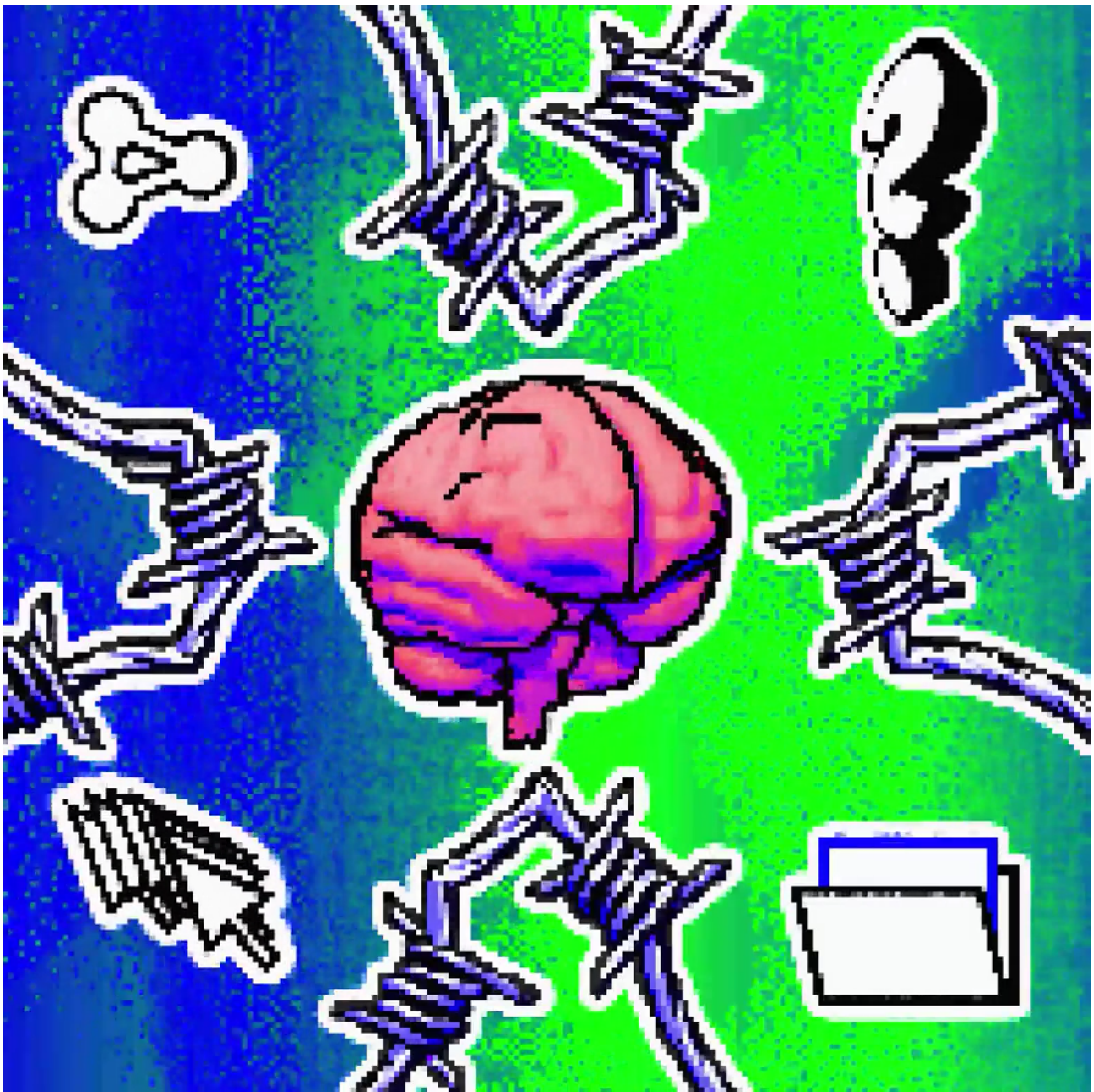


Skeptics Say, 'Do Your Own Research.' It's Not That Simple.

Jan. 3, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET





By Nathan Ballantyne and David Dunning

Dr. Ballantyne is a philosopher who studies how to improve judgment. Dr. Dunning is a social psychologist who studies misbelief.

A new slogan has emerged in the culture: "Do your own research." On internet forums and social media platforms, people arguing about hotly contested topics like vaccines, climate change and voter fraud sometimes bolster their point or challenge their interlocutors by slipping in the acronym "D.Y.O.R."

"Two days after getting the jab, a friend of mine's friend had a heart

attack," a Reddit user wrote recently in a discussion about Covid-19 vaccines. "I'm not saying they're connected, but D.Y.O.R."

The slogan, which appeared in conspiracy theory circles in the 1990s, has grown in popularity over the past decade as conflicts over the reliability of expert judgment have become more pronounced. It promotes an individualistic, freethinking approach to understanding the world: Don't be gullible — go and find out for yourself what the truth is.

That may seem to be sound advice. Isn't it always a good idea to gather more information before making up your mind about a complex topic?

In theory, perhaps. But in practice the idea that people should investigate topics on their own, instinctively skeptical of expert opinion, is often misguided. As psychological studies have repeatedly shown, when it comes to technical and complex issues like climate change and vaccine efficacy, novices who do their own research often end up becoming more misled than informed — the exact opposite of what D.Y.O.R. is supposed to accomplish.

Consider what can happen when people begin to learn about a topic. They may start out appropriately humble, but they can quickly become unreasonably confident after just a small amount of exposure to the subject. Researchers have called this phenomenon the beginner's bubble.

In a 2018 [study](#), for example, one of us (Professor Dunning) and the psychologist Carmen Sanchez asked people to try their hand at diagnosing certain diseases. (All the diseases in question were fictitious, so no one had any experience diagnosing them.) The participants attempted to determine whether hypothetical patients were healthy or sick, using symptom information that was helpful but imperfect, and they got feedback after every case about whether they were right or wrong. Given the limited nature of the symptom information that was provided, the participants' judgments ought to have been made with some uncertainty.

How did these would-be doctors fare? At the start, they were appropriately cautious, offering diagnoses without much confidence in their judgments. But after only a handful of correct diagnoses, their confidence shot up drastically — far beyond what their actual rates of accuracy justified. Only later, as they proceeded to make more mistakes, did their confidence level off to a degree more in line with their proficiency.

The study suggested that people place far too much credence in the initial bits of information they encounter when learning something. “A little learning,” as the poet Alexander Pope wrote, “is a dangerous thing.”

Anecdotally, you can see the beginner’s bubble at work outside the laboratory too. Consider do-it-yourself projects gone wrong. Power tools, ladders and lawn mowers are easily mishandled by untrained users who know just enough to put themselves in danger. A [study](#) found that U.S. consumer injuries from pneumatic nail guns increased about 200 percent between 1991 and 2005, apparently as a result of the increased availability of nail guns that were affordable for nonprofessionals.

Research also shows that people learning about topics are vulnerable to hubris. Consider a 2015 [study](#) by one of us (Professor Dunning) and the psychologists Stav Atir and Emily Rosenzweig. It found that when novices perceive themselves as having developed expertise about topics such as finance and geography, they will frequently claim that they know about nonexistent financial instruments (like “prerated stocks”) and made-up places (like Cashmere, Ore.) when asked about such things.

Likewise, a 2018 [study](#) of attitudes about vaccine policy found that when people ascribe authority to themselves about vaccines, they tend to view their own ideas as better than ideas from rival sources and as equal to those of doctors and scientists who have focused on the issue. Their experience makes them less willing to listen to well-informed advisers than they would have been otherwise.

There should be no shame in identifying a consensus of independent

experts and deferring to what they collectively report. As individuals, our skills at adequately vetting information are spotty. You can be expert at telling reliable cardiologists from quacks without knowing how to separate serious authorities from pretenders on economic policy.

For D.Y.O.R. enthusiasts, one lesson to take away from all of this might be: Don't do your own research, because you are probably not competent to do it.

Is that our message? Not necessarily. For one thing, that is precisely the kind of advice that advocates of D.Y.O.R. are primed to reject. In a society where conflicts between so-called elites and their critics are so pronounced, appealing to the superiority of experts can trigger distrust.

The problem is compounded by the fact that outsider critics frequently have legitimate complaints about advice provided by insider authorities. One example might be the initial instruction from public officials at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic that people need not wear masks.

Instead, our message, in part, is that it's not enough for experts to have credentials, knowledge and lots of facts. They must show that they are trustworthy and listen seriously to objections from alternative perspectives.

We strive to offer careful guidance when it comes to our own areas of expertise. Even so, some D.Y.O.R. enthusiasts may reject our cautions. If they do, we hope that they will nonetheless heed at least one piece of advice: If you are going to do your own research, the research you should do first is on how best to do your own research.