

# Ms. Information (2023)

## A documentary film by Gwen Isaac

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*I could deal with a lot if I had that much Lego. I could deal with a lot, but not this much.*



So, I knew this was going to be rough watching. As an aspiring NZ science communicator who has followed Siouxsie for years and whose partner studies conspiracy theories, unfortunately, I'm no longer shocked by the absolute vitriol she had (and actually still has) to put up with. Anyone who has spent a decent amount of time on the internet knows that there is an underbelly of people who use the anonymity

of a screen to show the worst of humanity. What I am shocked by are employers and other people in positions of power who don't take it seriously. Even leaving aside the detrimental effect these attacks have on mental health, it only takes a google search of 'stochastic terrorism' to realise that online hate is deadly serious.

It feels simultaneously just the other day and a million years ago. For those who have already forgotten: in early 2020, New Zealand, informed by best practice science and politicians willing to follow said science, locked down the country to combat the spread of COVID-19. It was wildly successful, with widespread buy-in and thousands of lives were saved. The documentary maker (Gwen Isaac) got amazingly lucky with this project's timing. We see not only the peak, but also the build-up to the pandemic through the lens of Siouxsie's professional and home life in a candid style that gives the audience insight into her as a scientist, and as a person. Even before lockdown she had been in the media, damping down panic, giving us realistic warnings and practical actions. Almost immediately she started getting pushback. Increasingly aggressive criticism escalating over months and years that I don't have the stomach to repeat here. A weaker person would have given up, but our passionate pink-haired colleague isn't that.

This documentary will be shocking for a lot of people, and it should be. Siouxsie has dealt with more online hate in the past 3 years than anyone should ever have to endure. And it wasn't even as though this was for a personal opinion she was somehow bullish enough to promote in the media – this was factual, scientific, life-saving information.

Information she tells us she felt a duty to share. Information directly relevant to her expertise and her obligation as an academic; that is if we still consider universities to be the critic and conscience of society. We can't be complacent about this; the world is just going to get more complicated, and pandemics are by no means the only things Aotearoa will have to grapple with. To face the 21st century issues rushing towards us, subject matter experts have to feel safe to share their knowledge without fearing death threats.

Maybe I'm just nostalgic for the team of five million. Nostalgic for not knowing what Siouxsie was dealing with behind the scenes, and #yeahscience gifs. Despite it being a horrendous personal time with my own science and imposter syndrome, there was an undeniable collective will I remember treasuring. I dressed up as Siouxsie for our 2020 Christmas party and won a prize for my commitment. Others had gone with wigs, and I quietly looked down on them as not-true Siouxsie fans; a day of bleaching my hair seemed insignificant compared with all she had done that year. It took until the end of January for it to fade to orange.

So much has changed in these 3 plus years, and so much has been forgotten. Science communication is a science itself, and although it's having its time in the limelight, not many people do it well. We're doomed if the few who do end up being fired, burnt out or silenced.

The main message I got from this documentary is the need to protect those who do such difficult mahi. We would be outraged if nurses or firefighters weren't provided protective equipment to shelter their health in the line of duty, let's not pretend that a scientist doing their job is any different. So, I give thanks every day for people like Siouxsie who are infinitely more resilient than I. There are many more of us who might have excelled at this most difficult type of communication but eventually dropped out, or never even started because the fear, exhaustion, or attacks just got too much.

We have to keep the hope alive. There is no other choice. In the Q&A Siouxsie spoke about the "hard-liners" vs the "persuadables" and how we can never give up on those who have been taken in. For more detail on this, I heartily recommend ['The Workshop'](#) and their communication resources. We won't save everyone but it's the people who you already have a connection with who we can still reach. Kanohi ki te kanohi, face to face. That's where the change really happens. Don't give up hope. I might not work as a science communicator, you probably don't either, but that doesn't mean we can't communicate science in thousands of big and small ways every day.

Thank you Siouxsie, for your resilience and hope 💕