

# *Stranger Things* on TikTok: Young People, Climate Change and Upside Down Political Communication

Catherine Happer and Anders Åberg

In November 2021, people from all over the globe came together in the Scottish city of Glasgow for the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) to discuss the most important issue of our era. As an international event with real political significance, the world's professional media descended on the city, devoting hours of coverage to progress on the delegates' negotiations and analysis of the commitments being made through the usual journalistic norm of elevating the primary definers of politicians, business groups and other official speakers (Painter et al., 2018). A highlight was the arrival of former US president Barack Obama and the tone was one of serious dialogue and decision-making amongst those in power. Meanwhile, activists, campaigners and NGOs came together as a community digitally and physically, in parks, streets and on social media, to march, protest and mobilise to demand urgent and meaningful action on climate. Here it was the arrival of youth climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who began her school strike for the climate in 2018 and persuaded millions of young people to follow her, which drew the most attention. The tone, as represented in part by the visuals of the banners and placards, was one of colour, creativity and fun dominated by young people.

In spite of the shared orientation, it became possible to identify two distinct events – the official COP and the unofficial COP or what is sometimes referred to as "the people's COP" – which can be mapped onto two very different media cultures with different modes of communication and ways of doing "politics" (Hautea et al., 2021; Molder et al., 2021). This article examines the way in which young people draw on the resources provided by popular culture to engage in an alternative form of political communications via the social media ecosystems within which they are embedded (Inthorn et al., 2012). It takes as the foundation research which shows that the majority of young people suffer from some form of "climate anxiety", a response that is rooted in a belief that governments can't be trusted to act to save the planet, and a growing disconnect from official decision-makers and a mainstream media which is aligned with them (Happer and Philo, 2016; Hickman et al., 2021). This is then not simply a question of the affordances offered by digital technologies (what we might call the supply side) but a problem with what is offered in the mainstream of media and politics (the demand side).

As a result, we argue, young people construct and embrace their own communications communities organised around trust and belief in alternative

forms of informational content and which construct action on climate change as the central issue on which to build collective solidarity and public consensus. We draw on the concept of the "civic imagination" to refer to the way in which social media users draw on the symbolic resources from popular culture to imagine alternative futures (Jenkins et al., 2016). These often highly personalised narratives allow for expressions of climate fear, anxiety and frustration and offer a novel alternative to conventional political communications which, as we will show, may be a more effective way to build common cause amongst young people.

Science fiction has been identified in particular as providing the resources through which potential futures might be imagined (Jenkins, 2017). With climate change necessarily a phenomenon characterised by its relationship to the future, texts which focus on the issue offer particular opportunities for giving life to the imagination outside of the limits of the present (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011). Although set in the 1980s, the Netflix flagship series, *Stranger Things*, centres questions of generational conflict with young people leading the battle against the threat of a dystopian future, and therefore its role in young climate activism in social media is a case in point. Through an analysis of the series, we explore the way TikTok users select, appropriate and rework its language, imagery, motifs and themes to offer an illustration of how climate impacts, and the urgency and barriers to action are being constructed away from conventional political reporting.

### Trust, information and decentred media cultures

The media model of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of communications from the few to the many, with broadcast media, and particularly television, central to the facilitation of the public sphere (Happer et al., 2018). There was a social contract between media and their audiences which was based on trust in the journalistic norm of "objectivity" to represent what was going on in the world (Schudson, 1978; Deuze, 2005). This involved a leap of faith in that most people would never directly experience what was represented in these accounts and there were limited alternatives to the version of events which was on offer (Möllering, 2001). Political communications within this model were oriented to the issues prioritised by political speakers and other elite groups (and away from those which were marginalised) and the norms and practices of professional journalism involving everyday routines in the collection of evidence and sourcing (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Whilst of course political activities organised away from this mainstream media culture, the aim most often was to penetrate it on the assumption that was the only way change might occur.

The affordances delivered by digital technologies, and in particular, those of Web 2.0 which allow for the peer-to-peer model of communications underpinning social media platforms, have delivered radical change in the way in which people access information and engage with political issues.

There is no consensus on how we might understand these changes (Edgerly and Thorson, 2020), however one thing that is not in question is that the social contract between journalists and audiences to produce *the* trusted version of events – as the “core communicative institution of democracy” which facilitates the political engagement of its citizens – is fundamentally challenged (Kriess, 2017). This does though affect different groups to different degrees.

Young people as a group are particularly affected; as digital natives, they tend to begin their news trajectories with a platform notification, a news aggregate or a friend post and rarely go directly to established media outlets’ own websites (Newman et al., 2023). Increasingly research has found that many young people construct their media ecologies around particular topics of interest avoiding traditional news reporting altogether, which should be seen in the context of an overwhelming choice of content and lack of trust in the media environment overall (Edgerly, 2017). But these engagement patterns also correlate with low levels of trust in conventional politics and in particular in public institutions and a tendency to invest in alternative often interpersonal sources of information (Edgerly 2017; Chevalier, 2019; Dardelli, 2021). As noted, we cannot separate these demand side questions from those of supply: for young people, their migration to these decentred cultures where alternatives to the mainstream are offered is perhaps not surprising as on the issues which they care about most and impact them directly such as climate and access to housing, political decision-making to varying degrees across Western democracies has not served their interests (Kelly and Pike, 2016; Happer, 2024).

There are competing ways of understanding what constitutes doing politics, and what makes a good citizen, though there is a continuing tendency, as noted, to found these on perceptions of a public sphere with a consensual orientation point rooted in conventional assumptions of quality of information and evidence (Kriess 2017) – which misinformation, disinformation and “fake news” circulating in social media cultures are often understood as opposing and disrupting (BBC Online, 2023). But if we take a fundamental principle of citizenship as having an informed engagement in “politics” understood as necessarily involving a contestation of power and the aim to redirect outcomes in society which affect how we live (Nash, 2001; Inthorn, 2012), we can look at the work of those in these decentred social media cultures as illustrative of doing politics differently as well as redefining what political communications look like and how they might achieve change. Here we are going to look specifically at the climate change social media ecosystem with committed activists at the centre but travelling much further than that to mobilise around the issue (Hopke and Hestres, 2018).

An interesting place to start is the quality of information. If we look at mainstream media coverage historically, the pattern is one of uncertainty and scepticism of robust scientific evidence (Boykoff, 2011), which in part

reflects the tendency to follow the elite speakers who collectively have lacked the political will to take decisive action. In this, the alternative stream of information offered by the climate social media ecosystem is closer to traditional journalistic practice in that it is broadly founded on the premise that the science from credible organisations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is settled (albeit there is also a culture of scepticism which operates on the opposite and this may be one of the issues with the loss of a recognisable communicative core). However, in terms of the ways in which the political message is conveyed more generally, in this ecosystem, we move further and further away from the conventions of news and political reporting.

### Popular culture and the youth climate social media ecosystem

As youth have come to dominate the online climate movement, it has been increasingly located in the cultural space they inhabit with highly visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok being prominent which promote influencers or celebrities from popular culture formats over politicians or journalists (Hautea et al., 2021; Molder et al., 2021). TikTok enables the customisation of short-form video content, which is informal, meme-based and transient and very distinct from the sombre analysis of professional media to more emotive, entertaining, impressionistic way of planting the message. Hautea et al. (2021: 12) describe how this works:

[I]ndividual TikToks become vehicles for personal narratives, which are then connected through features such as hashtags and viral sounds. [ ] TikTok creators connect disparate ideas through memetic themes while maintaining individualistic identities, sustain message persistence in cyberspace without explicit tethering to on-the-ground events, deploy humor and juxtaposition to disrupt dominant climate discourses.

This is one of the platforms which facilitated Greta Thunberg to grow her following, and where a TikTok short of her dancing to a now iconic pop song by Rick Astley is a valid form of political expression.

This illustration again emphasises the importance of the popular culture contexts which young people inhabit. Here we want to draw on the concept of the "civic imagination" as one in which media users imagine alternative worlds to critique current social and political realities drawing on the symbolic resources from popular culture – which speak to them and also speak to their peers – in order to drive change in society (Jenkins et al., 2016). Engagement which may drive political action is produced through a collective investment in and recognition of the artefacts, the stories, the visuals, and the references from popular culture which help to construct a sense of shared objectives (Literat et al., 2021). This may be particularly important for those who may be entering the world of "politics" for the first time, and for those

who are removed from conventional news environments (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016).

Climate fiction (also known as "cli fi") as a narrative mode could arguably be viewed as a genre; nevertheless, certain literary scholars contend that it is more appropriately classified as a subgenre of science fiction (Milner and Burgmann, 2018). Its essence lies in addressing climate change and the potential dystopian consequences thereof. Works in the cli-fi genre typically narrate stories explicitly focused on anthropogenic climate change, either realistically or symbolically by connecting climate change and its repercussions to some form of human agency or error (c.f. Schneider-Mayerson 2018).

While *Stranger Things*, as we will discuss, does not fit neatly into this (sub) genre – in that its focus is not climate change – the narrative and symbolic elements provide communicative tools which young people have taken up to make sense of and respond to the threat climate poses. Through an exploratory qualitative analysis of TikTok videos, based on a small sample, we have identified three themes which act as visual and narrative connectives between the series and climate change. These videos were collected initially via the hashtags and keywords #climatechange and #strangerthings, with later additions as the analysis progressed (eg #vecna and #upsidedown) via the in-built search function which delivers results organised according to a range of factors including relevance to the search terms and engagement. Relevance is based on video captions, text, and hashtags<sup>1</sup>. For each combination of hashtags the top 20 videos were assessed and the most relevant four or five from each list analysed in depth which amounted to a total of approximately 50 videos. All examples have been reworded and/or generalised in order to protect intellectual copyright and anonymity of content producers. Due to season 4 being the latest to be released at the time of the analysis, of July to August 2023, there is a particular emphasis on this season which aired in 2022.

The three themes are: the Upside Down as an allegory of climate change, generational conflict and the trust deficit, and time running out to act. The imagery, text and audio from the series act as connectives which allow young people to produce a more developed articulation of their perceptions, fears and conflicts than the visual short form that the TikTok platform enables, and which speaks to others immersed in the same global popular culture.

### *Stranger Things*

The Netflix series *Stranger Things* – cited as one of the platform's flagship programmes – was first released in 2016 and almost immediately moved into the centre of the global popular culture, with particular appeal to young people who are at the centre of its story and worldview. As of November 5, 2023,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/how-tiktok-works/search/>

season four is the second most popular Netflix-series to date, with 147,700,000 viewings, according to Netflix's own statistics.

*Stranger Things* tells the story of a small group of pre-teen – at the start of the narrative in 1983 – boys and eventually girls, lovingly and to some degree of complexity portrayed as nerds. They are bullied by the tougher kids, and they are ardent Dungeons & Dragons enthusiasts. The series is famous and much commented on for its nostalgic flair for the culture and aesthetics of the United States of the 1980s. The creators, The Duffer Brothers, Matt and Ross, work systematically with borrowings, references and allusions to the popular culture of the 1980s and with the cultural memory of the political climate of the time. There are several allusions to the contradictions and debates of the Reagan era in American political history, as well as clear thematic and iconographic parallels with, especially, several of Stephen Spielberg's productions. Perhaps the most obvious are the ties to *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), where a group of children take care of and protect a creature from outer space from an adult world that is perceived as incomprehensible and threatening, not least from scientists and representatives of the military-industrial complex, who want to investigate and exploit the alien life form. In *Stranger Things*, the counterpart to E.T. is the girl Eleven. She has telekinetic powers and has escaped from a research facility in the children's hometown of Hawkins.

This research facility is officially operated by the United States Department of Energy, but clandestinely, a mysterious organization led by Dr. Martin Brenner conducts experiments with the aim of developing paranormal abilities in a group of children. Inadvertently, the facility has opened a portal in its basement to a dark and dangerous parallel world or dimension, which we come to know as the Upside Down. The first season revolves around the inexplicable disappearance of one of the children, Will Byers. It is revealed that he has ended up in the Upside Down and is unable to escape. His friends, along with Eleven and a few older children, form a small group of pre-teen-investigators who aim to find him.

Season one concludes with the group rescuing Will from the Upside Down, and Eleven defeating the season's main monster, the Demogorgon. The subsequent seasons trace the group's transition from 12-year-olds to teenagers, placing a stronger emphasis on romantic subplots. However, the foundational elements established in the first season are still present: the threat from dark forces in the hostile world of the Upside Down, the struggle against mysterious organizations and external powers seeking to weaponize telekinetic children, and generational conflict with young people saving the day. In the spirit of hyper-intertextuality characteristic of the series, the rendition of the Upside Down and its "Boss" monsters are systematically associated with the lore of Dungeons & Dragons. Following the tradition of the adolescent sleuth narrative, the young detectives solve mysteries and risk their lives to protect the world, particularly Hawkins, ultimately facing the

risk of being consumed and destroyed by the destructive forces within the Upside Down (Leigh Sandford 2020, 2–7).

As noted, it is far from self-evident to consider *Stranger Things* as climate fiction – it does not neatly align with this generic framework largely because it is not directly concerned with climate change at all. The series unfolds during a time when other catastrophic scenarios were more pressing: the Cold War’s threat of nuclear war and megadeath, as well as the risk of infiltration by foreign powers. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of *Stranger Things* that render it relevant in today’s climate crisis-oriented context and readable as a parable of the climate crisis, and which as we will argue young people on TikTok draw on to articulate their own climate sentiments.

### The Upside Down as an allegory of climate change

The menace in *Stranger Things* emanates from the Upside Down, gradually introduced during the first half of the series’ inaugural season. The Upside Down is portrayed as a kind of parallel dimension. When the protagonists of the series enter the Upside Down by passing through one of the portals that open between the two dimensions, they find themselves in a dark, negative version of Hawkins, uninhabited, and uninhabitable, by humans. Environments and structures remain the same, but in the Upside Down, the air is filled with particles resembling snow or perhaps ash from a fire. The trees in the Upside Down lack leaves, and the ground, buildings and structures are covered with roots that sometimes appear more like tentacles. The *mise-en-scène* is dominated by cool gray and blue tones, occasionally shifting, especially in season four, to warm orange tones that emphasize the Upside Down’s resemblance to depictions of hell as a hot, burning place. The sky is covered with turbulent clouds that emit flashes of lightning. Often wet and slippery, the ground features pools of viscous liquid reminding of tar.

Several scholars have highlighted and commented on the connection between the Upside Down and ecological and environmental issues, thereby linking it to the climate crisis in a more developed way. Meeker and Szabari (2018, unpaginated) argue that *Stranger Things* is an example of plant horror. In this context, they point out, for instance, that the Demogorgon has a “face” that is a monstrous, flower-like orifice that opens to devour its victims. They emphasize that: “The lingering vegetal presence in the series draws the past closer to our own, more ecologically-focused moment.” Building on a critique of the media portrayal of Greta Thunberg as a (white) saviour bravely advocating for the climate against a reluctant and capitalist-driven adult world, McCain and Torres (2023, 1644 and 1646) assert that climate activism historically performed by indigenous people or people of colour lack a similar media representation. They argue that even if *Stranger Things* may not unequivocally be described as an ecological narrative, parallels exist between this media portrayal and the series’ depiction of Eleven, whom they suggest can be read as a Gaia figure, a deity personifying Earth.

Multiple elements in the depiction of the Upside Down can support such an allegorical reading of this domain as an image of the climate threat – and a dystopian future of how earth might look – and a form of nature’s revenge against humanity, which has essentially caused its own downfall. Towards the end of season four, it becomes evident that the antagonist Vecna was, in fact, one of the telekinetic children, Henry Creel, code-named 001 and experimented on by Dr. Brenner in the early days of the Hawkins laboratory. It is also revealed that Eleven, in a telekinetic showdown, sent Henry to another dimension, possibly created in that very moment. In this dimension, Henry, it seems, constructed the negative version of Hawkins that we have come to know as the Upside Down. Later, in the beginning of the narrative in season one, Eleven accidentally opened a portal to this dimension in a powerful outburst of telekinetic energy. So, it’s Dr. Brenner and his employers who set in motion the events that, by the end of season four, have reached a point of catastrophe.

In the final scene of season four, the season finale’s ultimate battle between Eleven and her friends and Vecna is over. It is a moment of joy and relief after the intense drama. Suddenly, the sky darkens, and the main characters witness the air being filled with the characteristic particles previously seen only in the Upside Down. They move in the direction from which the particles seem to be coming and arrive at a beautiful summer meadow full of vibrant and colourful wildflowers. Midway across the meadow, they discover that it has turned gray, desiccated, and covered in a mold-like substance. As they gaze over a valley, they see massive fault lines where fire and smoke emerge. The barrier against the Upside Down has collapsed, and the world is threatened with destruction.

These themes and imagery offer much for TikTok users to work with and, on the platform, we see connectives being made between the Upside Down and the monsters within, and real climate impacts, such as extreme weather events in order to mobilise around a fear of the kind of future these impacts might deliver. Videos attach the hashtag #climate change to visual reportage of storms, tornadoes, forest fires and flooding, or more explicit video titles such as ”the upside down is real”, or ”as hot as the upside down”. TikTok users colourise and add dramatic music to photos of intense orange and yellow skies, what look like uninhabitable landscapes with trees and plants wilting (almost like tentacles) or ice melting and gathering dark clouds – and cut them through with scenes from the series – to visually connect climate change with its dystopian message. The sense of uncertainty and fear of an unknown future are realised through captions such as ”spring in December! The birds and flowers are confused!” and ”it’s snowing in LA #strangerthings”. A motif which appeared across the videos sampled was the explicit reference to the monsters of the Upside Down as representing climate change, as an embodiment of threat to humanity’s future shown in titles such as ”Vecna is climate change”. In particular Vecna, also the name of a fictional character



from Dungeons & Dragons, is associated with the bringing of heatwaves perhaps in reflection of his demonic, red appearance and location in the Upside Down.

### Generational conflict and lack of trust in adult decision-makers

A recurring theme in *Stranger Things* is the struggle of the young protagonists against an uncomprehending and at times hostile adult world. This is primarily highlighted in the everyday portrayal of the group's relationship with their parents and other adults throughout the series. In the first scene of the first season, the core of the group – Mike Wheeler, Will Byers, Dustin Henderson and Lucas Sinclair – is gathered in Mike's basement playing Dungeons & Dragons. They are abruptly interrupted by Mike's mother, who insists they stop because it's late. This moment does not depict a direct conflict but rather a generation gap. In the eyes of the parents, dedicating so much time to a fantasy board game is incomprehensible. The group's interest in the world of Dungeons & Dragons serves to illustrate and emphasize the idea that children and adults inhabit different realms, struggling to understand and connect across the boundaries of these worlds. As Meeker and Szabari puts it: "The Duffer Brothers' portrayal of Hawkins also emphasizes, in a highly Spielbergian mode, the experience of children who are profoundly and, in a sense, irretrievably alienated from their parents, whose bourgeois domesticity covers over pervasive trauma." (2018, unpaginated).

However, as the story unfolds, these worlds will collide and intersect, with children and adults gaining a better understanding of each other, and the children's strength and agency becoming evident to the adults. This is an aspect of the generic patterning of *Stranger Things*. For another element linking the series to the 1980s is its adherence to certain genre conventions. The show exemplifies the dramatic (and psychological) structure characteristic of the family film genre, as it evolved during the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States (Allen 1999, 113–116). The family film was commercially significant during that period and shares similarities with the story worlds of successful novelist Stephen King (e.g., *It*, 1986). The flaunting of these generic affinities in *Stranger Things* can be interpreted as yet another nostalgic nod to the cultural and media climate of the 1980s.

A more antagonistic and destructive relationship between children and adults is simultaneously portrayed, especially in the relationship between Eleven and Dr. Brenner, who oversees the telekinesis experiments in Hawkins. Initially presented as a paternal figure to the children at the facility, it becomes increasingly clear throughout the series that Brenner perceives his relationship with Eleven as a father-daughter bond. However, as he keeps Eleven captive, constantly pushes her, torments her, and subjects her to punishment, the relationship appears distorted on multiple levels. Other adult antagonists represent authorities, possibly the military, and foreign powers

(such as the Soviet Union). The precise nature of the organizations, interests, or forces these characters represent is often somewhat unclear. So, even though there are adults in the story who are on the children's side, notably Will's mother, Joyce Byers, and Sheriff Jim Hopper – who also plays the role of Eleven's more supportive stand-in father, the mirror opposite of Dr. Brenner – generational conflict remains a fundamental aspect of the narrative.

This pattern is reaffirmed in the opening of season four in the first scene at the Wheeler family's home. Similar to the very first scene at the Wheelers' in the series' beginning, the conflict revolves around Dungeons & Dragons. Mike is now fourteen years old and a member of the Hellfire Club, a role-playing group with a specific focus on Dungeons & Dragons, that is set to meet in the evening. His father, portrayed in the series as the epitome of conservative and somewhat disconnected adult masculinity, comments on the activity: "Why don't you just call it the high-school drop-out club?" and then turns to his wife, saying, "Remind me, when do they become reasonable human beings again?" This serves as a reminder of the constant but low-key alienation characterizing the relationship between generations.

*Stranger Things*, like many texts in popular culture, is shaped according to more or less vague but recognizable psychoanalytic patterns (c.f. Lu, Kaluzeviciute, and Sharp). At the centre of the entire drama is a subtly incestuous struggle between "daughter"/"sister," "son"/"brother," and "father" (or, indeed, "Papa"). When Dr. Brenner unexpectedly reappears in season four – presumed to be dead – he approaches the terrified Eleven with the words: "Let us work together again, daughter and Papa." It turns out that this generational conflict and twisted family romance serve as the primary driving force of the narrative and the very origin of the Upside Down itself. Henry/Vecna holds Dr. Brenner responsible for the entire catastrophic sequence of events that, in the season's conclusion, risks leading to the world's, or at least humanity's, demise. When Dr. Brenner dies, Eleven appears to share her "brother's" perspective. In any case, she denies him the reconciling words he asks for in his final moments.

In their analysis of a sample of popular climate change-hashtagged TikTok videos, Hautea et al. (2021) found a tendency to portray younger and future generations with a sense of responsibility, understanding and concern in contrast to older generations as either ignorant and indifferent or actively destructive. We can root this most recent iteration of generational conflict in the social media communications of Greta Thunberg, who, originally appearing in pigtails with homemade banners carrying out her own school strike, may have visually embodied ideas of childhood innocence but through her political action showed her assertiveness and resistance to an inactive adult world (Happer, 2019).

This TikTok sample indicates the connections between *Stranger Things*, climate change generational conflict (sometimes referred to as GenZ versus boomers) and/or corrupt or ineffectual decision-makers are made in a range

of direct and indirect ways. For example, the scene in which Vecna, himself originally a victim of the corrupt adult world, describes the "poisoning" of our world with "unnatural structures" is hashtagged with #climatechange and #pollution whilst still and moving images of the teenage characters resisting are tagged with #savetheearth #climatechange. Meanwhile other users voice their personalised frustration with inaction on climate and failed leadership in talking head videos cut to music and imagery from the series. Across the wider sample, the theme of generational conflict is communicated through the positioning of youth as the saviours of the climate emergency – #savetheday #savetheearth #genz – alongside dismissive or hostile captioning and disruptive editing of 'boomers' speaking, including politicians and well-known climate sceptics. This small-scale analysis also suggested that these ideas and themes may be connected with questions of distrust in mainstream media and public institutions more widely, something which may not be surprising as research has shown that consumers of alternative digital media often turn to them as correctives of what they see in the former (Reiter and Matthes, 2023; Happer, 2024).

### Time is running out

In the fourth season of *Stranger Things*, there are (of course) several elements that connect it to the horror tradition. Consistent with the series' predominant intertextual strategies, these often involve references to texts and phenomena that were prominent during the first half of the 1980s. The Creel family's house serves as a haunted house of a similar type as those featured in the popular films *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *Amityville II: The Possession* (1982), and *Amityville 3-D* (1983). Another example is Victor Creel, Henry's father, who, in his older age, is portrayed by actor Robert Englund, best known for his role as Freddy Krueger in *The Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, whose first part was released in 1984.

However, a significant motif appears to be directly drawn from an earlier source. In the opening of the fourth season, some children are brutally murdered. Eddie Munson, the young protagonists' Dungeons & Dragons mentor and leader of the Hellfire Club, is unjustly suspected of the murders. The young detectives gather to solve the mystery and clear their friend of suspicion. What the audience knows, and the group soon begins to suspect is that Vecna is responsible for the killings. The murders follow a specific pattern after Vecna infiltrates the young victims' subconscious. The crucial moment involves them hearing and seeing a grandfather clock ominously striking; a while after this sighting, they encounter Vecna, who kills them. The use of the grandfather clock is most likely derived from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Masque of the Red Death," (1842) where a clock serves a similar foreboding function. The clock's design bears a striking resemblance to Harry Clarke's classic illustration of the story from 1913, which also

depicts a figure representing death that bears a strong visual resemblance to Vecna.

The first visual appearance of the grandfather clock shows it embedded in a tree, linking it to the notion of a menacing and vengeful nature that the entire Upside Down can be said to represent in the series. The clock can also be decoded as a variant of the Doomsday Clock, devised by a group of scientists in 1947 to illustrate the risk of humanity causing a global catastrophe, particularly in response to the nuclear threat. When the Doomsday Clock was moved to its shortest time to date before Doomsday in January 2020, one minute and 40 seconds, it was emphasized that climate change had worsened the situation (AP/ABC, 2020) (Subsequently, the clock has been moved forward an additional 10 seconds in 2023, primarily due to the war in Ukraine). Based on similar principles, the Climate Clock, set up in Union Square in New York in 2020, is counting down to its own doomsday acting as a visual reminder of how close the earth is getting to climate catastrophe.

The clock motif reaches its climax after one of the young protagonists, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, witnesses and hears the grandfather clock. Through their investigation, the group has realized that Max is now in the same situation as the previously murdered youths. She is aware that her time is measured and prepares for the worst. At the end of episode four, Max goes to her brother Billy's grave, ready to face Vecna. While her body enters a trance-like state at the grave, she is transported to The Upside Down. Mike's older sister Nancy and her friend Robin have visited Victor Creel at a mental institution and concluded that music can serve as a kind of lifeline for those ensnared by Vecna. Following a lengthy scene where Max confronts Vecna at what appears to be the core of The Upside Down, her friends manage to find a cassette tape with Max's favourite song. They put headphones on her and insert the cassette into an iconic Sony Walkman. As Max hears the notes of Kate Bush's "Running Up that Hill (A Deal with God)," Vecna loses his grip on her, and a portal opens to the graveyard where her anxious friends are calling. Max escapes and successfully returns through the portal. Thus, the song is connected to the clock motif, serving as a kind of soundtrack of hope, an opportunity to escape the inevitability of the ticking clock.

The motif of the clock ticking and time running out hashtagged with #climatechange and #strangerthings4 was also present in TikTok videos in the sample drawing out the theme of saving the planet as a race against time. In a number of videos within the wider sample, the Climate Clock in New York is used to visualise how close the earth is getting to climate catastrophe and is typically hashtagged with #timeisrunningout, #strangerthings and #vecna. Audio from the series of the clock chiming is added to build a sense of the threat of time hurtling on – such as in one video entitled "Counting down the time to save the earth" and another which features a full screen digital clock marking the time, the level of warming and volume of carbon emitted in tonnes as they move forward and grow in parallel with the rhythm

of the clock. Similarly, "Running Up that Hill (A Deal with God)" has become a viral sound meme across social media and combined with the hashtags above is used to symbolise the struggle with climate change as a race to beat opposing forces. In a typical example of a video tagged as "fighting climate", we see Max racing away from Vecna again here understood as the embodiment of climate change towards a caption of 'Kate Bush' as representing "decarbonisation", "green transport" and "global cooling". Across these examples, we can see the way in which the young users of TikTok draw on an assumed pop culture literacy to communicate their political arguments with a sense of urgency – perhaps most explicitly done in one video which opens with a still image of one of the lead actors combined with audio of fast-paced clock beats captioned "I'm quitting" and then cuts abruptly to an explainer about climate change with the words "see, I got your attention".

### Conclusion: The End (?)

Life in the Upside Down is untenable. It is an environment that, in a very literal sense, is hostile, teeming with creatures that attack and consume humans. In the fourth season, it is clarified that this environment is a human creation – given the fictional premises, such as the existence of telekinesis – and that the entire Upside Down is a kind of extension or manifestation of a vengeful entity, Vecna, who was once human and, in Oedipal rage, seeks to destroy his father, his sister, and all of humanity. By placing this mythologically tinged conflict in the context of the Reagan era's neoliberal transformation of American society, that period's overarching fears about uncontrollable social changes and the threat of annihilation through a nuclear holocaust are projected onto the current moment's urgent climate crisis (cf. Ní Fahlínn 2022, 204f). Through the conventions of the horror genre, the threat is visualized as simultaneously overwhelming and abject, in deep connection with the primal fears and emotional reactions latent in the human psyche, traditionally addressed in the genre.

This renders *Stranger Things* a text that, in the guise of nostalgic genre fiction, can provide tools for young people today to articulate understandable climate anxiety and to mobilise sentiment around the urgency of the action to be taken. This should be seen in the context of a decline in trust in official decision-makers and young people's orientation away from traditional news sources (Newman et al, 2023). New, highly visual social media such as TikTok, which focus on the production of personalised videos composed of the resources on offer in the wider culture, allow young people to draw on their civic imagination to imagine alternative futures. Here we identified three themes in the series which are particularly fruitful for young climate TikTokers: the Upside Down as an allegory of the climate threat, generational conflict and lack of trust in adult decision-making and time running out – which allowed them to construct oppositional futures – one where the world

is increasingly destroyed, and one where young people come in to save the day (and defeat the corrupt adults responsible for the destruction). As the video is shared, users are brought into a community which organises around both a love of the series and the vision of social change it is drawn on to create. In this, in spite of some of the very negative visions of (future) threat, the civic imagination retains its inherently positive function, putting patterns of meaning and symbolism in this deeply nostalgic narrative with a dystopian twist to work to try to change the world (Jenkins et.al. 2016, 5).

As such, where professional media messaging about climate impacts are politician-led, remote and unrelatable, these young climate communicators tether this global issue to their own anxiety, anger and frustrations and crucially their own agency and capacity to drive change. If researchers working in the field of climate communications have consistently argued positive affective messages – avoiding evocations of fear and alarm – are most effective in fostering engagement (Moser and Dilling, 2007), young people are instead drawing on these emotions in order to get their social media peers to care enough to do something. This is a whole new way of doing politics and communicating political messaging in which climate change is made up of a series of personal narratives that speak to the collective cause. In this way, social media users follow one of their key influences, Greta Thunberg, who personalised the concerns of the world and made them her own.

The degree to which such communications actually deliver change is of course open to debate. As Hautea et al. acknowledge, political change of the sort needed is going to be more difficult to deliver when communications take place in a "cyberspace without explicit tethering to on-the-ground events" (Hautea et al., 2021). There is not a clear sense that young people know what to do next and the distance from conventional politics may also be a barrier here. Research indicates that they do have higher levels of concern, sense of threat and emotional response to the issue but the way in which that translates into climate or environmental action is still unclear (Hickman et al., 2021).

Facing the imminent fifth and concluding season, the Upside Down threatens to invade, take over, and devastate life as we know it. Something in the tone of the series makes it likely that Mike, Dustin, Will, Lucas, Max, and Eleven will succeed in overcoming this threat. The evidence here suggests that young climate activists, and their followers, will continue to draw inspiration from these kinds of texts, which we can only hope translates into positive action in the pursuit of a sustainable future of which they imagine themselves as guardians.

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