A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet

COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms
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Executive Summary

The scramble to get the COVID-19 vaccine has created a cottage industry for criminals and scammers to illegally peddle the shot (fake or real) enabled by social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, a joint Digital Citizens Alliance (DCA) and Coalition for a Safer Web (CSW) investigation has found.

DCA and CSW engaged with online vaccine peddlers, learned how they operate under the noses of Facebook and Telegram monitors, and purchased at least one supposed vaccine (which will be tested if/once it arrives, with DCA reporting the findings).

To say the demand outstrips supply is perhaps the largest understatement in world history. Even with production moving at a breakneck speed, the vaccines cannot get into arms fast enough. The thirst for the COVID-19 vaccine creates a fertile ground for scam artists on the internet to do what they do best — prey on fears to sell hope to the hopeless.¹

Over the past year, we’ve seen how criminals lure consumers with ads and posts for face masks and COVID-19 testing kits on social media platforms. Some have even created websites, with the help of known and previously trusted internet domain providers, to lure consumers into buying products which may or may not be able to provide any protection from COVID-19.

Now, DCA and CSW researchers are finding pages operated by sellers offering vaccines. Researchers identified pages on Telegram promising to sell vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna. In chats with the contacts on the Telegram pages, sellers indicated they were US-based and that they could ship their product at the necessary cold temperatures needed to keep the vaccine active... as long as buyers could pay for it with a gift card.

Additionally, researchers found Facebook pages advertising vaccines made in China. While the posts didn’t specifically say the vaccines were for sale, researchers used Facebook Messenger to connect with representatives ready to explain how American buyers could purchase the vaccine shown in the photographs. Of course, regulators have not approved the Chinese vaccine made by Sinovac for sale in the United States.

¹ The COVID-19 vaccine is a regulated drug that can only be administrated through authorized channels.
While these may seem like obvious scams, we don't know how many people may have bought these vaccines and actually tried to shoot them into their arms. It is said that someone thirsty in the desert will drink sand if someone tells them it is water. As more Americans struggle to get the vaccine, offers like the ones included in this report will lure the desperate and those who seek an end to nearly a year of fear and isolation.

This report includes screenshots of the posts on Facebook and Telegram as well as the chats between researchers and operators and/or sales representatives.
Vaccines from China Offered on Facebook

In mid-January, researchers started to see Facebook posts “gaming” the system to work around Facebook’s defenses. Sellers’ posts referred to a COVID-19 vaccine, but the posts didn’t say the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine was for sale. However, the posts included international phone numbers and a link to Facebook Messenger, which DCA and CSW researchers used to connect with a sales representative for “Hongyu Medical Product/Service.”

The vaccine is made by Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac. Sinovac is a real company with a coronavirus vaccine, but it hasn’t been tested in the United States or approved for use. In fact, the World Health Organization has pre-approved only five Chinese vaccines for export (one of them - a hepatitis A shot - is made by Sinovac). Furthermore, The New York Times also reported the few announcements about Sinovac’s vaccine “that have trickled out suggest that China’s vaccines, while considered effective, cannot stop the virus as well as those developed by Pfizer and Moderna.”

On January 12, a Facebook post from a company called “Hongyu Medical” said “Several COVID-19 vaccines are in development. They are going through different studies and checks (called clinical trials) to make sure they are safe, and that they work before they are given to the public.” It included a picture of the Sinovac SARS-CoV-2 vaccine.

4 The Hongyu Medical Product/Service researchers found on Facebook does not appear to be connected with Zhejiang Hongyu Medical Commodity Co. Ltd., which manufactures wound care and personal care products, according to its website.
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms

Several COVID-19 vaccines are in development. They are going through different studies and checks (called clinical trials) to make sure they are safe, and that they work before they are given to the public.

#medical #COVID19 #coronavirus #epidemic #TestKit #vaccine #
Researchers initially contacted Hongyu Medical via Facebook Messenger to discuss vaccines for sale to determine if they had anything that could be used to fight COVID-19. (see images 2 & 3)

IMAGES: 2-3

The Hongyu representative asked for the researcher’s email and wanted to continue the conversation away from Facebook Messenger. Before the conversation moved to email, the Hongyu representative confirmed that it was selling the Coronavirus vaccine.
In the email conversation, the Hongyu representative sent several documents that sought to validate the efficacy of the vaccine they would be sending. The documents included research findings, an example procurement letter of intent and the full applicant process as completed by the Turkish government, for some reason. (see images 4-7)

**IMAGE 4:**
COVID-19 "Vaccines" For Sale on Social Media Platforms

Overview of Global COVID-19 Vaccine R&D

截止2020年10月19日，根据WHO公布的数据，全球有44个候选疫苗进入临床阶段，154个进入临床前阶段
Up until Oct. 19th, 2020, according to data from WHO, there are 44 candidate vaccines entered clinical phase and 154 entered preclinical phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>疫苗企业</th>
<th>疫苗名称</th>
<th>进入3期临床时间</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>07/03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderna公司 Moderna</td>
<td>07/27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BioNTech/复星/辉瑞 BioNTech/Fosun Pharma/Pfizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>康希诺 Cansino Biological</td>
<td>09/02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>扬森 Janssen Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>09/07</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Novavax公司 Novavax</td>
<td>09/23</td>
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10个候选疫苗进入3期临床 Ten candidate vaccines entered Phase III clinical trials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>疫苗企业</th>
<th>疫苗技术路线</th>
<th>疫苗类型</th>
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<td>中生武汉所 WIBP/Sinopharm</td>
<td>Inactivated</td>
<td>灭活 Inactivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中生北京所 BIBP/Sinopharm</td>
<td>Inactivated</td>
<td>灭活 Inactivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Non-replicating Viral Vector</td>
<td>ChAdOx1-S</td>
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<tr>
<td>科兴生物 Sinovac</td>
<td>Inactivated</td>
<td>灭活 Inactivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderna公司 Moderna</td>
<td>RNA</td>
<td>LNP-encapsulated mRNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BioNTech/复星/辉瑞 BioNTech/Fosun Pharma/Pfizer</td>
<td>RNA</td>
<td>3 LNP-mRNAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>加马列亚研究所 Gamaleya Research Institute</td>
<td>Non-replicating Viral Vector</td>
<td>rAd26-S+rAd5-S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>康希诺 Cansino Biological</td>
<td>Non-replicating Viral Vector</td>
<td>Adenovirus Type 5 Vector</td>
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<td>Non-replicating Viral Vector</td>
<td>Ad26COVS1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novavax公司 Novavax</td>
<td>Protein Subunit</td>
<td>Recombinant Glycoprotein</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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When the researcher asked to make the vaccine purchase, the Hongyu representative asked for two documents to be provided: a disclaimer and a procurement letter of intent from a government entity. The Hongyu representative asked the researchers if they have imported drugs before, which they had not. (see images 8 & 9)
Disclaimer

To: China Pharmaceutical Group Chinese Medicines Shares

The CDC of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Turkey first expressed its sincere thanks to the Chinese Medical Group / Chinese Biology for applying for the purchase of the Chinese medicine phase III vaccine after it was approved for listing. In order to inject the new crown inactivated vaccine, the CDC of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Turkey is the real user of the new crown inactivated vaccine. Any problems arising from the injection vaccine are borne by the organization and have nothing to do with the entrusted unit Chinese medicine stock group.

Hereby declare

CDC, Ministry of Health, Republic of Turkey

Embassy of the Republic of Turkey

致：中国医药集团国药股份

土耳其共和国卫生部疾控中心首先向中国医药集团/中国生物表示由衷的感谢，本次我国申请中国医药三期新冠灭活疫苗获批上市许可后采购，为了注射新冠灭活疫苗出现的突发问题，特做如下说明：

土耳其共和国卫生部疾控中心是新冠灭活疫苗的真正使用者，注射疫苗出现的任何问题由本组织承担，与委托单位国药股份集团无关。

特此声明

土耳其共和国卫生部疾控中心

土耳其共和国驻华大使馆
Procurement Letter of Intent for Vaccine

From: Egypt Embassy in China
TO: China International Anti Epidemic Materials Reserve Center

It is reported that the COVID-19 inactivated vaccine of China National Biotec Group Co., Ltd. (CNBG) in your country has entered the clinical phase III, and has achieved success with capacity of mass production. First of all, on behalf of the Government of Egypt, congratulations to the Chinese government and relevant R&D and production companies! At the same time, we hope that the two countries can strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the development and detection of corona-virus vaccine, so as to benefit the people of two countries jointly.

The Government of Egypt, hereby entrust below company and local coordinate to assist in purchasing 10 million (10,000,000) vaccines. Please kindly support and assist.

Thank you for your support!

Authorized by the Government of Egypt
Contact person in Egypt company: ____________________________
Coordinator in Shanghai ____________________________

Egypt Embassy in China
Sept ___, 2020
As a result, the sales representative responded, "your custom is so strict in checking the packages from China, you’d better contact with someone who imported medical products before, or though we send to you, the package would be held by your custom, and you will face high penalty."\(^5\)

Researchers requested to be connected to an importer, but email correspondence ended and no sale was finalized.

Soon after finding the Hongyu Medical post, CSW researchers started finding more posts using pictures of the Sinovac SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. In one case, the picture included the seller’s vaccine was “ready to send” rather than a mention in the text.

\(^5\) While the DCA research never specifically mentioned which country they were in, the researcher noticed the sales representative looked up their profile on LinkedIn.
Scam artists have no fear of Facebook and its defenses. Consumers shopping for medical treatments on Facebook should beware, as creative cons could try to trick the platform and promote inadequate treatments in order to make a few dollars on an unsuspecting and desperate consumer.
Controversial
Telegram Has Vaccines for Sale

The illegal and/or illicit activity that DCA and CSW researchers have found for years on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram is now showing up on new platforms that are finding new audiences as a result of political strife. That includes the increasingly popular messaging service Telegram.

Telegram is best known as an encrypted messaging service like Signal or WhatsApp from which you can converse 1:1 or in groups. But Telegram is actually both a chat and social media app, offering what it calls “channels” which allow users to broadcast posts to subscribers more like Facebook, Twitter, or well-known social media platforms.

Since Amazon Web Services took down Parler (another site that grew rapidly out of political discord), Telegram has added 25 million new users for a total of more than 500 million active users. That number comes from Telegram itself and a January 12th post in which the platform thanks the “Official Ohio Proud Boys” for helping make this growth possible.

The Coalition for a Safer Web is actually suing Apple for not removing Telegram from its app store. Apple removed the aforementioned Parler for “failing to crack down on violent, extremist conversation in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol” according to The Washington Post.\(^6\)

\(^6\) [https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/17/apple-capitol-siege-telegram/]
CSW researchers have also found examples of illegal and/or illicit commerce on Telegram, including the sale of “vaccines.” Investigators from both DCA and CSW reached out to some of the people selling what they claim to be COVID-19 vaccines.

In some cases, the sellers claimed to be shipping their product from the United States.
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COVID-19 "Vaccines" For Sale on Social Media Platforms

Corona Virus Vaccines
4.94K members

Corona Virus Vaccines
January 4

Corona Virus Vaccines
4.94K 13 1
Members Photos Video

*VACCINES*
- Pfizer BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine
- Moderna Covid 19 Vaccine
- AstraZeneca Covid 19 Vaccine
*Treatment*
- Remdesivir
- Dexamethasone
CONTACT @TDCADMIN to order

CONTACT @dutchx to order
MENU
*VACCINES*
- Pfizer BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine... $150/ vial
- Moderna Covid 19 Vaccine... $180/ vial
- AstraZeneca Covid 19 Vaccine... $110/ vial

Shipping
- Overnight shipping within the US... $25
- outside USA 3-5 days shipping... $42

>> Ice packed
>> Stealth packaging
>> Double vacuum sealing
>> provide Tracking number

CONTACT @dutchx to order 2.0K edited 09:34
A DCA researcher used the Telegram contact information to begin a conversation with the seller, who said the vaccine would be shipping from a location in Richmond, Virginia. A DCA researcher reached out to the seller, "@dutchx", who followed up via Telegram. After a week's worth of messaging, the DCA researcher was able to purchase “the Pfizer vaccine” from the seller.

**IMAGES: 14-15**
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
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IMAGES: 16-17
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms

IMAGES: 18-19

Once I get it, I may want to buy more. How many could I buy in the future?

We can do between 100-1800 vials weekly

I just sent $175. Please confirm when you receive

Send me a screenshot please

Did you pay under business

Or through friends and family?

We clearly said friends and family option

For PayPal

Hmmm. I'm no expert at this. I sent, can you send that back? Than I'll figure out friends and family, how to do that correctly

Ok

It will be refunded

I sent the 175 as friends and family as well. So if you can refund the other, and send me tracking

Send screenshot

Yes it will be refunded shortly
The DCA researcher purchased one vial of the “vaccine.” The seller, who claimed to be based in Richmond, asked for payment to be made with an Apple gift card, but finally agreed to payment via PayPal. A $175 payment was made via the payment app on January 25. Three days later, the investigator received an email from Delta Express that, “We are pleased to inform you that your shipment has now cleared customs and is now Registered.”
DCA is waiting to see if the vaccine arrives, but if and when it does, it will be tested to determine if its authentic. But expectations are low, especially after a further search into just who is this mysterious seller. The researcher performed an online search of the sellers' phone number. The results from the search revealed complaints about the seller as well as illegal drug sales from a site called "Dutch Cartel."
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet

COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms

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**Paramountlineexpress.com**

1 reports /

**Complere scam involving several individuals** 🚨 Unresolved

by: #30698  Apr 10, 2017  Monetary Loss: $350

Well i was in knoxville started talking to a local about audio equipment... after a good couple hours of dealing he informed me they were at his house and hed send them ..i started getting emails and text from both him and the delivery company saying it was therr will be shipped soon ..got me to pay him for the speakers in texas .. told me it was on its way a couple days later he texts asked if i got it told him no he said hed work on why next i know they said i needed to pay 130 buck charge 100 for insurance and 30 for psi charge ..wtf?..

Next after paying wat he said was there insurance branch ..they said ohh its in customs had a small hick up and said i needed to send another 100 to the lady in customs ..for a refundable payment ...just as a delivery charge ...so i asked a name they gave me a un cameroon..really Cameroon

Names reported:
Phones reported: 571-XXX-XXXX  502-XXX-XXXX
Web/emails reported: www.paramountlineexpress.com

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A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
COVID-19 “Vaccines” For Sale on Social Media Platforms
In further searches, researchers found more channels offering vaccines from the United States on Telegram:

**IMAGE 26:**
A Shot from the Darkest Corner of the Internet
COVID-19 "Vaccines" For Sale on Social Media Platforms
CSW researchers connected with the operator of the page from image 27 and engaged in the following conversation (images 28 & 29):

IMAGES 28-29:

CSW researchers did not buy the vaccine. The research team is continuing to search for others posting “vaccines” on Telegram and is finding new posts popping up.
Conclusion

So much harm can come from these activities. The most obvious being that desperate people get scammed and throw good money down the drain. But bad actors that go the additional step of sending something could sicken their victims or give them a false sense of security, thinking they might have some protection against COVID-19 when, in fact, they have nothing at all. And that is not even the worst possibility. Someone - seeing the money made by scam artists - could try to actually sell the real thing, taking that shot out of someone else’s arm and putting the valuable vaccine at risk during transport. This kind of activity could easily spiral out of control.

How to stop the out-of-control market of illegal and/or illicit activity on the social media platforms is something about which we all need to be concerned. For all of the talk from the platforms - on television and testifying before Members of Congress - they’ve never been able to stop shady sales of drugs of all kinds. Consumers are put at risk. Additionally, advertisers still have to worry that their brands - some built over decades of marketing and consumer loyalty - could wind up positioned next to an illegal and/or illicit product for sale. The problem of illegal and/or illicit items made available on social media platforms has spread now beyond Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and others. It’s easy to understand why. For young entrepreneurs with an up-and-coming platform, there seems to be little reason to be concerned about cracking down on illegal and/or illicit behavior. They very well might ask themselves “if no one ever really came after the big guys who let this happen, why would anyone ever come after me?”

It is worth noting that investigators did not find vaccines for sale on Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube. The research team has little doubt that people have tried to post “vaccines” there, but likely been blocked. It is encouraging to see some platforms, when they choose to, are able to proactively prevent some illegal and/or illicit activity like selling COVID-19 vaccines. It does raise the question, why can’t they stop other kinds of illegal and/or illicit activity that happens all the time? DCA and CSW will release additional research on additional activities that the platforms have been warned about, but either can’t, or won’t, stop in a new report coming out just weeks from now.
About Digital Citizens Alliance

The Digital Citizens Alliance is a nonprofit, 501(c)(6) organization that is a consumer-oriented coalition focused on educating the public and policymakers on the threats that consumers face on the Internet. Digital Citizens wants to create a dialogue on the importance for Internet stakeholders—individuals, government, and industry—to make the Web a safer place.

Based in Washington, DC, the Digital Citizens Alliance counts among its supporters: private citizens, the health, pharmaceutical and creative industries as well as online safety experts and other communities focused on Internet safety. Visit us at digitalcitizensalliance.org

About The Coalition for a Safer Web

The Coalition for a Safer Web is a non-partisan, not-for-profit advocacy organization whose mission is, inter alia, to promote new public/private partnerships to facilitate the expeditious removal of extremist & terrorist incitement and instruction content from social media platforms. Visit us at coalitionsw.org. CSW uses technology from The Global Intellectual Property Enforcement Center (GIPEC). GIPEC Worldwide is a cyber intelligence company that uses patented tools to interrogate the deep web and social media. To learn more about GIPEC visit www.gipec.com.