

# Humor & Risk:

## An exploration of case studies

### Overview

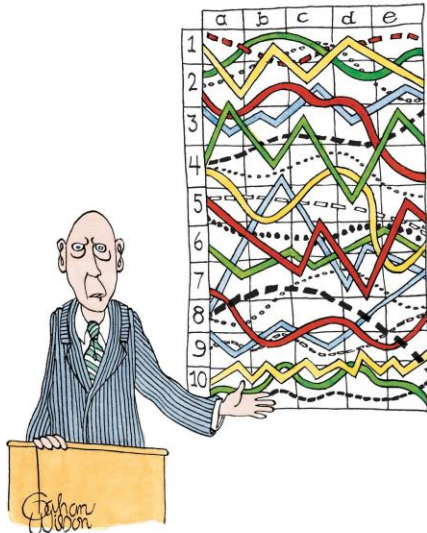
At its most fundamental level, managing risks is, at its core, about noticing and confronting the gap between *what is* and *what could be*. Humor is also about noticing, confronting, and in particular, highlighting this gap. While humor is not something that readily exists in the climate and disaster risk management field, this exploration sought to identify why humor can be useful, and more specifically, document cases where humor has worked effectively.

This exploration of humor in the context of DRM has revealed the humor can be used as a risk communication and engagement tool, supporting the following:

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

#### 1. **Humor engages the audience, breaking through resistance and boredom**

Much of climate and disaster risk management events are comprised of PowerPoint presentations that struggle to hold the audience's attention. These presentations can include charts, graphs and more words than are advisable on any given slide. This information and the points the presenter attempts to make are crucial to support a better understanding of risk and more evidence-informed decision, and yet the presenter can lose the audience. Humor, in the form of cartoons, can enliven the presentation, waking the audience up. For instance, the use of this cartoon can make it clear that the presenter understands that s/he is presenting a large amount of complex data, and can be used before diving into that information, causing the audience to pay more attention to what comes next.



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

See "Cartoonification of webinars" and the example from the "Cities on the Frontline" speaker series (page 11).

## 2. Humor enables new ideas to emerge

As is discussed in the book, *Humor and Creativity*<sup>1</sup>, humor stimulates a different part of the brain, which can cause us to look at a problem from a different angle, and perhaps even come up with new ideas or solutions. This cartoon can serve as a metaphor for doing the same thing and expecting a new solution. When used effectively in a workshop setting (evidenced in the case studies) this cartoon can stimulate conversations around new ideas, so that we don't fall into the "honking again" situation.

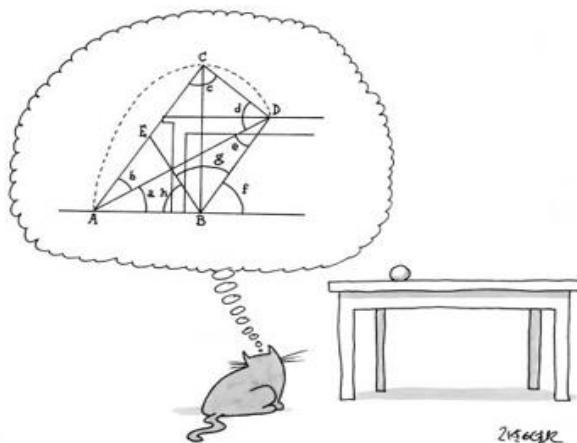


<sup>1</sup> Luria, Sarah, John Baer and James Kaufman (2018) *Humor and Creativity*. Academic Press.

There is an example from the [World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group](#), however, it is not focused on disaster risk management and was omitted from the case studies. It will require more exploration and documentation of humor in the context of DRM to illustrate how humor can enable new ideas in DRM.

### 3. Humor invites us to open our minds and change our frames of reference

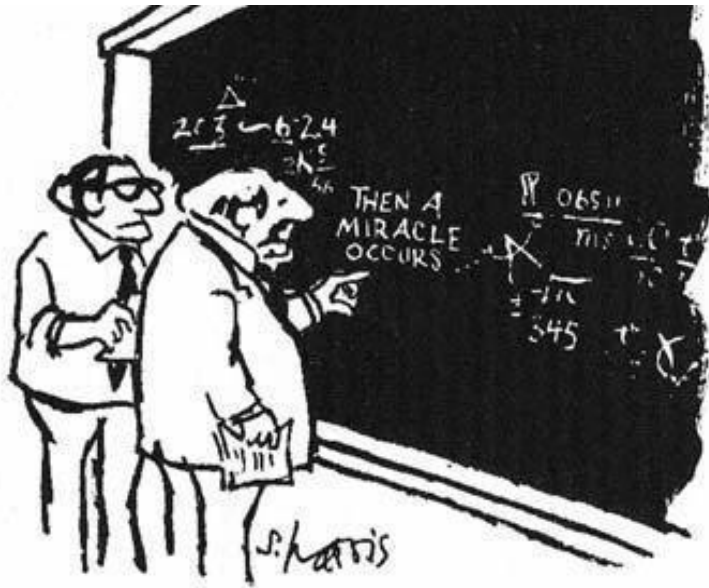
Similar to creativity, infusing humor into activities creates a clear signaling to participants that this is not a typical way of engagement. Instead, we are invited to change our way of thinking, creating mental space to engage with the topic in a newfound way. For instance, we often expect that individuals or communities who at risk are making decisions the same way that we, technical specialists, do. And yet, most individuals who are at risk in a floodplain, for instance, often derive benefit from living there, such as their livelihood. Thus, there are different decision-making factors that are considered. It may be just as strange to think of a cat doing math to get to the tabletop. By looking at this cartoon through the lens of at-risk communities, we can better see that our frame of reference and starting point is, perhaps, misguided.



See example on “Cartoons to distill what matters” and the IPCC Cryosphere report (page 6).

### 4. Humor creates a safe space to be candid and think outside the box

When speaking about complex and difficult topics, such as DRM, humor creates the space to comment candidly on aspects that sometimes need a closer eye or a more critical perspective. By employing cartoons that can serve as metaphors, participants can see their role or project in a new light, and highlight the potential problems. For instance, are we perhaps expecting a miracle to occur when attempting to close the gap between *what is* and *what could be*?



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

See "Cartoon Talk" (page 13) and the example from the World Bank workshop with the Government of Afghanistan.

### 5. Humor helps us envision how things can go wrong, and how things could be changed

Because of its ability to provide commentary non-aggressively, cartoons can help to capture something that might, on its face seem acceptable, but when put into a cartoon, it stimulates use to think about what might go wrong.



See "Cartoons to structure narratives of what can go wrong" (page 10) and "Cartoonathon" (page 15) and the example of the World Bank/Government of

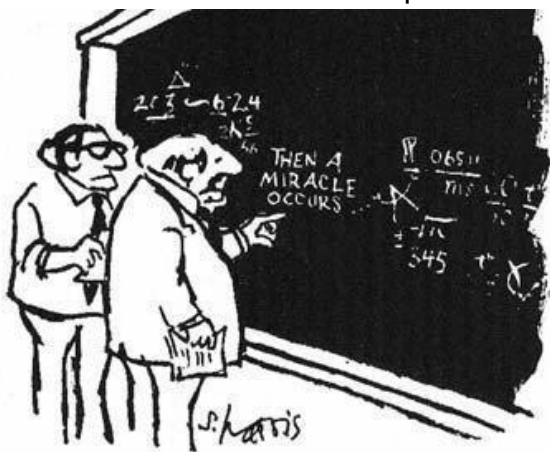
Afghanistan workshop highlighted what was thought to be an acceptable solution: put government officials in the field to better understand the community. The cartoon highlighted an underlying assumption.

It is clear that humor can play a role in how we engage and communicate in the disaster and climate risk management field. This innovative tool merits further exploration as we continue to develop out the risk communication toolbox.

## Humor in Action: Case studies from DRM

There are plenty of available examples showing humor that works in the context of disaster and climate risk management. 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*<sup>2</sup>, 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."

*Bob Mankoff says: 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.*

<sup>2</sup> Green, D. (2016). *How change happens*. Oxford University Press.

*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.”*

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 are produced that 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.

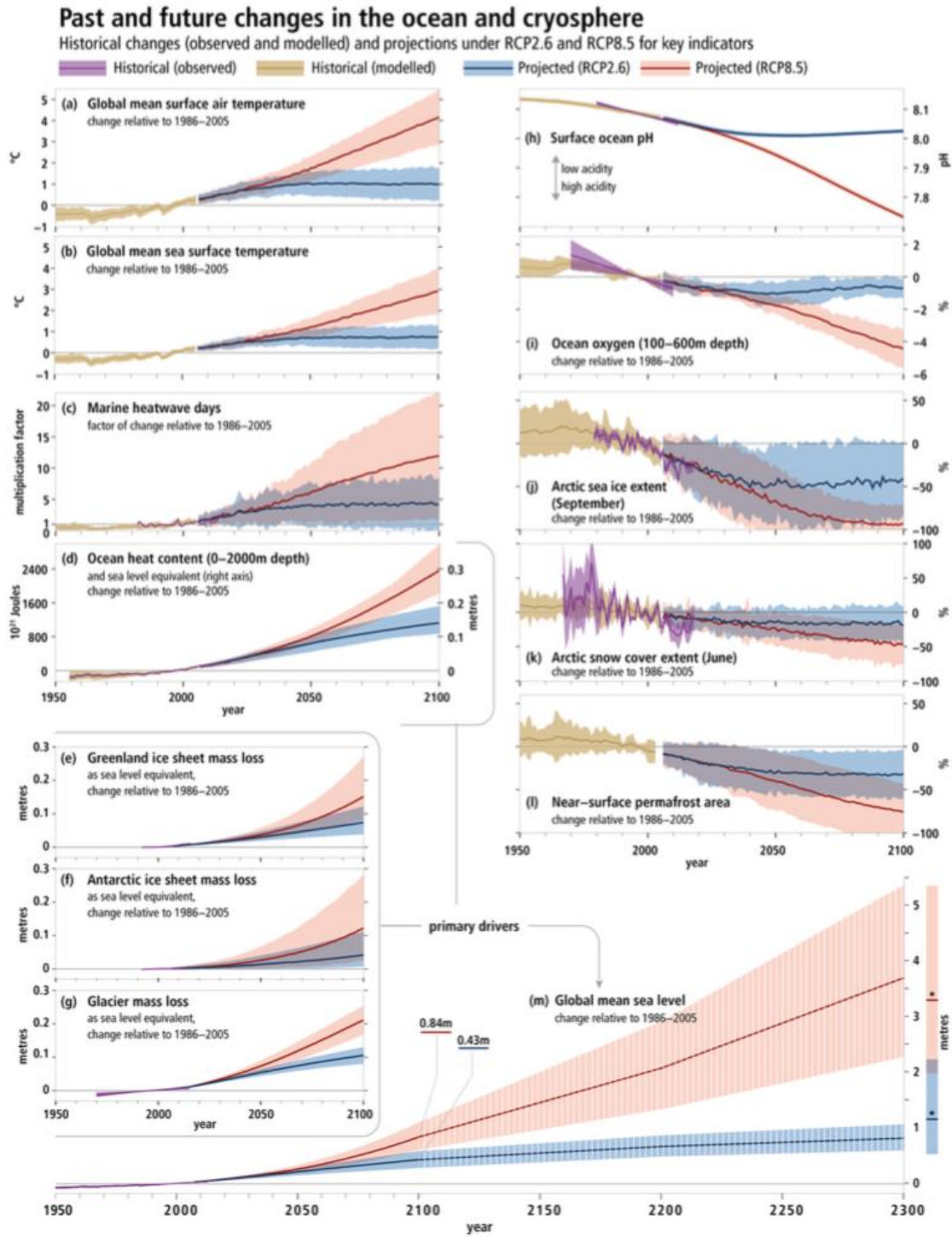
A case in point: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its 700-page [Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere](#).

*Bob Mankoff says: 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.*

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.”*

*Cartoon by Danny Shannahan / CartoonCollections.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 and, coupled with some key information derived from the report, it is effective.

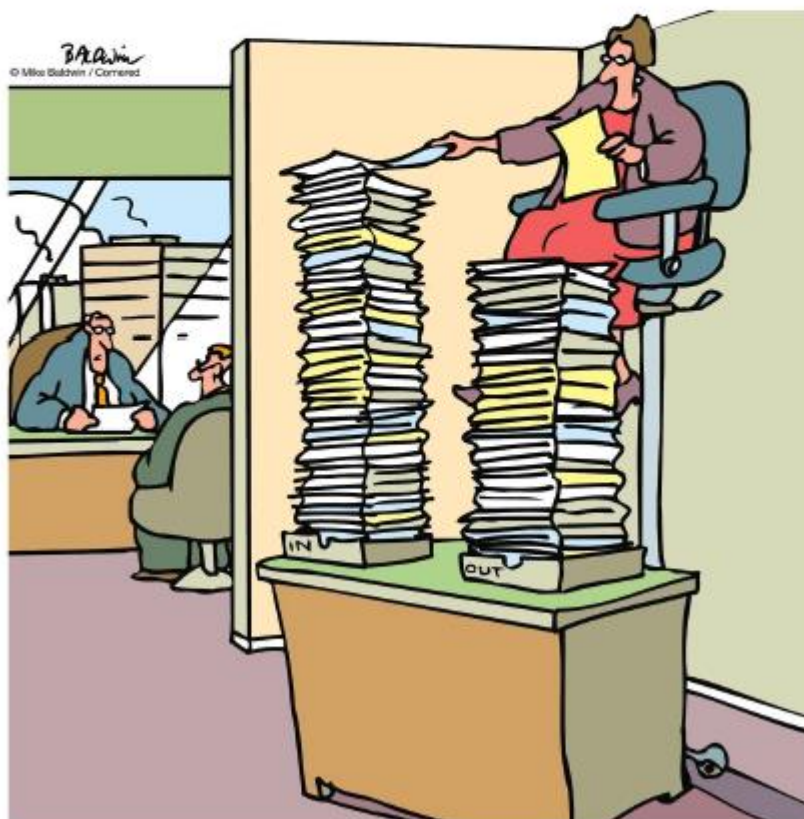


Take this other key message: read the bolded title and allow your eyes to land on the cartoon.

**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."**

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.

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 Mankoff says: 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.*

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 have 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?

*Cartoon by Kendra Allenby/ CartoonCollections.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

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 InsuResilience Global Partnership Annual 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 of about 15 participants.



In the background, the *Try Honking Again* cartoon (below) 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 participatory session that ultimately produces cartoons that may capture the essence of what a presenter says, depict its implications (i.e. taking ideas to extreme logical conclusions), or critically examine and challenge 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 & 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](http://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 [IFRC](#), 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.

*Cartoon by Kendra Allenby/ CartoonCollections.com*

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.

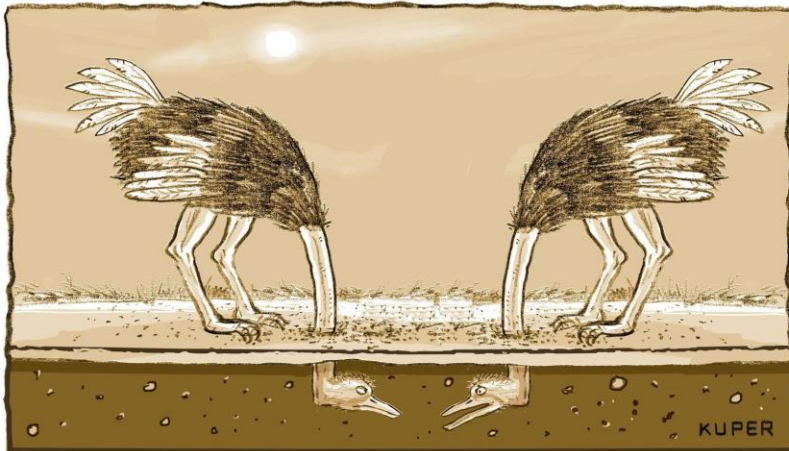
Here are some quotes from event participants (World Bank staff and Afghan Government officials):

- "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 (2/3 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?”*



## *CLIMATE GRIEF*

Many other organizations have used Cartoon Talk 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 International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies.