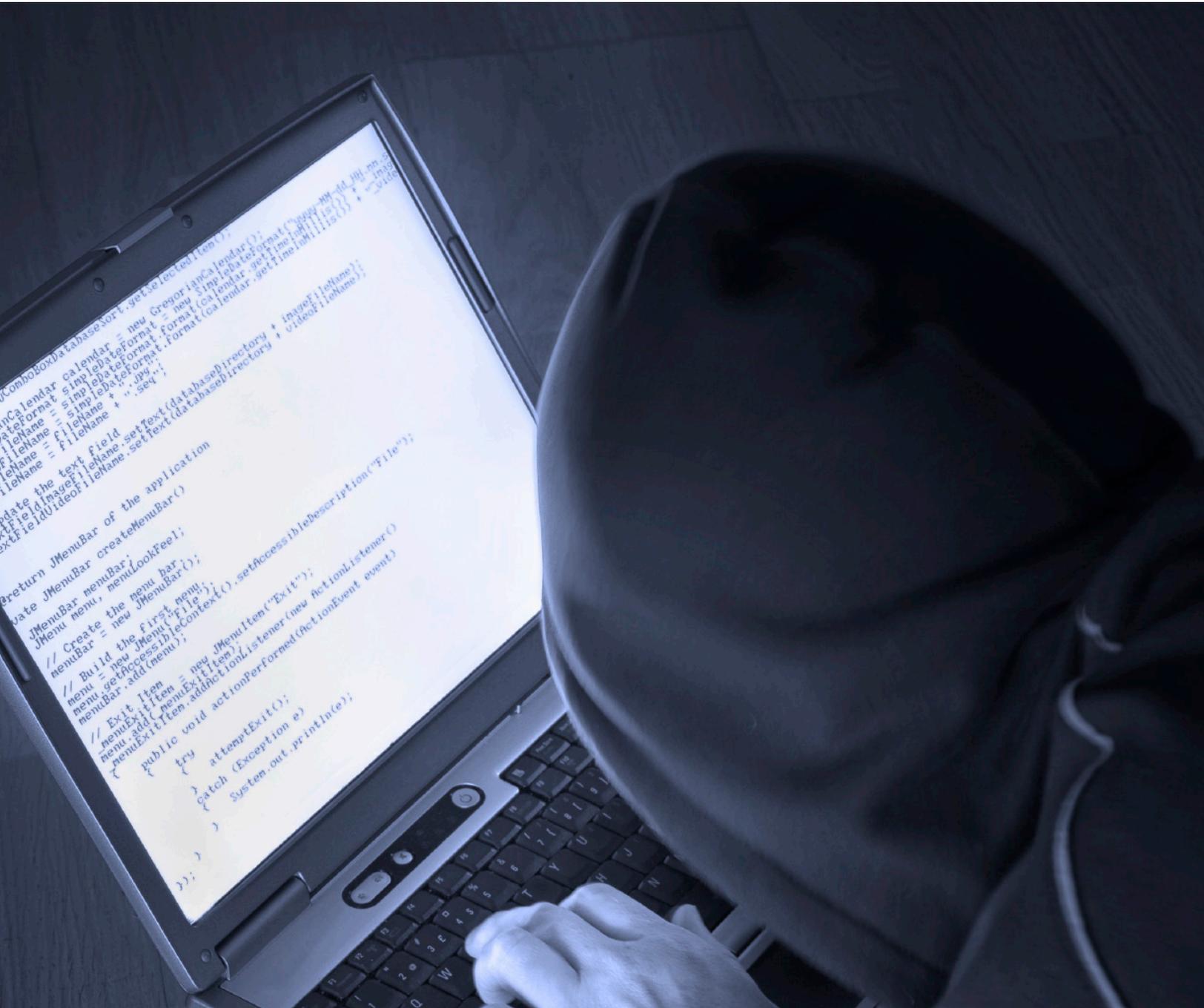


GOOGLE & YOUTUBE AND EVIL DOERS: TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

A REPORT ON HOW GOOGLE AND YOUTUBE STAND TO BENEFIT WHEN BAD
ACTORS EXPLOIT THE INTERNET

JUNE 2013



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception, Google adopted the motto “Don’t be evil.”

In an open letter when the company went public, Google described its “don’t be evil” motto as: “We believe strongly that in the long term, we will be better served—as shareholders and in all other ways—by a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short term gains.”

Google is a great company with brilliant minds. It has demonstrated a willingness to take on huge challenges and solve major problems.

That is why it is so disconcerting to see a leading American company allowing one of its most prized platforms, YouTube, to be exploited by those selling and promoting illegal narcotics, prescription drugs without a valid prescription, knock-off merchandise, and fake IDs, including driver’s license and passports.

When Google sells ads on YouTube videos promoting things like drugs, prostitution, and forged documents, it has effectively become advertising partners with bad actors that make the Internet unsafe. That is because when YouTube users click on those ads, Google’s business model is to split the ad revenue with those video producers.

It’s hard to fathom why Google would knowingly run ads tied to videos promoting unsafe and potentially dangerous activities. While we all know that the price we pay for a free and open Internet will be things we may find objectionable, we are disappointed when a great company like Google profits from them.

The Digital Citizens Alliance is focused on highlighting the challenges we face with making the Internet a safer place so we can find solutions. Given how popular YouTube is with teens and pre-teens, this report must be an alert for parents to closely monitor their children’s usage.

By pointing out how YouTube has become overrun with thousands of potentially dangerous and harmful videos, we also call on Google to recognize the responsibility to clean it up. That is what a great company does and why the Digital Citizens Alliance is optimistic that Google can live up to its motto.

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

This report was created by the Digital Citizens Alliance, 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 and the importance for Internet stakeholders—individuals, government, and industry—to make the Web a safer place.

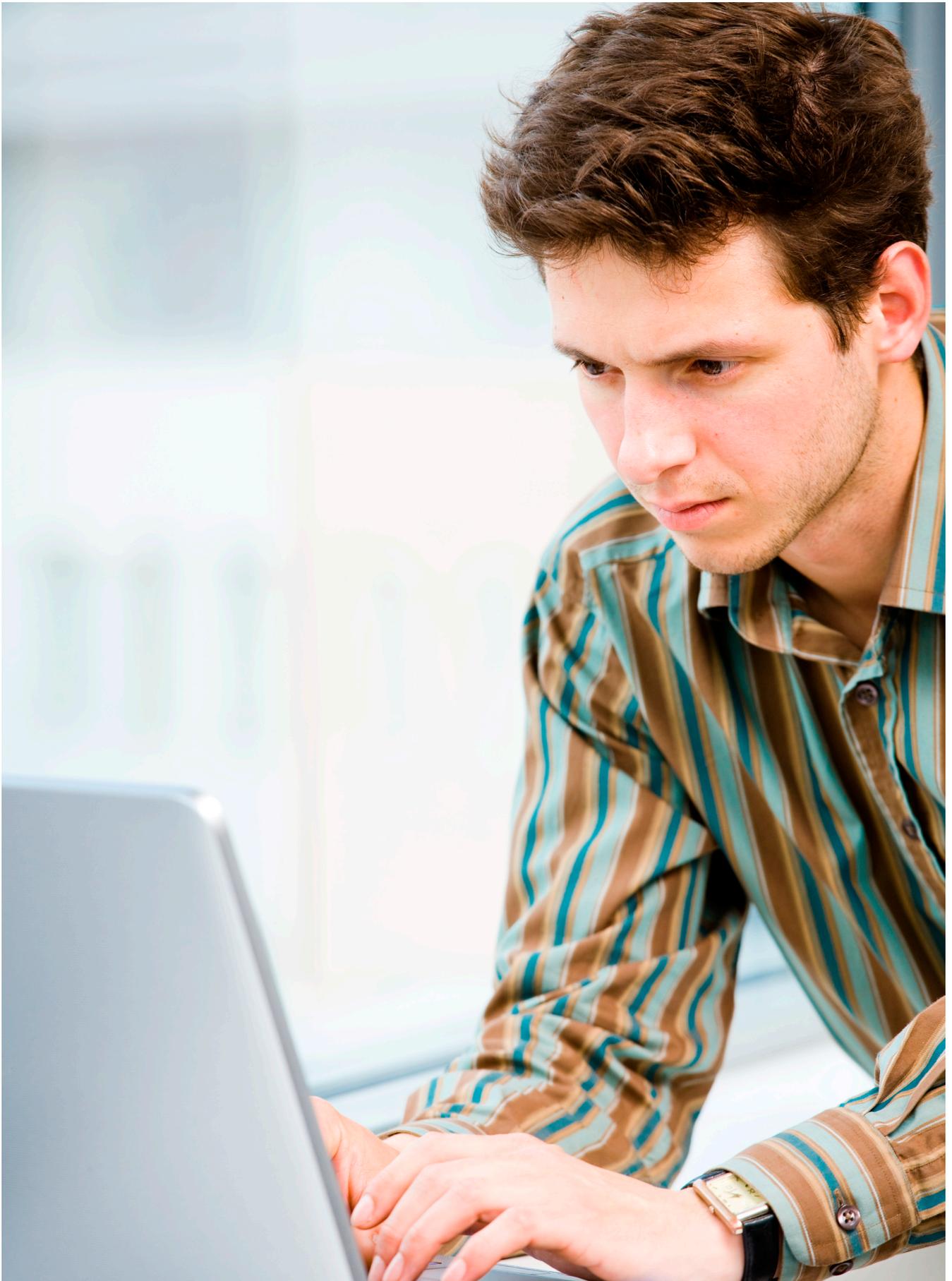
While all Digital Citizens hold themselves personally responsible to do all they can to protect themselves and their families, we are also concerned that technologies, standards, and practices are in place that will help keep all of us safe as a community. The industry has a critical role to play in ensuring those safeguards are established and updated as needed to address the continually evolving challenges we face online.

We have much work to do, but we can’t do it effectively without understanding the problems we face. That is why the Digital Citizens Alliance investigates issues such as those detailed in this report. By sharing our findings with consumers, we hope all Digital Citizens will engage in discussions about these issues. Our focus with this report is exposing the dangers so we can then work together to find solutions.



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YOUTUBE AND EVILDOERS: TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

In any other era, it's hard to imagine bad actors actually advertising their services. But in 2013, it's commonplace. Illegal narcotics, prescription drugs without a prescription, knock-off merchandise, fake IDs, including driver's license and passports, and a host of other things are now advertised online. To a certain extent, it's the price we pay for a free and open Internet that gives us access to all sorts of useful information.

But we don't expect one of our greatest Internet companies, Google, and its video subsidiary, YouTube—the favored venue for teens—to help. The company whose motto is “don't be evil” is, sadly, hosting evil on its platforms. And from appearances, Google is profiting from it.

Google's business model is to split the ad revenue with video producers that post videos to YouTube. Unfortunately, an increasing number of those videos are promoting activities that are potentially dangerous.

The fact that Google continues to enable these videos on YouTube—and benefit from them—is surprising given its 2011 settlement with the Department of Justice to settle charges that it knowingly allowed ads for fraudulent Canadian pharmacies in the United States. That settlement ended an investigation into whether or not Google knew that the pharmacies weren't requiring prescriptions for drugs such as Oxycontin and Ritalin, but continued to accept the ads and help them improve their websites.

Our investigation didn't start with Google. It actually began when Digital Citizens began probing how online pharmacies provide potentially dangerous prescription drugs to consumers, including teens, without first having to see a doctor. In the course of that investigation, we realized that many of the online pharmacies turned to YouTube to promote and market potentially illegal prescription drugs.

We found that these “pharmacies” ran videos that were merely advertisements for these potentially illegal prescription drugs. Even more alarming was the fact that YouTube not only accepted those videos, but also ran advertisements with them. That means that when those ads were clicked, YouTube split that ad revenue with those advertising drugs.

As we expanded our investigation, we came to learn that YouTube has advertising relationships that go well beyond unscrupulous online pharmacies. This report is the product of that investigation.

SO, WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

YouTube is the third-most popular website in the world and a favorite destination for teens and pre-teens. According to YouTube, it attracts more than 1 billion unique visitors a month.

Just like a popular TV network, that large number of visitors makes YouTube a popular place to advertise. It works in two ways.

Video producers create channels on YouTube to display their videos. These producers may pay Google to promote their videos.

But YouTube also understands that popular videos, just like popular TV shows, are the most likely to be watched and therefore places advertisements around those videos. So, when you watch a YouTube video, you may see advertising embedded in it or around it (often on the right-hand side where other videos are listed). Google shares the revenue it gets paid for those ads with the video producer.

Unfortunately, bad actors and other unscrupulous people have caught on and use YouTube to market or advertise anything from illicit and illegally acquired prescription drugs, guns, and knock-off merchandise to tutorials on making bombs, how to forge a passport, and content theft.

This is alarming because it's given bad actors and others a mainstream platform to advertise in a way unprecedented in history. Can you imagine the Boston Globe or CBS ever allowing advertisements on how to get illegal drugs such as cocaine? Or the New York Times allowing advertising on how to get a forged passport?

Furthermore, YouTube is not just a mainstream site; it's one of the most popular for teens and pre-teens, visited by millions daily. So when bad actors are allowed to advertise on YouTube, they are reaching the most vulnerable and impressionable audience.

We all accept that the darker elements of the Internet are the price we pay for its openness. But in this case, it's not about openness. It's not about bad actors leveraging an open platform. It's about Google and YouTube effectively becoming advertising partners with those bad actors.

That is the troubling outcome of this investigation, and one which we hope that Google and YouTube will recognize and address.

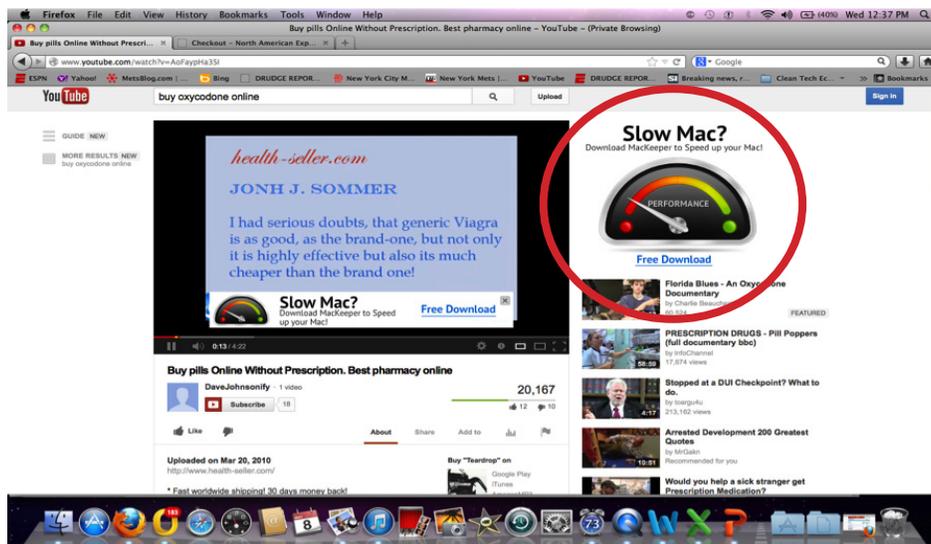
GOOGLE, YOUTUBE, AND DRUGS

As YouTube became more widely popular, the number of advertisements to purchase drugs increased along with it. Today, when a YouTube search is conducted for "buy drugs without a prescription," it returns 38,200 results. When you dig a little deeper for specific drugs, you get the following:

- "buy percocet without a prescription" 531 results
- "buy tramadol without a prescription" 924 results
- "buy oxycontin without a prescription" 958 results

Note: Search conducted on May 8, 2013

For example, when we searched for "Buy Oxycodone online," one of the search results was for this video produced by the BuyMorphContin, which claims on its profile to be based in Canada.



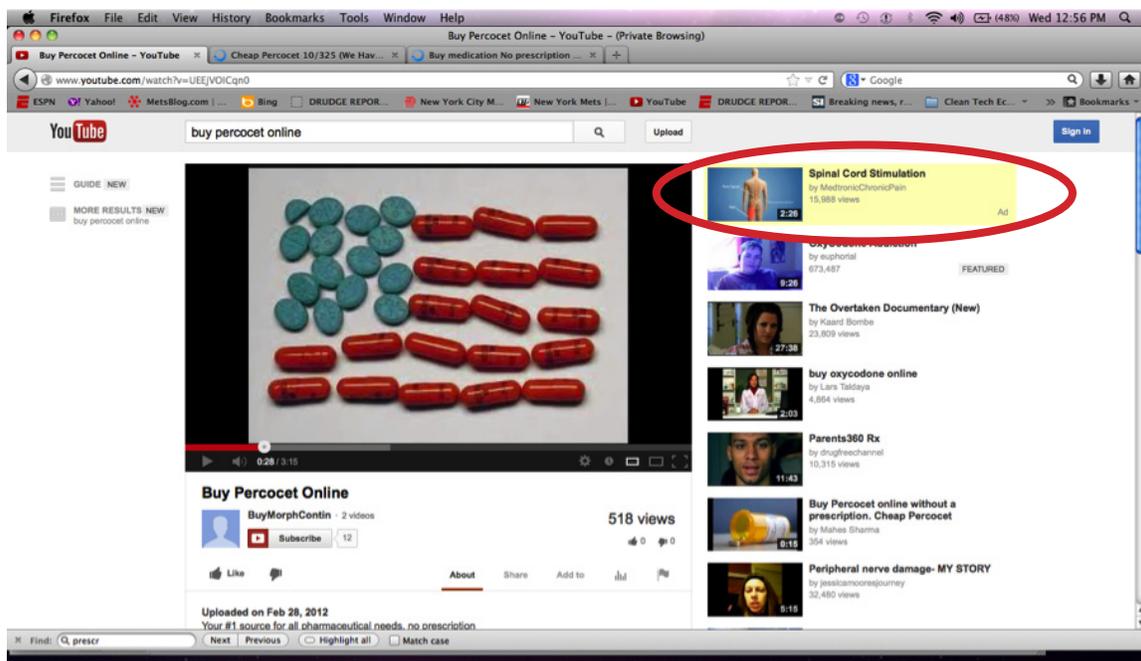
Notice the ads for "Slow Mac?" embedded both in the video and to the right. In both instances, "Slow Mac" is paying Google to advertise—and those ads are showing up on a video promoting illicit oxycontin.

When we clicked through to the website included in the video, we were directed to Cure-Plus.org. It didn't offer oxycodone, but it did offer to sell dozens of other prescription drugs, including Zanaflex, which we were able to buy in less than two minutes simply by supplying a credit card number.

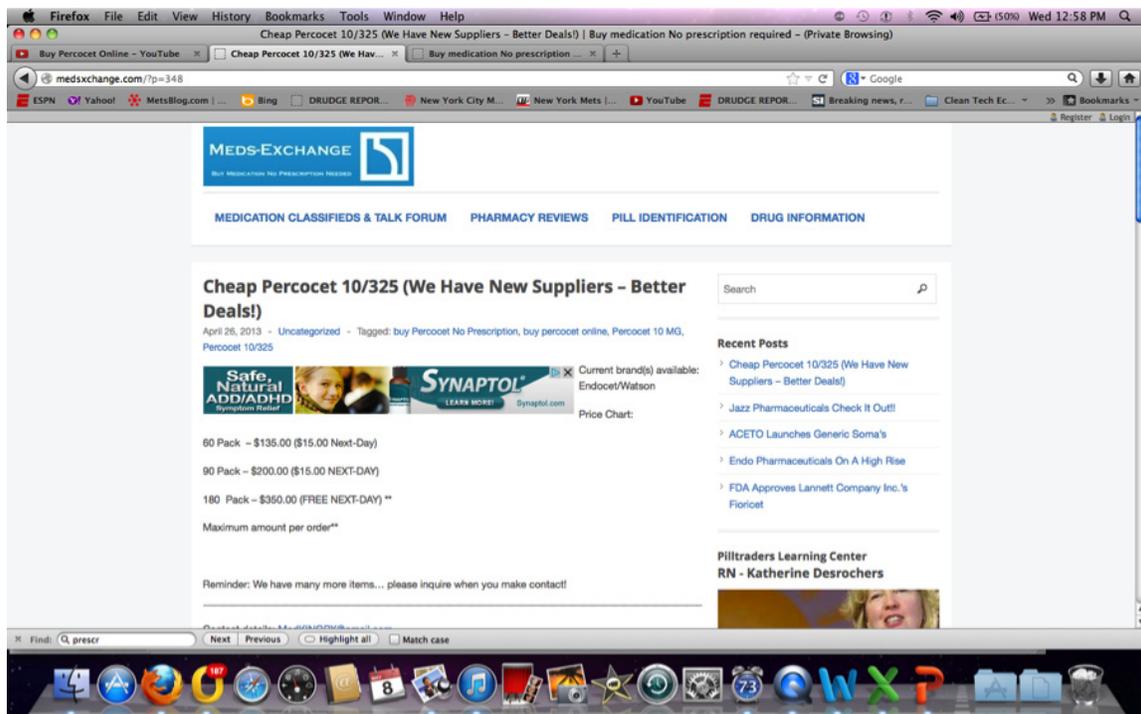
Zanaflex is a muscle relaxer that, according to the FDA, can cause liver damage and hallucination-like symptoms. It isn't a drug that should be acquired without first seeing a doctor and having it prescribed.

Google's business model is to share ad revenues with the video producer promoting the services Cure-Plus.org offers in providing these drugs without a prescription.

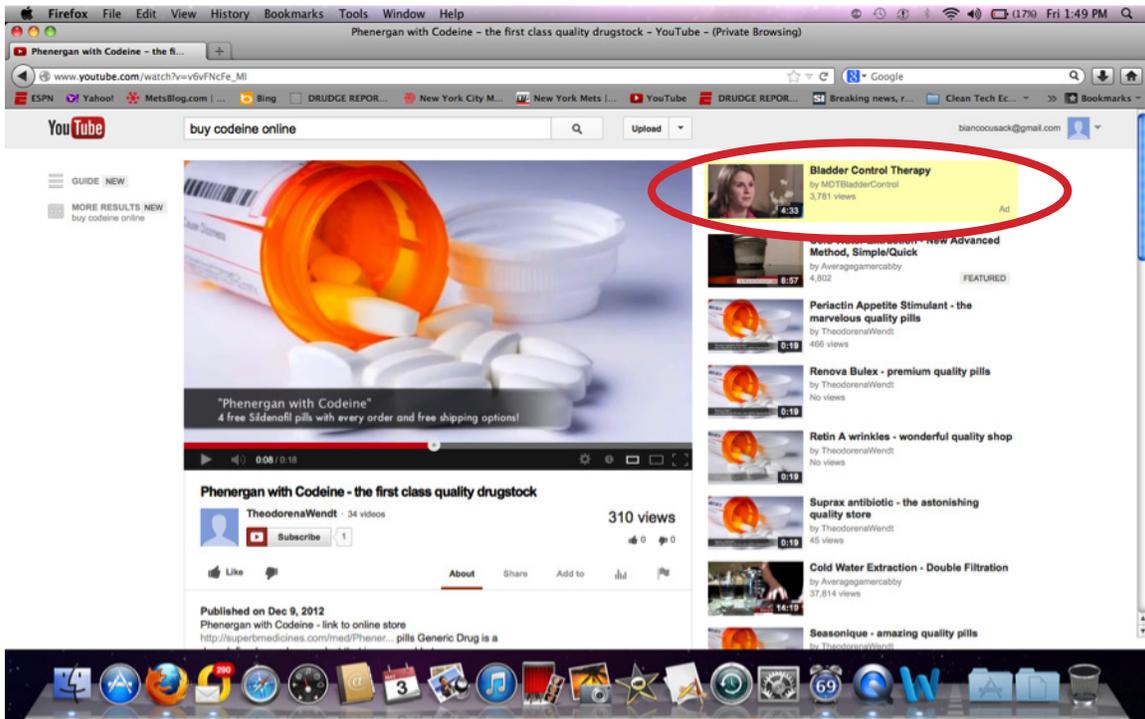
There are dozens of other examples on YouTube. When we searched for "buy percocet online," one of the videos promised "Your #1 source for all pharmaceutical needs, no prescription required." Notice the spinal cord ad to the right of the video.



When we went to the website listed on the video, it took us to medsexchange.com, which promoted its "Cheap Percocet 10/325 (We Have New Suppliers – Better Deals)." The website is below:

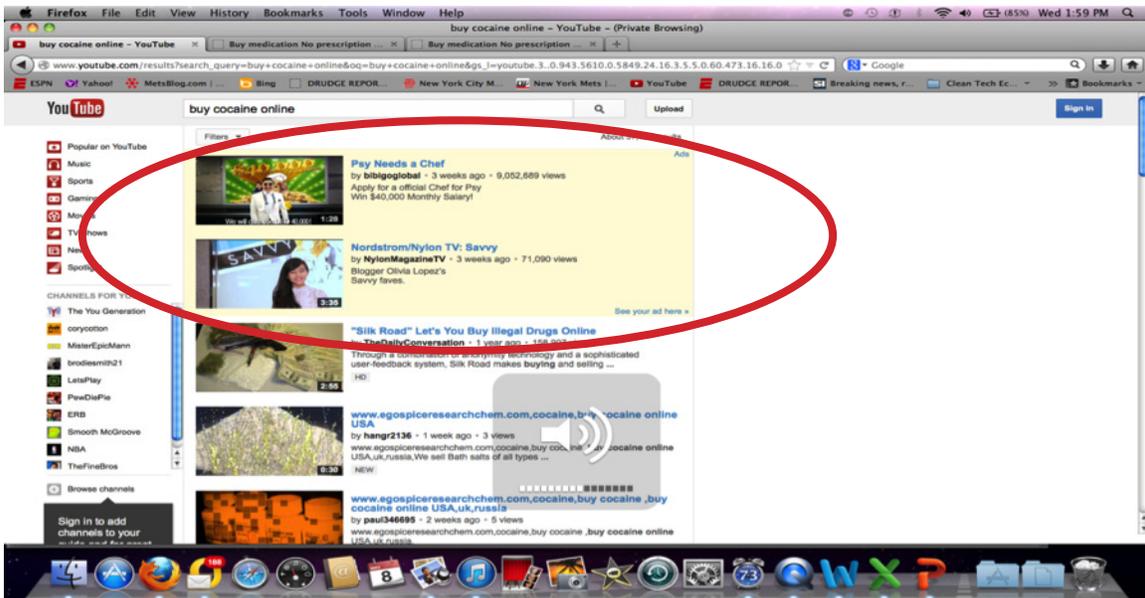


There's also a vibrant market on YouTube for codeine, the prescription painkiller. Below is an ad for a bladder control therapy running against a video promoting how to buy Phergan with Codeine online:

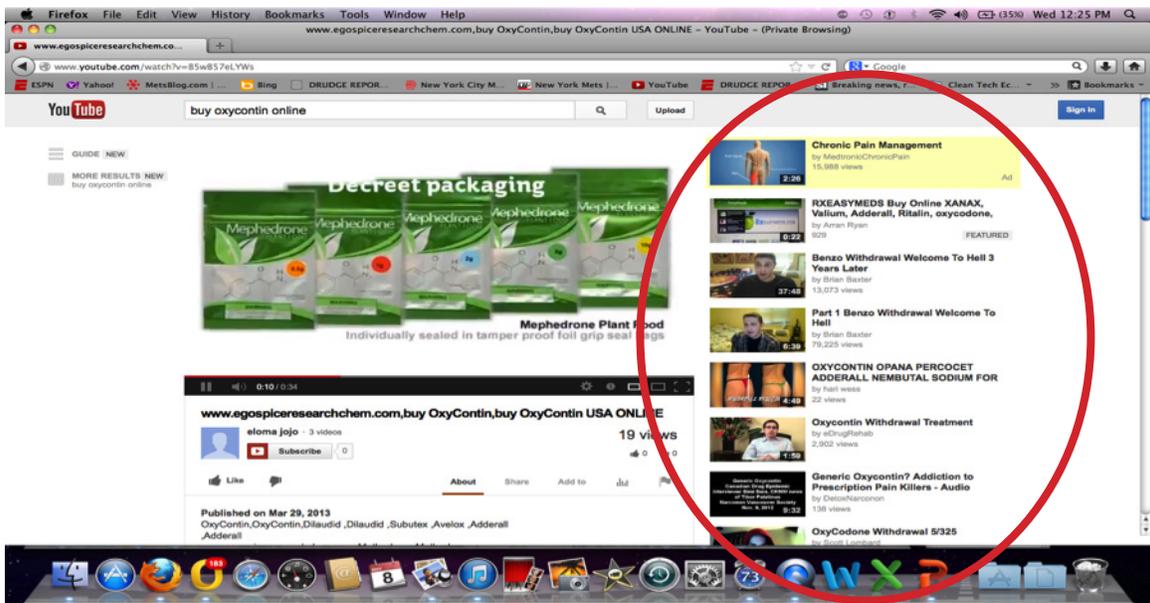


But it's not just sketchy "pharmacies" that are on YouTube. Illegal drugs once sold on the streets are for sale on the Internet these days—and once again, they are typically bringing in ad revenue for Google.

Just doing the search "Buy cocaine online" brings you to two Google ads right under the search term.



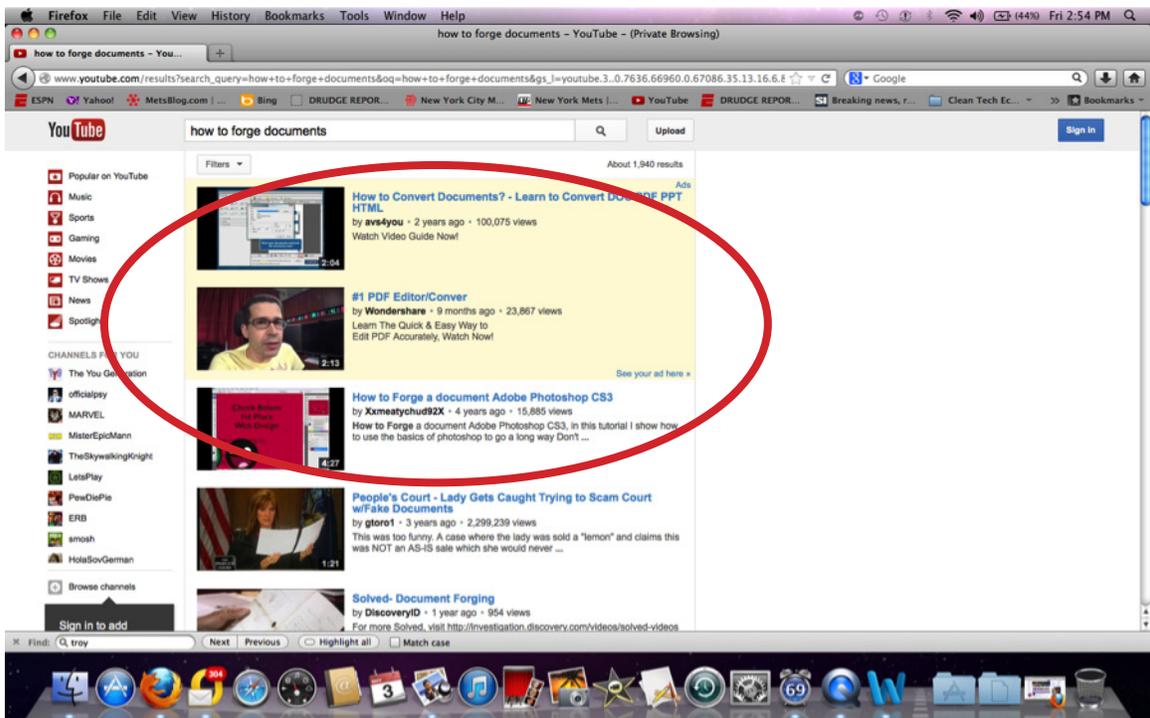
Multiple video channels have been created on YouTube for "egospiceresearchchem," which claims to be selling drugs including vicodine, marijuana, bath salts, heroin, and morphine. Among the videos posted include those that feature Google ads, such as this:



All in all, there are hundreds of YouTube sites that offer drugs in which Google seems to make a profit from advertising.

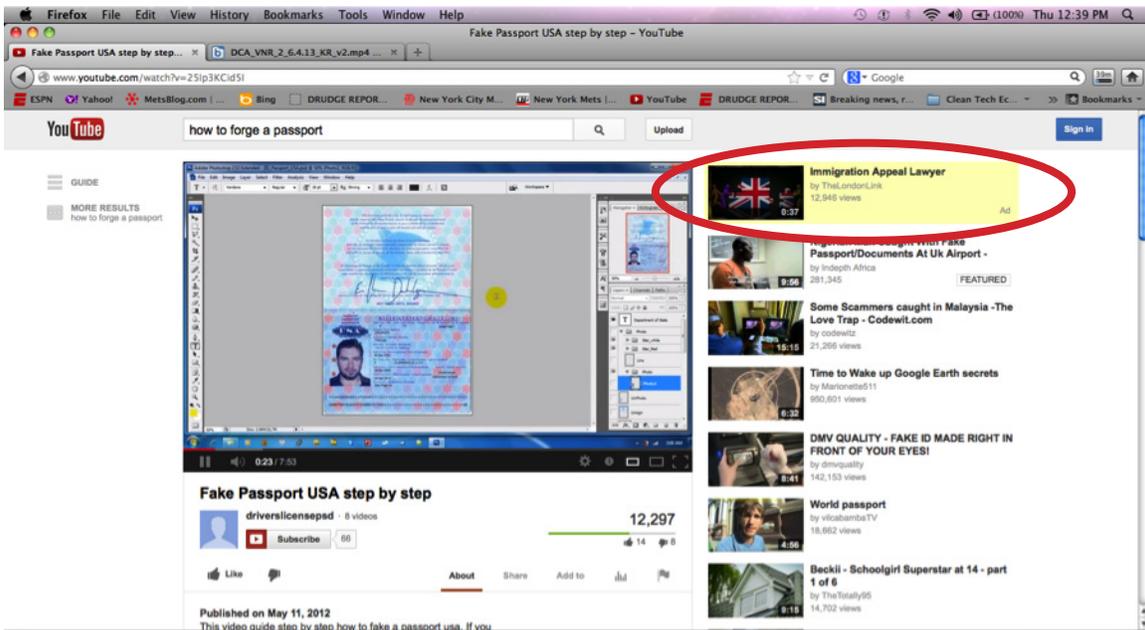
GOOGLE, YOUTUBE, AND FORGED DOCUMENTS

There is also a huge market on YouTube for marketing forged documents, including drivers' licenses and even passports from all over the world. There are plenty of places to find them and YouTube has lots of advertisements alongside.

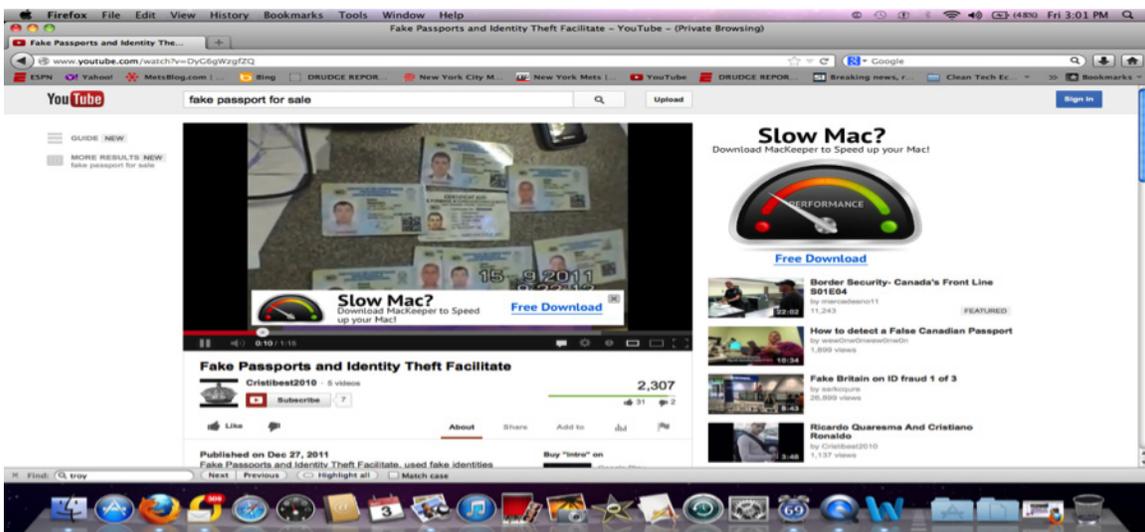


A seven-minute video entitled "Fake Passport USA Step by Step" that describes the video as a "step by step how to fake a passport usa. If you want to buy this file PSD please visit" with a link to a website that offers to provide templates for drivers licenses and other official documents from around the world.

To the right of the video is a Google ad for "Immigration Appeal Lawyer."



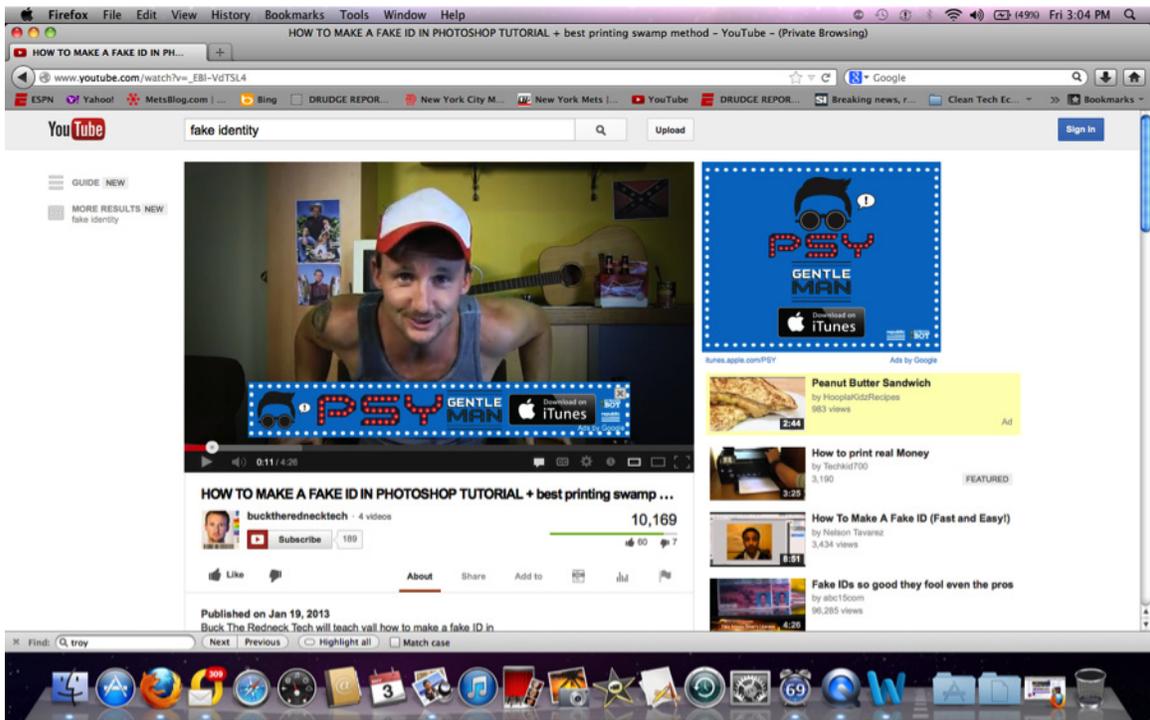
Forged documents are often behind a number of online crimes, such as identity theft. But they are also at the center of numerous crimes taking place offline, everything from underage drinking to illegal immigration to grand larceny.



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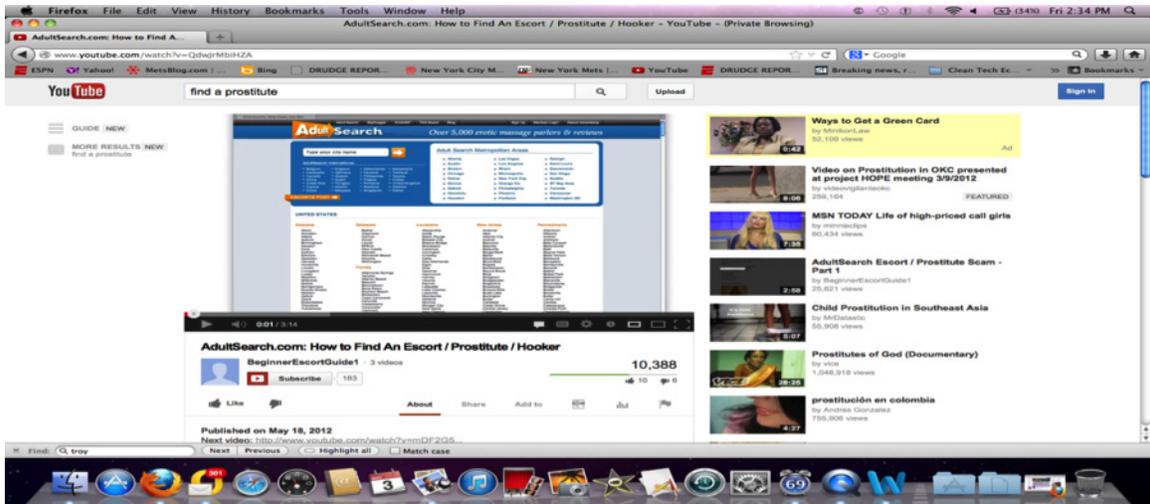
Moreover, benign advertising juxtaposed with video content portraying illegal or dangerous activity can serve to diminish the seriousness of the risks involved. That's particularly worrisome with regard to teens.

For example, Korean pop star Psy is very popular with kids, and the ads in the screenshot below promote his new song—all while explaining how to make a fake ID using Photoshop.

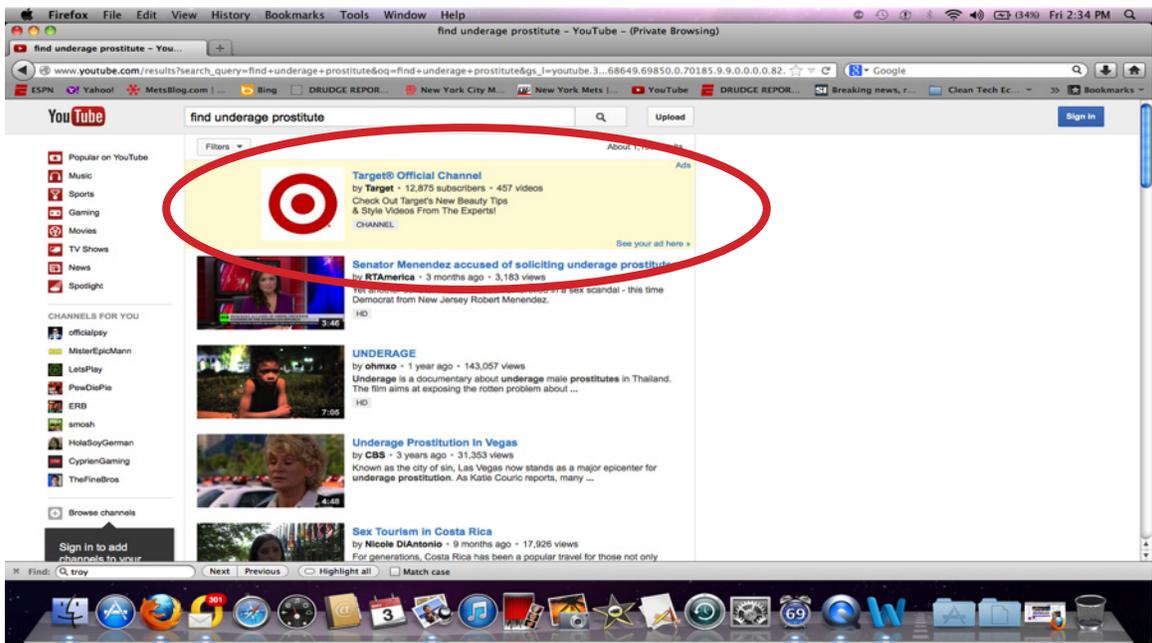


GOOGLE, YOUTUBE, AND PROSTITUTION

The world's oldest profession has a foothold on one of the newest social platforms. Type in "find a prostitute" and AdultSearch.com, a leading online provider of escorts, provides a how-to course. But they also make money by allowing ads next to their videos, as in the case below of the ad on "Ways to Get a Green Card" on the right side.



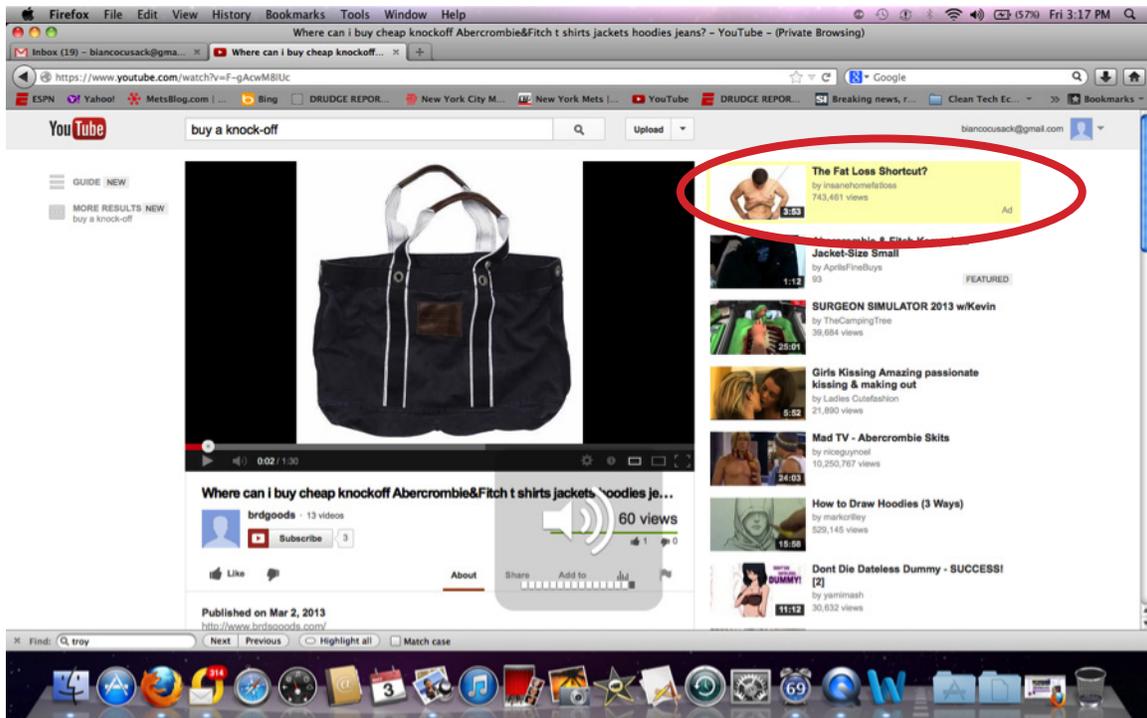
Sometimes, Google is positioned to make money simply from the search itself. In this case, a search of "find underage prostitute" yields an ad for Target, which no doubt would be unhappy to be linked to that search.



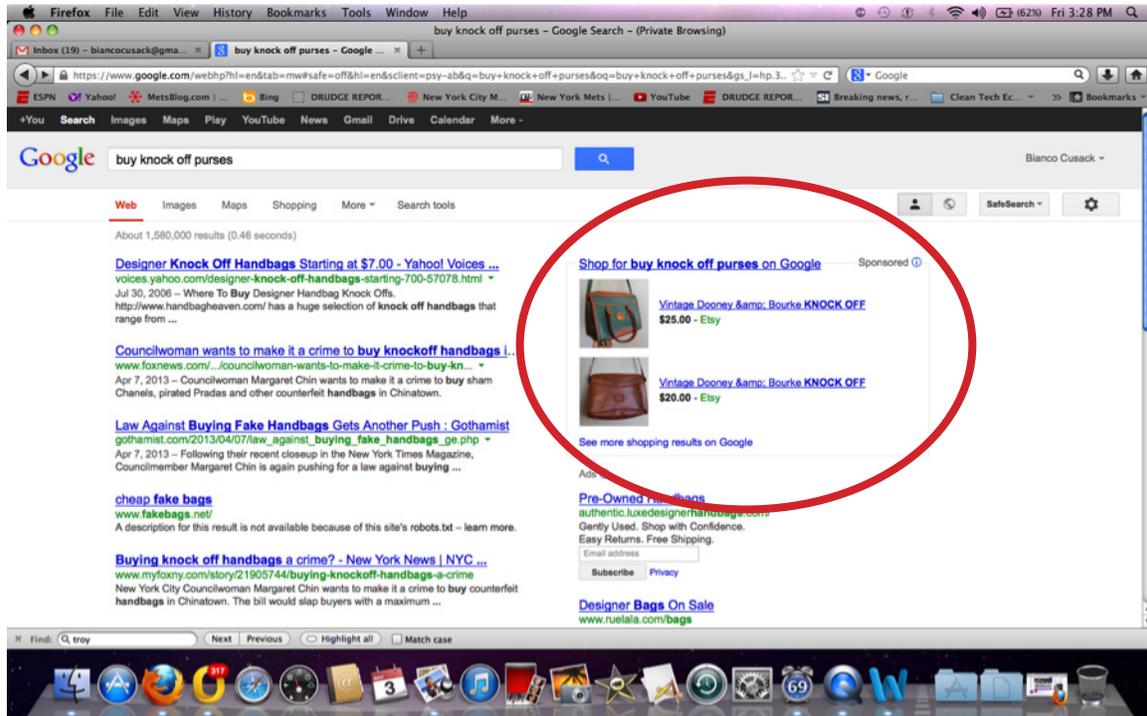
GOOGLE, YOUTUBE, COUNTERFEITS, AND CONTENT THEFT

Google has made great strides in trying to block copyrighted material on YouTube and it deserves credit for doing so. That is why it's so discouraging to see their willingness to make money off of ads associated with Google searches and YouTube videos that promote counterfeit products or demonstrate how to engage in content theft.

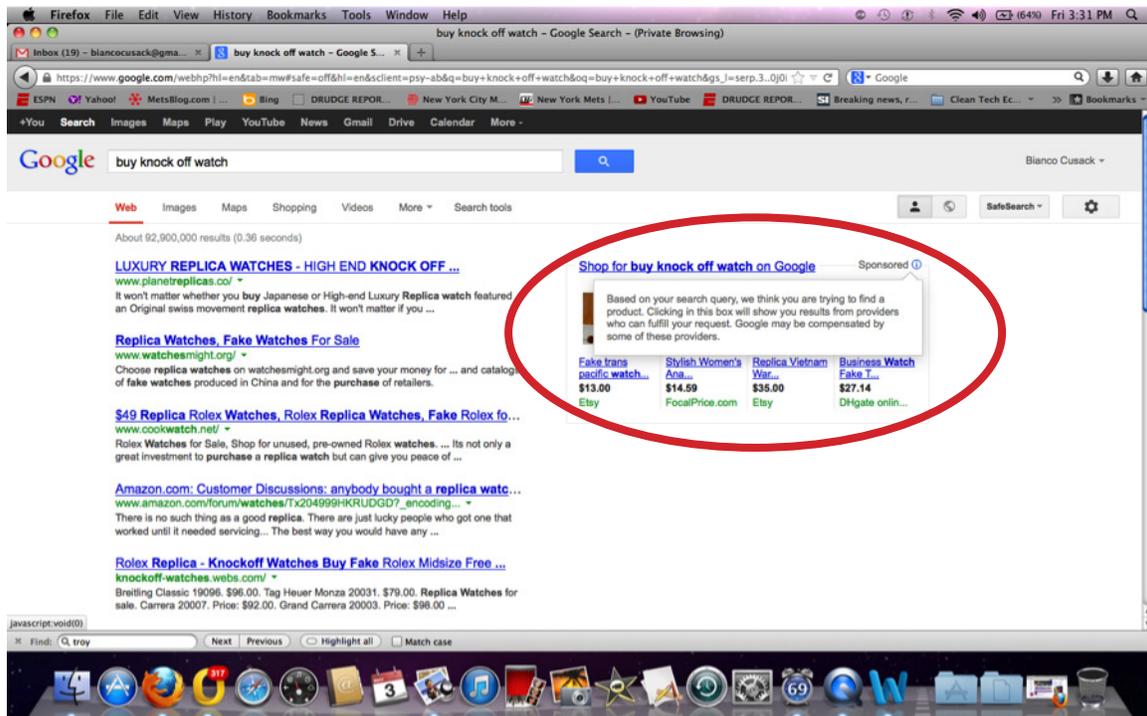
Take a look at this YouTube video promoting counterfeit Abercrombie and Fitch goods. Notice the ad on the right-hand side for weight loss. With that ad, YouTube is essentially sharing revenue with a counterfeiter.



Google seems to do the same thing with its sponsored links attached to a search for "buy knock off purses":

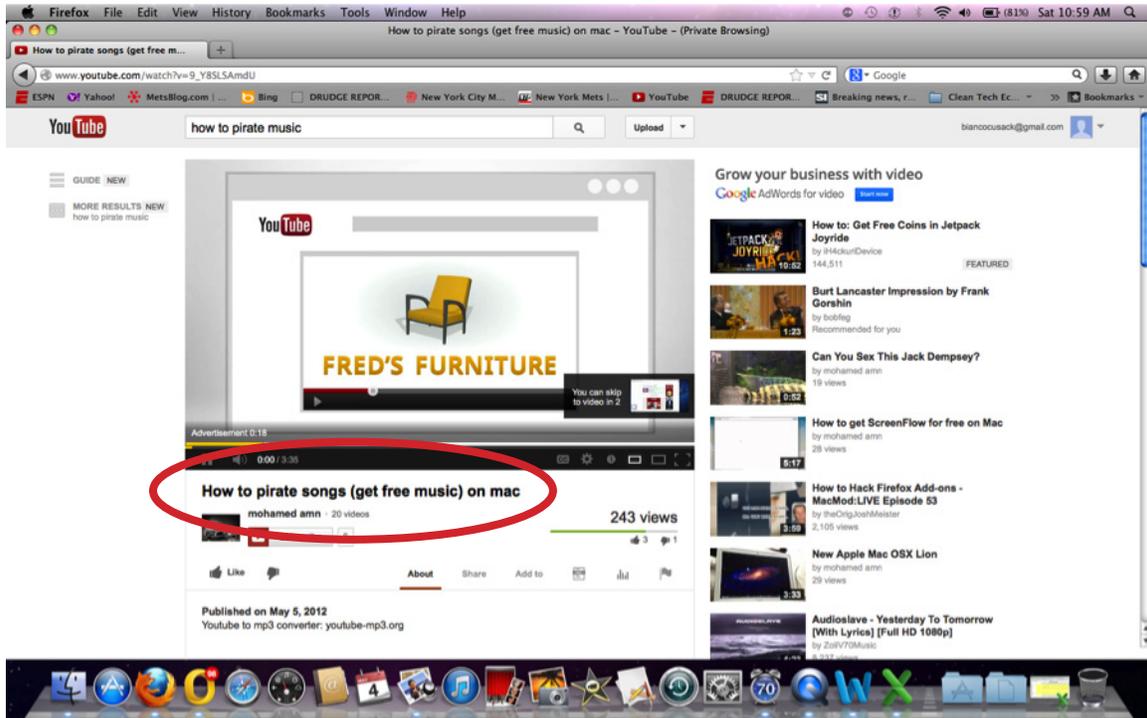


Notice how in the instance below, Google acknowledges it may be compensated by those promoting knock-off watches:

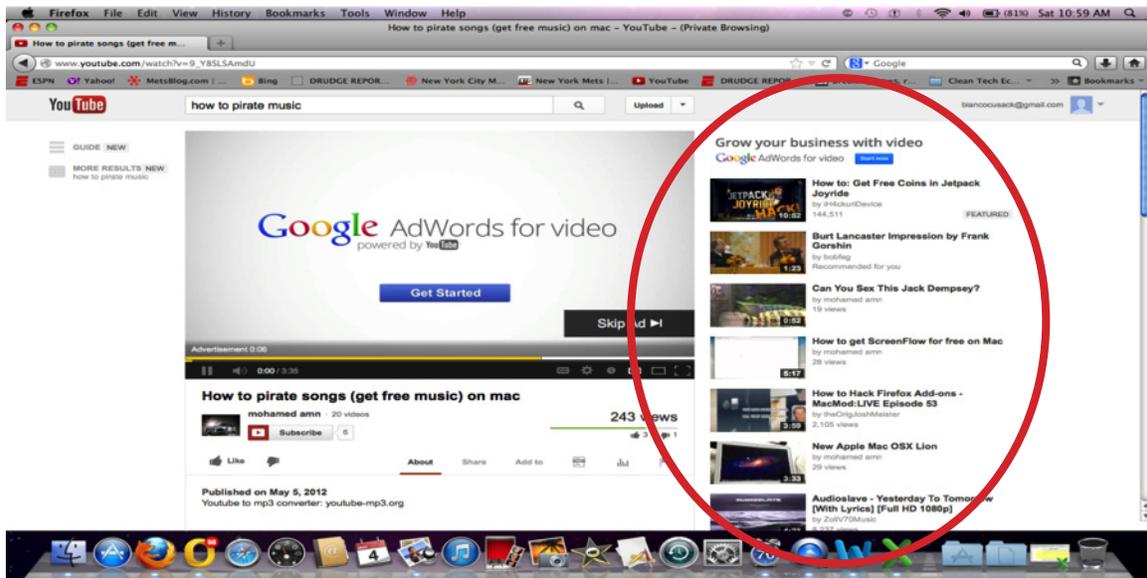


Google also seems to stand to profit by sharing ads with those who want to show others how to engage in

content theft. The example below shows an ad for Fred’s Furniture attached to a video on “How to pirate songs (get free music) on mac”:



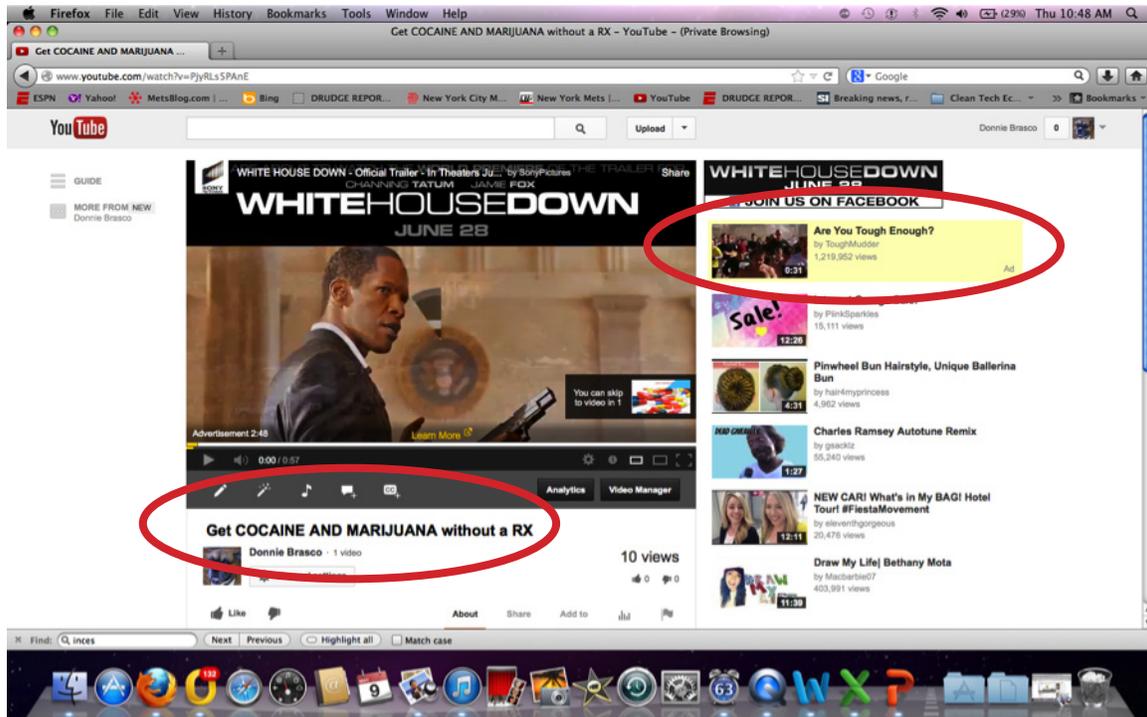
And, ironically, Google runs its own ad—on how to make money—for the same video!



DRUGS AND GOOGLE ADS: A CASE STUDY

To understand how the economics of YouTube ads work, the Digital Citizens Alliance created its own YouTube account, created a fake drug video entitled, “Get Cocaine and Marijuana without a RX.” The basic video lists a domain (that we made up) offering to sell prescription drugs. We posted the video and gave permission to YouTube to monetize it. By monetizing it, we allowed YouTube to place ads next to the video—with the understanding that we’d split the ad revenue with YouTube.

Within three days, our video had multiple ads running alongside it and even embedded within it:



As you can see, in this instance YouTube placed two ads with the video advertising cocaine and marijuana. The first ad, which ran before the video would start, was for a new Sony movie titled "White House Down." The second ad, to the right, is for Tough Mudder, an endurance race held in multiple locations around the country.

We then decided to "report ourself" to Google. We alerted them of the ad, and it was taken down. Google deserves credit for doing so, but it begs the question why Google—with its sophisticated technology—couldn't have spotted the offending video in the first place.

MAKING THE INTERNET A SAFER PLACE

As a society, we know the Internet offers the potential for great good. It eliminates time and distance, enabling people all over the globe to connect. And that openness we accept comes at a cost. We accept the fact it will be used by terrorists, criminals, and other bad actors to advance their ends.

But as one of the most visited websites in the world, YouTube has an important place in our society and an obligation to the online community it serves. That is why Google and YouTube must take more responsibility for what is appearing on their platforms.

It is critical they are proactive in this regard; this is not the time or place for government to intervene. But we, the Digital Citizens, can hold them accountable. Therefore, Digital Citizens calls on Google to take the following steps:

- Google and YouTube should not benefit financially from videos that promote potentially illegal or unscrupulous actions. Unless they act to stop these videos, Google and YouTube will remain as advertising partners with these bad actors. By allowing ads and sharing in their revenue, Google and YouTube are encouraging the creation of videos related to drug dealing, prostitution, ID forgery, content theft, and counterfeiting. Instead of just waiting for users to complain, Google should use their vaunted analytics systems to identify and eliminate objectionable YouTube videos.
- Google seems to have drawn a line that says that porn and vulgarity are objectionable and won't be

facilitated, but illegal narcotics and prescription drugs are fair game. Google should adopt the same standards on these potentially dangerous activities that it does for pornography and vulgarity. For example, Google should stop autocompleting phrases such as “buy oxycodone online” and “how to build a shrapnel bomb.”

- Internet users deserve a more clear understanding of what Google is willing to allow. If Google is going to continue to potentially profit from ads on objectionable videos on YouTube, it should clearly state the criteria.

Google has proven time and time again that it has brilliant minds who can accomplish great things. We hope that they reaffirm their commitment to “don’t be evil” and put Internet safety above profits. In doing so they would make the Internet a safer place.

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alliance 

www.digitalcitizensalliance.org