

How do you talk to a whole country about COVID-19? Use a GIF

February 28 2023, by Dr Siouxsie Wiles



Microbiologist and award-winning science communicator Siouxsie Wiles. Credit: Stephen Langdon, courtesy of Siouxsie Wiles

If you used or lurked on Twitter in March 2020, chances are you saw, or even shared, an animated GIF illustrating how our actions could help

"flatten" the COVID-19 "curve." The teal and orange GIF toggled between two scenarios. In the "whatever" approach, a person downplays the seriousness of COVID-19, which soon leads to health care capacity being overwhelmed. In the alternative "don't panic, but be careful" approach, a person is shown promoting such things as staying home when sick, which helps "flatten the curve" and keeps hospitals safe.

I'm one of the people behind that GIF.

It was inspired by a tweet I saw in late February 2020. Dr. Drew Harris, a [health policy](#) and population health educator, tweeted a modified version of a CDC graphic showing how protective measures could be used to slow daily cases of a disease. Harris had added a very important line to the CDC graphic: a measure of health care capacity. Accompanying the graphic was Harris's message that even just delaying cases of COVID-19 could mean "the difference between finding an ICU bed and ventilator or being treated in the parking lot tent."

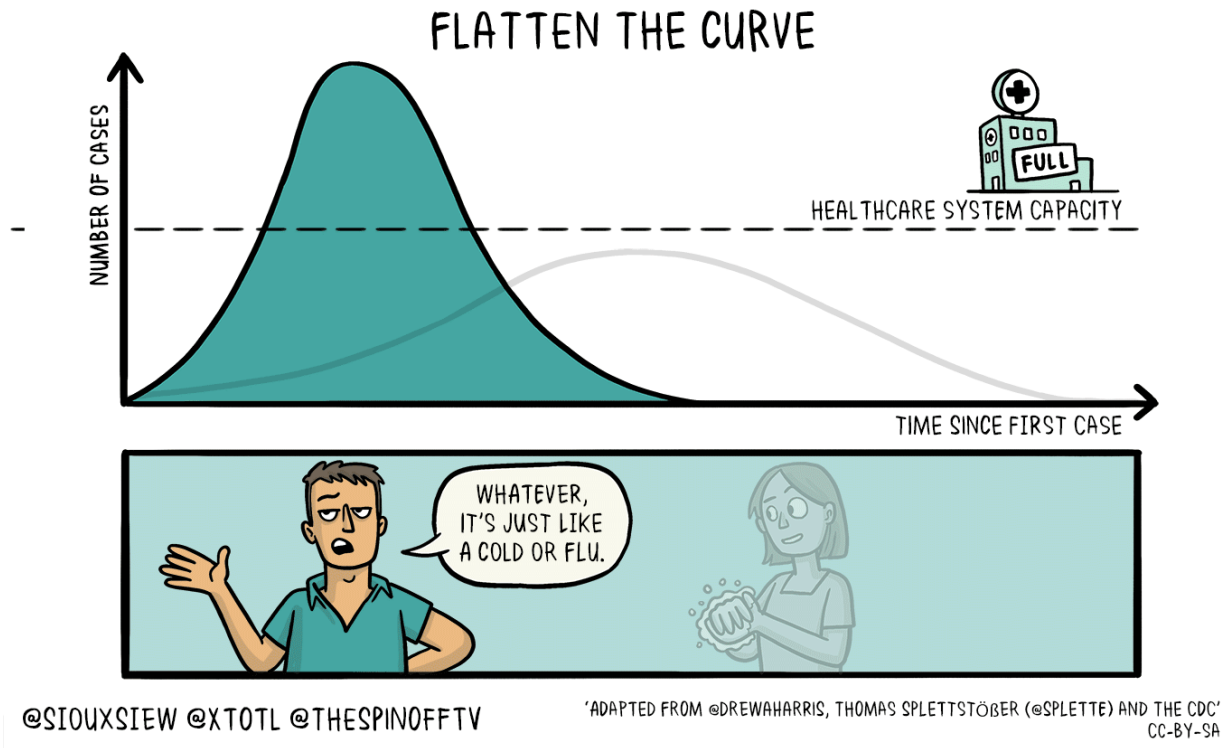
I immediately recognized Harris's tweet as a powerful message about the effectiveness of collective action. Our individual attitudes and actions mattered. We could all help flatten the curve. What we needed was to make Harris's message even more engaging and empowering.

A key collaboration

That's where award-winning cartoonist Toby Morris came in. We'd never met but I'd long admired his cartoons on political and [social issues](#). The editor of online media company The Spinoff introduced us and Toby quickly turned the CDC graphic and Harris's health care capacity line into what would become our award-winning GIF.

We released our "Flatten the Curve" GIF on Twitter on the 9 March 2020 under a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-4.0 license. I also wrote [an](#)

[article](#) to accompany the GIF for The Spinoff. Within days the GIF had gained millions of impressions on Twitter and had spread around the world.



Credit: Siouxsie Wiles & Toby Morris, via Spinoff.NZ

That GIF was the start of what has become the most impactful and productive collaboration of my career. The graphics Toby and I have collaborated on have been translated into multiple languages, and used by communities, politicians, and public health officials around the world, including the World Health Organization. Our article, [Going viral: A science communication collaboration in the era of COVID-19 and social media](#), documents our collaboration and offers advice to researchers and illustrators who wish to try their hand at science

communication.

When my co-authors and I sat down to write the article, I thought Toby and I had made about 50 graphics together. I was wrong. After counting them all up, there were more than 70. It's my fault our article includes a table that's more than three pages long. I wanted the article to stand as a record of our collaboration, alongside the story of how it started, and the thinking behind some of our most popular graphics.

Changing messages for a changing situation

In many ways, the article and our graphics tell the story of Aotearoa New Zealand's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. It began with the message to "Flatten the Curve" in early March 2020. This quickly pivoted to "Stop the Spread," also known as the elimination strategy, and how our own actions could "break the chain" of transmission.

When the country went into lockdown in late March 2020, Toby and I explained the importance of everyone staying in their "bubbles" and how it would likely take some weeks before we knew whether our lockdown was working. That's because of the virus' incubation period—the "lag" between people being exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and developing the symptoms of COVID-19. I didn't want people to start losing hope when they saw cases continuing to rise despite everyone but our essential workers being stuck at home. When Aotearoa New Zealand emerged from that lockdown, we turned our attention to explain how the contact tracing apps worked.

In mid-to-late 2020, as governments around the world began making vaccine prepurchase agreements, Toby and I moved on to explaining the different strategies to make a vaccine and the concept of "community immunity"—that vaccines aren't just an individual good; high vaccination levels can also help protect the people in our communities

who can't be vaccinated themselves. Then when the New Zealand government announced they would be rolling out the Pfizer mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, we created graphics explaining how mRNA vaccines work and how they and other COVID-19 vaccines had been developed so quickly.

When more infectious and immune evasive variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus began emerging, we turned our attention to explain these variants of concern, using the analogy of a bicycle lock to illustrate the link between genes and proteins.

Finally, in late 2021, when Aotearoa New Zealand stopped pursuing elimination, Toby and I produced graphics explaining what influences the risk of catching and spreading COVID-19. We also updated our graphics on masking, and with rapid antigen tests now being widely used, showed people how to correctly swab their noses.

Looking to the future

While Toby and I have mostly returned to working on other things, we have produced a couple of non-COVID-19 related graphics. One was about Mpox (formerly known as monkeypox), a viral disease which caused a global outbreak in 2022. We've also tackled antibiotic resistance, which is one of the areas I research.

Toby and I are often asked what made our collaboration so successful. In our article, we discuss what's worked for us and provide some tips for researchers and illustrators who want to give science communication a go. The Spinoff and the New Zealand Science Media Center have also produced an illustrated guide to help researchers navigate the process of commissioning an illustrator.

Given the ongoing need for engaging, accessible, and effective science

and public health messaging, the more researchers and illustrators that collaborate the better as far as I'm concerned.

The paper exploring this collaboration is published in the journal *Frontiers in Communication*.

More information: Siouxsie Wiles et al, Going viral: A science communication collaboration in the era of COVID-19 and social media, *Frontiers in Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2023.1087120](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1087120)

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