The resulting cartoons may capture the essence of what emerged from presenters and group discussions, depicting its implications (i.e. taking ideas to extreme logical conclusions), or critically examining and challenging positions and proposals. By engaging event participants in suggesting improvements to draft cartoons created in real time, this co-creation process prompts meaningful conversations about the topic of the session or event. More than aiming to provoke laughter, the creations seek to *inspire reflection & dialogue* about risk (though of course humor is welcome).

There are four phases of a cartoonathon that support a co-creation process:

1. Create cartoon drafts based on real-time input

Via livestream, the cartoonists attentively and actively listen to presentations and group discussions, sketching original drawings and captions in real time.

2. Share draft cartoons

Right before the end of the “input” session, cartoonists submit their drafts (usually at least 3-4 per artist for a 20-minute “input” session). After very light processing, the event facilitator projects those cartoons to the audience for enjoyment and to spark discussion.

3. Engage participants

The facilitator then invites the audience to:

- a) *Bubble up*: Use a tailor-made digital platform to compare random pairs of cartoons and decide which drafts are most likely to spark subsequent engagement and those that merit further development.
- b) *Discuss*: Briefly discuss how the selected cartoons connect to their own experiences, proposals and insights. Key messages are shared with plenary via a digital platform.
- c) *Improve*: Suggest improvements to any of the cartoon drafts, so they can be made clearer, funnier, and/or more useful. Feedback is submitted digitally by participants, and can be integrated by cartoonists into a polished version of the drawings and captions.

4. Publish final cartoons

Improved and final versions of selected cartoons are completed either before the end of the full event, or within a couple of days and made freely available for use in any subsequent event-related materials, acknowledging the co-creation process. While cartoonists retain creative ownership and copyright to their cartoons, event organizers are allowed to use the finished cartoons freely (to the extent stipulated in the contract). All other parties may find the cartoons on CartoonCollections.com and use them under the appropriate licensing agreement.

Both face-to-face and virtually, cartoonathons have been run for organizations as diverse as the [International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies](#), the [World Bank](#), Boston University, and the [BMW Foundation](#).

During the World Bank workshop on disaster risk financing, mentioned in the previous section, the “Cartoon Talk” activity set the stage for presentations from experts and government officials, as well as small-group discussions. Artists attentively listened in during presentations and discussions while sketching original cartoons. At one point, an Afghan government official requested support to “bring the government to the field, where disasters happen.” Participants nodded in acceptance. Yet a cartoon artist detected—and depicted—some underlying assumptions... Here is the draft, one of about twenty creations shared in real time:



At first glance participants were confused ('Huh?'), then smiled or even burst out in laughter ('HaHa'), then came to an abrupt, useful realization ('A-ha!'). The humorists had delivered a mirror depicting the gap between *what is* and *what could be*. Participants critically examined the draft cartoons and suggested ways to make them clearer, better, or more useful. The final version below integrates participant suggestions for more Afghan-like mountains and failed crops around the bureaucrat's desk, to represent a field in times of crisis.



We put him in the field but it didn't help.

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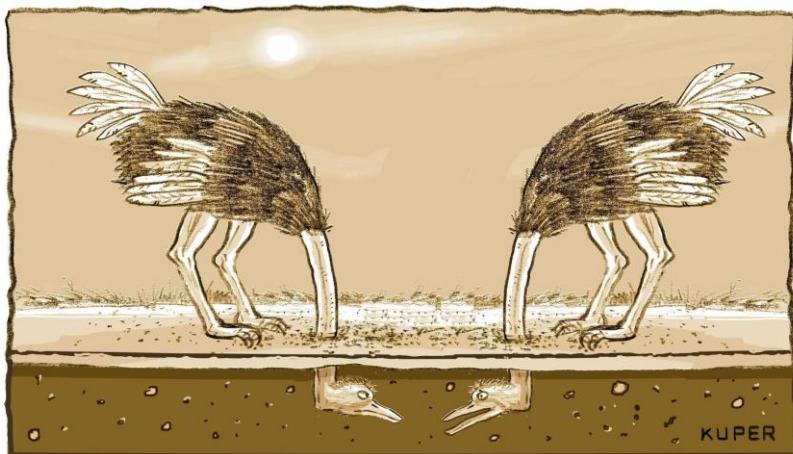
Having gone through this unconventional, bonding activity, participants discussed how the newly-created cartoons related to their own experiences, triggering insights and concrete proposals for next steps.

Here are some quotes from event participants (World Bank staff and Afghan Government officials):

- "Allowed to connect as individuals. Brilliant conversation that is more honest than we've heard about the real challenges. Great energy. I want to do this in all my workshops."
- "I like the whole process. It was very interactive and interesting. I am glad I could be part of this amazing experience."
- "Humor helps people talk about difficult issues - well done!"

Climate Grief - Northeastern University

As part of a two-hour event at Northeastern University's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, over 300 participants (3% of them joining via livestream) asked questions of a panel on climate grief. The almost 30 draft cartoons that were produced in real-time during the event captured the sorrow, fear, and grief that young people feel as the older generation continues to not do enough to care for the climate we leave to our youth. Some of them are humorous, but they need not force humor to make a point. Here is a sample of finalized cartoons building on feedback from participants:



"Hey how are you feeling about the climate crisis?"

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CLIMATE GRIEF

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Many other organizations have used both Cartoon Talk and Cartoonathons to create more meaningful discussions among participants in topics unrelated to disaster and climate risk management, illustrating that it's not just this sector that needs the help of humor. Some examples include the World Bank Group's Independent Evaluation Group and the Green Climate Fund's Independent Redress Mechanism.

SECTION D - BRINGING HUMOR TO YOUR WORK

[Neutral voice]

We hope that you've gotten to a point where you're thinking, "Okay, so maybe humor can be useful in my work." As you may have guessed by now, we strongly believe that by employing humor effectively and smartly, we can all better engage with others, enable the emergence of new, creative ideas, and stimulate candor about our own assumptions. The shortest way to describe "why harnessing humor to address risks" requires only ten letters:

Why HUMOR for RISKS

AHA!

HaHa

Huh?

But how you ask, can you integrate humor into your projects? At what point in the project cycle can it be useful? You can and should think about humor as a useful tool for the following:

Project identification and concept development

What exactly should the project focus on? Why should this project be developed in the first place? How should we design it? How do we move past some of the challenging and disagreed upon points to come to a conclusion? Deliberately designing humor into the early stages can help the conversation on all of those questions. Humor can help create a safe space while providing an environment that stimulates ideas and new perspectives, bringing to the surface the heart of the matter, like the rationale for why a project is critical.

A World Bank project in Romania hired cartoon artists to create tailor-made cartoons in both English and Romanian, such as the one below, to stimulate discussions with the Romanian Government on retrofitting schools. The cartoons provoked conversations around why investment in schools has been so challenging, and the importance of ensuring this young generation of Romanians is safe while learning. These conversations led to the development of a project on school infrastructure that was approved in April 2021.



Instead of fixing the buildings, we invested in new school uniforms.

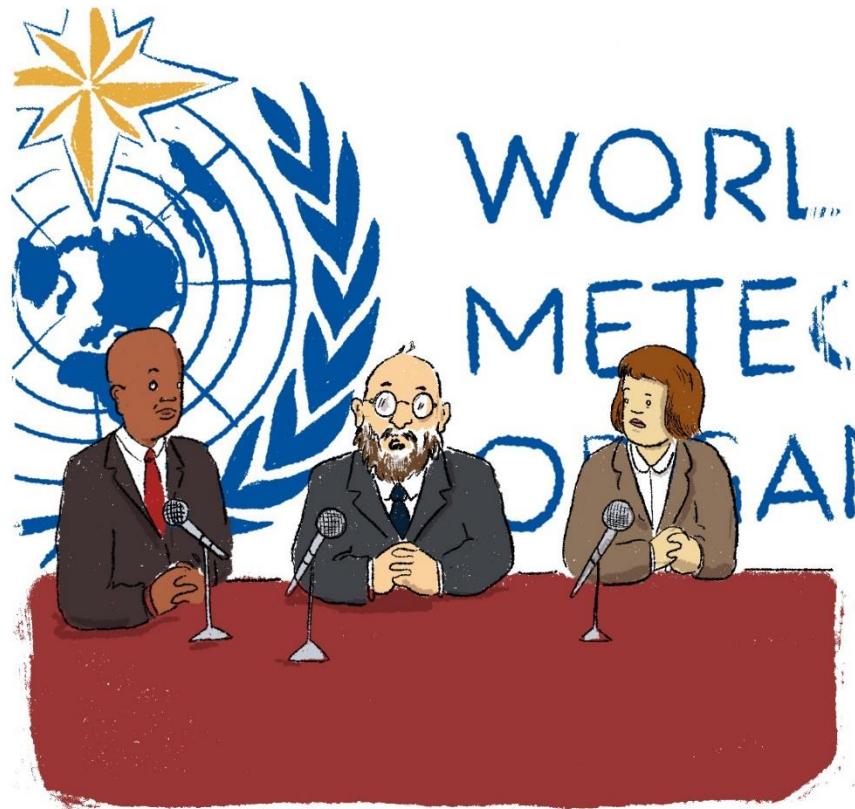
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Engaging the public in disaster or climate risk activities

Disaster and climate risk management projects create many diverse activities and interventions, yet a surprisingly large amount of activities would benefit from the development and implementation of communication strategies and plans. Whether the project includes a component on raising awareness of risk, stimulating preparedness activities, requiring public buy-in on resilient infrastructure activities, or delivering post-disaster recovery efforts, well thought through communication strategies and plans can lead to a more successful outcome.

For instance, a World Bank project in Haiti created a robust and successful communication strategy and implementation activities that targeted the public, encouraging them to be prepared ahead of hurricane season. This project incorporated many tools in the risk communication toolbox, including humor: during a workshop on weather forecasting and awareness with children, a humorist was employed to facilitate and make children feel more comfortable to broadcast their weather forecast. The videos of the children were broadcast on national news as part of this preparedness campaign effort.

Humor can also capture the attention of those with the capacity to amplify messages. The Adrienne Arsht - Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center and partners were working on a new initiative on extreme temperatures; the Center engaged cartoon artists to help create resonance with naming heatwaves to increase their visibility and raise awareness of their danger. The cartoons played a central role in enhancing visibility of the message: three of them were included in an article by the Washington Post entitled *“Heat wave ‘Hugo?’ New coalition seeks to name hot weather like hurricanes”*.



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A risk communication professional can help you understand which project components could benefit the most from a well thought through communication strategy, and whether humor is the right tool to use. Give that same risk communication professional this document and ask if they think there's an opportunity for an infusion of humor to make the message resonant, stimulate more meaningful discussions, or create better engagement.

Presenting findings

We opened with the perils of boring conference events, but there is boring everything out there! We know you have tons of information to share with many different audiences--risk data perhaps? If you care about your audience and want them to absorb the very important information you are trying to convey, try adding in a well-chosen cartoon here or there that amplifies the power of your point. Maybe if we made technical reports and presentations a bit more engaging and--dare we say--entertaining, we would make the information "stick" in brains more. We would reckon that there is a cartoon for nearly every presentation topic, whether it's innovation, climate change, financing, partnerships, or anything in between. The good folks at Cartoon Collections can help you out. Next time you are pulling together a presentation to talk about climate change, maybe you drop in this cartoon midway through your presentation to make the audience perk up, as after all, this is sometimes what it feels like in climate conversations.



If you cover your eyes, you can make it go away.

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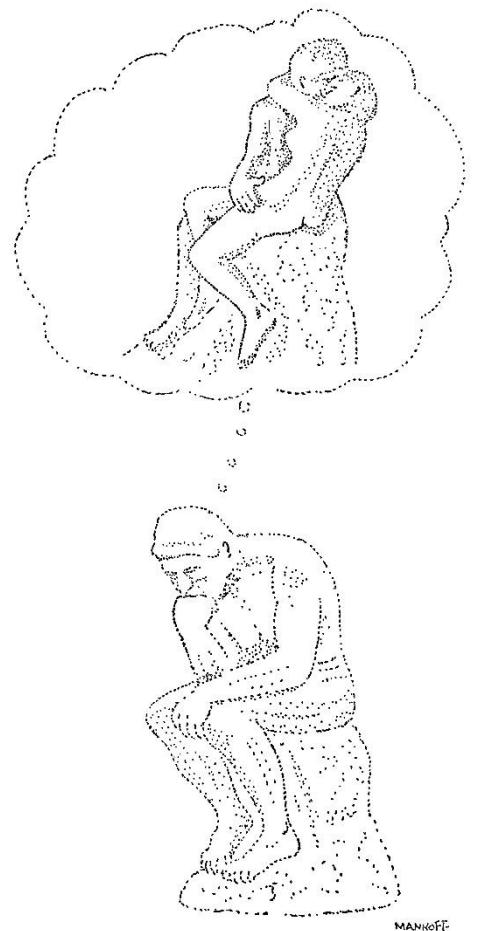
Recommendations and words of caution

What can go wrong? Like with any powerful tool, humor can be an excellent tool to use in activities, but can also lead to severely negative consequences if used irresponsibly or incompetently. Here are a few things—recommendations and words of caution—to keep in mind when infusing humor:

1. Focus your thinking on your audience

The goal of using humor in risk management is not to cause laughter, but to be more effective at getting from where we are to where we need to be. And we can't get there alone: we must work for others, with others. The problem of course is that people's minds don't exactly work the way we wish.

If we've got to work with others, then we need to know how they think. If we want to change their minds, we need to know what they're thinking



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[Bob's Voice]

or not thinking



‘Are you not thinking what I’m not thinking?’

[©Pat Byrnes/CartoonStock.com](https://www.cartoonstock.com)

Are people thinking about risks, the way you experts want them to? Maybe not. Probably not. Great minds think alike but few of us have great minds. Pretty good will have to do. So you'll probably have to rethink how you think others think - or not. And tailor your design and use of humor accordingly.

[Neutral voice]

Like all good communication and engagement activities, make sure you structure humor infusions with the audience in mind. While humor is universal, humor is also highly cultural. With the help of a professional humorist and appropriate consultations with locals, tailor your risk communication and humor approaches based on what is culturally appropriate, relevant, and resonant. What works in one country may not work in another (even intra-country cultural humor can be wildly different). For that matter, the humor lenses in Section B may not be fully universal or may differ slightly than how it is explained here. Importantly, as implied in the “benign violation” section above, it is crucial to understand how far a trespass can go until it ceases to be perceived as benign. Issues like nudity or violence may be commonly accepted in certain instances but be completely inappropriate in other contexts. It's easy to be surprised by the boundaries of others. So employ culturally relevant humorists and risk communication experts!

For instance, the example above on safer schools in Romania (see page 56) was developed in consultation with a Romanian cartoon artist. He was able to pick up on cultural aspects that

non-Romanians would not fully understand, resulting in a discussion that resonated much more with the government officials in the room. As we expand into this field, GFDRR Labs and Cartoon Collections are working to identify humorists who are from many diverse backgrounds in order to bring different cultural perspectives. Ensuring that the local context is accounted for and integrated will go a long way to helping you achieve your goal, while minimizing the risk that humor doesn't fall flat, or at worst is offensive.

Make sure that you also check for sensitivities on the topic, the culture, or anything else that may cause more harm than good. Of course, we are not advocating to steer the conversation away from tough topics or difficult discussions, but it is important to make sure that the humor infusions contribute "Aha" moments and not moments where the audience walks away feeling thoroughly offended.

2. Don't force it.

Humor is not right for every situation. There is a time and a place for humor. For instance, integrating humor in an actual early warning message, emergency evacuation or other emergency response situation would be ill advised. But humor could be well used during risk awareness and behavior change campaigns, or as part of coping mechanisms after a shock. Be critical about whether the humor would advance and add to the risk communication or engagement goal; don't think it will always work.

The infusion of humor can have varying impacts depending on the social setting in which it's being deployed. The difference in impact and approach will differ in a school setting versus a conference versus a highly professional setting. So make sure you think about this before forcing the use of humor.

But we also think that the field needs to expand and welcome humor into spaces where it is not currently the norm, in order to do all the good it can do - not just "move the needle" of engagement, but also enable resilience and change. If it hasn't been done before in your work environment, maybe it's time to try this innovative approach.



"This really is an innovative approach, but I'm afraid we can't consider it. It's never been done before."

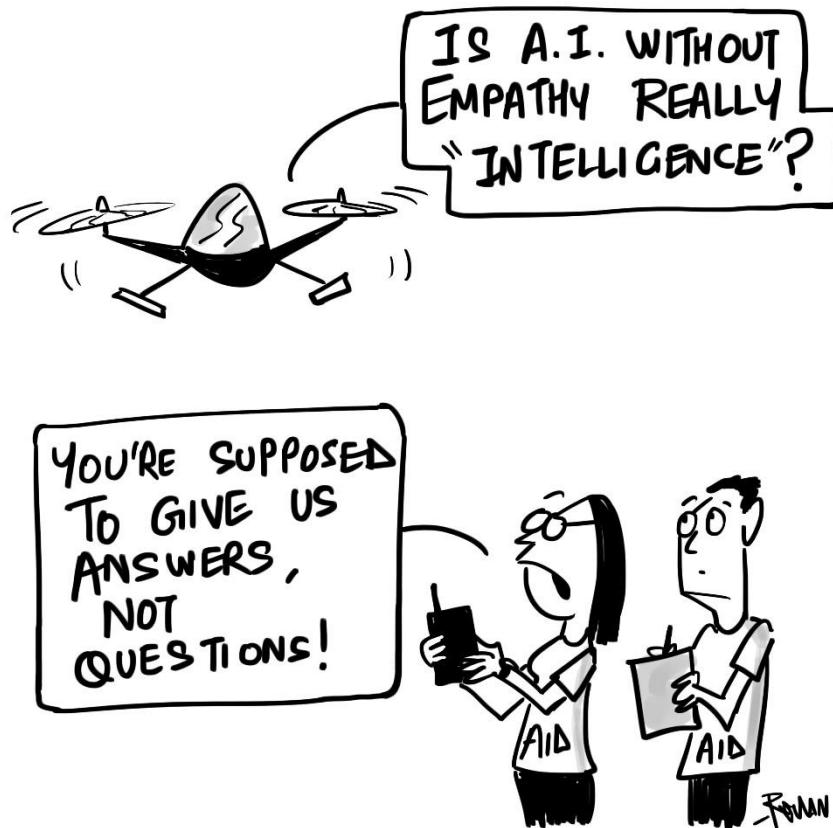
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3. Humor must be designed and employed smartly.

We've all experienced horrifyingly bad attempts at using humor, whether in personal or in professional settings. No one wants to be that person who starts off an interaction with a joke that falls flat, or offends. Remember: a joke is a statement intended to provoke laughter, and if people sense you're embarking in a provocation, they'll be ruthlessly intolerant if you are perceived as going too far (i.e. offensive), or not far enough (i.e. fall flat).

That's why we stay away from jokes and instead prefer "idea drawings": cartoons that require some cognitive work from the target audience - a bit like a puzzle that needs to be figured out. Less provocation, more invitation. That's also why we collaborate with professional humorists to support the successful design and integration of humor into risk-related endeavors. They are professional for a reason - go find them (or we can help you find them).

Of course, humor is not something that can only be found in the DNA of a small subset of humans who are born humorists: we can all learn to use, and even create, humor. Drew Tarvin sums it up in his book, *Humor that Works*: "Humor us like a screwdriver: an incredibly effective tool that often involves a twist and, when used in the right context, can help you construct and deconstruct any number of objects. But, in order to get the benefits, you have to use it correctly." The book then discusses three main dangers: (1) Humor can distract people, (2) Humor can divide people, and (3) Humor can disparage people. In short, he argues that humor carries risks but the pros far outweigh the cons - if employed intelligently and with empathy.



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4. The humor world involves a different tribe than the development and humanitarian tribes

Working with humorists is highly enjoyable and leads to some amazing sparks of creativity. But do keep in mind that humorists do not “speak the same language” as those of us in the development and humanitarian space. There are certain expectations when engaging with cartoonists, in particular, that you should keep in mind, primarily around communication style (relatively easy to anticipate and therefore address) and intellectual property.

In the creative world, any cartoon typically remains the intellectual property of that cartoon artist - even if it was commissioned by your organization. This means that there needs to be stipulations in contracts between cartoonists and your organization about who retains the rights of the cartoon, and who has license to use it under what circumstances. For nearly all instances, the copyright stays with the cartoon artist; this is typically non-negotiable, as they are artists and copyright is a highly important component to their work. When you contract with a cartoon artist in tailor-made engagements, like the Cartoonathon, there is typically a stipulation in the contract that will allow your organization to use any of the cartoons developed for specific purposes, for free - but others may need to pay a small license fee for presentations, publications, or campaigns. Make sure you read and understand the terms of copyright and use.

What this copyright stuff also means is that you cannot, legally, take any of these cartoons from this publication or elsewhere and use them without proper permission. If you are wowed by any cartoons, please secure the licensing fee through CartoonCollections.com to use them, which is generally fairly small (and a small price to pay to drive your point home and engage with your audience).

For all humorists, and artists writ large, remember that their work is their livelihood, and we must respect it as we would any other product or service.

5. Aim for bonding about what's laughable.

Don't target people, target what's absurd about ourselves and the ridiculous, improvable systems we inhabit. Ensure empathy. Remember that somehow, somewhen, someone can change the rules of play - and maybe you can play a role.



"I was just going to say, 'Well, I don't make the rules.' But, of course, I do make the rules."

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[Bob's Voice]

Humor usually works by choosing a target - something or someone to make fun of. Like any effective tool, humor can be used for good, or for evil. I sometimes have chosen the questionable side, but we all know where you risk managers have to stand. Importantly, you need to be, and be seen as, kind.

Constructive humor neither “punches up” nor “punches down” but “elbows to the side” exposing our common foibles and weaknesses to make us more resilient.

[Neutral voice]

In the words of our collaborator Belina Raffy: Love yourself, love your audience, find the system funny. Humor can serve as a mirror for risk: with laughter as a potential by-product, it can help us reveal, reflect, and see.



LAUGHING IS REVEALING ONE'S SELF.

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Humor is a powerful tool, when used correctly and appropriately. We strongly believe that if you join us in this exploration of humor, barring the caveats above, that your work can be improved in ways that you may not understand just now. We hope this journey is just the start, and that at the very least, you had some laughs along the way.

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FRONT MATTER

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Bob Mankoff has been for over four decades the driving force of comedy and satire at some of the most honored publications in the United States, including *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*. He has devoted his life to discovering just what makes us laugh, and seeks every outlet to do so, from developing *The New Yorker*'s web presence to integrating it with algorithms and A.I. For twenty years as Cartoon Editor for *The New Yorker*, Mankoff pored over thousands of submissions each week, analyzing, critiquing, and selecting each cartoon. He is the author of numerous books, including his *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *How About Never – Is Never Good For You?: My Life In Cartoons*, Mankoff's career started, unexpectedly, by quitting

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Simone Balog-Way is a Disaster Risk Management Analyst with the Labs team at the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery. She leads efforts around risk communication, community engagement, and non-traditional partnership development within the disaster and climate risk management sectors. Simone also manages the Understanding Risk (UR) Community, a network of nearly 13,000 experts and practitioners involved in the creation, communication, and use of risk information to support evidence-informed decision making and policies. She has supported public awareness and behavior change campaigns and has worked to infuse art, visualization, and other unconventional methods of communicating risk into the disaster risk management field. Simone holds a Master of Science in Risk Analysis and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication.

Samantha Vuignier is the Sales Director for Cartoon Collections LLC and CartoonStock Ltd., the world's largest online cartoon licensing database and cartoon artist agency. In partnership with The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, Samantha has helped develop programs to pair cartoon artists with academic researchers, international development professionals, and humanitarian workers, such as the World Bank and International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, to enable more meaningful engagement of serious discussions through co-created events like Cartoonathons and custom commissioned artwork. Samantha holds a bachelor's degree in Cinema Studies from The University of Chicago, with twenty-five years of experience in the image licensing, curation and archiving industry starting with the Bettmann/United Press International news photo archives and leading up to the cartoon archives of The New Yorker and Condé Nast publications before joining the team at CartoonStock.com.

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