

YouTube Enabling (Maybe Validating) Shadowy Sellers of Medical Masks and Bogus Vaccines

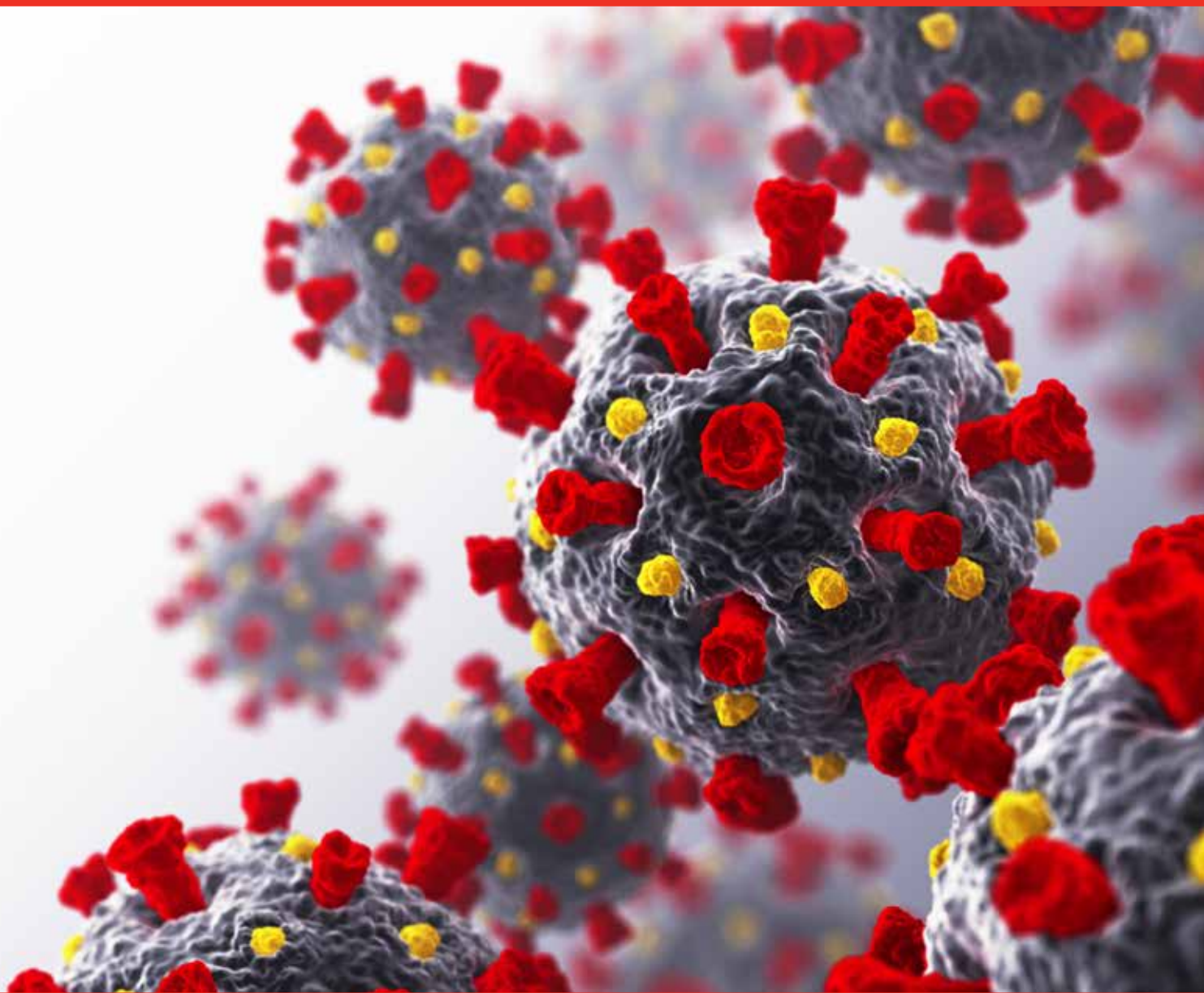




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Sellers hawking medical masks and bogus coronavirus cures are doing brisk business on YouTube, researchers for the Digital Citizens Alliance (DCA) and the Coalition for a Safer Web (CSW) found after an 18-day investigation from March 6-24. While law enforcement has called for a crackdown on those profiteering from the coronavirus crisis, the social media platforms have either been unable or unwilling to stop potentially dangerous activities. Additionally, researchers found the most concerning videos pushing coronavirus-related products were accompanied by links to a Center for Disease Control (CDC) website, which could create confusion for users trying to distinguish between legitimate sources of information and the shadowy figures that DCA's and CSW's investigators identified.

Below is one example, a video from an outfit called PharmaChem which used YouTube to promote masks for sale.

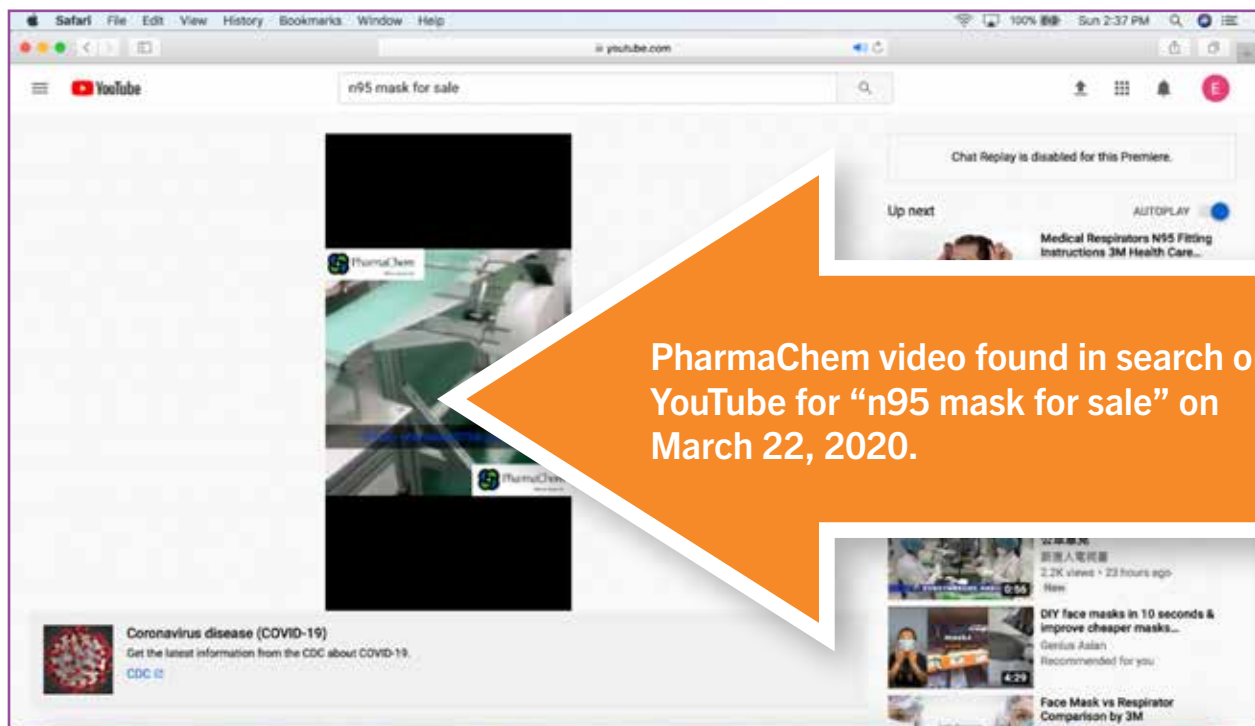
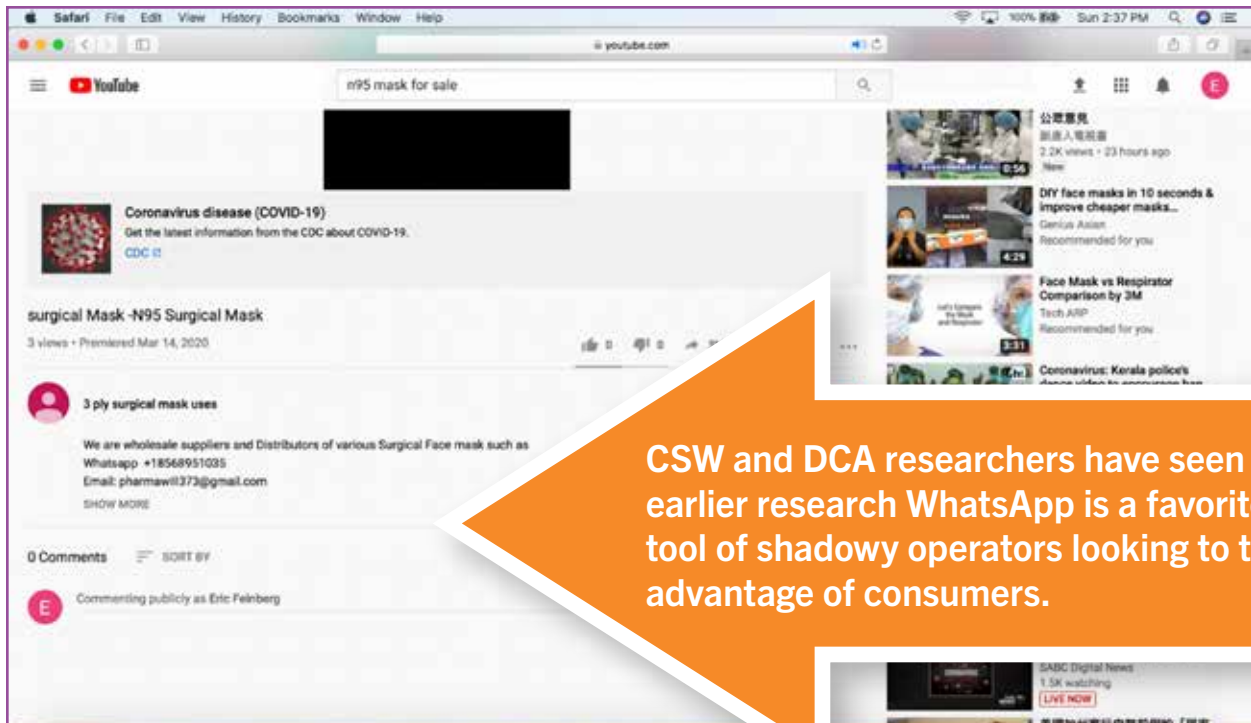


IMAGE 1

Researchers found multiple examples of videos on YouTube offering medical masks and vaccines that sellers claim will protect buyers from the coronavirus. The "vaccines" are clearly false because there is no coronavirus vaccine. In follow-up conversations the research team initiated with sellers, there was ample reason to believe the offers for masks were dubious as well, as highlighted by interactions with representatives from some of the sellers.



CSW and DCA researchers have seen in earlier research WhatsApp is a favorite tool of shadowy operators looking to take advantage of consumers.

IMAGE 2

After finding PharmaChem on YouTube, researchers quickly saw how the operation utilized tools across multiple social media platforms to push masks and converse with consumers.

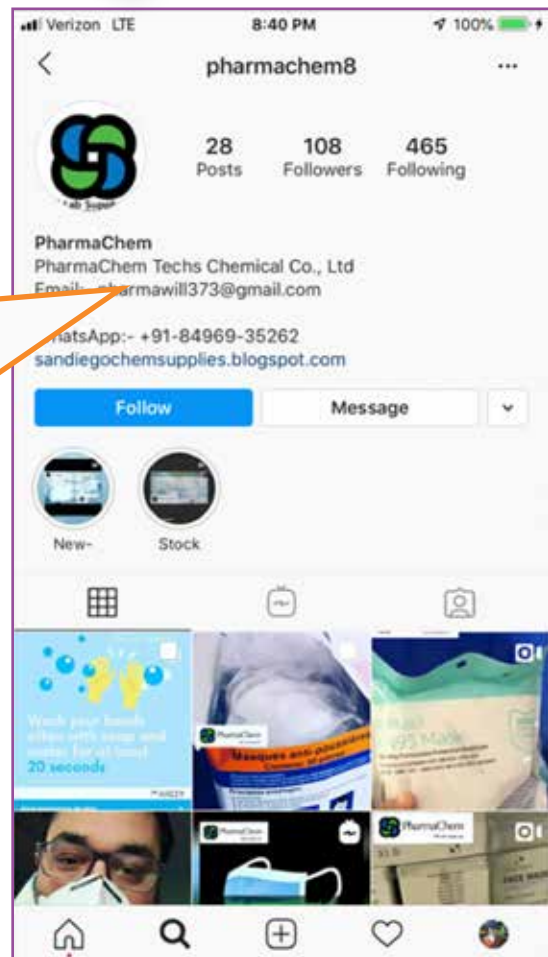


IMAGE 3

PharmaChem had an Instagram page that used the same email as its YouTube page (see image 3). However, the operation listed different WhatsApp numbers on each page. The Instagram listing also includes a website, address: "sandiegochemsupplies.blogspot.com."

CSW researchers used the WhatsApp contact from Instagram to chat with “customer service” at PharmaChem (see image 4) about a mask purchase. In the chat, PharmaChem says the masks come from Mumbai, India. In an email exchange with CSW investigators (in the green dialogue boxes), the PharmaChem respondent says the company is in San Diego. The email correspondence also says the company is located in San Diego (image 5).



IMAGE 4



Location:- San Diego,CA
Also indicate the full shipping address of goods.
And within 3-4 working days, the goods will be delivered to you in accordance with the international and national supply contract seal signed papers.

IMAGE 5

On the PharmaChem home page (image 6), researchers found “vaccines” and “cures” for sale along with the masks.

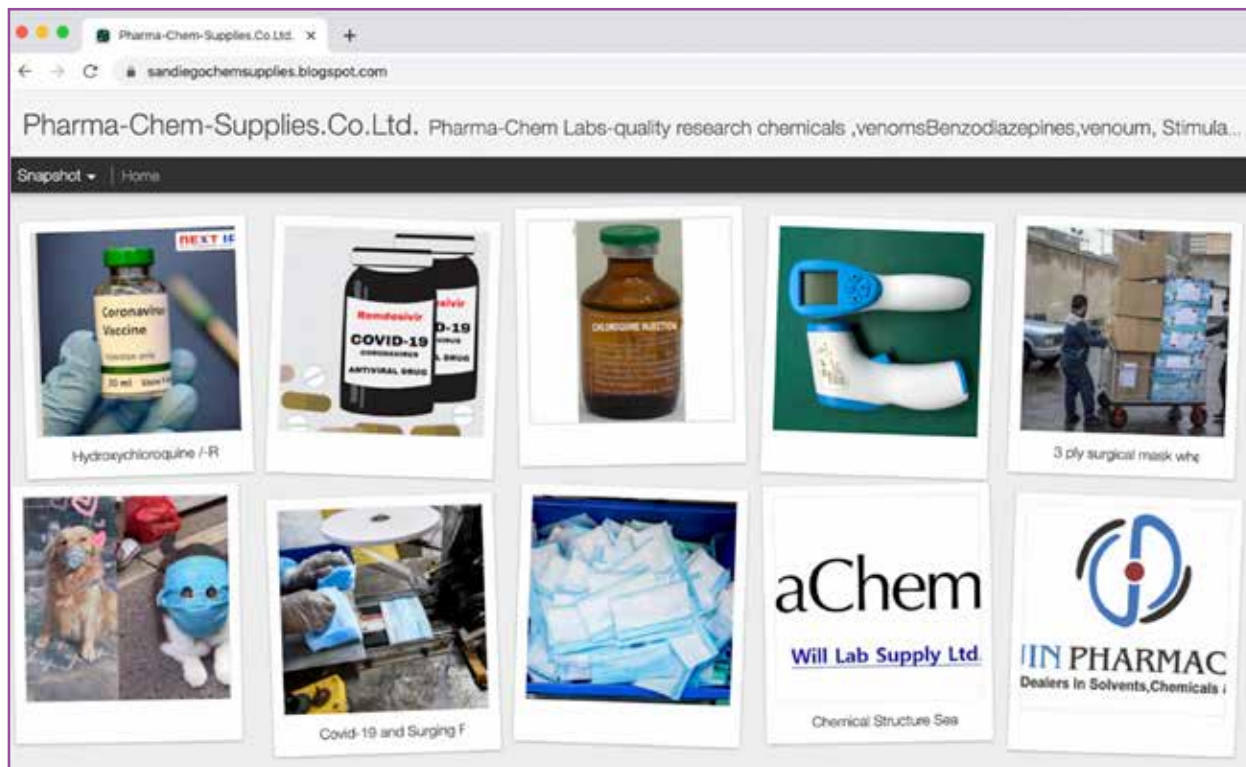


IMAGE 6

DCA researchers carried on an additional conversation using the number provided on YouTube in a chat. Researchers asked the PharmaChem representative about vaccines and masks, with the PharmaChem rep even acting as a pharmacist offering a recommendation about which medicine would be best to buy (see images 7-11).

IMAGE 7

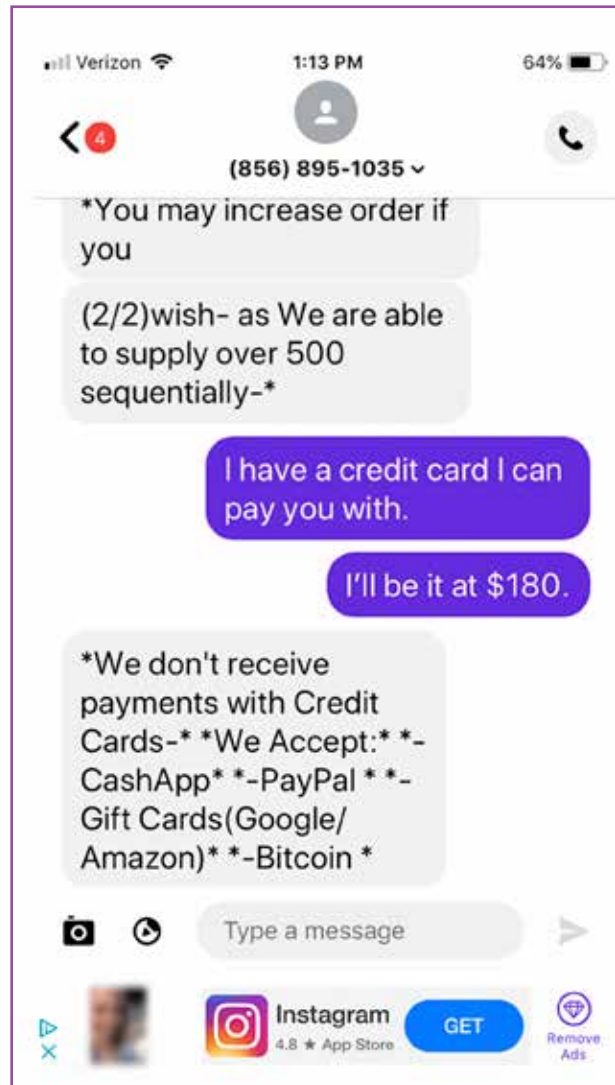
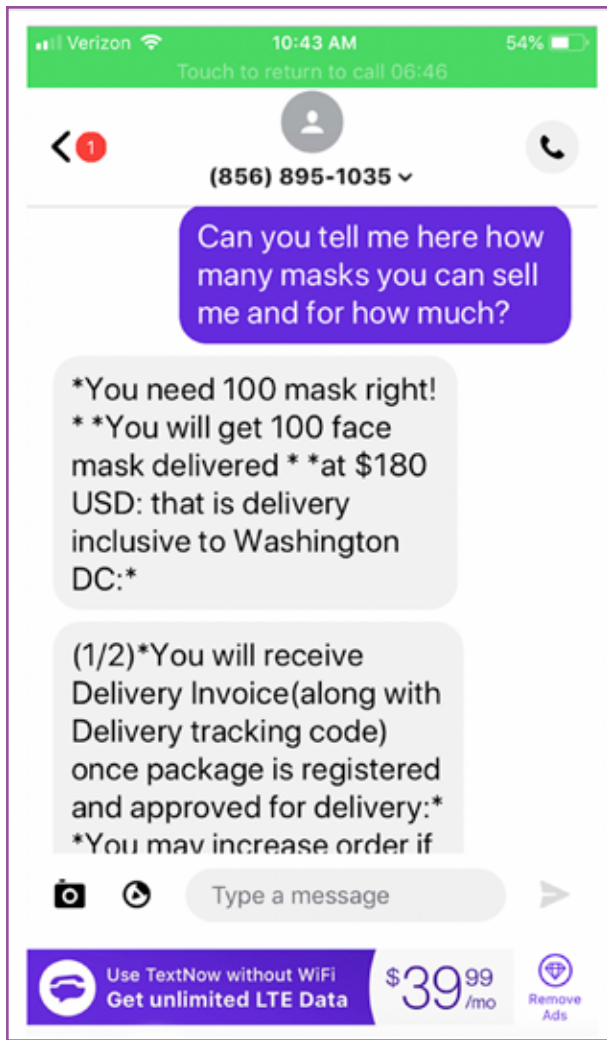


IMAGE 8

IMAGE 9

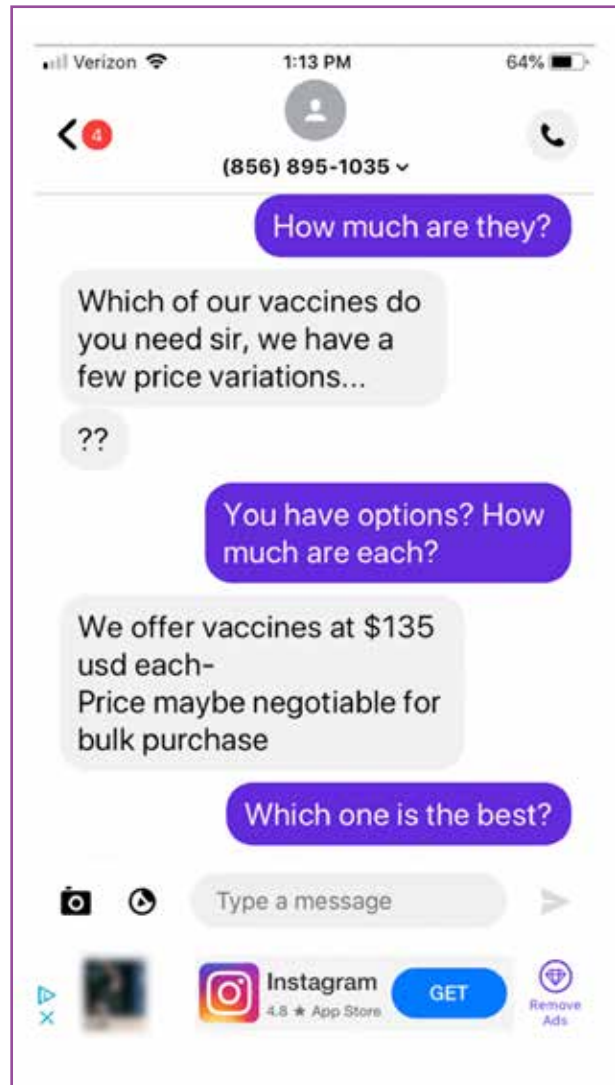
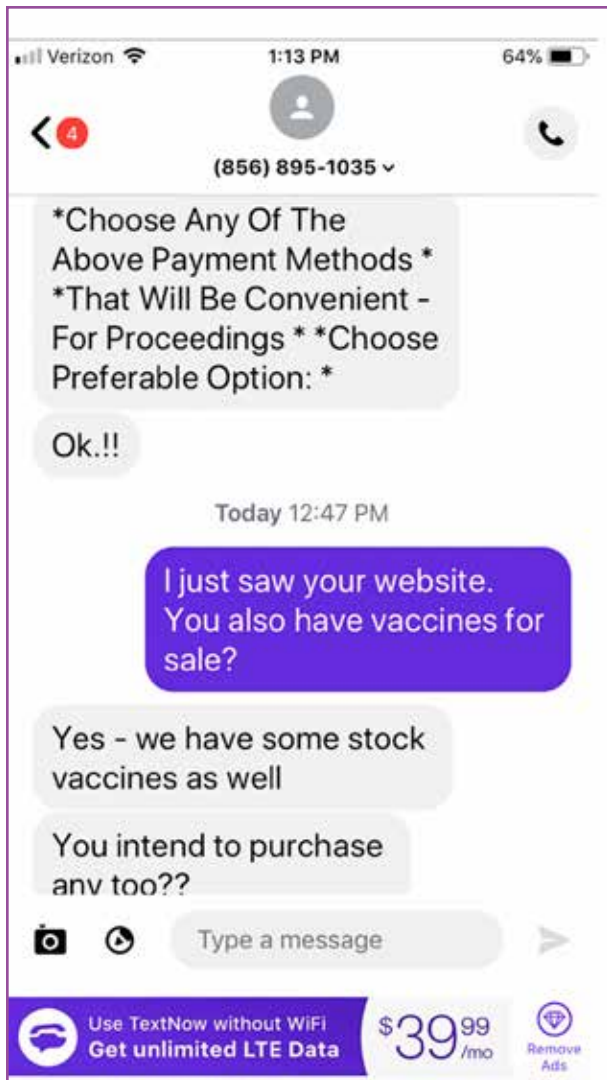
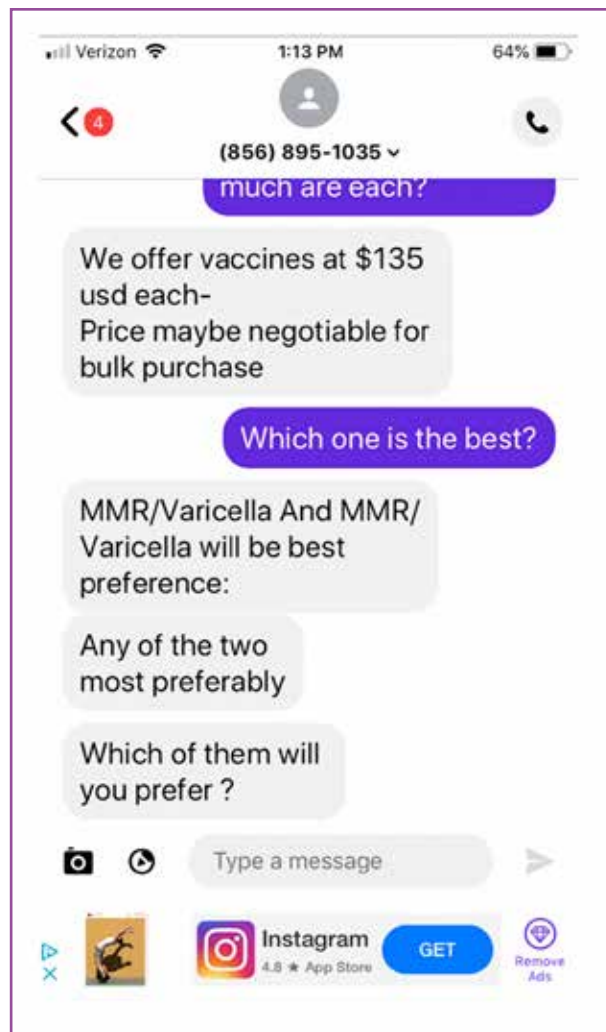


IMAGE 10

IMAGE 11



Other sellers didn't even try and pretend to be legitimate. One seller simply goes by the name "Real ID Card Fake Passport Producer" also used YouTube to offer "Covid 19 Drugs."

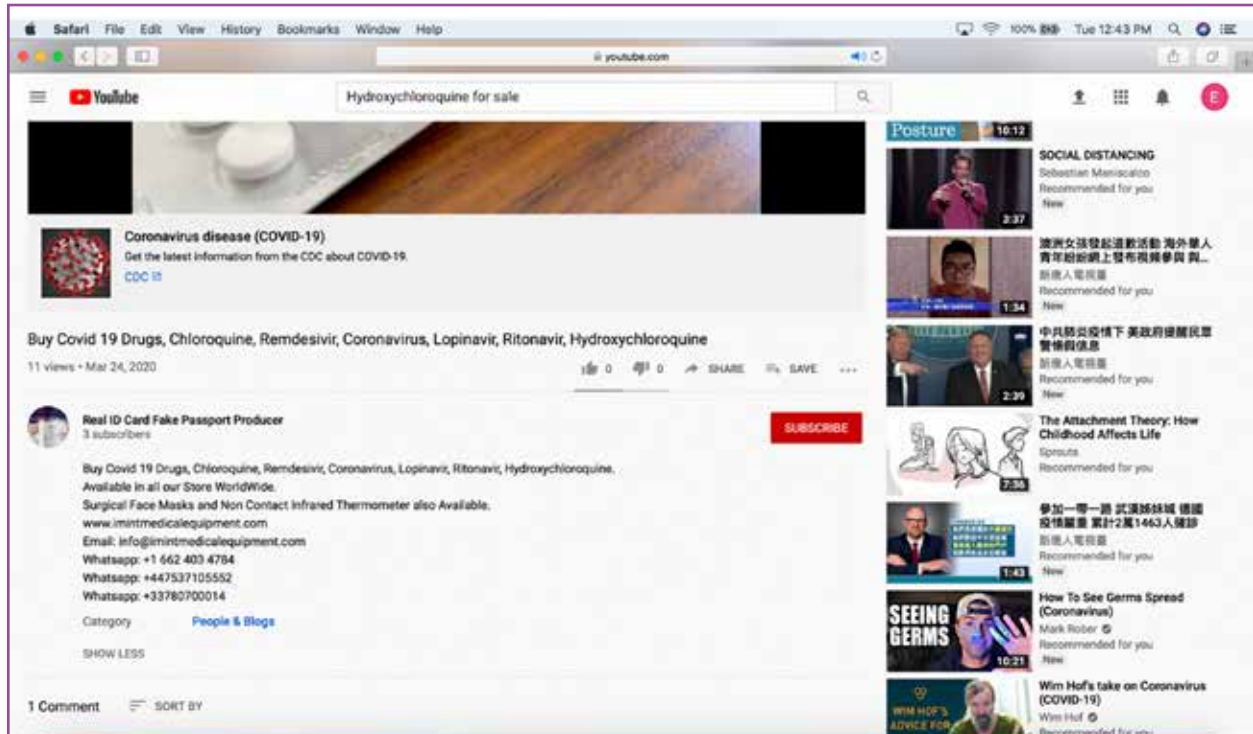


IMAGE 12

Some of the other videos on Real ID Card Fake Passport Producer's YouTube page include "Clear Your Criminal Record, Expungement of Criminal record, Buy New Identity Documents" and "clear your criminal records, Obtain Real Passport, SSN, ID, DL, Green Card, Gun Permit."

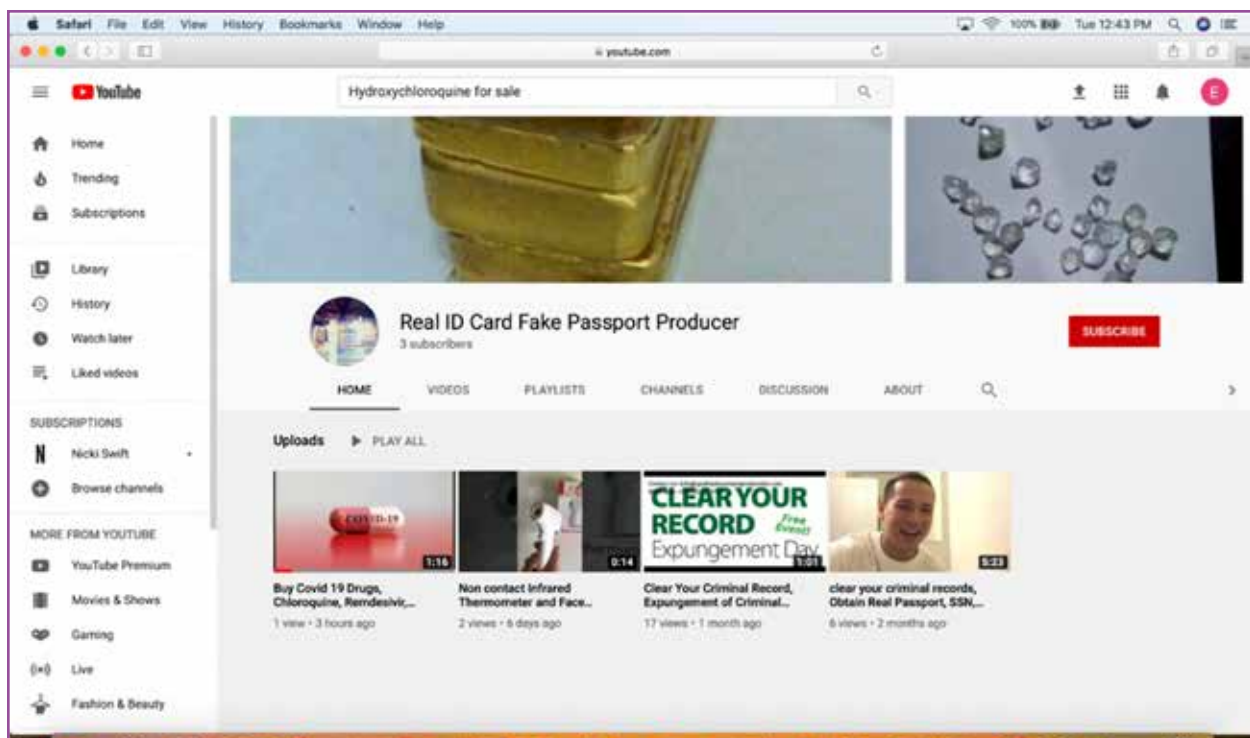


IMAGE 13

Shadowy Sellers Want Big Buys, Lots of Money

On March 10, after multiple media outlets first [reported](#) that Google was serving ads for dubious coronavirus-related products in online search results, Google said that it would formally ban ads for protective facemasks. But the ads didn't stop.

On March 17, U.S. Sens. Mark R. Warner (D-VA) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) slammed Google in a [joint letter](#) to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for continuing to run ads for products which "exploit fear for profit but also serve to trigger shortages of essential health care products at a time of critical need." Sens. Warner and Blumenthal went on to urge the FTC to "intervene in order to protect the public and the nation's supply chains."

The Senators might want to look into YouTube, which has been owned by Google for nearly 14 years.

Searching for terms like “N95 mask for sale” and “Masks For Sale”, researchers found multiple examples of masks for sale and after making contact with several sellers, found the offers to be suspicious.



The CDC link below gives the appearance of legitimacy to the video from Ukrainian seller.

IMAGE 14

The research team found a video selling masks made in the Ukraine (see image 15). The YouTube page included a link to a website (image 16) and a Gmail address. After contacted by email, the seller said the “minimum order of masks is 100 pieces” and the price would be “2050 US dollars” (image 17).



The link on the video page takes viewers to this website that claims to be N95 mask seller in the Ukraine. According to whois lookup, the site mannosjimdofree.com is “available.”

IMAGE 15

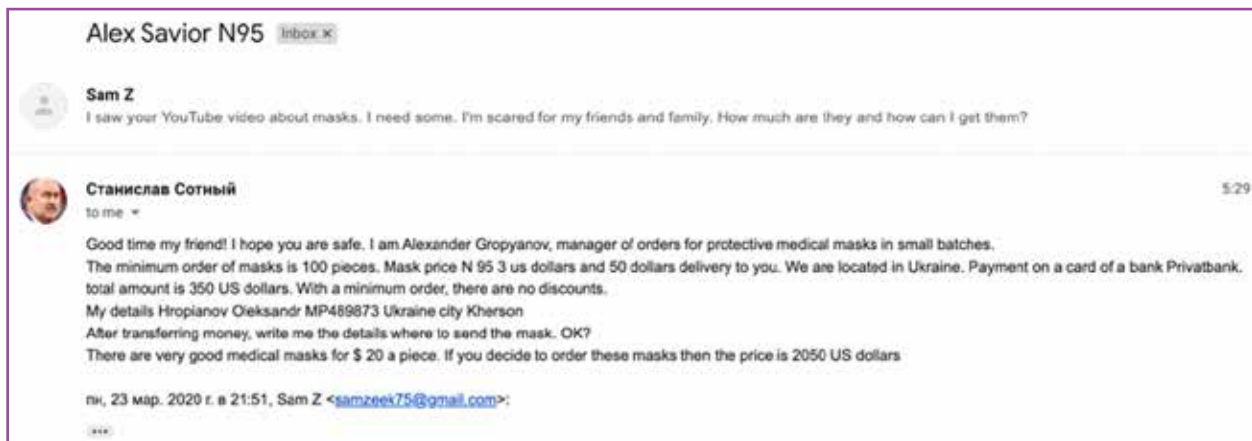


IMAGE 16

In email correspondence between DCA researchers and the Ukrainian seller, the seller asks for more than \$2,000 for 100 masks.

Mixed Messages – A sort-of PSA Gone Wrong?

The research team was also curious about the link underneath those videos that you'll see on images 1, 2, 12, and 14.

Here's a closer look:

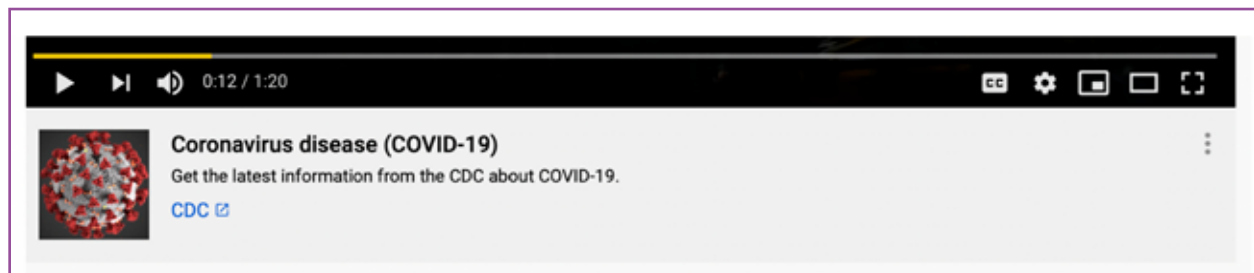


IMAGE 17

This is a link to the Center for Disease Control's website where readers can find helpful information about the coronavirus. This seems like a good idea, but does it offer sellers of illegal and illicit items a kind of legitimacy – an unintended endorsement from the CDC? There is no explanation about where it comes from or why it's there – leaving viewers to assume it probably is from the CDC and is there to provide helpful information. But why should a CDC link show up anywhere near a link to a video offering viewers a coronavirus vaccine?

Adding to the confusion, that same link shows up underneath videos to news reports about the coronavirus.

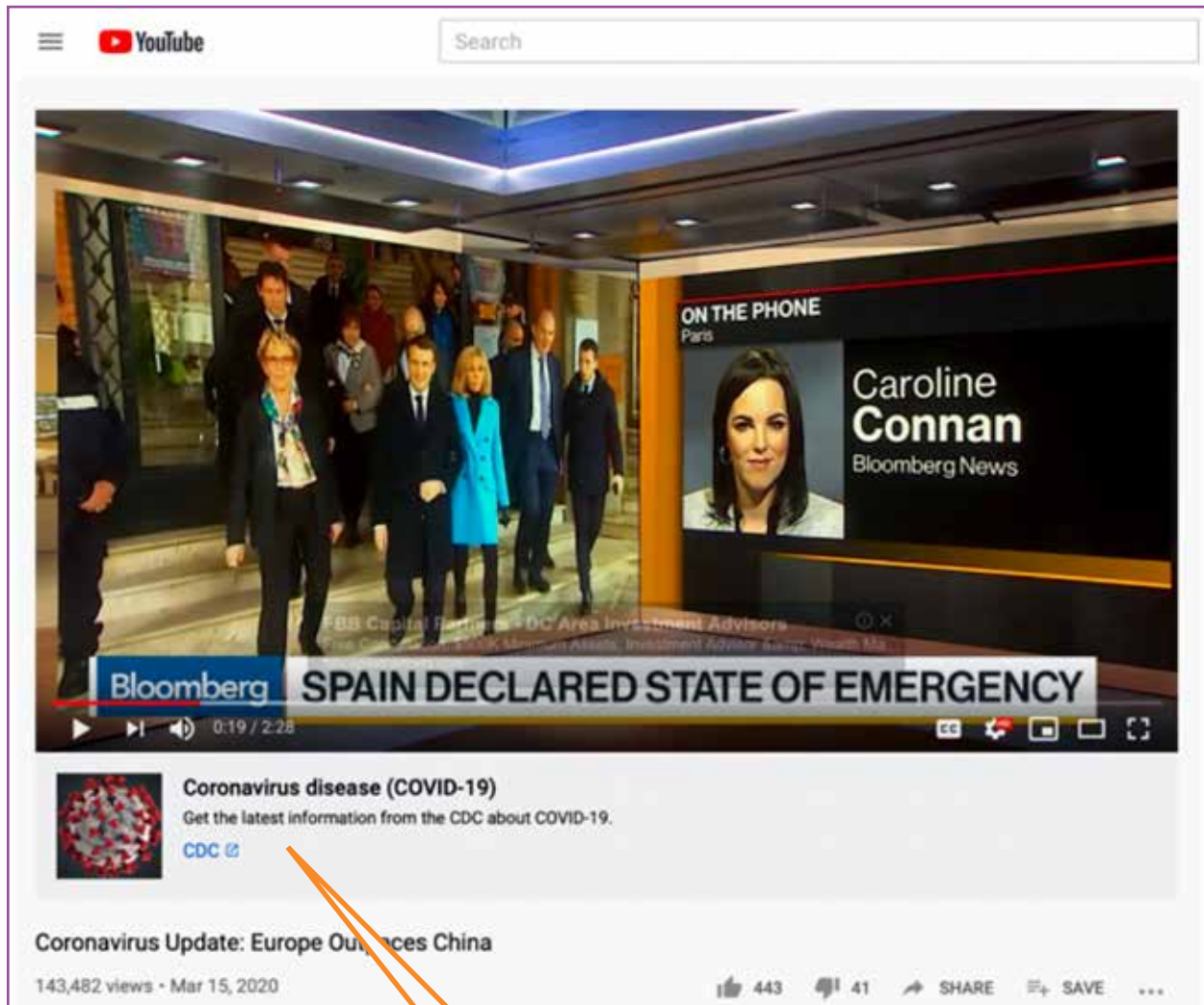
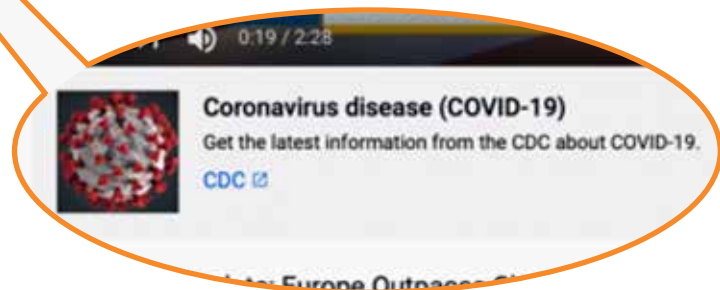


IMAGE 18



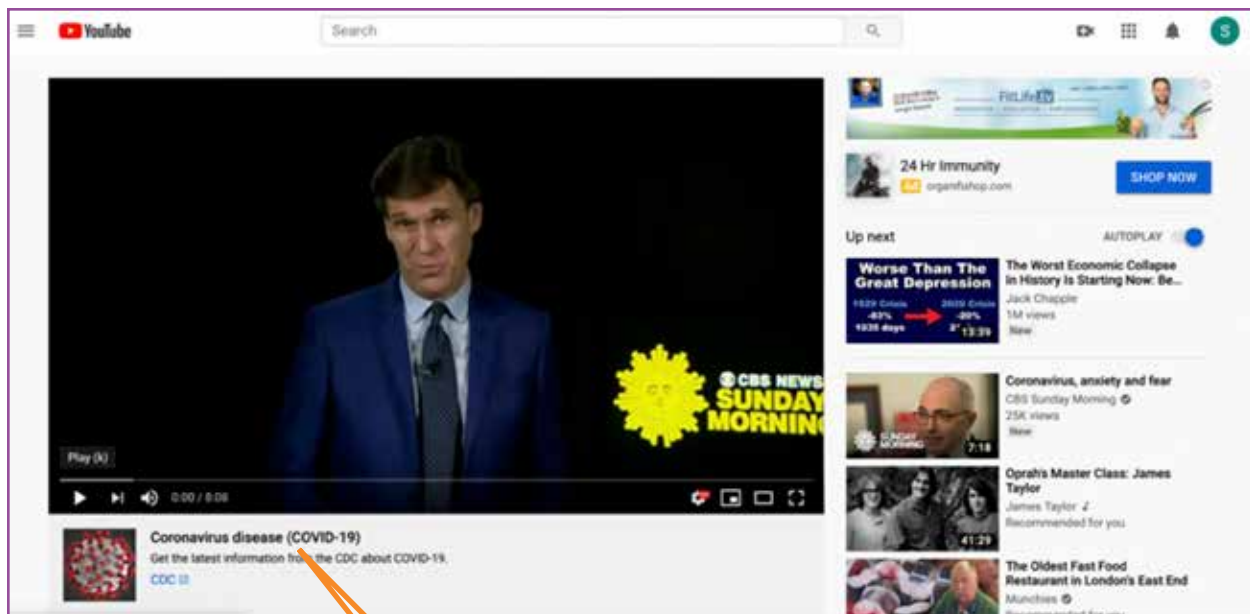
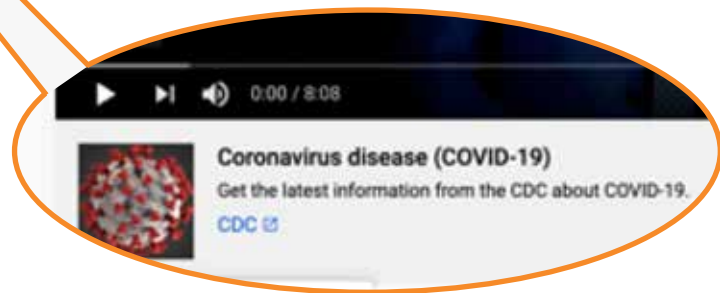


IMAGE 19



This CDC link by news stories makes perfect sense. Users looking for the latest information who are already looking to trusted, established news sources could probably make use of the information from CDC. However, it is very problematic to have it posted accompanying fraudulent cures or videos by scammers offering for medical masks or other urgently needed supplies.

Digital Citizens has ordered masks from several sellers we located on YouTube. The research team will update this report to indicate whether or not the masks were delivered.

Conclusion

We are living in unprecedented times where schools and businesses are closed for days on end as the world fights a pandemic that has no cure. Fears are heightened and consumers are extremely vulnerable to scams that try to offer solace or solutions.

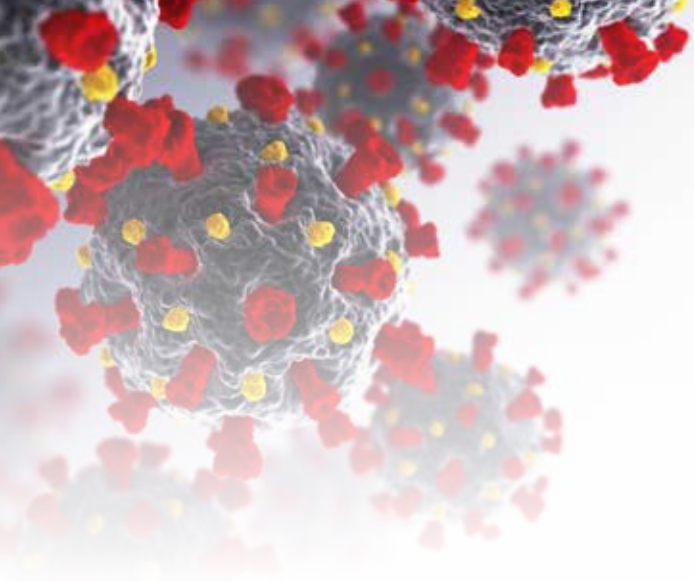
With nearly 1.5 billion people using YouTube daily, the company has a responsibility to stand by its word and to protect consumers from fake healers and medicine men.

YouTube's parent company, Alphabet (which also owns Google), should immediately take down videos for vaccines and n95 masks. They are already more than a week late on their March 17th promise.

You can do your part to help stop this practice. If you see a shady YouTube video, you can report the inappropriate content. There are different ways to report bad YouTube content depending on the device you are using. To see how you can report, go to:

<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802027?co=GENIE.Platform%3DAndroid&hl=en-GB>





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.

