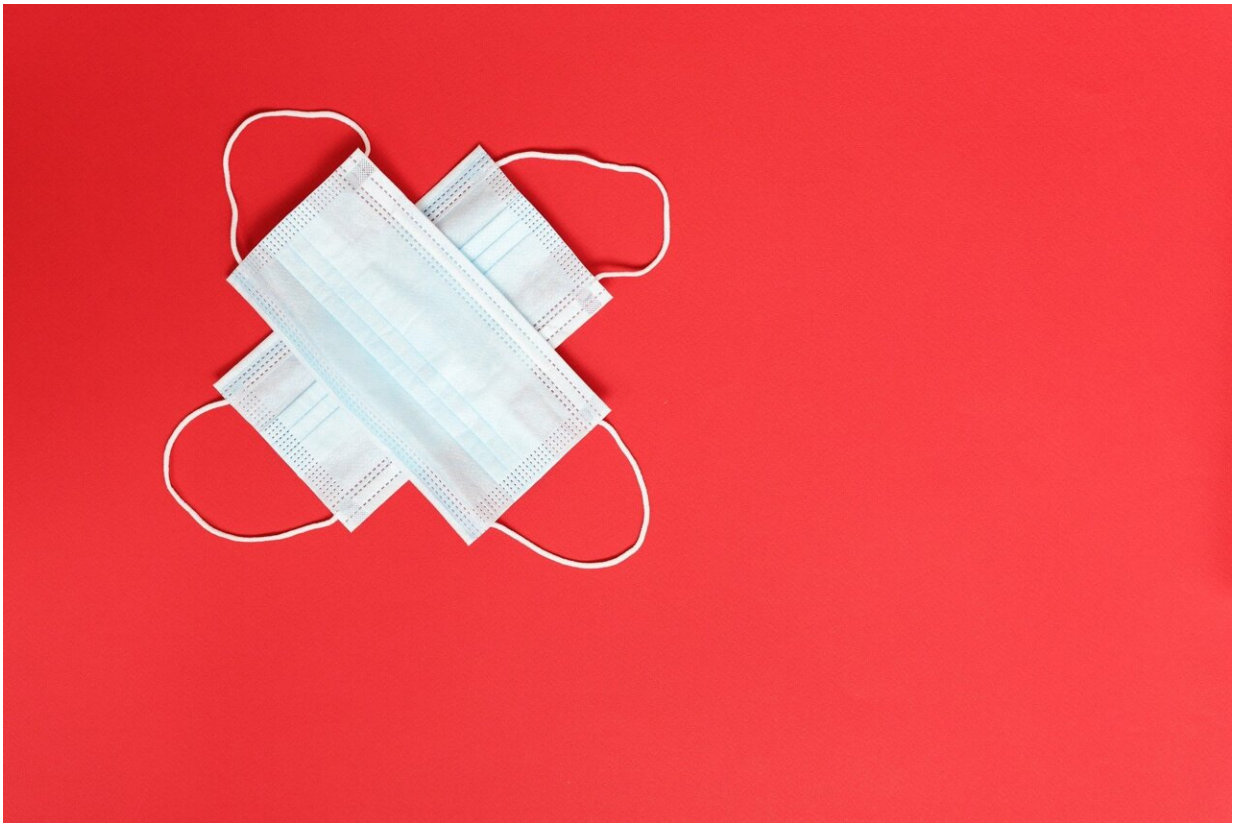


The Yelp of COVID: Vigilantes crowdsource pandemic safety tips for consumers

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Melissa Lee had more to deal with than funeral planning when her husband, Dan Williams, died by suicide in January. She also was faced with continuing his 1,400-member Facebook group, "Athens, GA Mask

Grades 2.0," designed to help residents of Athens protect themselves from COVID-19 by grading local businesses on their safety measures.

The group follows a strict template that Melissa Lee compares to a Yelp review. The review includes information about a company's physical distancing provisions, the availability of outdoor services, vaccination requirements, and the percentages of masked employees and customers.

"A mask is like a visible sign of whether or not you're listening to the same information," said Lee, who works in donor relations at the University of Georgia. "There is some beauty in supporting those that are aligned with you. But it's also just kind of sad that there's two sides to that."

Such COVID vigilantes have cropped up in multiple cities, appearing where safety guidelines are lax despite high numbers of positive cases.

Some states, such as Florida, go as far as preventing local safety mandates, though the Sunshine State has been sued by a group of parents for banning strict mask mandates in schools.

In Georgia, although Republican Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency due to COVID, no state mask mandate exists. An executive order allows businesses to disregard the COVID safety ordinances created by [local governments](#) requiring masks.

Similarly, in Tennessee, Republican Gov. Bill Lee issued an executive order that prevents local mask orders in 89 counties.

These states stand in sharp contrast to those with definitive policies, such as California, where masks are required in hospitals, schools and correctional facilities, regardless of vaccination status.

The lack of government action in some communities is forcing everyday people to fill the void, according to Imran Ahmed, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, an international nonprofit organization designed to disrupt online misinformation.

"You can see here that people are taking action collectively, essentially replicating what governments should be doing, but in a private fashion out of sheer desperation," Ahmed said.

With about 6,800 members, Alabama-based "Mask Up Huntsville" says its mission is to track the mask compliance of local businesses. Alabama currently recommends wearing a mask indoors but has no mandate. In the public Facebook group, people can also ask for recommendations from others about which doctors and dentists follow responsible COVID guidelines, and they can share personal anecdotes about pandemic life. But what isn't allowed: political statements of any kind.

In Tennessee, a perceived lack of information from government authorities led to a private Facebook group called "Knoxville Parents Against Covid." Amanda Jamison Gillen created the group to allow parents to report if their child tests positive for COVID, as an alert to other parents amid a vacuum of information at the time from the schools.

Knox County Schools recommended the use of face masks in 2020 but did not require them when classes resumed in August. In late September, however, the school district updated its COVID policy following an injunction by a district judge. It now requires masks for all students, staffers and visitors, and students are required to isolate if they test positive for COVID.

Chyna Brackeen joined the Knoxville group the day it was created. She became one of the group's administrators about a week later to help

handle its rapid growth and check for misinformation.

"One of the major reasons we decided to require moderator approval of posts was so that conspiracy theories wouldn't run rampant," Brackeen said.

Misinformation about COVID is persistent online, but Ahmed said it is not the impetus for creating such groups. The sheer amount of information online can make it hard to tell what's true. This overabundance of information has "trapped tens of millions of Americans in an alternative world in which horse dewormer shoved up your bum can fix COVID," he said.

Arthur Caplan, a professor of bioethics at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine in New York City, said community-based COVID-safety social media groups help provide balance.

"Social media has become a kind of cesspool for the crazy," Caplan said. "I like using it as a place where you could really protect yourself, your kids, try to form communities that are trying to do the right thing, rather than undermine public health efforts."

Dan Williams started the Athens page after being inspired by the efforts in Huntsville. His public page reached over 2,000 members before being reported by Facebook users who disagreed with the group's messaging. He created a private "2.0" version as a workaround.

Williams had a history of mental health issues, and the pandemic may have made matters worse, Melissa Lee said. "That year of boiling society could have very well affected his mental health," she said. "It clearly bothered him."

But members continued his work, stepping up as volunteer

administrators for the site after his suicide, she said. While it's difficult to track, the Facebook group may be having a larger impact.

For example, in August, a group member posted about Earth Fare, a grocery store chain that did not support mask mandates. Two days after being called out on social media, Earth Fare Athens posted the following on Facebook: "We whole heartedly agree with the concerns mentioned. Effective immediately, we will be following all locally mandated guidelines." The company declined to comment for this story.

Facebook and other social media platforms may be valuable in amplifying and endorsing public health recommendations, said Glen Nowak, co-director of the Center for Health & Risk Communication at the University of Georgia. "The broad idea is to show people who are in favor of something that there are other people who are also in favor, that you're not alone."

Still, Nowak said, there is a need to proceed with caution, especially when it comes to specific scientific questions. "The value of these groups is in sharing experiences," he said. "It's hard to rely on non-expert sources for questions that really mostly involve science or medicine."

There's also concern that online groups are not widely accessible beyond communities that are white, educated and savvy with [social media](#), Caplan noted.

"The usual obstacles are out there for poor people who might be sympathetic but don't have internet access," he said. Or those who "don't feel comfortable getting into a discussion group that's almost exclusively white."

Yet in the absence of COVID safety mandates, groups like these prove useful to consumers such as Travis Henry. It helps him make informed

decisions.

"I don't want to know about aggregate trends about every grocery store in America," Henry said. "I want to know about the half-dozen that I can drive to, and which one has the largest percentage of people who are masked, or which one has put up plexiglass windows."

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