Celebrity Precedents: Assessing New Politicization and Climate Change Policy Rhetoric in Leonardo DiCaprio's Before the Flood

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ABSTRACT

This article juxtaposes the demonstrated prevalence of celebrity politics with that of climate change policy inaction in the United States, to contextualize Leonardo DiCaprio's ecodocumentary, Before the Flood within its current sociopolitical moment. I argue these components work in tandem to structure DiCaprio's message within a social framework accommodating him as a political figure. In turn, the documentary can be conceived of as both a contributor and a product of new celebrity political discourse serving to further the politicization of climate change.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Overview of Climate Change Research and Rhetoric in the United States

Anthropogenic climate change is the most pressing issue of the 21st century and beyond, as humans’ ability to continue living on Earth and maintaining business as usual affects every conceivable industry and social construct we have collectively built. In November of 2018, the U.S. Global Change Research Program, a federal agency, released the “Fourth National Climate Assessment,” (2018), with over a thousand pages of evidence from nearly 300 scientists, presenting clear, unequivocal proof that humans have caused climate change. The second chapter, “Our Changing Climate,” consolidates findings from observed warming, as well as formal detection and attribution studies, such as computer models and simulations, to support the conclusion that humans have contributed to a total “likely...global average temperature increase” of 1.1°F to 1.4°F (0.6°C to 0.8°) between 1951 and 2010 (p.76). The report points specifically to greenhouse gas emissions, aerosol production, ozone depletion, and changes in land cover, such as that due to deforestation, as causes. Following the evidence of human impacts to the climate, the assessment outlines how, after leaving climate change largely unattended to since our first inclinations of its existence, we have nearly reached the point of no return from a world to be inundated with not-so-natural disasters, droughts, famines, and floods of near-biblical proportions. The report was not the first of its kind, or even the beginning of climate change research, which begs the question of how climate change policy in the United States has seemingly failed to enforce stringent guidelines in the face of over 185 years of what William Forster Lloyd (1832) conceptualized as a tragedy of the commons, an unwillingness for society to maintain the environment without a directive to do so.

Joseph Fourier’s 1824 discovery of what became known as the greenhouse effect led to Svante Arrhenius’s conclusion in 1896 that the industrial burning of coal was contributing to global warming (Crawford, 2018). However, neither an approaching 200 years of climate change research, establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), or consensus among scientists on the dire state of climate change has prompted consistent governmental intervention in the United States to mitigate the consequences or reduce the nation’s carbon footprint to pre-industrial levels. The United States is a world leader, yet it has largely resisted full commitment to the global conversation around climate change mitigation as a civic duty until now. The United States Congress set forth six findings detailing the consequences of human-made climate change in the Global Change Research Act of 1990, and the act mandated subsequent updates, including the 2018 report (“Legal Mandate,” 1990). Yet the word “climate” is markedly absent from its title, obscuring the purpose of the act from the average American, and in the following years since the original decree, the knowledge offered through these reports has not amounted to significant action. In 2006, former vice president Al Gore released An Inconvenient Truth (AIT), but even this explicit call for action on climate change did not see immediate mobilization despite winning an Academy Award, prompting Gore to release a sequel in 2017 (The Climate Reality Project).
Similarly, Maxwell Boykoff's (2007) content analysis of media discourse regarding Hurricane Katrina suggests Americans were already aware of the extensive implications of climate change by 2005, as credible news publications questioned President George W. Bush on whether he saw climate change as a catalyst for the hurricane's disastrous consequences, and Bush himself acknowledged human activity was contributing to the earth's warming (p.476). At the same time, his disregard of climate change as an imminent political issue did not amount to American criticism of his performance in a profound way. Indeed, even Boykoff acknowledges the inaccuracies implicit in Bush's denial and recognizes a political side to climate change, but concludes by saying "we should more realistically seek a creeping evolution in how non-state actors such as the mass media influence climate policy," thereby displacing political responsibility from politicians to the media's portrayal of climate change (p.479).

Boykoff's study illuminates the way in which climate change has often been relegated as a social issue, to be discussed by credible figures outside of the political arena and through unconventional political mediums, specifically documentary, as seen through An Inconvenient Truth. George W. Bush's rhetoric demonstrates the general ineffectiveness of conventional politicians in the climate change conversation because they demur in the face of the conflicting and immediately costly systemic changes required to overhaul existing, coal-friendly infrastructure. In short, politicians have largely been beholden to carbon, so they allow climate change to persist without intervention. Consequently, as recently as 2009, millennials were estimated as even less likely to care about the environment than baby boomers (Twenge & Campbell, 2010, p.1049), and in 2012, "the issue of climate change was nearly invisible," for American voters (Davenport, 2016). However, this begs the question of why, just four years later, the 2016 presidential election cycle saw Americans suddenly focused on the political implications of climate change. The election was saturated with divided political debate and saw politicians on either side of the aisle split between overt acceptance and vehement denialism, rather than the ambiguous skirtsing around the issue which had previously allowed Americans to shrug their shoulders at climate change. Coral Davenport's article, "Climate Change Divide Bursts to Forefront in Presidential Campaign," (2016) is one of many examples of the media's fascination with this new, political focus on climate change, and notes that current President "Donald J. Trump, has gone further than any other Republican presidential nominee in opposing climate change policy." Indeed, Trump's stance on climate change flies in the face of scientists, within his administration and otherwise, and news publications have thoroughly documented him making a variety of statements dismissing climate change as a hoax, including "I believe in clean air. Immaculate air. But I don't believe in climate change" (Cillizza, 2017).

Since 2016, climate change policy has been situated in a seemingly unprecedented rhetorical moment, so the question remains of how best to explain a new politicization of climate change in the United States, considering its level of polarization among elected politicians and the degree to which Americans are still willing to accept political denial of climate change in the face of its tangible consequences. If politicians have not been the primary messengers and scientists have been largely unable to permeate the political shirking of eco-responsibility, it appears there are influential figures outside of the political arena who are informing Americans' perception of climate change as political in nature. More specifically, celebrities with social credibility and a demonstrated interest in social activism played a visible role in the 2016 election, including current President Donald Trump. While Trump's denials of climate change seem contrary to the effectiveness of celebrities in promoting climate change policy, existing research on celebrity influence suggests his victory in securing the election was the result of a larger social acceptance of celebrities as credible and persuasive figures, particularly in combination with an increasing disillusionment with the agendas of conventional politicians. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider how his celebrity adversaries, those who are actively promoting climate change policy, are similarly politicizing themselves in the face of dire warnings about the future of Earth's climate, and to such a degree that they may also be considered politicians, regardless of whether they have formally entered the political landscape via a campaign or place on the ballot.

I argue Leonardo DiCaprio's 2016 ecodocumentary, Before the Flood, converges at these axes and rhetorical analysis of the film offers one instance to consider how a conflation of celebrity status and political influence is shaping a new face for climate change policy rhetoric within the U.S. sociopolitical landscape. A thorough explanation of the film's relevance is forthcoming, but as mentioned, Al Gore utilized ecodocumentary as a new lens to consider the politicization of climate change. As both a former politician and media personality, he established documentary filmmaking as a viable path for other socially credible figures to politicize climate change beyond conventional rhetoric. Following AIT, the ecodocumentary genre offers a means for socially powerful people to follow up on Gore's rhetorical flaws concerning an effective call to action. Thus, the following literature review follows existing research on celebrity credibility, the political influence of celebrities, and the ecodocumentary genre to ultimately establish how Before the Flood exists as a piece of political rhetoric and DiCaprio as a political figure.
Intersection of Celebrity and Policy

From Got Milk? to the U.S. military, Americans have been inundated with the persuasive power of celebrity figures for decades (Park & Avery, 2016). Celebrity endorsements are commonplace in advertising and research has studied extensively how consumers associate celebrities’ attractive personal traits with the product in question (Agrawal, Jadish, & Kamakura, 1995; Dekker & Reijmersdal, 2013). As Park and Avery (2016) suggest through their study on celebrity endorsements in military advertising, a celebrity’s likeness is not only well-suited for the purposes of selling products, but it also possesses political power and the ability to fuel patriotism. As one point of comparison, the Black Eyed Peas promoted Barack Obama with their “Yes We Can” ad campaign (2008), a music video starring the group and various other celebrities lip-syncing to his campaign speeches. This platform merged celebrity influence with political influence, bolstering Obama’s political credibility through the appearances of non-political influencers with large fanbases. Similarly, Park and Avery’s theory surrounding celebrity endorsements in U.S. military advertising concluded that celebrities have the power to promote patriotism.

Regarding climate change policy, various celebrities have promoted their own “green” initiatives, indicating they comprehend the importance of their voices in aiding awareness of environmental issues. Julie Doyle (2016) focuses on the vegan branding from celebrities Alicia Silverstone and Ellen DeGeneres, who overarchingly take an ethical vegan approach by way of non-anthropogenic “care, compassion, kindness, and emotion” for all animals, but who also use rhetoric on their platforms focusing on how individuals benefit, physically and emotionally, by eating vegan (p.787). Beth Jorgensen (2015) explains how dietary choices comprise one avenue people use to emotionally invest and recommends “[d]eveloping advocacy for a more sustainable food system by more closely connecting animal rights advocacy to the global food system, both environmentally and in terms of social justice,” just as celebrities like Silverstone and DeGeneres have done (p.13). Relatedly, Doyle (2016) also discusses the popularity of plant-based diets among celebrities. She notes, “celebrities are also media creations and branded commodities,” so while a plant-based diet may otherwise seem unattractive, the emotional connections people have with celebrity figures could influence their decisions to adopt a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle (p.781).

At the same time, Gwendelyn Nisbett and Christina DeWalt (2016) found that young people find celebrity endorsements of products and issues to be important, but do not necessarily change their own attitudes just because a famous person promotes it (p.150). Andrew Pease and Paul Brewer (2008) found that Oprah’s support for Obama in 2008 correlated to increased public perceptions of his likelihood to win the election, but they could not prove her support had a direct correlation to voter behavior at the polls. However, a decade after their study, Oprah gave an impassioned speech at the 2018 Golden Globes with a decidedly partisan message about the Me Too Movement, and there was enough fanfare about the possibility of a political agenda to prompt media speculation about Winfrey running for president in 2020 (Deerwester, 2018). These conflicting conclusions suggest American celebrities have a unique opportunity to be perceived as credible political voices if they move from endorsing candidates to being candidates themselves. They may actively remove the gap between advocacy and political output and undertake explicitly political responsibilities on behalf of their fans, rather than advocating for existing politicians to better represent their constituents, including through climate change policy.

It is critical to situate Al Gore and An Inconvenient Truth (2006) within research on celebrity influence because much of the film’s success banked on the way Gore framed himself and discussed climate change, rather than the mere exposure the film gave Americans to the state of climate change. He did not revolutionize climate change policy in his moment as a documentarian, considering that the United States continues to rely on fossil fuels and the current presidential administration denies the impacts of human activity on climate change. However, similar to Jorgensen’s findings, Gore’s storytelling strategies inspired Americans to consider ways of implementing eco-consciousness into their daily lives because he presented himself as a social influencer, not just a politician. Rosteck and Frentz (2009) discuss how discourse regarding An Inconvenient Truth frames Al Gore as a “rock star,” and this suggests much of the credibility he earns through the film is a result of taking on a celebrity-like persona, focusing on his personal life and successes to meld his identity between celebrity and politician (p.3). His ability to push climate change into the American political consciousness was not the result of active policy change, but of characterizing himself as a sort of celebrity, with the political credibility to call for new policy, as well as the social relevance to inspire people who might not otherwise understand why climate change matters to the average American.

Similarly, the “Yes We Can” campaign was clearly successful in amplifying Obama’s political potential, and through his presidency, Obama seemed to emphasize his own persona as one comparable to a celebrity. Margolin (2009) says, “If we didn’t know [him] as a politician, we wouldn’t be surprised to see him in a Pepsi commercial.” Furthermore, his likeness represents “HOPE” and...PROGRESS,” internationally, so he is recognizable because people see him as a celebrity icon (p.184). Perhaps Obama’s conflation of celebrity status and political power aided Donald Trump’s credibility because Trump’s fans are also his constituents, and America’s exposure to him as a
household name, charismatic television personality, and famous entrepreneur allows him to assume credibility. Gore and Obama are both esteemed politicians, but their ability to influence American conceptions of climate change policy stems, at least in part, from the celebritized identities they cultivate rhetorically, and this may be permeating into sociopolitical norms surrounding the relationship between celebrity identity and political power.

**Celebrity Politics and Climate Change**

Climate change policy progress seems to be in contention with voters' current disillusionment in the political system and their increasing willingness to turn to nontraditional sources of social power to influence policy, even if this means sacrificing climate change mitigation. Carvalho, Wessel, and Maesele (2017) graze the surface of this new sociopolitical moment in saying, “failure of the political options tested up until now suggests that a different climate politics may be necessary and that citizen political engagement may play a key role in bringing it about” (p.125). However, the possibility for change is limited if the only citizens actively engaging in politics are denying climate change. In turn, voters may opt to champion celebrity status over climate politics to elevate regular citizens to political roles and challenge the status quo. The notion of citizens rising from beneath the surface to tackle climate change policy relates to Trump because his fans desired a president who embodied an anti-establishment perspective. While Trump's platform is in contention with Americans' understanding of the human impacts of climate change and the necessity of progressive policy, it is possible that his supporters are avoiding cognitive dissonance by justifying his climate denialism as a necessary sacrifice for greater changes to the face of American democracy, made possible through celebrity power.

Still, Whitmarch, O'Neill, and Lorenzoni (2013) argue climate change policy can benefit from a new political perspective because conventional politicians have focused mainly on displacing responsibility to the individual up to this point. They state, “Consequently there has tended to be a policy focus on voluntary lifestyle change encouraged through information” rather than on a policy level, and attribute this to politicians' fear of backlash if they admit to the truth of climate science (p.11). Berglez and Olausson (2013) approach political silence on climate change from another angle, claiming it has not been fear driving politicians to avoid climate change policy, but the indifference of their constituents lessening its political prioritization. They argue that people not only understand climate change but have shown a willingness to pinpoint examples of it in everyday life, such as changes in weather patterns or the disappearances of native animals in their towns. Consequently, this familiarity with the impacts of climate change has lessened its novelty and people react passively at the prospect of policy change because they feel like the damage has already been done, is not serious, and may even bring new benefits (p.64-65). Furthermore, Carvalho, et al condemn the “moralization of climate change” resulting from an individualistic approach, and similarly argue that this mistaken redirection of climate change as a moral issue for individuals to debate, rather than a political one contingent on collective action, is pushing traditionally non-political actors to address climate change through political channels (2017, p.128).

In tandem, these studies establish a similar communications problem, wherein the government is promoting a traditional, sender-receiver orientation. The government is acting as the supply side and is telling the receiver side, citizens, what to do about climate change, or discouraging reversed feedback by staying indifferent. However, as the latter study implies, a functional democracy requires that constituents attend to climate change by pushing their representatives to serve as the ear of the majority and instill sweeping environmental policy. The study ends with the suggestion that the politicization of climate change should be further researched in terms of “alternative positions of agency and identity through communication practices,” providing a useful jumping off point for a first assessment of the unique agency of celebrities to initiate necessary climate change policy, should they so choose (p.132).

**Existing Ecodocumentary Analysis**

Documentary filmmaking is a viable option for celebrities to engage with climate change policy because it offers a way for them to communicate their relatability through storytelling, while also demonstrating their expert knowledge on the subject at hand. Existing research on ecodocumentaries, referring to documentaries related to environmental issues, demonstrates the value of ongoing research regarding the genre's political influence, as various articles have assessed the persuasiveness of An Inconvenient Truth (2006) by analyzing Gore's rhetorical strategies.

Hammond and Breton (2014) analyze the persuasive power of three climate change films, The Day After Tomorrow (2004), The Age of Stupid (2009), and An Inconvenient Truth, through their appeals to the viewer's sense of loss. The authors claim that each film subscribes to affective appeals to nostalgia or a desire to change the future before more is lost. The collective move toward emotional narrative, rather than explicit political advocacy, informs a new, “postpolitical” understanding of climate change because the filmmakers meet their political agendas by invigorating viewers with emotional appeals (p.303). Referring to AIT specifically, the authors argue that Gore's emotional narratives are effective because they evoke regret over personal loss and grief for
events that could have been avoided, like his son's near-fatal car accident, and he projects these emotions onto a fear of loss pertaining to climate change. While Gore takes time to interweave his personal stories with details about his career, Hammond and Breton say Gore's power does not stem from his political past, but rather from the emotional invocation of personal agency he besets on the viewer, as he asks him or her to hold humanity accountable for anthropogenic climate change. The film benefits from appeals to loss, they argue, because the viewer is persuaded to feel personally responsible and capable of mobilizing a path to change, either to recoup what was lost, or prevent more from slipping away. While Hammond and Breton do not make this connection, their findings suggest one benefit and one consequence to Gore's narrative style. Appealing to loss is beneficial because it makes Gore personally relatable, thus celebritizing him to lessen the gap between his identity and the viewer's. However, loss is an emotion people necessarily experience alone, so it is arguably more effective for appeals to individuated action than collective action.

Hammond and Breton's study returns to the idea of a sociopolitical transition around climate change, moving from framing it as an individual responsibility to a collective one. Relatedly, Lin (2013) assesses AIT using the first-person hypothesis, which says that when people see media encouraging a message they agree with, they are more likely to believe the media has affected them more than others, creating a division between “you” and “them.” Thus, she argues that the behavioral messaging in AIT makes individual viewers perceive the film's call to action as more motivating for them than for other viewers. Lin implicitly shows how Gore's narrative style encourages individual action through an “us versus them” dynamic, rather than unifying people toward a common goal. Consequently, as Lin notes, AIT's call to action—studies on viewer responses to the film show that the film's message inspires social change, but this motivation dissipates a month after audiences watch the film (p.713). This seems reminiscent of Pease and Brewer's (2008) findings on Oprah's endorsement of Obama because she similarly inspired people to think about politics, but did not urge long-term attitudinal engagement.

Under Lin's theory, any documentary with agreeable messaging would seemingly suffer from the first-person hypothesis. However, Rosteck and Frentz's (2009) rhetorical analysis of AIT assesses Gore through the lens of a political jeremiad, framing Gore as the lone protagonist, on a personal quest to conquer nature and defeat climate change, a beast endangering his world. Consequently, the authors argue that Gore is portrayed as a hero at the center of a familiar character arc, and his storytelling encourages viewers to model their own behavior after him, by trying to conquer climate change alone. This promotion of individuality explains why a viewer may see Gore's call to action as one of personal responsibility, and fail to connect with climate change policy action in a collective way. Rosteck and Frentz argue that this behavioral modeling is ideologically persuasive, but do not comment whether it leads to tangible action. However, applying Lin's theory, Gore could have maintained viewers' motivation longer if he simply framed himself as a member of a larger political body and urged viewers to consider the importance of holism for climate change policy, rather than attempting to tackle it alone. Rosteck and Frentz conclude by saying that Gore is ultimately asking viewers to “be courageous,” an ambiguous call to action leaving viewers to feel as though climate change is their personal responsibility, but without a clear way to measure their success (p.16).

Altogether, research on AIT suggests Gore promotes individuated action to stop climate change, when to do so requires a coordinated, massive effort only attainable with communal compromise. While Gore differed from many of his political peers by calling attention to climate change, his behavior seemingly did not go far enough to challenge expectations about America's obligation to engage in climate change policy efforts on the world stage. Consequently, viewers lost motivation because they did not see their specific actions yielding a substantial impact (Lin, 2013, p.725). Yet, AIT is still a model for ecodocumentary discourse because it avoids markedly ineffective fear appeals, and instead opts for storytelling strategies designed to motivate the audience to change the status quo around climate change, rather than yield to it (Hammond & Breton, 2014, p. 303). It has yet to be determined whether AIT could inspire new ecodocumentarians to follow up with more effective calls to action and incorporate more messaging imbuing viewers with a sense of communal political responsibility, rather than individual accountability.

**Toward a Research Agenda**

In the twelve years since AIT was released, research has compared AIT to other films, but no one has contributed new research on ecodocumentaries produced since the end of Barack Obama's presidency. Obama's transition out of the White House marked the end of a political era of increased U.S. involvement in the global climate change conversation, particularly through entry into the Paris Climate Agreement alongside over 100 other countries, and the beginning of an era centered on regressing these initiatives and encouraging climate change denialism. There is seemingly no research aimed at discussing the convergence of celebrity influence and political power in climate change policy rhetoric, nor has there been any speculation into whether the ecodocumentary genre has used film to bolster the current social relevance of climate change, particularly considering recent reports coming from such entities as the United Nations, stressing a united, international front at the crux of climate change
mitigation before the point of no ecological return, which could be as soon as 2030 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018).

As Americans prepared for the 2016 presidential election, United Nations Messenger of Peace and Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio released Before the Flood (hereafter referred to as BTF), a climate change ecodocumentary he produced and narrated. The film premiered internationally on National Geographic and has since been available on Netflix. It follows DiCaprio’s journey around the world, as he investigates the impacts of climate change in places like Miami, India, and the South Pole, and speaks with a wide swath of experts, such as environmental conservationists, climatologists, economists, and politicians, before delivering an address as Messenger of Peace at the United Nations Paris Climate Accord in 2016. DiCaprio has worked quietly to promote and fund causes dedicated to ecosystem restoration and climate change mitigation through his namesake environmentalist foundation since 1998, and BTF marks his second of two ecodocumentaries, following The 11th Hour in 2007. This work, in conjunction with his role as Messenger of Peace and his Hollywood career, seemingly melds his celebrity status with his expertise on climate change and thus politicizes his visibility in the public eye.

This article is chiefly concerned with demonstrating that DiCaprio is not simply an advocate or activist. His fans are also his constituents because he has a seat at the table with other politicians and represents America there. Further, the timing of the film’s release is of critical importance because it was strategically premiered in October 2016, to put climate change on Americans’ minds just before the presidential election in November, and to emphasize America’s place on the world climate stage. DiCaprio’s narrative strategies and purposeful release of BTF in a politically charged cultural moment is important because it exists within the larger conflation of celebrity status and political power which was being exhibited during the election cycle, a moment which saw a celebrity politician literally ascend to presidency. Climate change had never emerged as a central topic in political debates, nor was it a substantial motivating force for Americans to engage in civic duty until 2016, despite tangentially related celebrity activism which encouraged Americans to engage in environmental compassion. Donald Trump, a celebrity politician, included climate change denialism within his campaign rhetoric, and BTF is arguably a direct response to this, coming from another politicized celebrity. In this moment, Americans seem willing to invest political capital into issues intertwined with the idea of celebrity, a form of power which has formerly been limited to the sphere of nonpolitical entertainment, rather than landmark policy change. Thus, DiCaprio is not an external commentator, but a direct political influence, and BTF demarcates his dual identity of celebrity and politician.

**EXPLANATION OF TEXTS**

*Before the Flood* exists in conjunction with DiCaprio’s other demonstrated initiatives to engage with policy as a celebrity, making him a useful social influencer to assess as a political force. He continues to influence policy in various ways, including through the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, which has funded environmentalist initiatives since 1998, his role as a United Nations Messenger of Peace since 2014, as well as his Hollywood career. Most recently, his role in *The Revenant* (2015) was filmed concurrently with production of BTF, and portions of the film appear in the documentary. Relatedly, upon winning the 2016 Academy Award for Best Actor for his role, DiCaprio used his allotted time to thank the Academy to instead impress upon the audience the urgency of climate change. He used an anecdote about how it affected the filming for *The Revenant*, saying “Our production needed to move to the southern tip of this planet just to be able to find snow. Climate change is real, it is happening right now. It is the most urgent threat facing our entire species, and we need to work collectively together and stop procrastinating” (Griffiths, 2016). Through his career, DiCaprio has forged a place in the same room with politicians and uses it to lead them in efforts to curb climate change and mitigate carbon emissions. Thus, rhetorical analysis of *Before the Flood* allows for an updated and pertinent analysis on how celebritized climate change politics exist in the current political moment, yielding useful insight into the larger sociopolitical tenor in the United States.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a rhetorical analysis approach to encapsulate a comprehensive critique of Leonardo DiCaprio’s choices as both a documentarian and political celebrity. In the broadest sense, Aristotle’s artistic proofs of logos, ethos, and pathos determine a speaker’s effectiveness by his or her ethical implementation of meaningful messaging, speaker credibility, and appeals to emotion. Relatedly, the politicization of celebrity is inherently a product of shifting discourse, regarding both the boundaries of ethical credibility between political and non-political actors, and the way in which audiences perceive the latter as credible based on emotional relatability. I argue DiCaprio establishes artistic proofs through strategic rhetorical devices that maintain his dual identity as a politician and celebrity throughout the film’s narrative, and allow both sides to converse with one another. Thus, multiple viewings of *Before the Flood*, with a critical focus on DiCaprio’s storytelling as a credible political figure, provide the basis for conclusions about climate change communication and the American sociopolitical imagination.
ANALYSIS

Establishing Earth as a common home

Before the Flood begins with art, specifically three, still close-ups of Hieronymus Bosch's painting, “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” underscored by foreboding music (Figure 1). The painting depicts humanity's fall from grace, presumably after eating from the tree of knowledge, into a state of apocalyptic despair. In the first still, there is a single owl looking out from its home with wide eyes, but unlike a typical bird's nest, it is situated within a pink, fleshy sphere with a set of wings, which makes it look as though he is resting within the womb of a larger bird. The wings of the nest are outstretched, as if it is about to take the owl into flight and reveal to it the scope of the universe. Then, the camera pans out to a shot of three people on horseback in the center of the frame, facing away from the viewer, and in the foreground, there are more people resembling babies, as they lay within a large cradle. The image fades into a different still of nude people sitting atop disturbing, house-like structures that resemble human flesh and markedly phallic shapes. Together, these images emphasize human reproductivity, birth, and child-rearing in the opening of the film, thus framing humanity as a family. The humans shown are never cropped to show them in isolation, but rather in groups, suggesting humanity's survival depends on collaboration and community. Likewise, destruction of the environment is the result of collective ignorance. The owl with large eyes in the first shot symbolizes wisdom and juxtaposes the humans in the last, as they are depicted with their backs turned to the viewer, disregarding the destruction around them in favor of blissful corruption.

DiCaprio as a family member

The three opening shots proceed by depicting human evolution chronologically, starting before the birth of humanity, with just an owl, into a time of hunter-gatherer communities on horseback, and finally landing at a closer resemblance to an industrial world, its face changed by human infrastructure. Relatedly, DiCaprio's entry into the film as the narrator begins with birth, as his voice underscores a black and white photo of his father holding him as an infant, in front of foliage, and he tells the audience that his father displayed Bosch's painting on the ceiling of DiCaprio's childhood bedroom, above his crib. Immediately, DiCaprio's role as the narrator is neither as a climate change expert or a solo, celebrity protagonist. He arrives as a child, his most vulnerable and innocent state, thus allowing him to show that he has not gotten to this point alone, but rather as the result of his family. It is significant to see DiCaprio with only his father at first because, having just shown an image of Bosch's painting that relates masculinity and phallic symbolism to environmental destruction, he reframes manhood, and more largely, mankind, into a symbol of a nurturer. DiCaprio implicitly deconstructs the gendered social norm of man as sole provider and protector, stemming from the idea of man as hunter, which has

![Figure 1](image-url) "The Garden of Earthly Delights" by Hieronymus Bosch
given way to a world resembling the third shot from Bosch’s painting. This hierarchy enables justification of environmental destruction as a means of providing for one’s family, so to shatter it suggests humanity as a body of equal individuals who share a common home. Relatively, the photo of DiCaprio with his father gives way to second photo, showing him distributed equally onto the shoulders of both of his parents, demonstrating this even-handed distribution of responsibility to protect future generations.

In the next shot, Bosch’s entire painting is shown. It is a triptych, displayed in three conjoined panels, and having told the audience he has loved the work since childhood, DiCaprio moves to discuss each panel. The middle panel is a depiction of “overpopulation, debauchery, and excess,” and the third panel is “nightmarish,” he says, especially for a child, since it shows “a twisted, decayed, burnt landscape. A paradise that has been degraded and destroyed.” Yet, DiCaprio is intimately familiar with the intricacies of this hellscape. The notion of a child exposed to such a painting and becoming so intimately familiar with it is meant to be disturbing; as the artwork fades backward into images of smoke plumes and rapid shots of car exhaust pipes, highways with light pollution, and cars sunken into flooded waters, DiCaprio nonverbally implies that the fiction in Bosch’s painting is now the reality for children growing up as humans destroy their world.

Establishing political credibility through social relatability

Ordinarily, a celebrity spokesperson or advocate may use his or her career as clout to persuade others, but DiCaprio’s family photos and emphasis on the most innocent time in his life makes him utterly human by displaying his vulnerability and dependence on others. From a political standpoint, DiCaprio’s self-humanization closes the mental gap between conceptions of Hollywood extravagance and those of a representative politician. Likewise, he guides the viewer to see climate change as an imminent threat to the safety of his or her home as opposed to far-away places outside the realm of imagination. He is not concerned with rushing into an urgent examination of facts, nor is the primary purpose of his narration an educational one because his normalcy allows him to establish credibility just the same. He claims his human imperfections, making him a worthy guide through treacherous territory, even as he continues to learn the terrain.

After Bosch’s painting, the opening credits roll and show “A Film by Leonardo DiCaprio,” but DiCaprio yields his own expertise to the voices of newscasters and scientists, backing the images of melting glaciers and wildfires. When his face is finally shown three minutes into the film, he assumes a political subjectivity at the United Nations for the Paris Climate Accord, but rather than cut straight to his speech as United Nations Messenger of Peace, he is shown in casual banter with South Korean Secretary General Ban–Ki Moon. DiCaprio does not bombard the viewer immediately with an aggressive call to collective action. Instead, he navigates carefully around his agenda and repeats the idea of Earth as humanity’s one and only home by asking Ki-Moon, “What issue do you think is the most important?” and showing Ki-Moon’s response: “If you consider the vastness of this universe, this planet Earth is just a small boat. If this boat is sinking, I think we will have to all sink together.” Here, DiCaprio is not the leader of the conversation, but he establishes credibility by showing the viewer how he consumes knowledge to gradually progress from a bystander into the role of an educated expert.

In the next shot, DiCaprio explicitly politicizes himself, as he stands before international delegates on behalf of the United States while giving his speech at the United Nations. Still, his credibility as a politician benefits from his willingness to yield to and democratically represent the voices of others. Rather than name himself as the Messenger of Peace first, the film cuts to a sound clip of the announcer at the agreement introducing him. As mentioned, DiCaprio’s role as a producer for the film means that this choice, to include the announcer, suggests a deliberate technique to downplay his own privilege as a celebrity to forge a political pathway. He declares, “I feel incredibly honored that they chose me,” and when he laments, “Try to have a conversation with anyone about climate change and they just...tune out,” he shows humility for the value of his voice, rather than forcing himself unto the audience as the pinnacle of expertise. Further, he is shown before the United Nations declaring, “I stand before you, not as an expert,” and self-identifying his imperfections as a politician, admitting that as “an actor, I pretend for a living. I play fictitious characters, often solving fictitious problems.” This is overlaid with DiCaprio’s earnest, narrative commentary, “I want to do everything I can to learn more about this issue,” even as his position at the podium speaks for itself in proving his demonstrated prowess. He continues, “If the U.N. really knew how...pessimistic I am, they may have picked the wrong guy,” again downplaying himself as the scene fades into footage from DiCaprio marching amongst protestors against the Dakota Access Pipeline. DiCaprio’s credibility lies in his genuineness and the relentless affirmation of his duality between celebrity and politicized expert. When he admits to his fame and social influence, it still humbles him, because he uses it as a means of suggesting that he, like most people, still has much to learn.

DiCaprio avoids centralizing himself or escalating his social status as a tool to elevate his knowledge unto a pedestal. In the next scene, a shot cuts to clips of various newscasters labeling DiCaprio as “an actor with zero years of scientific training” and denying climate change by claiming DiCaprio has simply fallen prey to a hoax,
which he offers up to the viewer without commentary. He repeatedly navigates away from a narrative of the omnipotent hero, and in its place, he emphasizes his pursuit of knowledge as an imperfect but impassioned member of a democracy. He sets his political and intellectual contributions up as a product made possible by a relationship between various and sometimes conflicting political, scientific, and social forces and figures. Ultimately, this contributes to the overarching theme of Earth as a shared home, and humanity as a complicated family necessitating communal effort to progress.

**Establishing credibility via celebrity status**

As the film progresses, DiCaprio transitions from humbly acknowledging his celebrity status to melding it with his political agency, while never releasing his grip on the ideas of egalitarianism and family. Further, he politicizes himself by constructing patriotism via environmentalism, as he situates climate change policy perpendicularly to raising the next generation of Americans.

After shots from his speech at the United Nations, the camera follows behind DiCaprio as he walks into the production office for *The Revenant* and greets the director, Alejandro Iñárritu, with a deep hug, as though they were brothers. *The Revenant* depicts the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the explosion of the fur-trapping industry, and the camera cuts to DiCaprio holding vision boards with images of trappers meant to inspire the film's aesthetic. As the camera focuses on images of men posing proudly next to enormous heaps of animal carcasses and displaying their weapons, DiCaprio describes the setting of the film as an era that “has a lot to do with men who are pillaging the natural world,” reintegrating subtle criticism of a patriarchal perspective of the environment which was first underscored in the opening photo with his own father. Likewise, the next shot cuts to show DiCaprio filming a fight scene in his role, playing one of the frontiersmen he has just described. He never offers a full description of his character in the film, so the snippet of dialogue he chooses to show in the documentary characterizes the viewer's entire understanding of how *The Revenant*, and DiCaprio’s larger career, relates to climate change policy. Thus, when his character, fighting off an enemy, simply yells, “come on, son,” DiCaprio implies that the storyline of the film extrapolates, in some sense, on the notion of Earth as a home and humanity as a family, harmed by mans' toxic desire for control.

DiCaprio continues with judicious appeals to familism, repeatedly downplaying his celebrity status and guiding us through the devastation of anthropogenic climate change through the perspective of a child. In the shot following his character’s battle scene, clips of him on the set flash as he narrates about his boyhood, specifically the countless weekends he spent at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum studying images of extinct species. Rather than righteousness condemning humanity's complicity, he shares in the same culpability he besets among the audience. He relives his visceral first reaction as a boy, self-aware of the effects of humans “[decimating] the ecosystem forever,” and his words leave the audience feeling similarly guilty about the emotional burden children today carry, knowing that their predecessors have left behind a barren landscape.

**Toward an explicit politicization**

The timing of *Before the Flood*’s release, just prior to the 2016 presidential election, was DiCaprio’s choice. On the film’s website, he says, “With the elections in the United States only a couple of months away, we sought to make sure that voters know this could be the last chance we have before it is too late to elect leaders who believe in science,” explicating the film’s argument that voting for people who advocate for climate policy is a patriotic act (RatPac Entertainment, 2016). Relatedly, DiCaprio’s establishment of a narrative centered on family has political value twofold. It induces pathos to bolster his credibility, and, moreover, unites humanity as one nation, bound together by an environment with no natural borders and divided only between those willing to protect it and those aimed at destroying it. The value of home and family remains key to modern political discourse depicting a nation as a homeland in need of defense from enemies, particularly in light of Donald Trump’s campaign to “Make America Great Again” and champion nationalism over globalization.

Following footage from *The Revenant*, DiCaprio begins interviewing climate change experts, starting with a political source: Michael Brune, the director of the Sierra Club. Brune outlines the economic justifications for continued use of fossil fuels, then describes how an increasing dependence on them is translating into “very risky, very extreme, new sources” as the scene cuts to a clip of mountaintop removal, blowing off the top of a mountain with explosives and producing plumes of rust-colored smoke from the blast. Similarly, in the next shot, a man in a small boat uses an oar to literally battle dangerous flames coming up from the water he sails on, presumably because fracking has leached oil into the water. Brune’s words and DiCaprio’s choices of imagery replicate scenes of modern warfare and are meant to strike fear into the American viewer. For Americans, warfare is typically portrayed as an event on foreign soil, but he depicts climate change as a domestic battle. Thus, the viewer perceives increased proximity to danger caused by climate change.

The use of war imagery pertaining to climate change defines home as that which is safe and comfortable, but under siege by enemies who threaten to turn it into something unlivable and alien, or so fantastical it
seems fictitious. The latter depiction relates back to Bosch's painting, as DiCaprio alludes to other fantastical depictions of destruction to shape his discourse regarding a definition of “home.” Bosch's painting is so horrifying and repulsive, it is hard to reconcile it as a depiction of Earth. Likewise, in the next scene, DiCaprio is on a helicopter tour of the Suncor oil sands, and as various shots flip between aerial of an endlessly clear cut, brown landscape, he remarks with surprise that it resembles “Mordor, from Lord of the Rings,” or something so unrecognizable as reality that he must turn to fantasy to understand it. Like Bosch's painting, DiCaprio frames the disturbing, nightmarish reality of human environmental impact from a child's perspective, leaving the viewer with a sense of guilt for the terror the next generation will feel when the comforts of their home are taken from them. DiCaprio is not a child, nor is his subjectivity immature. But in alluding to a sense of childlike curiosity as he looks out of the helicopter, DiCaprio emotionalizes the world future generations will be born into and imbues empathy for them because, unlike “Mordor” or “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” they will experience barrenness and chaos in reality, not in fiction.

In the first three images of the film, DiCaprio established art as a gateway to reality through “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” because the work's ability to comment effectively on reality allowed DiCaprio, an artist himself, to present himself as an expert from the perspective of an actor. Bosch's painting and Lord of the Rings both employ art as a portal to understand climate change as a political issue, validating DiCaprio's career as a performing artist as a credible means of approaching climate politics. Ultimately, he uses art's ability to reflect on the state of humankind to justify his politicization. Appropriately, DiCaprio fades out from shots of the oil sands and begins to recount the beginning of his political emergence, catalyzed by his Hollywood fame. A photo appears of him in the White House, meeting Vice President Al Gore, and immediately, Before the Flood is situated in the shadow of An Inconvenient Truth's intentions and urgency. The frame zooms in on a young DiCaprio sitting with Gore, and DiCaprio admits that when Gore first taught him about global warming, “it sounded like some nightmarish, science-fiction film,” again compartmentalizing climate change through artistic fantasy and validating art as a viable method to involve oneself in politics. Then, the frame cuts back to a close-up of DiCaprio in the helicopter flying over the warlike, oil sands. He is visibly older than he was in the photo with Gore, forcing the viewer to see him approaching the age Gore was at the height of his political career. Without words, his physical maturity suggests intellectual growth, and these contrasting images of war-torn landscapes, artistic fantasies, and political meetings culminate to authenticate DiCaprio's maturity and ability to undertake a political identity in a brief series of shots.

After pausing on his face in the helicopter, a sound bite from the year 2000 declares DiCaprio as the chairman of Earth Day in Washington, DC, when he was 25 years old and just entering a political advocacy role through his namesake foundation. It is followed by footage of him interviewing former President Bill Clinton on that day. Between Gore and Clinton, this is the second time in a short span within the documentary that DiCaprio is framed opposite a powerful, political figure. This pattern of mirroring him as a celebrity opposite a politician is a crucial foreshadowing device and hints at his intended duality, as it physically matches him with a political presence while the dialogue narrates his established interest in climate policy. Now, having established not only his connection to Gore as a politicized celebrity and ecodocumentarian, but also the president Gore ran alongside, he explains how his call to action diverges beneficially from theirs and marks a new era of climate change discourse.

The next scene with Clinton shows the former president, like Gore, remarking that climate change policy inaction will continue until individuals can directly feel the effects of climate change. The scene then cuts to a clip of DiCaprio on The Oprah Winfrey Show, demonstrating the advantages of simple, environmentally conscious actions, like changing your light bulb, as DiCaprio narrates solemnly, “Back then, everyone was focused on small, individual actions.” Another cut turns to a shot of arctic snow packs melting into the ocean, and he says “…but it’s pretty clear we’re way beyond that point now,” as the scene cuts to black. The visual break cues the viewer into DiCaprio's clear transition away from individuated efforts and toward large and collective action. This is the critical juncture of the film, as he removes himself from any remaining suspicion of the documentary as another iteration of AIT, or of himself as the same, young Hollywood personality from 2000, without a comprehensive grasp on climate change, and he moves forward, having thoroughly established his ability and expertise. For the remainder of the film, he works to reconcile the flaw in individuated climate change rhetoric that Rosteck and Frentz (2009), and Carvalho, et al. (2017) point out, by instigating a call for collective and coordinated policy change.

Rhetorical strategies bolstering DiCaprio’s call to action

In the clip of President Clinton from 2000, he remarked that climate change “seems sort of abstract now,” but DiCaprio meets with Mayor of Miami Beach Philip Levine, Secretary of State John Kerry, and finally, President Barack Obama, all of whom remark unequivocally on the urgency of the issue and the need for massive human action to halt and reverse its worst consequences. In the respective shots of DiCaprio with Gore and Clinton, DiCaprio has
chosen images that show him on a physically equal plane with the politician, eyes locked on one another. Similarly, the first frame with both DiCaprio and Mayor Levine shows their profiles, similarly seated with legs crossed, facing one another in Levine's office. Likewise, as soon as John Kerry walks into the room to meet DiCaprio, he greets DiCaprio with a hug and reminds him of the last time they hugged—the shot cuts sharply to a famous photo of Kerry and DiCaprio's profiles, smiling with noses touching, as if they are about to kiss. DiCaprio meets Obama last, and as he talks, DiCaprio is again shown facing the president, with the White House behind them. Neither the camera angle nor the order in which he interviews the men is coincidental. Their equal footing implies collaboration and teamwork, while also asserting DiCaprio's power, as he literally ascends in political status, moving from interviews with a mayor, to a secretary of state, to a president, and each time appearing physically equal to the politicians he speaks with. In a further use of nonverbal cues, the respective scenes with Kerry and Obama show them walking into the room, where DiCaprio is already present and waiting, thus implying that DiCaprio commands the space and his experts, Kerry and Obama, have sought him out. The greetings between the men before their respective interviews also call back to DiCaprio's appeals to family because Kerry and President Obama greet DiCaprio informally, as one would greet an old friend, and this show of personal liking validates DiCaprio's relatability to a politician, verifying his place in the room.

At the end of the film, DiCaprio arrives for his last excursion, but rather than a political or scientific expert, his final meeting is with Pope Francis at the Vatican. This employs an extensive show of narrative circularity because DiCaprio started the film with his own father, and ends both in Italy, one root of his patrilineage, and with a symbol of God, the most universal and powerful symbol of fatherhood. While the Pope is shown before a congregation, presenting his “Encyclical on the Environment,” in Italian, DiCaprio translates the Pope's line, “Our common home has fallen into serious disrepair,” appealing to family and calling for collective action once more. This interview bolsters DiCaprio's credentials for a final time. His status as a celebrity, alone, would not be enough to warrant a personal meeting with the Pope, so his ability to form a relationship with the Pope inextricably politicizes him, using climate change as the vessel. Still, he maintains duality when he returns to the United Nations in the next scene, since the viewer knows he has admitted that, above all else, he “pretends for a living.”

The Pope, a universally known figure, represents an alternative, but tangentially useful vantage point with which to understand the conflation of celebrity and politics through climate change. The Pope is a household name, too, and similarly he is politicized through his belief in climate change and his call for sweeping policy change to protect humanity. Appropriately, DiCaprio ends his meeting with the Pope by gifting him a book of Bosch's artwork, and presenting “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” thus retracing his steps back to the initial, artistic avenue DiCaprio took to celebritization, and onward to simultaneous politicization.

Before the Flood bears the burden of convincing people that climate change is a political issue days before a presidential election. Subsequently, the final moments of the film test the tethers DiCaprio has established rhetorically between celebrity influence, politicization, and human collectivity, as he pushes for a final, explicit call to action in the hopes of promoting his own political agenda. Bosch's painting intersperses with shots of DiCaprio entering the signing of the Paris Climate Accord and delivering the ending of his speech for the United Nations, impressing urgency upon the viewer as he declares, of Bosch's painting, “we’re in that second panel. What Bosch called, ‘Humankind Before the Flood.’” At once, the entire film culminates as a warning of humankind's teetering on the edge of apocalypse and a depiction of a battle against humans' fall into the third panel, “a planet that we collectively have left to ruin.” DiCaprio's excessive use of “we” in these final scenes cues the viewer, if they have otherwise been impervious to his filmic strategies, to understand him as the viewer's equal, not their superior, and climate change as a problem to be solved by “[controlling] what we do next. How we live our lives, what we consume, how we get involved, and how we use our vote to tell our leaders that we know the truth about climate change,” a truth established on understanding the world through Bosch's artistic depiction of it as a shared garden.

Simultaneously, DiCaprio frames himself as a political representative as his audience shifts, and he insists to the United Nations, “A massive change is required right now. One that leads to a new collective consciousness. A new collective evolution of the human race, inspired and enabled by a sense of urgency from all of you.” He appeals to family values one last time, saying, “You will either be lauded by future generations, or vilified by them,” and the frame rate increases exponentially. We just barely see DiCaprio shaking Gore's hand at the United Nations, which gives DiCaprio a final chance to demonstrate his validity alongside politicians with a vested interested in climate change policy before the film cuts to a black screen with the large white text, “IT IS UP TO ALL OF US.”

LIMITATIONS

Since the release of BTF, countless examples of climate change denialism from the current presidential administration have continued to emerge, and both celebritized politicians and politically influential celebrities have used rhetoric to frame climate change...
politically. It is possible to expand exponentially on the core argument with news stories, tweets, and speeches demonstrating Americans' acceptance of a celebritized political venue and its connection to climate change policy, and to connect those retrospectively to DiCaprio's rhetorical influence. However, the foremost aim of this study is to trace the trajectory leading up to DiCaprio's decision to release a pointed and partisan means of discourse designed to influence the politicization of climate change. Future research would benefit from further comparisons between DiCaprio and Before the Flood to other examples of related discourse released since the film's debut. Such research could expand on the nuanced extent to which celebritization of politics is the product of a continuing sociopolitical trend in the United States.

Additionally, this study analyzes one documentary from one country because the film's unique circumstances are not comparable to other existing ecodocumentaries, even if they were released between 2016 and the time of this study in 2018. DiCaprio's background as a recognizable face in Hollywood, an environmentalist with 20 years of dedicated service work, a United Nations Messenger of Peace, and the simultaneous producer and narrator in the film distinguishes him as a uniquely relevant model to extrapolate on the maximum degree of relation between celebrity and political power, and the intersection of this relationship with the reframing of climate change as a political issue for America to solve as a leader on the world stage. Relatedly, research on how sociopolitical expectations in other countries conceive of these intersections between celebrity status, political power, and the politicization of climate change would contextualize this study from the United States within the global conversation around climate change policy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzes the rhetorical importance of Leonardo DiCaprio's Before the Flood and assesses the extent to which DiCaprio serves as a political figure and, therefore, contributes to the politicization of climate change in the United States. The film is contextualized within existing research on climate change discourse, the ecodocumentary genre, and celebrity involvement in the political arena. Combined, findings on these topics suggest a basis for DiCaprio's rhetorical strategies to uniquely politicize both himself and climate change in four main ways. First, his rhetoric humanizes him and allows him to serve as a more effective, democratic representative for Americans. Second, he uses filmic strategies suggesting comparisons between himself and other powerful, U.S. politicians, such as Al Gore and Barack Obama. Third, he presents climate change as an issue to be solved through the collective power of a democracy, rather than on the individual level. Fourth, he depicts Earth as a collective home for humanity, and as a nation under threat by an enemy, the enemy being humanity's disregard of climate change.

Ultimately, DiCaprio explicitly recognizes the social influence afforded to him because of his celebrity status, and the viewer is not meant to completely separate him from it. Rather, he grapples with this by attributing his successes largely to the many people who have served as his family, empowering him over the course of his career with the tools to assert expert political credibility without isolating him from the people he seeks to represent. Further, the fact that his call to action did not include his name on a ballot in 2016 does not undermine the groundwork he has set forth by equating himself to elected officials. Should he choose, the strategies he has undertaken to portray himself as politically credible would arguably allow him to seek elected office on any level, and furthermore, his place in the room with international politicians and their recognition of his expertise informs how the conflation of celebrity status and political power is transforming what it means to be a politician. In summary, DiCaprio seeks to dismantle all boundaries between celebrities and politicians; politicians and constituents; celebrities and their fans; artists and scientists; men and women; and people of all nations. He underscores a new precedent for considering celebrities and politicians as one and the same. As the meaning of political identity continues to evolve in the face of globalism and climate change, the foundations DiCaprio lays forth for considering political credibility may enlighten future conceptions of democracy itself.
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