

Keep calm and make GIFs: Communicating Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand

Covid-19 is arguably the most VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) global situation since World War II. Two years after the pandemic began, the situation was as volatile and unpredictable as ever before. As Veil et al. (2008: 31) stated, ‘The literature on crisis and disaster has always emphasized the role of communication’, and this pandemic has illustrated the importance of clear communication in helping people navigate VUCA situations. Countries whose leaders bluffed their way through the early stages of the pandemic, ignoring the science, have seen disastrous consequences (Paz 2020; Philips 2021), while countries where the leaders followed the scientific evidence, and transparently communicated the risk and required response to their public during the first half of 2020, minimized the damage (Frieden 2021; Hyland et al. 2021). The Aotearoa New Zealand government’s Covid-19 response was lauded locally and internationally, highlighting communication as the key to success in eliminating the virus in the first six months of the pandemic (Frieden 2021; Greive 2020; McGuire et al. 2020; Provoke Media 2020).

While the initial government response in Aotearoa New Zealand has been shown deserving of this praise, there were some contributions to the country’s communications effort that have been overlooked by the academic community. In one instance, the collaboration of microbiologist and science communicator, Dr Siouxsie Wiles, and illustrator and creative director, Toby Morris, created social-media-friendly communications that translated the complex science of Covid-19 into easy-to-understand GIFs; short for Graphic Interchange Formats, which can produce brief looping animations (Cyber Definitions n.d.). This research asks what characteristics of the Morris and Wiles collaboration helped people navigate the Covid-19 VUCA situation. This study also asks whether a counter-VUCA model might exist that is appropriate for a public communication context; one that helps mitigate the common pitfall of answering a complex situation with confusing messages. It goes on to highlight how the findings from this study support the model of VUCA Prime as a way for communicators to navigate a VUCA situation.

Background: VUCA and Covid

Since the start of the pandemic, much has been written about Covid-19 and its significance for different scholarly fields. The implications of Covid-19 as a VUCA state have been explored in education (Hadar et al. 2020; Myung and Kimner 2020), organizational development (Ey, Berka and Doyle 2021), music (Tolmie 2020), leadership studies (Gottfredson 2021; Worley and Jules 2020) and healthcare (Maini et al. 2020; Strumberg and Martin 2020). While the nature of the VUCA impacts defined in these studies varies from larger existential issues arising from Covid-19 to role-specific experiences in the day-to-day, a key theme of the literature is the application of adaptability, versatility, or flexibility for combatting the drawn-out VUCA state that the pandemic has presented.

Several attempts have also been made at creating an acronym to counter VUCA. VUCA Prime, created by futurist Bob Johansen (2007), is one of the earliest counter-models to VUCA and is widely referenced by business and leadership practitioners (Clayton 2019; Clio n.d.; di Bartolomeo 2019; O’Shea 2017). VUCA 2.0, coined by Bill George (2017), has also gained a significant amount of traction (Confederation of Indian Industry 2019; Mitchell 2021; Tidwell 2020). Some have conflated the two, using George’s title with Johansen’s descriptors (Faecks 2021; Yoder-Wise 2021) or using some of the terms interchangeably (VUCA World n.d.).

VUCA	VUCA Prime (Johansen 2007)	VUCA 2.0 (George 2017)
Volatile	Vision	Vision
Uncertain	Understanding	Understanding
Complex	Clarity	Courage
Ambiguous	Agility	Adaptability

Table 1: VUCA and counter-VUCA models.

Both VUCA 2.0 and VUCA Prime were created for business leadership purposes, as Johansen (2007), and later George (2017), were looking to combat the increasingly VUCA state of the modern business world. This study came to focus on Johansen’s (2007: 177) VUCA Prime and his ‘rules of thumb to follow as you figure out how to make your peace with your own VUCA world’. Johansen (2007) argued for a compelling vision, understanding based on trust, a clear, well-framed message and the agility to let the events of the VUCA world shape actions and outcomes. Each of the four terms of VUCA Prime will be discussed in more depth throughout the course of this article.

New Zealand, Public Health Crisis and Communication

Since Aotearoa New Zealand successfully eliminated the first wave of Covid-19 from the community in May 2020 (Cousins 2020), Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her government’s communications response have been praised, studied, and critiqued in both the media and academic literature. A local news website editor (Greive 2020) and senior academic (Wilson 2020) both called the communication campaign a masterclass and two of the country’s leading epidemiologists deigned her leadership ‘brilliant, decisive and humane’ (Baker and Wilson 2020: para. 10). Aotearoa New Zealand topped various ranking lists of countries throughout 2020 and early 2021 for its pandemic response (Bloomberg 2021; Lowy Institute 2021; Provoke Media 2020) and public support for the strict measures increased during the initial lockdown period (Manhire 2020).

Beattie and Priestley’s (2021) thematic analysis of the daily media briefings holds Ardern up as an exemplar of crisis communication, while Craig (2021) argued her regular calls for kindness from New Zealanders towards each other was a useful tool in controlling her positive political

image. McGuire et al. (2020) analyzed a wide range of media texts, concluding that Ardern's leadership persona evolved throughout the period of the initial lockdown from a strong, decisive leader to a fellow human going through the same lockdown experience; the latter emphasized by her use of Facebook Live from a home setting.

A part of the success of Aotearoa New Zealand's communication campaign during this initial wave was due to Ardern's ability to lean on experts and rely on their work when and where appropriate. Jamieson (2020) praised the speed with which the Ardern government acted, and he is one who recognized the science communicators who aided the government's response. He fleetingly mentioned Toby Morris and Dr Siouxsie Wiles, as did Freeman et al. (2021) in their study of the implications of Covid-19 on children and families in New Zealand and the Pacific. What is lacking in the literature is a study of how the work created by Morris and Wiles connected with the people in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. Kearns and Kearns (2020) argued comics should play a significant role in communicating through the pandemic due to their proven history in delivering vital health information. They asserted that the storytelling of comics lends itself to better understanding and sense-making when compared to the knowledge-deficit model common to the communication of science.

Methodology

This study contextualizes the collaboration of cartoonist Toby Morris and microbiologist and science communicator Siouxsie Wiles within a VUCA framework. The effectiveness of two key media texts created by Morris and Wiles was analyzed against the theory of advertising creativity. This theory came to the fore due to the researcher's own professional and academic background, as well as Toby Morris' professional history in the advertising industry. Advertising theory is also applicable in a VUCA context due to the shared focus on clarity of message (Bernbach 1989; Camp 2008; Sullivan 2016). The analysis of two of their most widely shared GIFs is summarized in the following sections.

The second half of the analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with Morris and Wiles. Conversational in style, these interviews were designed to shed light on Morris and Wiles' methods, processes, and intentions in creating the work, specifically the two GIFs mentioned. For the purposes of this study, Toby Morris and Siouxsie Wiles were interviewed separately, once each via Zoom video-conferencing for a duration of circa 90 mins. Deploying a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), these semi-structured interviews were coded thematically using NVivo analysis software. The key terms of VUCA were included as keywords while other themes and keywords were identified inductively throughout the coding process. Subsequently, the corresponding terms of VUCA Prime and VUCA 2.0 were applied as keywords and coded against the interview data. Further iterations of coding ensured it was thematically appropriate and methodologically sound, with minor and irrelevant themes being discarded throughout the process. VUCA 2.0 was later eliminated from the analysis due to its similarities to VUCA Prime and the lack of occurrences of the VUCA 2.0 term *courage* in the early stages of coding. VUCA and VUCA Prime terms were then matrix-coded against

themselves, each other, and previously identified themes to identify patterns and correlations. Findings focus on the two keywords with the most references (*accessibility* and *values*) and the terms derived from VUCA and VUCA Prime.

Analysis

This study focuses on the collaboration between Dr Siouxsie Wiles and Toby Morris. Dr Wiles had been writing articles for the New Zealand online magazine and new website, The Spinoff, about Covid-19 since January 2020 (The Spinoff n.d.). Wiles began working with Morris in March 2020 as the first cases of Covid-19 reached Aotearoa New Zealand. The following analysis sheds some light on how the collaboration formed and analyzes two of the key Covid-19 communications they created.

A counter-VUCA collaboration

Johansen (2007: 177) stated the importance of *vision*, ‘In the face of volatility, people need a sense of direction, and leaders have a chance to provide intentionality and purpose’. Dr Siouxsie Wiles took it upon herself in the early stages of the pandemic to write and share informative articles about the virus (Wiles et al. 2022).

When Dr Drew Harris, a population health analyst at Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, published his version of the flatten-the-curve graph (Harris 2020), Wiles understood what he was trying to communicate and contemplated how she could improve it. She contacted The Spinoff to see if Toby Morris was available to illustrate a new version of the Drew Harris graph. Morris, who had been following Wiles’ articles, dropped his other work to contribute to the pandemic response. Consistent with the VUCA pressures, the gravity and urgency of the pandemic meant that within an hour of Wiles’ request, she was on the phone with Morris planning a revised version of the flatten-the-curve graph (Morris 2021; Wiles 2021b). By the next morning, their flatten-the-curve GIF was live on The Spinoff and was rapidly shared across social media.

Even in the very first stages of collaboration, the four elements of VUCA Prime were present. Wiles had a clear *vision* of how Morris could aid the *clarity* of her communications. Their adaptation would increase the *understanding* of the audience it reached and both Morris and The Spinoff were *adaptable* enough to bring her vision to life. While the last two sentences may seem a little heavy-handed, the coding of Morris and Wiles interviews later in this study highlights how appropriate the VUCA Prime model is to this case study. The VUCA pressures of mounting Covid-19 cases, constant updates on scientific information and, later, new variants and vaccines, nurtured the necessary conditions for Morris and Wiles to continue creating their communications.

GIF #1 - Flatten the Curve

The Flatten the Curve GIF (Figure 1), which started the Morris and Wiles collaboration, clearly set itself apart from other Covid-related information. However, it is important to reiterate that this GIF did not present any information that was not readily available online at the time. Instead, it was a reinterpretation of the Drew Harris graph, itself an adaptation of a CDC graph (Figure 2). The crucial difference with Harris’ adaptation was the addition of a line representing the

capacity of the healthcare system. The idea he intended to get across was that, should the virus be allowed to spread unchecked, the healthcare system would be overwhelmed with Covid-19 cases and unable to provide any of its other vital services (Roberts 2020). Morris and Wiles' adaptation made the graph easier to understand and actionable for the public, adding the proactive steps people could take to help flatten the curve and slow the spread of Covid-19. In the Morris and Wiles GIF, the two illustrated characters took on two possible counter viewpoints, the repercussions of each character's actions visualized as the image frames changed. The female character who is taking the cautious/advised approach showed the steps that the public could take to help flatten the curve. Encouraging personal responsibility was a key element of the Morris and Wiles collaboration. They were not just giving people a more aesthetically pleasing and simpler way of digesting Covid-19 data, their vision was always to show people what they themselves could do with the information (Morris 2021; Wiles 2021a; Wiles 2021b). The work they produced for this GIF, and for all their future collaborations, took the stance of not only explaining the science as simply and clearly as possible but showing how individuals could improve the situation for themselves and their community.

[insert Figure 1 here: files Fig1_Page_1.jpg and Fig1_Page_2.jpg]

Figure 1: Toby Morris and Siouxsie Wiles, *Flatten the curve*, 2020. GIF 14.05 x 25.07 cm, The Spinoff. Released under a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA licence; reprinted with permission.

[insert Figure 2 here: file Fig2.jpg]

Figure 2: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.), 2007. *Interim pre-pandemic planning guidance: community strategy for pandemic influenza mitigation in the United States: early, targeted, layered use of nonpharmaceutical interventions*; © CDC.

Wiles was very clear about her intentions when she first started writing articles on Covid-19 and sharing them through social media; she wanted as many New Zealanders as possible to understand what was happening and what they could do to affect the course of the pandemic (Wiles 2021b). The built-in feedback mechanism of social media gave Wiles the ability to clarify her stance and prepare her next article based on the public conversation on these channels. This approach is somewhat counter to the scientific deficit model; the idea that a gap in knowledge can be filled by one-way communication (Ahteensuu 2012; Ishihara-Shineha 2017). This model prevails in science internationally even though it has been widely criticized (Katsikopoulos 2021).

Wiles' ability to reach people where they were was amplified through her collaboration with Morris. His illustrations made her work even more accessible. Morris stated, 'We wanted people to take some responsibility and take some ownership [...] take it seriously and make good choices' (Morris 2021). By translating, rather than solely presenting scientific information to the public, and by showing the reader the two extreme examples of best and worst behaviour, they purposefully interpreted the data and made it relevant and applicable for the intended audiences.

The following quote from the pioneer of modern advertising, Bill Bernbach (1989), highlights one challenge of science communication during VUCA times and provides a rationale for the success of Morris and Wiles work.

There are two attitudes you can wear: that of cold arithmetic or that of warm human persuasion. I will urge the latter on you. For there is evidence that in the field of communications, the more intellectual you grow, the more you lose the great intuitive skills that make for the greatest persuasion - the things that really touch and move people. (Bernbach 1989: 8)

Morris' visual communication, combined with Wiles' vision, set this communication apart from its predecessors by using 'warm human persuasion' (Bernbach 1989: 8). The use of colour, cartoon-style characters and the animated nature of the GIF meant that Morris and Wiles' message was available to people on social media channels and in the language of social media. In contrast, the scientific graphs permeating social media at the time fit into the 'cold arithmetic' Bernbach (1989: 8) spoke of as the alternative. These other graphics often took the form of growing line graphs and exponential curves (Catanzaro 2020; Zaiets et al. 2020) showing the cold hard science of the virus but not showing people how they could act. Through a VUCA Prime lens, when compared to the original CDC flatten the curve graph, or the Drew Harris reinterpretation, Morris and Wiles' version was much easier to comprehend and associate with. Morris' addition of a small cartoon hospital with a full sign added clarity to Harris' capacity line and highlighted the point he was trying to make: with an unchecked spread of the virus, the healthcare system would be quickly overwhelmed.

The public who interacted with the Morris and Wiles visualization required fewer steps to read and interpret the message than they did for the original graphs, as the GIF is laid out in a way that makes for fast content processing. The illustrated graph is a clear example of Sullivan's (2016: 105) 'quick-get'; the concept that the most important aspect of communicating an idea is how fast you can get it across to your audience. This thought was reiterated by Johansen (2007: 178) himself when he stated, 'Framing a message is critical... Framing is a first step toward clarity, and clarity is so important for people who have exceeded their own personal thresholds for complexity and understanding'. Especially when life-saving information is coming from multiple sources, and the science is constantly being updated; an urgent VUCA situation.

The preceding shows how Morris and Wiles' Flatten the Curve GIF unknowingly utilized components of the VUCA Prime model. Not only did the simplicity and accessibility of the cartoon version of the graph add *clarity*, it also gave the public of Aotearoa New Zealand a *vision* of how they could take action to combat the virus and avoid the worst-case scenario. They were giving the public the opportunity to do what Johansen (2007) suggested when he created VUCA Prime. The full title of Johansen's (2007) work, *Get There Early: Sensing the Future to Compete in the Present*, is an appropriate analogy for how Wiles approached getting information to the general public. Flatten the Curve, and subsequently Break the Chain, were what Johansen would call getting there early to be able to adapt to the VUCA situation as it changes.

GIF #2 - Break the Chain

The Break the Chain GIF (Figure 3) was created a couple of weeks into the Morris and Wiles collaboration and is the one that ‘went doolally’ (Wiles 2021b). The motion of the GIF and simplicity of the story once again follow the premise of the ‘quick-get’ (Sullivan 2016). The three Rs of persuasive writing, as proposed by Camp (2008: 13), state ‘Remember the Reader and the Result’. While the Break the Chain GIF is an animation, it can be categorized as persuasive writing, it was a clear example of communication where the reader and the result were front of mind. Unsurprisingly, the data of this study reiterated how much Morris and Wiles had their readers in mind as they created the work (Morris 2021; Wiles 2021b). For those in Aotearoa New Zealand looking for guidance on how to behave as the threat of the virus approached, these GIFs clearly illustrated the repercussions of the choices they would make in the coming days and weeks.

[insert Figure 3 here: files Fig3_Page_1.jpg and Fig3_Page_2.jpg]

Figure 3: Toby Morris and Siouxsie Wiles, *Break the chain*, 2020. GIF. 1360 x 856 px. The Spinoff. Released under a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA; reprinted with permission.

VUCA vs VUCA Prime

For the purposes of this study, Toby Morris and Siouxsie Wiles were interviewed separately about the aforementioned GIFs and their wider collaboration. These semi-structured interviews were coded thematically using NVivo analysis software. The key terms of both VUCA and VUCA Prime were included as nodes while other key and descendent nodes were identified inductively throughout the coding process.

It is important to reiterate that a VUCA framework had not been established for this research at the time these interviews took place. The questioning in the semi-structured interviews was to investigate the characteristics and intentions of their collaboration with the aim of determining what made their communications so successful and engaging. The study was not intended to encourage VUCA-related coding. However, subsequent coding using VUCA terms revealed how relevant the VUCA and VUCA Prime frameworks are to this case.

Node	References	Node	References
VUCA	32	VUCA Prime	60
Volatility	20	Vision	21
Uncertainty	9	Understanding	18
Complexity	13	Clarity	18
Ambiguity	2	Agility	12

Table 2: VUCA and VUCA Prime references in original data.

With 60 unique references, VUCA Prime far outstripped any individual coded keyword and had nearly double the unique references of VUCA terms (Fig. 6). Of the VUCA Prime terms, *vision* appeared most commonly with 21 references, many relating to Wiles' clear focus and goals when communicating the science of the pandemic. Johansen (2007) spoke of the clarity of intent and direction of *vision* as a part of his VUCA Prime model. He also stated that 'vision seeks to create a future' (Johansen 2007: 58), which speaks directly to Wiles' intentions with respect to her writing about the pandemic in the first instance and her subsequent collaboration with Morris. Throughout the interviews with Morris and Wiles, it became clear that Wiles had a vision of New Zealanders working together to get through the pandemic, and this collaboration was a part of how she could help facilitate that future for herself and the rest of the country.

A really deliberate thing was just – people need to understand what's happening. And they need to do that calmly so that we can get through this together. (Wiles 2021b)

She said to me the reason I wanted to ask you to work on it was that you are good at making things... putting the audience into things and making it clear why we should care about something. (Morris 2021)

I was right to stick with my guns. I was right to learn those skills [science communication]. I was right to take that stuff seriously because when you're in a public health crisis, it turns out that the skills that I had developed over all those years and that expert knowledge of infectious diseases were really, really important. (Wiles 2021b)

Accessibility

Accessibility appeared regularly throughout both of the interviews. The references coded under *accessibility* can be split into three key themes. The first was about helping people understand the message they were trying to convey; *accessibility of understanding*.

I'm trying to take complicated and sort of niggly issues, or important issues, that people sort of should be talking about and should be thinking about, but it can sometimes be kind of daunting and put those into accessible or approachable, sort of formats. (Morris 2021)

We need to phrase things in a way that's understandable and accessible to the broadest possible audience. (Morris 2021)

The graphics are being able to then distil and, here's the main point. And if you don't have any time to do anything else, this is what we need you to take away. (Wiles 2021b)

There's a little hospital with a full sign on it which is very, very, very obvious but I felt like it's just one of those things that saved somebody two seconds of thinking. (Morris 2021)

Saving somebody two seconds of thinking is a good analogy for Morris and Wiles' intentions. Aware that people were frantically looking for guidance during this VUCA time, they wanted to help people understand what they were trying to get across and make smart decisions as quickly as possible.

The second theme that arose from *accessibility* was about how easily the public was able to access the work in whatever media channel they were using; *ease of access*. Using graphics to highlight key components of their topics was a cornerstone of the Morris-Wiles collaboration. Wiles writing was always available to supplement the graphics and it gave readers a more in-depth understanding should they want it, while Morris' graphics communicated key information in GIF format so that it could be grasped while scrolling through a social media feed. Morris was acutely aware of where their audience was, what they were doing under these VUCA circumstances, and where they were most likely to see and engage with their content.

We're sort of working under the assumption that also people are just sitting at home frantically sort of doom-scrolling. Just, sort of, staying on social media necessarily. That if we can get across as much of the message as we can, without people even leaving that one post, you know, that we can get it in one Twitter post or one Facebook post. (Morris 2021)

Reaching people on the social media platforms they were interacting with and sharing information about the pandemic was an integral part of the collaboration and something that was a part of Wiles' vision when she initiated the collaboration with Morris.

The third and final theme revolves around the access they gave other communicators to their work; *professional accessibility*. Both Morris and Wiles emphasized that their graphics were published under a creative commons license, which meant they could be shared and repurposed without explicit permission as long as the authors were credited. This gave communicators around the world access to their work as a tool in their own communication campaigns against Covid-19. Wiles identifies herself as a strong proponent of open-access research (Open Access Australia 2020; Wiles 2021c) and wanted to extend the same principle to their creative output.

It was a very, from our perspective, was a very explicit, 'You're welcome to take this. So, take it'. (Wiles 2021b)

Usually, the instinct was to be quite protective of [my work] but whereas Siouxsie's more, you know, her sort of outward-looking science focus, kind of thing, was like, 'the more people that hear this the better.' (Morris 2021)

Values, expertise and personal responsibility

The reference that appeared the most after accessibility was *values*. Reflecting on the careers of Morris and Wiles, on some of their own explanations throughout the interviews, and on the key

messaging from Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Aotearoa New Zealand government during the same phase of the pandemic, it becomes clear how and why *values* featured so heavily in their interviews. Morris and Wiles both spoke of their shared values, and how each of them had made an impression on the other before they even thought of working together. Themes of *mutual professional respect* and *shared values* emerged; the two were seldom mutually exclusive.

Morris and Wiles are both experts in their fields. Morris is one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most awarded commercial artists. He has won accolades at the New Zealand News Publishers' Association Awards every year since 2016 (1News 2020; Bagge 2016; Newshub 2019; NPA n.d.; Spinoff 2018; StopPress 2017) and was the 2021 winner of Te Puiaki Whakapā Pūtaiao Science Communication prize (Prime Minister's Science Prizes n.d.b). His non-fiction comic strip work for Radio New Zealand and The Spinoff, under the banners of *The Pencilsword* and *The Side Eye* respectively, has focused on social issues affecting New Zealanders. He said himself during this interview that he is aware that a part of the reason he was approached by Wiles was his ability to take 'complicated and sort of niggly issues' (Morris 2021) people should be thinking about and make them less confronting and more accessible. When asked about how this collaboration differed from his previous work, he used the words 'public duty' (Morris 2021). In Morris' mind, this collaboration was important work that had to be done.

Wiles' story is similar. Her journey to science communication came about as a call to the public good while working in the UK. After winning a significant prize for her research on ethical animal use in science in 2005, she was prompted by the sponsoring organization to share her findings with the wider public. The importance of communicating her research is something that has stuck with her, with Wiles being awarded repeatedly for science communication (Prime Minister's Science Prizes n.d.a; Maurice Wilkins Centre 2013), she was appointed a Member of the NZ Order of Merit in 2019 and won New Zealander of the Year 2021 for her science communication efforts during the pandemic (New Zealander of the Year Awards n.d.). She expressed that she firmly believes, as a scientist working at a taxpayer-funded institution, that 'the public have a right to know what we do with their money' (Wiles 2021b). Her work in Aotearoa New Zealand has been guided by that same philosophy; by 'learning how to communicate in different ways to different people' (Wiles 2021b).

When the coronavirus pandemic began, Wiles was reminded of a hypothetical apocalyptic influenza discussion she facilitated on the remote Great Barrier Island off the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. There sociologist Professor David Johnstone, from Massey University, explained how it would be the communities that 'work together and come together and don't leave anyone behind' (Wiles 2021b) who stood the best chance of surviving. This stuck with her and Wiles deliberately aimed at keeping the community at the heart of all her communications about Covid-19. She saw her collaboration with Morris as an embodiment of their shared values, the goal of which was to inform as many New Zealanders as possible so they could keep themselves and others safe from the virus. Upon analysis, it became clear that the theme of personal responsibility that ran through their communications during the pandemic was also

something that drove them on a personal level; both felt the responsibility to use their professional skills to benefit the community.

In spreading their message as far and wide as they could, Wiles' values came to the fore in another way. **It was she who pushed to release their work under the Creative Commons license to get it to as many people as possible.** 'It was about sharing and the message being really important' (Wiles 2021b). The message Morris and Wiles were trying to get across was similar to the 'be kind' and 'team of 5 million' messages from Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Craig (2021: 302) suggested Ardern's call to kindness was a form of political control, a way of maintaining a carefully constructed political image, 'particularly when it was supported by competent management of the crisis'. While Craig's reasoning is clearly outlined regarding the political discourse, there is more to be said about why kindness was 'appropriate given the nature of the infection that threatened the population' (2021: 302). The values of kindness and community have been important in helping the public of Aotearoa New Zealand navigate the Covid-19 crisis. While some of Ardern's stock phrases have become clichés in the lexicon of Aotearoa New Zealand's Covid response, they were key in the success of the government communication 'masterclass' (Grieve 2020; Wilson 2020). The same could be said of the Morris and Wiles collaboration. All of their work was created to give the public agency over their own actions and to put their community first, a goal shared by Wiles, Morris, and Ardern.

Discussion

Summary of findings: A proof of VUCA Prime?

The collaboration of Morris and Wiles and its 'simple and human approach to a once in a lifetime problem' (Best Awards 2020: judge's comment) greatly aided the public as they navigated the early stages of the pandemic, helping them understand what was happening. Gladwin (2020) highlighted the affordance of digital storytelling for creating empathy and social momentum for environmental causes. In a similar way, the Morris-Wiles collaboration has 'affect[ed] change through empathy-driven media texts' (Gladwin 2020: 285).

When analyzed through a VUCA framework, the Morris-Wiles collaboration reveals the strength of Johansen's (2007) VUCA Prime as a counter-model to VUCA in a communication context.

Vision

Wiles had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve with her communication of the pandemic from the outset. The resulting work of her and Morris' collaboration also gave readers a clear vision of how their actions could impact the course of the pandemic.

Understanding

Similarly, Wiles knew that her understanding of the science could aid the understanding of New Zealanders facing a VUCA threat.

Clarity

The importance of clarity featured heavily throughout the interviews. When Morris won the 2021 Prime Minister's Prize for Science Communication he stated that 'clarity is the number one goal' (Royal Society 2022).

Agility

Morris and Wiles took an agile approach to working throughout the pandemic, updating their message as the science and best advice around the virus changed, as well as putting their other work commitments on hold to contribute to the pandemic response.

Agility, Accessibility or Clarity?

This study shows that the Morris and Wiles collaboration fits into the VUCA Prime model. The data also make an argument for an amendment when it comes to communicating a solution to VUCA issues; replacing *agility* with *accessibility*. While it was necessary for Morris and Wiles to be agile in the way they worked during the pandemic, accessibility was key to the success of their communications. What set the work of this collaboration apart from other science communication of the time was its ease of accessibility and ease of understanding; it was created for the social media platforms it was to be read and shared on and easily understood by people of all ages and backgrounds. However, the similarity between *clarity* and *accessibility* makes the amendment questionable, especially when talking about accessibility as an ease of understanding. If we were to fold *accessibility* into our understanding of *clarity*, this researcher proposes the following model as a VUCA Prime for Communication:

Vision – A clear understanding of the goals your communication is to achieve.

Understanding – Communicators must have access to the expertise to fully understand the issue and communicate the solution or mitigation in a way the reader understands.

Clarity – Ensure your communication is simple and accessible. Reach people where they are, frame your message in the simplest way possible and design it for the media they use.

Agility – Follow the plan to navigate your VUCA situation but remain flexible to adapt as the information changes.

Conclusion

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, the GIFs created by Morris and Wiles gave members of the public both an understanding of what was happening and guidance on how they personally could affect the course of the pandemic. Informed by their expertise and shared values, Morris and Wiles' work and communication processes provided insights into how it was possible to deal with a VUCA problem with clear, accessible communication.

This study has found that the model of VUCA Prime (Johansen 2007) stands up as a relevant counter for communicators in a VUCA situation, in this case, the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has also shown the importance of accessibility in communication. Ease of access and understanding were both vital to the success of the Morris-Wiles collaboration. They created messages for the media in which they were to be consumed with a distinct focus on making everything they produce as easy to understand as possible.

The theme of personal responsibility should also not be overlooked. Their own sense of responsibility was evident throughout their interviews in the way they felt obliged to use their expertise to help their community, and ultimately the global population, understand the science as the pandemic progressed. The communications that came from this collaboration were clearly produced to give the public clear steps to improve their personal and community situation heading into the pandemic.

As this is but one example, based on interviews with the two main collaborators and supported by a media-text analysis, there are limitations to the extent conclusions can be drawn or models extrapolated from the data. However, the findings from the analysis of the GIFs and the interviews stand up against advertising theory and the VUCA Prime model stands up in a communications context. There is an opportunity for further research that tests whether VUCA Prime is the best model for communicators to navigate VUCA problems. Whether this takes the form of analysis after the fact or a conscious adoption of VUCA Prime while communicating crises, there is little doubt there will be ample opportunity to do so.

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