

How the COVID-19 pandemic has emboldened ‘armchair’ virologists

[W]hen the Olympics are being broadcast, I transform into an armchair commentator, catching a full-blown case of what I like to call “Olympic fever.” Biathlon, hammer throw, curling, Greco-Roman wrestling . . . whatever happens to catch my attention on any particular day, I submerge myself in the action until I actually start believing that I possess—and must share—some special insight into the sport.

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Unfortunately, I’ve noted a similar phenomenon in people living through the COVID-19 pandemic. And it’s not so benign as feigning expertise in an arcane sport. Almost overnight, people who have had little exposure to epidemiology or virology—much less a formal background in these complex scientific disciplines—have what they present as well-formed and thoroughly researched opinions on the realities of this public health emergency.

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[E]veryone can work to stem the tide of faulty logic, conspiracy theories, and intentional obfuscation by invoking a phrase that has become all too rare in our information age: “I don’t know.” That may be a hard sentiment to conjure in an era where most answers come literally at the click of a button and when uncertainty can be as terrifying as the microbial threat we face. But now, more than ever, it is crucial that we respect the hard-won experience and knowledge of scientists and public health experts, supporting their efforts and valuing their advice with the trust they deserve.

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