



777 6th Street NW  
11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20001  
[www.digitalcitizensalliance.org](http://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org)

March 31, 2020

Chairman Joseph J. Simons  
Federal Trade Commission  
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20580

Re: Fraudsters and Opportunists Exploiting the Coronavirus Epidemic enabled by YouTube

Dear Chairman Simons:

We write to you again on efforts to prioritize investigations of fraudsters and opportunists exploiting the coronavirus pandemic, and to share new evidence of potential bad actors utilizing Google-owned YouTube to target unsuspecting Americans. We applaud the ongoing hard work and dedication to protecting this nation's citizens.

New research from the Digital Citizens Alliance (DCA) and Coalition for a Safer Web (CSW) finds YouTube enabling sellers to market medical masks, fake vaccines and bogus cures at a time when they are in short supply for medical professionals, not recommended for consumers and there is no legitimate vaccine or cure for coronavirus.

To be clear, YouTube, and its parent company Google, are shirking their formal policy that prohibits content that capitalizes off sensitive events. Beyond that, on March 10, Google stated it would formally ban ads for protective facemask after multiple major media outlets reported Google was serving them.

Exactly a week later on March 17, U.S. Senators Mark R. Warner (D-VA) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) slammed Google in a [joint letter](#) to your office 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."

Despite the official banning of the ads by Google and public pressure, On March 22, *CNN* reported that Google was still serving ads for medical facemasks on major news outlets.

Over this same period up until today, researchers from DCA and CSW identified and documented dozens of YouTube videos peddling mask, vaccines and cures through searches on the platform.

Additionally, DCA and CSW investigators 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, based on statements made by those sellers..
- Other sellers didn’t even try and pretend to be legitimate. One seller who simply goes by the name “Real ID Card Fake Passport Producer” was found using YouTube to offer “Covid 19 Drugs.”
- YouTube is including a link to CDC information on these videos from shady operators. Official CDC banners are being placed under any coronavirus related material on YouTube – from news stories by trusted media outlets to the more troubling videos from operators making outlandish claims.

**NOTE: All screen captures taken during searches are available in a slideshow which is available upon request.**

Digital Citizens is sharing this information in the hopes the Federal Trade Commission will act swiftly to hold bad actors, who take advantage of the coronavirus, accountable. In this crisis, strong action will deter others from engaging in criminal or illicit acts that harm consumers or add to confusion and anxiety. We remain available should your office wish to meet with us at any time to share in depth our analysis and findings.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Very truly yours,

**Digital Citizens Alliance**



Tom Galvin  
Executive Director

**About Digital Citizens Alliance**

The Digital Citizens Alliance is a nonprofit, 501(c)(6) organization 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

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as well as online safety experts and other communities focused on Internet safety. Visit us at [www.digitalcitizensalliance.org](http://www.digitalcitizensalliance.org).