



700 K Street NW
3rd Floor
Washington, DC 20001
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November 16, 2021

The Honorable James Clyburn, Chairman, House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
274 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Sellers Offering CDC Vaccine Cards and The Platforms Making It Possible

Dear Chairman Clyburn:

The Digital Citizens Alliance applauds the critically important work of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis to combat waste, fraud and abuse related to the ongoing pandemic. In support of those efforts, we write to you to share findings from the recent joint investigation of sellers offering CDC vaccine cards and the major social media platforms making it possible. On October 21, 2021, Digital Citizens Alliance (DCA) and Coalition for a Safer Web (CSW) published "[Cheating With Covid Cards](#)," which found vaccine card sellers have moved from the backrooms of Telegram and into the mainstream via Facebook and Instagram.

Digital Citizens and CSW researchers contacted sellers on Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram and found many of the same patterns and tactics from each:

- Utilizing misinformation and disinformation to persuade vulnerable buyers to act quickly.
- Seizing on the language of the anti-vaccine movement to at least appear as kindred spirits. Sellers offer the cards as a sort of 'public service' to those in the anti-vax community who don't want the vaccine and don't want to compromise their lifestyle because of vaccine mandates.
- Showing pictures of cards with lot numbers and actual stores (including major pharmacies), then promising in 1:1 conversations on apps like Telegram and WhatsApp the ability to produce a card that appears legitimate – using actual vaccine lot numbers and store information. The sellers claim and/or imply that they have contacts inside legitimate, respected drug stores and the offices of medical professionals. The rogue sellers claim they can create cards designed to evade potential law enforcement scrutiny using resources from legitimate businesses.

To be clear – researchers have doubts about the claims of these bad actors. They ask to share personally identifiable information, including social security numbers, which could be what the sellers are after. While it's possible that a lone wolf employee could go rogue and utilize their position to make a profit, we do not believe, based on our investigation, the pharmaceutical sellers (aka, CVS, Walgreen's, some supermarket chains, and independent operations distributing

the COVID-19 vaccine) are in any way a party to this activity. In fact, we believe vaccine makers and drug store chains are victims in this situation.

Additionally, we believe the potential danger to the public is real and of major concern. Fraudulent cards could allow unvaccinated people to move and mingle in places where they can be dangerous – like schools or amongst crowds at sporting events and concerts.

Finally, Social media platforms enable criminals to engage with large swaths of the public online. Many of the platforms show no urgency to address an issue that our investigation found escalating during two months of research. Facebook, and its subsidiary Instagram, were slow to act upon the findings included in our report. In a search conducted by a CSW researcher on November 15, 2021, as many as six Facebook posts included in the report remain active.

Platforms can't control what their users say, but they can control how much what they say is amplified. As Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen has said [Facebook's algorithms amplify harmful content](#). Our researchers witnessed what she described. They reached a point where they no longer had to search for sellers. Instead, the algorithm suggested sellers to them. We show what that looks like in the report (see pages 18-19). This is far from the only time we've seen platforms direct people looking for trouble right to the bad actors claiming to offer the dangerous goods and/or services that shoppers want to find.

Digital Citizens is sharing this information in the hopes the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis 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.

Sincerely,

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

as well as online safety experts and other communities focused on Internet safety. Visit us at www.digitalcitizensalliance.org.

About The Coalition for a Safer Web

The Coalition for a Safer Web, a cyber counter terrorism and anti-extremism non-profit organization whose mission is to prevent social media platforms from serving as pathways for extremists and terrorists to plot, incite, and execute domestic and foreign acts of violence. CSW currently advises Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and the National Security Council on social media-based extremist incitement and operational planning, as well as private industry and civil society organizations. Visit us at coalitionsw.org.

Cheating With Covid Cards Report Media Coverage

1. *NBC 4 Washington*, [**Fraudsters Claim They Can Register Fake Vaccination Card Buyers in State Databases**](#) – October 13, 2021
2. *WDIV Local 4 Detroit (NBC)*, [**Scammers are now using fake COVID vaccine card sales to steal people's identities**](#), -- October 28, 2021
3. *Salon*, [**Inside the black market for fake vaccination cards**](#) – November 2, 2021

Digital Citizens Alliance Coronavirus Related Investigations

Cheating With Covid Cards is the latest investigation from the Digital Citizens Alliance showing bad actors taking advantage of pandemic related upheaval and anxiety. Previous reports include:

1. [**Digital Weeds 2021: Illegal and/or Illicit on Social Media Platforms Never Goes Away**](#) – March, 2021
2. [**A Shot from the Darkest Corners of the Internet: Covid Vaccines “For Sale” on Social Media Platforms**](#) – February, 2021
3. [**YouTube Enabling \(Maybe Validating\) Shadowy Sellers of Medical Masks and Bogus Vaccines**](#) – April, 2020

Cheating with COVID Cards

Sellers Offering CDC Vaccine Cards and The Platforms Making It Possible

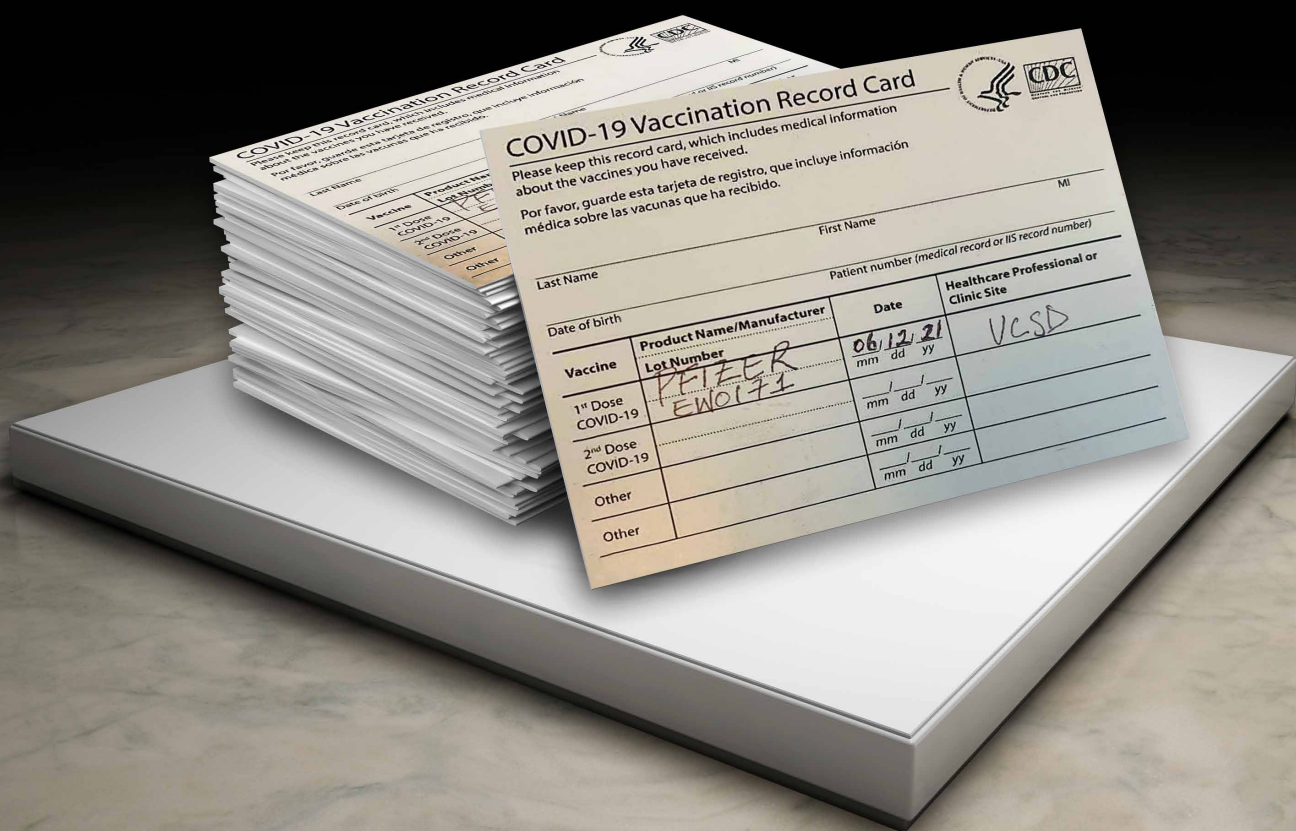


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CALIFORNIA News Times

Local Home / Local / Fake COVID vaccine card sales are ramping up on social media, cybersecurity expert says

Fake COVID vaccine card sales are ramping up online, cybersecurity expert says

Los Angeles August 12, 2021



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THE NEW REPUBLIC



Molly Osberg / August 27, 2021

Inside the Paranoid, Highly Excitable Ecosystem of the Vaccine Card Black Market

The person you're likely to find with their phony card is likely just an overtired bartender at the health infrastructure.

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Fake Covid Vaccination Cards Are on the Rise in the U.S., Europe

Vaccine mandates have fueled an increase in demand for fraudulent certificates as sellers flourish online



The CDC cards issued in the U.S. weren't intended to be...

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LAW

Fake COVID Vaccine Cards Are Being Sold Online Using One Is A Crime

June 8, 2021 · 5:47 AM ET

JACLYN DIAZ



Executive Summary

This summer, numerous media headlines focused on online sellers illegally pushing COVID vaccine cards for sale on social media platforms, particularly Telegram. The cards stamped with Centers for Disease Control (CDC) logos that sell for between \$100 and \$200 have been hot commodities for months. So why are illegal vaccine cards still so readily available on social media platforms?

Researchers from Digital Citizens Alliance (Digital Citizens) and Coalition for a Safer Web (CSW) have theories about why the number of vaccine cards available seems to be growing instead of shrinking. However, the two organizations are even more concerned about another development that should make headlines as well.

Vaccine card sellers have moved from the backrooms of Telegram and into the mainstream via Facebook and Instagram.

Digital Citizens and CSW researchers contacted sellers on Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram and found many of the same patterns and tactics from each:

- Utilizing misinformation and disinformation to persuade vulnerable buyers to act quickly.
- Seizing on the language of the anti-vaccine movement to at least appear as kindred spirits. Sellers offer the cards as a sort of 'public service' to those in the anti-vax community who don't want the vaccine and don't want to compromise their lifestyle because of vaccine mandates.
- Showing pictures of cards with lot numbers and actual stores (including major pharmacies), then promising in 1:1 conversations on apps like Telegram and What's App the ability to produce a card that appears legitimate – using actual vaccine lot numbers and store information. The sellers claim and/or imply that they have contacts inside legitimate, respected drug stores and the offices of medical professionals. The rogue sellers claim they can create cards designed to evade potential law enforcement scrutiny using resources from legitimate businesses.

To be clear – researchers have doubts about the claims of these cons. They ask to share personally identifiable information, including social security numbers, which could be what the sellers are after. While it's possible that a lone wolf employee could go rogue and utilize their position to help fellow anti-vaxxers, there is every reason to suspect that the pharmaceutical sellers (aka, CVS, Walgreen's, some supermarket chains, and independent operations distributing the COVID-19 vaccine) are in no ways a party to this activity. Furthermore, Digital Citizens and CSW believe these entities are being victimized by bad actors being enabled by the social media platforms.

Furthermore, vaccine makers and drug store chains are the victims here. Messages and posts from people claiming to be rogue employees or connected to rogue employees further erodes public confidence in institutions we need to trust.

Researchers wanted to buy the cards to see if sellers might be infiltrating the digital bookkeeping of pharmacies and/or doctor's offices. But the FBI has cracked down on anyone in possession of the cards. It may have been illegal for Digital Citizens to even try to buy the CDC's COVID vaccine cards.

So instead, Digital Citizens and CSW will share these findings with the companies mentioned in posts and messaging, including vaccine makers and pharmacy chains, hoping they can determine what is going on – if anything - inside their networks. Suppose bad actors are entering unvaccinated people as being vaccinated. In that case, there is potential for even greater chaos in the efforts to determine what communities might be most vulnerable to a potential COVID-19 outbreak.

Potentially, fraudulent cards could allow unvaccinated people to move and mingle in places where they can be dangerous – like schools or amongst crowds at sporting events and concerts. The danger here is massive.

Social media platforms enable criminals to engage with large swaths of the public online. Many of the platforms show no urgency to address an issue that has been escalating for weeks. (As researchers were reviewing some of the accounts on Facebook and Instagram, news broke that YouTube would ban all anti-vaccine content from its platform.)

Here are just some of what the Digital Citizens and CSW research teams have seen during this two-month investigation.

¹ www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/09/29/youtube-ban-joseph-mercola/

Posts Spreading Fear Through Misinformation & Disinformation

Image 1. "Doctor" selling cards on Facebook spreads misinformation and disinformation to sell fake cards

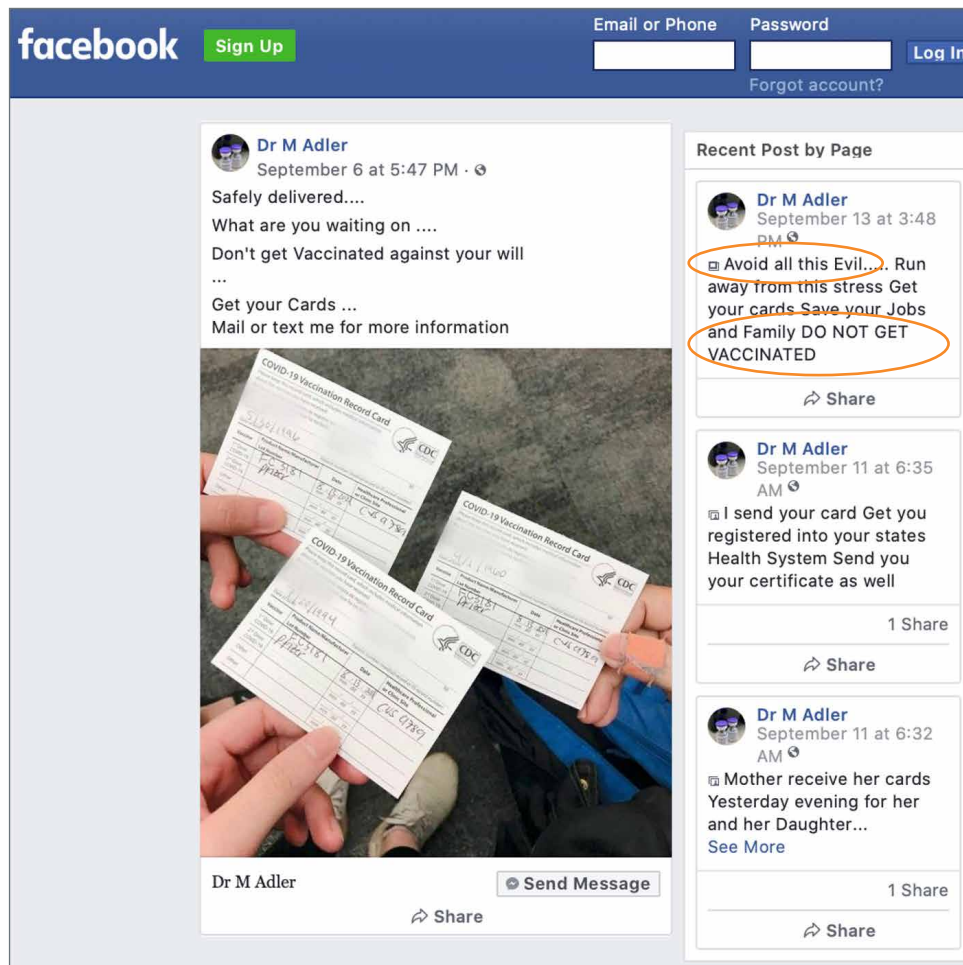


Image 1

Facebook Post including what can be inferred to be counterfeit vaccine cards, on which fake sellers have put a Pfizer lot number (3181) and a CVS store number (9789, which appears to be in Mission Hills, CA). The account operator, who calls himself "Dr M Adler," encourages people to "avoid all this evil" and "DO NOT GET VACCINATED." (Screenshot taken September 29)

Images 2-3. In Images 2 and 3 (below), the "Doctor" shares pictures of people with various kinds of skin irritation looking like some kind of blister. In one message (Image 3), he writes, "This is what Pfizer does to you... Stay safe with your vaccine Cards available at your convenience."

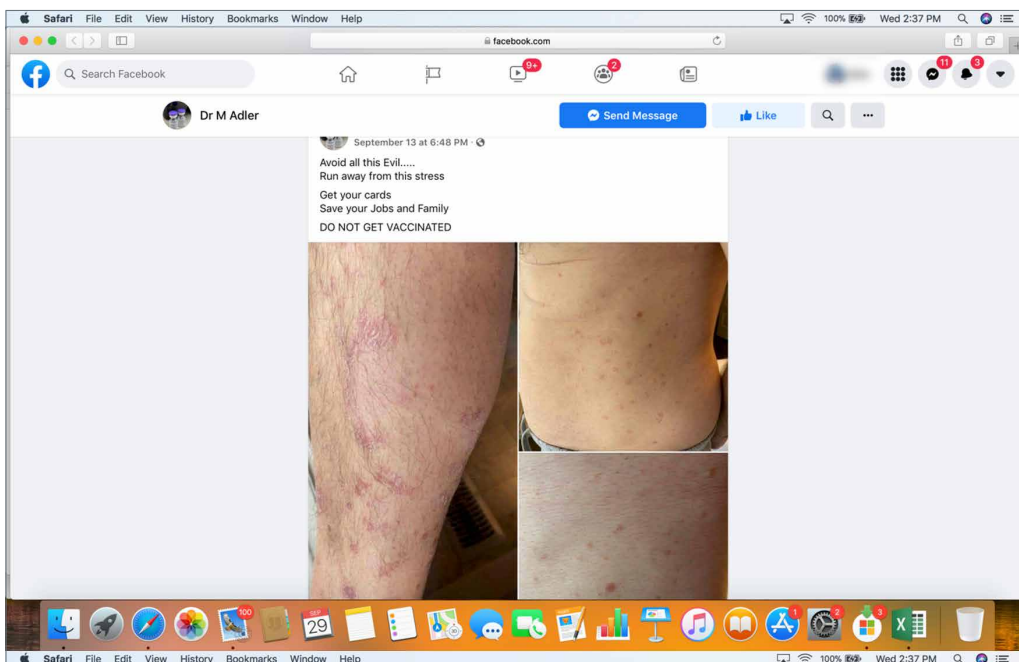


Image 2

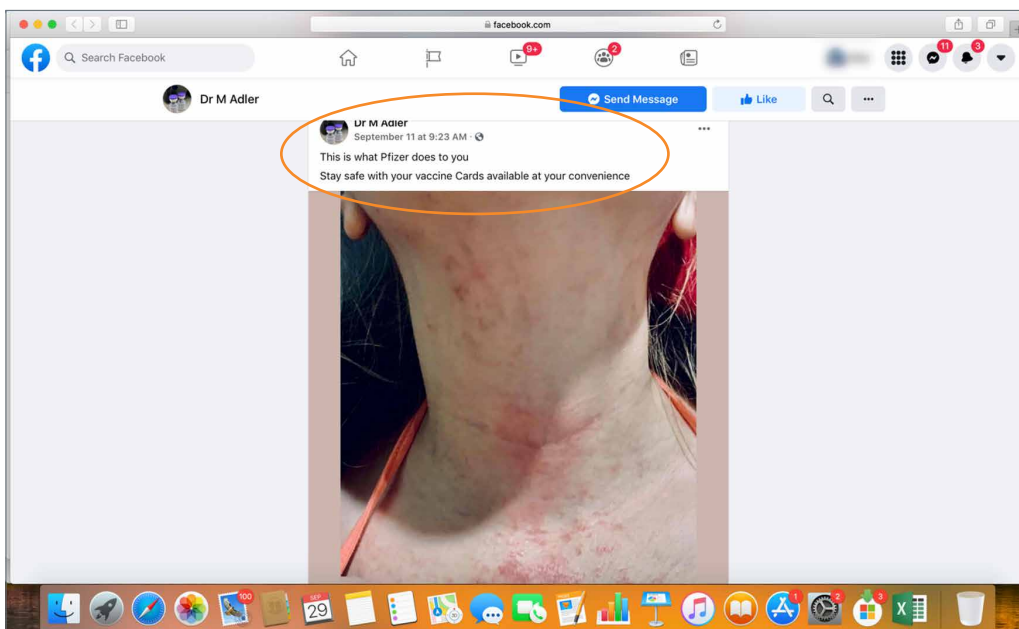


Image 3

Images 4-5. Novaccine4health – driving followers from Instagram to Telegram (and vice versa).

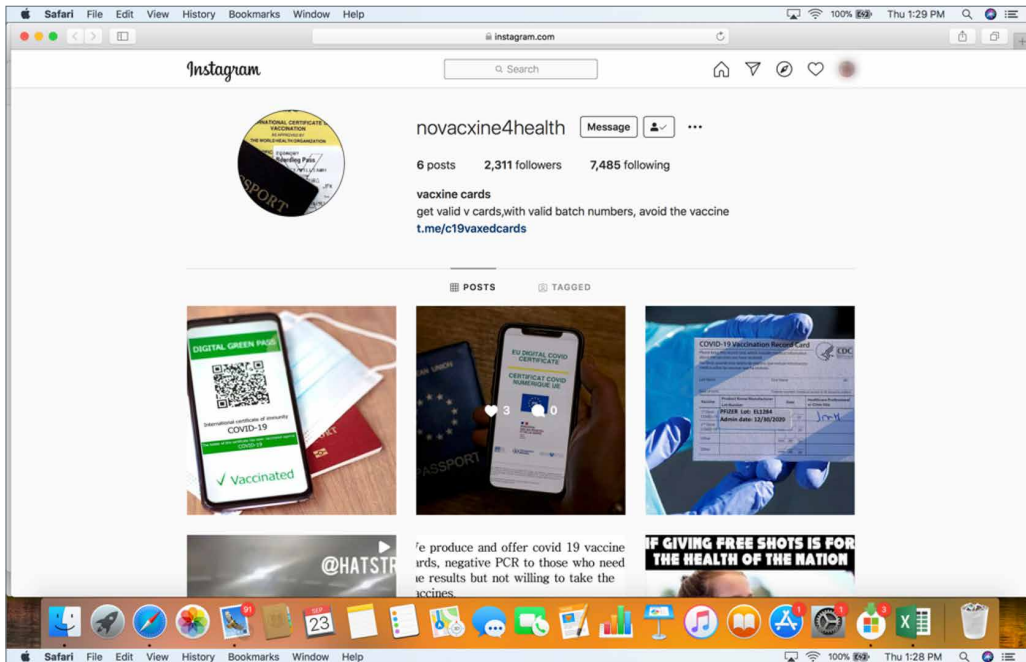


Image 4

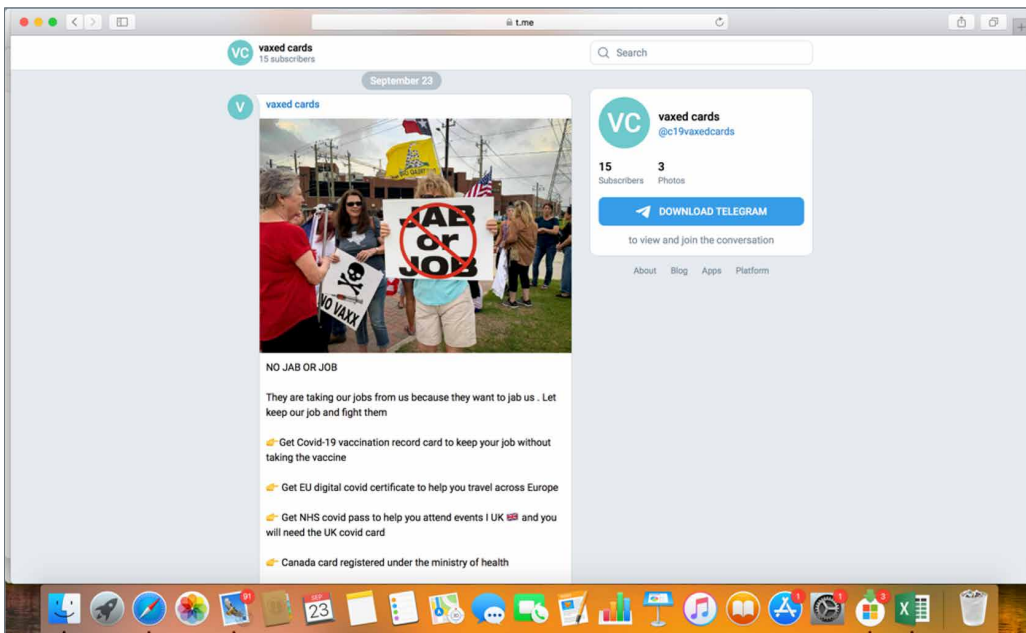


Image 5

Researchers found Novaccine4health with just six posts on Instagram (Image 4) but more than 7,400 followers. The page description makes its objectives very clear – “get valid v cards.with valid batch numbers, avoid the vaccine.” It then includes a link to a Telegram page (Image 5), where the operator shares even more political rhetoric. (From Instagram and Telegram, shared September 23, 2021.)

Sometimes misinformation is political, while others it is just about driving sales. For example, the aforementioned “Dr. Adler” said his cards were helping people avoid vaccinations. Digital Citizens and CSW shared the “Doctor’s” posts with investigators from WRC-TV, NBC 4 in Washington, DC. WRC’s News 4 investigators searched for some of the people whose cards were included in Dr. Adler’s posts. One card that intrigued the reporters belonged to “George Morrice”, who was pictured holding his card while wearing a uniform with a badge. In “Dr. Adler’s” post, he claims the picture shows that even “Police Deputies” are using his cards. (See Image 6 below).

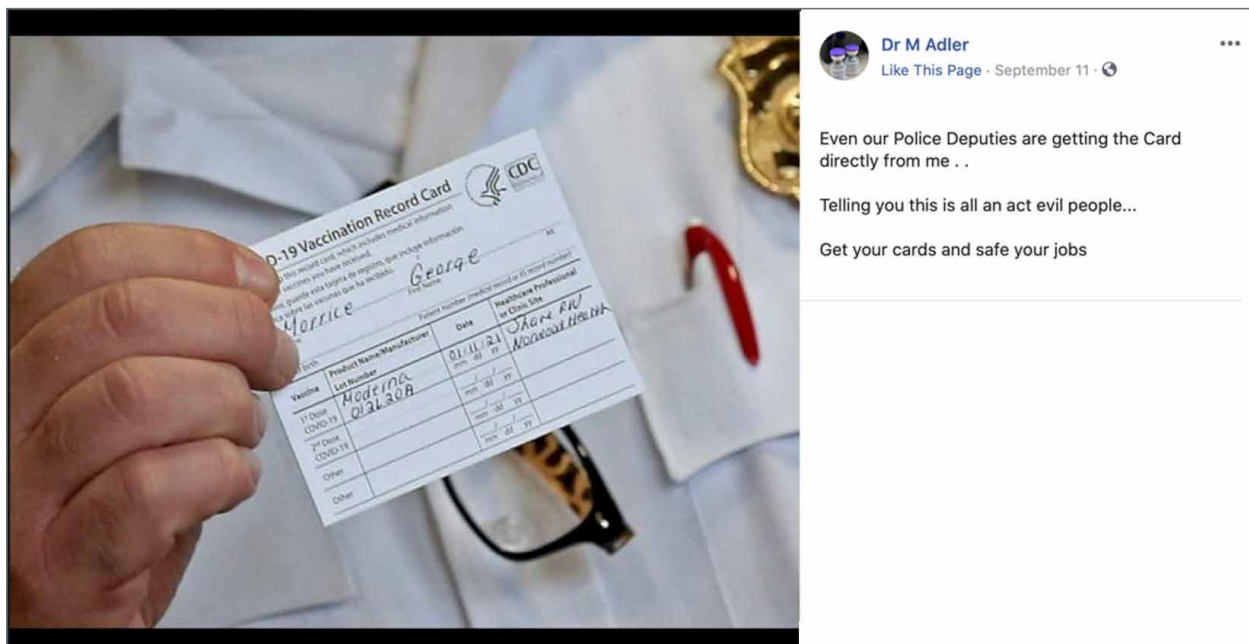



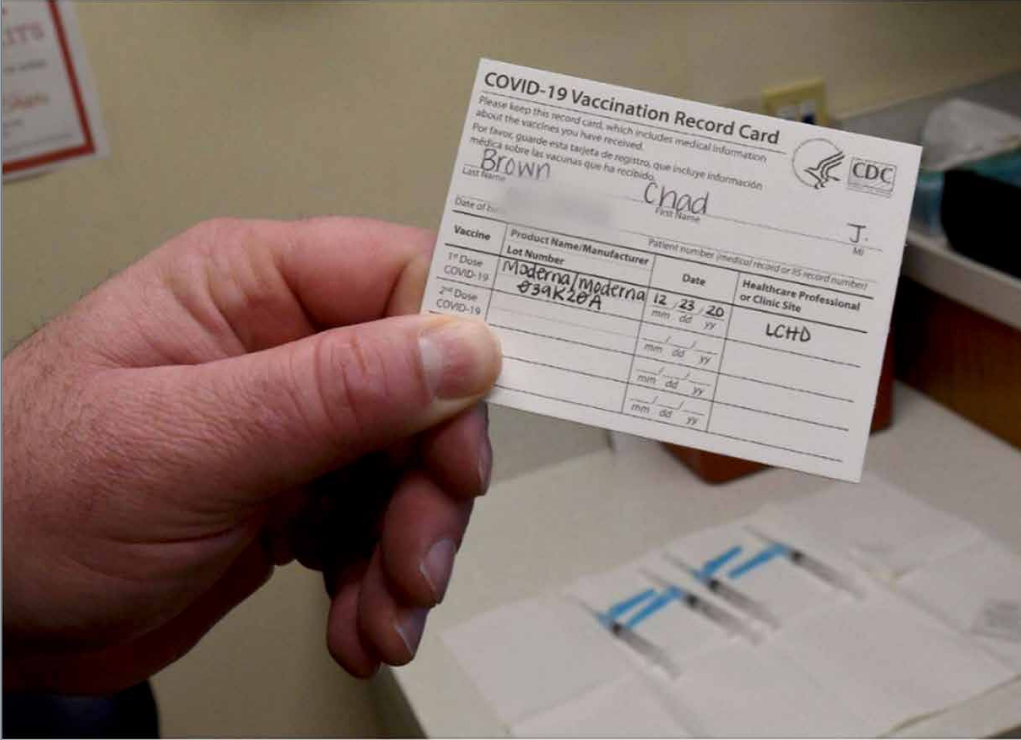
Image 6

But in truth, Morrice is the retired Fire Chief from the Norwood, MA Fire Department. The photo above is an actual photo of Chief Morrice holding his card after received his shot. Norwood provided News 4 Investigators video proof showing Chief Morrice getting vaccinated.

There is also the story of Chad Brown (see his card in Image 7 below).

 **Dr M Adler**
September 7 at 2:52 PM · 🌐

I've got you covered
Get your cards and you won't regret it
Safeguard your jobs



COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card
Please keep this record card, which includes medical information about the vaccines you have received.
Por favor, guarde esta tarjeta de registro, que incluye información médica sobre las vacunas que ha recibido.

Last Name: Brown First Name: Chad J. MI

Vaccine	Product Name/Manufacturer	Date	Healthcare Professional or Clinic Site
1 st Dose COVID-19	<u>Moderna/moderna</u>	<u>12 23 20</u> mm dd yy	<u>LCHD</u>
2 nd Dose COVID-19		mm dd yy	
		mm dd yy	
		mm dd yy	

3 Shares

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

Image 7

WRC contacted Brown, who is the Licking County (OH) Health Commissioner. He has spent months trying to get people vaccinated in Licking County. Brown said the photo used in “Dr M Adler’s” post (Image 7) comes from a [newspaper story](#) where he mentioned his vaccination.

Chats – Researchers Engage With Sellers to Learn About "Tactics and Motives"

Images 8-9. Sellers Promise Cards from "Doctors" Who "have access to all the medical database" cards

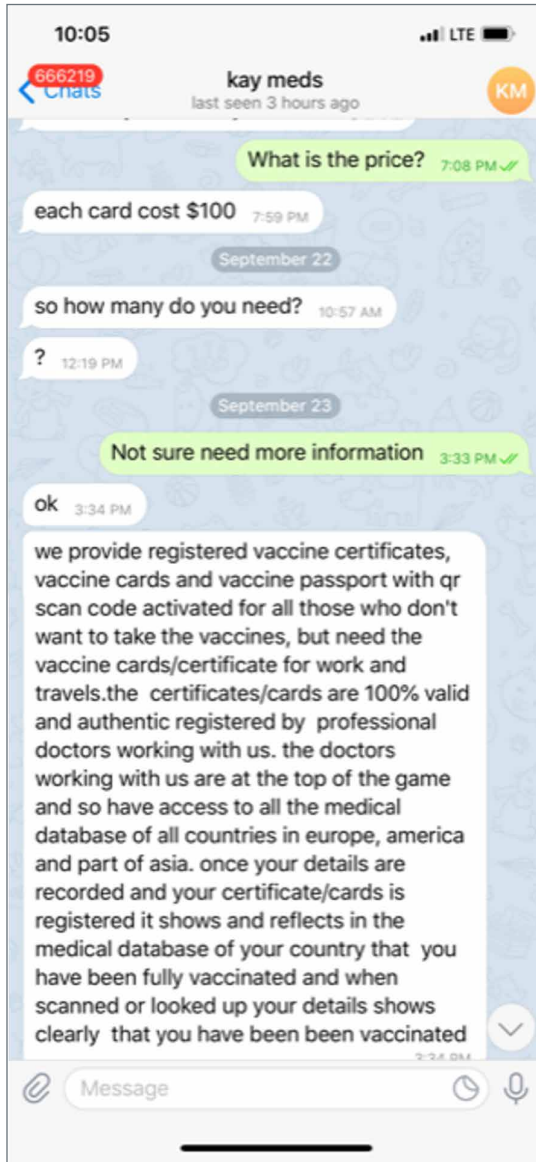


Image 8



Image 9

In Image 8, the seller promises doctors who "are at the top of the game" to provide registered vaccine certificates. From Telegram, a screenshot of chats from September 22-24, shared Sunday, September 26, 2021.

Image 10. Sellers offer discounts on vaccine cards

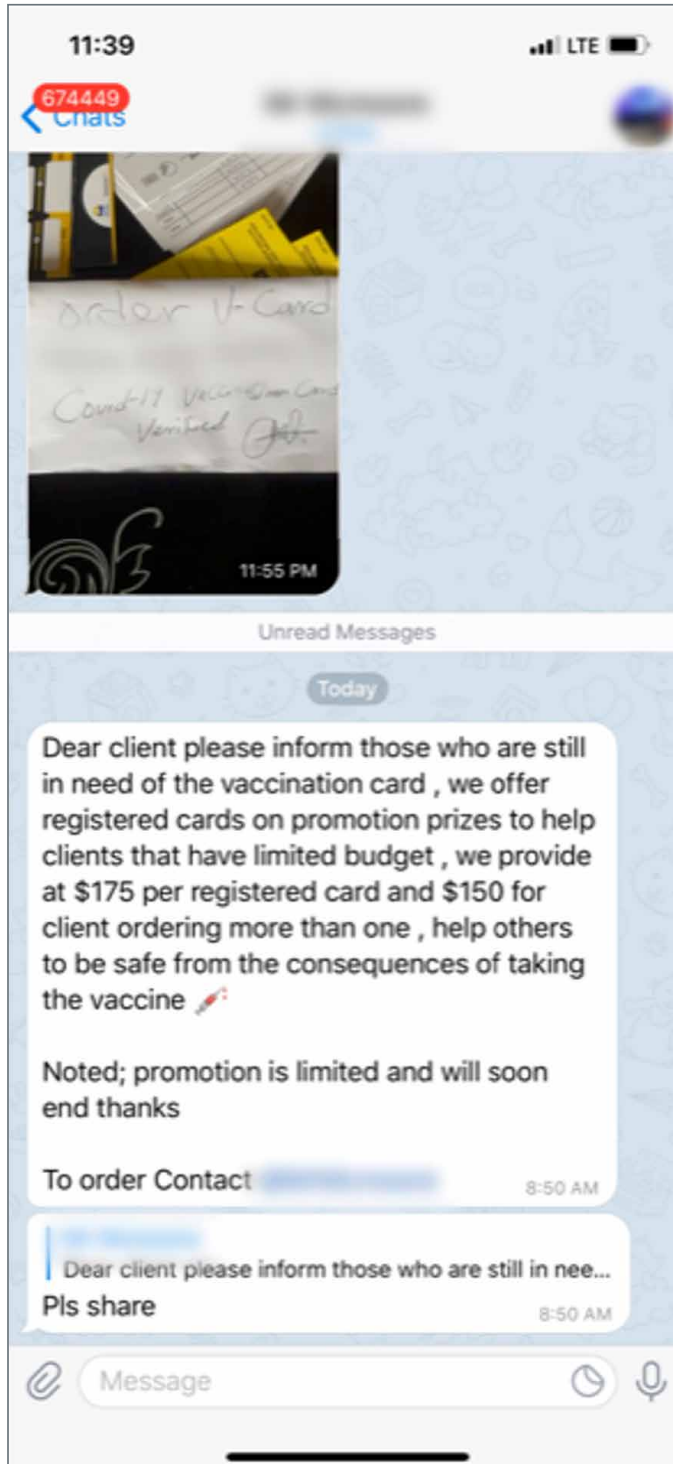


Image 10

The seller offers a discount to those ordering more than one vaccine card. From Telegram, shared September 28, 2021.

Image 11. Seller posting in Facebook "Support Group" offers registered cards in Washington, DC pharmacies

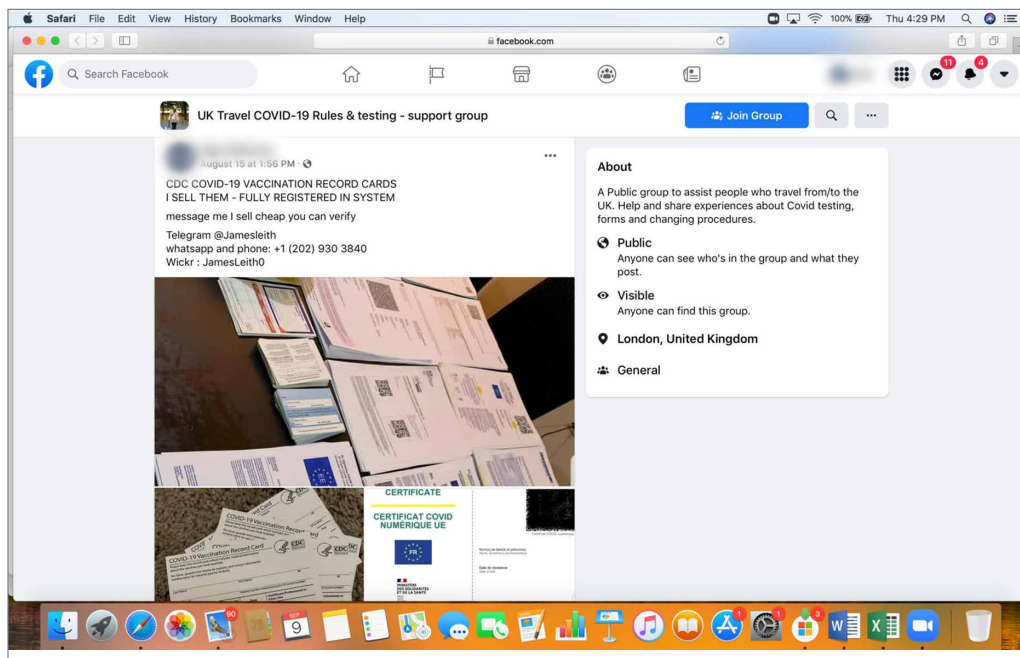


Image 11

After finding this Facebook post (Image 11), investigators started a chat with the seller. In a WhatsApp chat, the seller indicated they only sold "registered cards." The seller indicates they can register the cards with two CVS stores in Washington, DC, and include either Pfizer or Moderna as the vaccine. The picture within Image 13 (next page right) shows a card indicating the vaccine recipient got two doses of the Pfizer vaccine. The "Wag 17303" corresponds with a Walgreen's in Steubenville, Ohio. The information on the card indicates that the "second shot" supposedly happened at a Rite Aid. According to the Rite Aid store locator, the closest Rite Aid to Steubenville is in Burgettstown, PA, about 18 miles away. Again, it appears bad actors are victimizing large pharmaceuticals like Walgreen's and Rite Aid.

Images 12-15. Image 13 (below right) includes a card “registered” at a CVS, but researchers could not find a store number that matched the one on the card. From Facebook, screenshots from chats September 2-5 shared September 23, 2021.

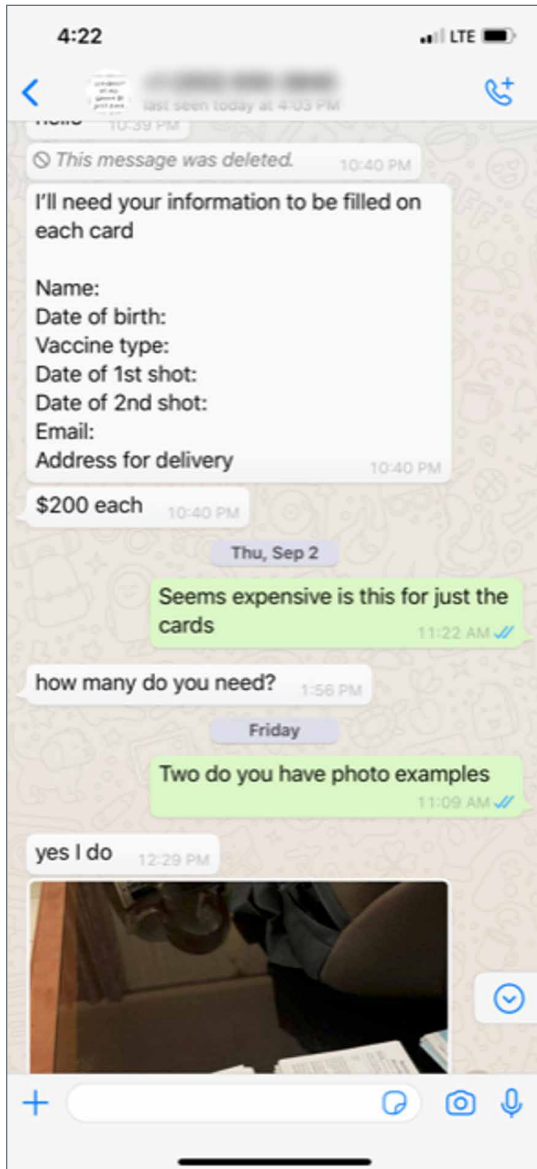


Image 12

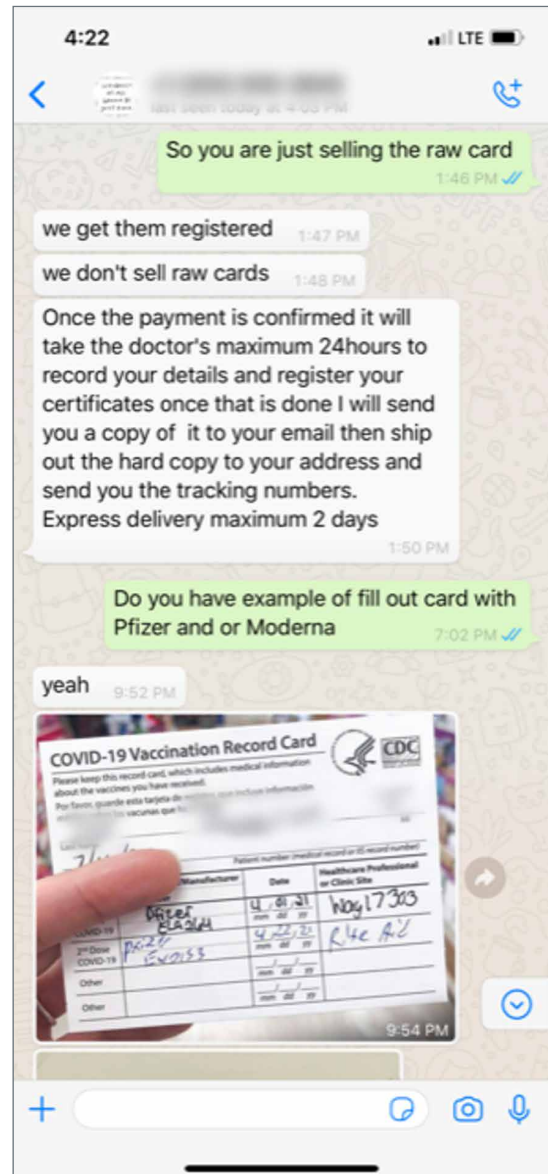


Image 13



Image 14

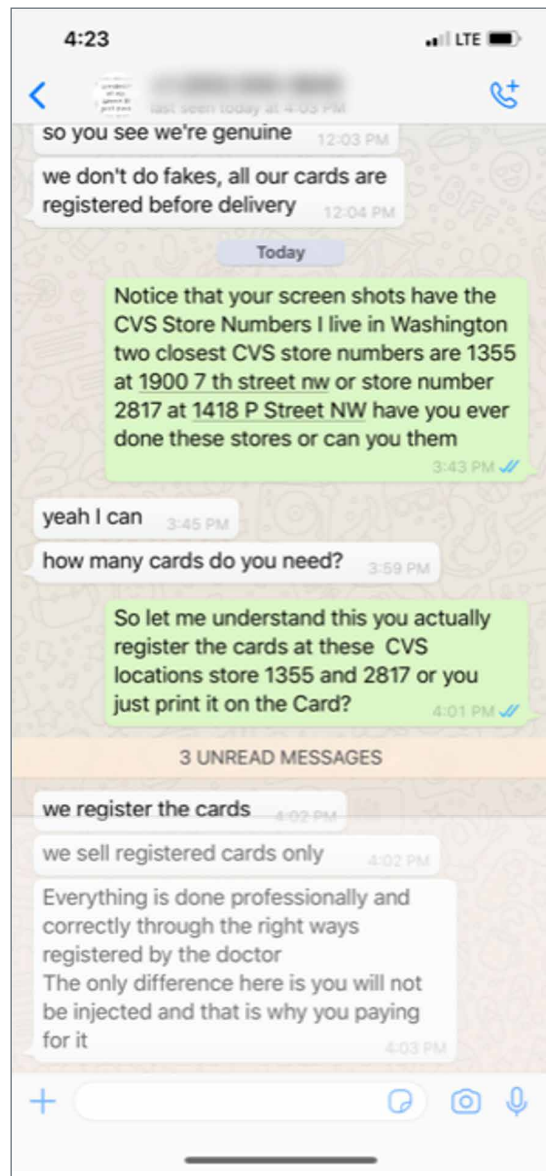


Image 15

Image 16. Instagram account implies vaccination card with lot information for the Pfizer vaccine comes from CVS in Iowa

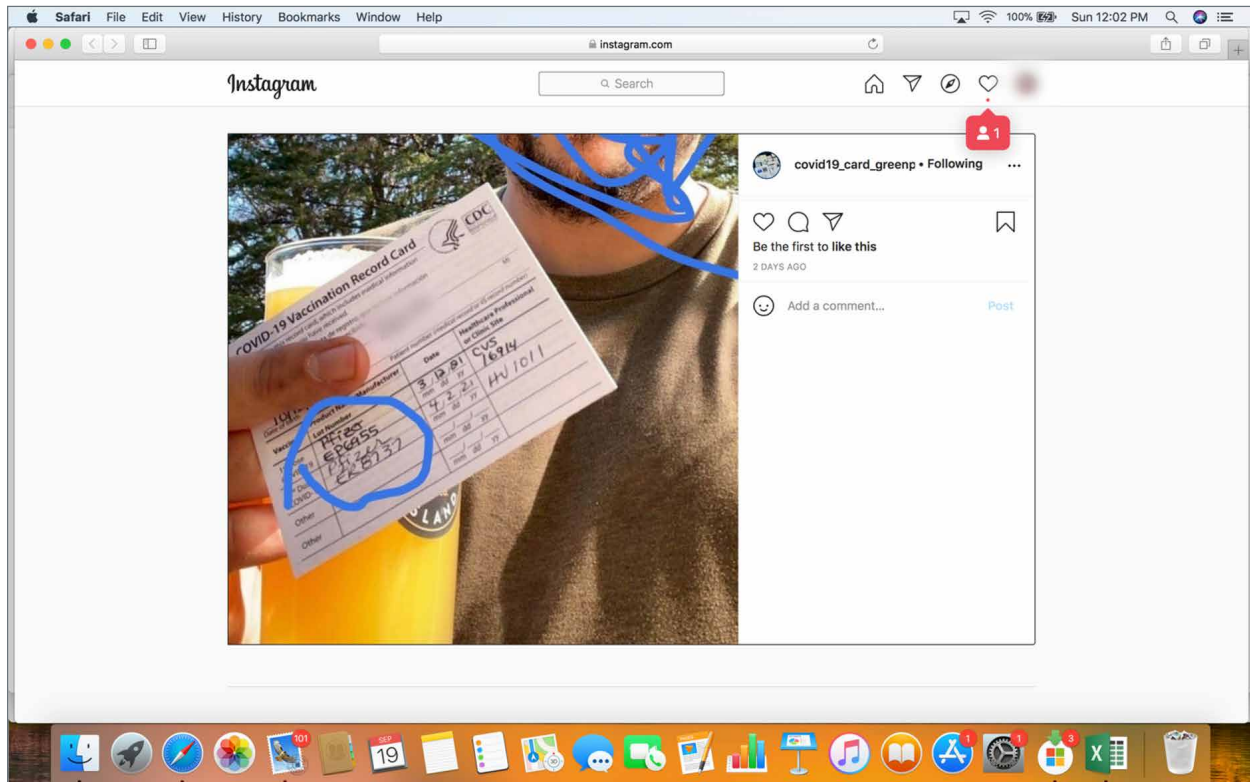


Image 16

The Instagram account of "covid19_card_greenpass" includes a CDC with lot numbers EP6955 and ER 8737 for the Pfizer vaccine. The store number on the card in Image 16 shows CVS Store 16914, which corresponds with a actual store – a CVS in Urbandale, Iowa. In a chat with a researcher Image 16), the seller indicates they can get a vaccine card with information from a store in Virginia (see Image 18 on the next page). From Instagram, screenshots were shared Sunday, September 19, and September 28, 2021).



Image 17

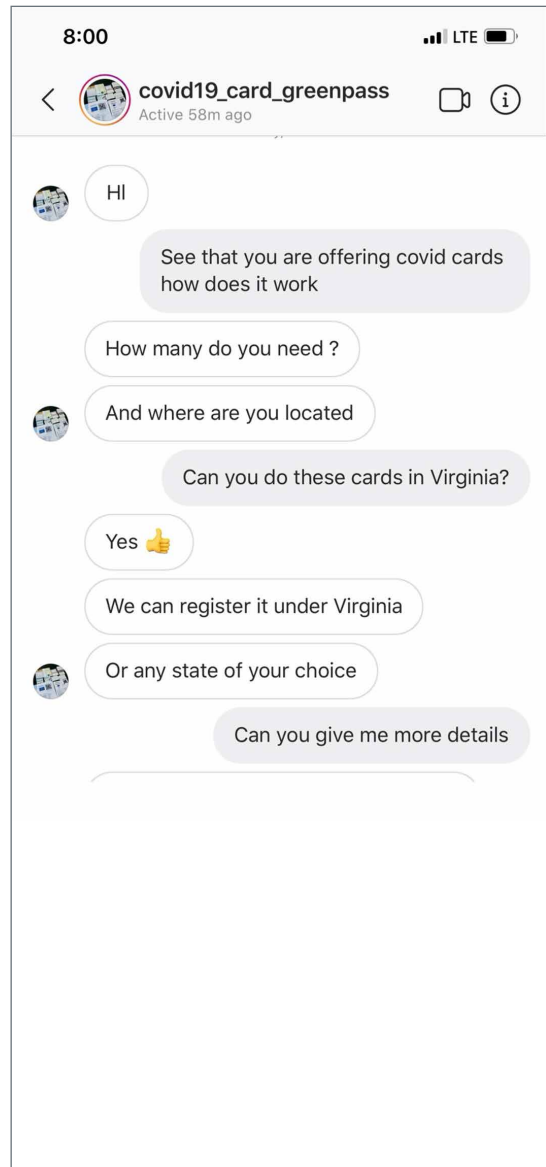


Image 18

Images 19-22. Lots numbers and stores allow sellers to charge more

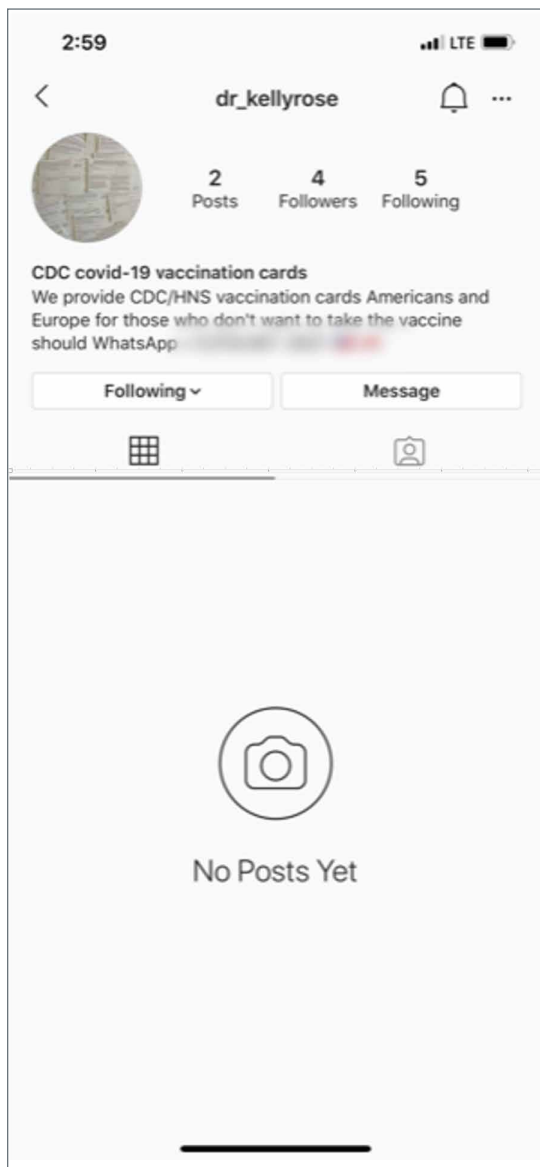


Image 19



Image 20

“dr_kellyrose” finds buyers on Instagram. As you can see in image 20 (above), the operator quickly pushes potential buyers to WhatsApp, where end-to-end encryption ensures a private 1:1 conversation. Once in WhatsApp (Images 21-22 on the next page), Doctor Rose explains their cards cost more because of the information they include. Also in Image 22 (next page, right side), the operator shares an image of a card with a Pfizer lot number and registration with The Little Clinic of Stony Brook, [a retail clinic inside a Kroger near Louisville, KY](#). Bad actors are targeting not only large operators, but independent operators like this company in Louisville. (From Instagram and WhatsApp, shared September 1, 2021)



Image 21



Image 22

Algorithmic Amplification and Search – How the Platforms Lead Sellers to the Vulnerable and the Willing

Images 23-26. With Images 23 and 24 on page 18 and Images 25 and 26 on page 19.

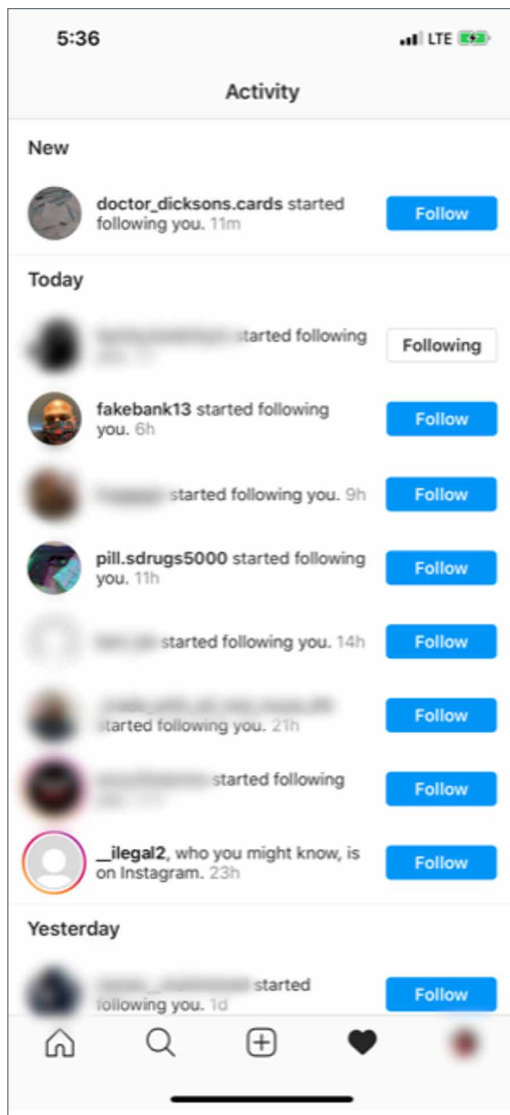


Image 23

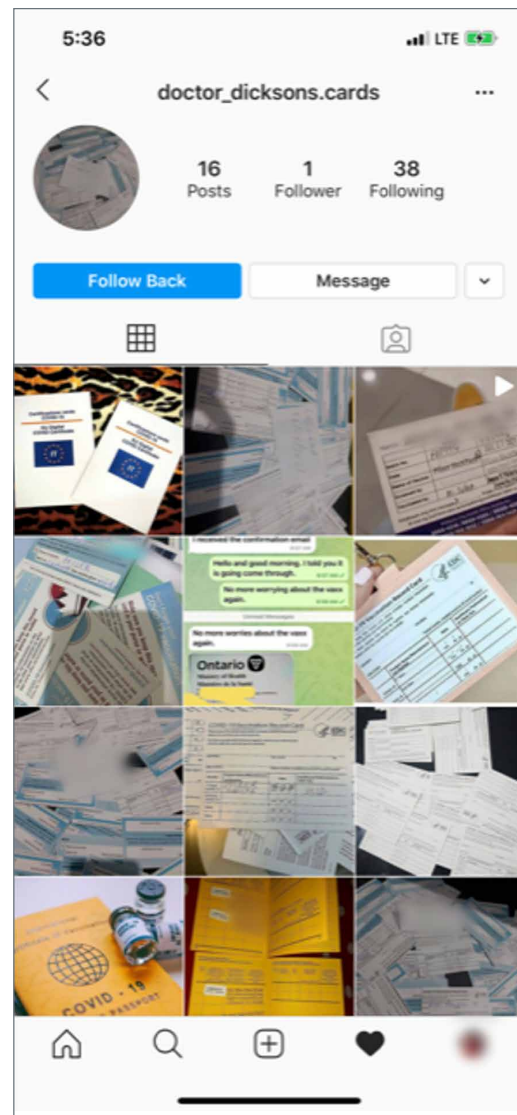


Image 24

After searching for sellers, researchers saw how Instagram began suggesting obvious sellers appearing to offer to share COVID vaccine cards, like "doctor_dicksons.cards" in Images 23-24 above (From Instagram, shared September 23) and "Max Williams" in Images 25-26 (next page) (From Instagram, shared September 28).

Images 25-26. The Platforms Suggest Connections with Sellers

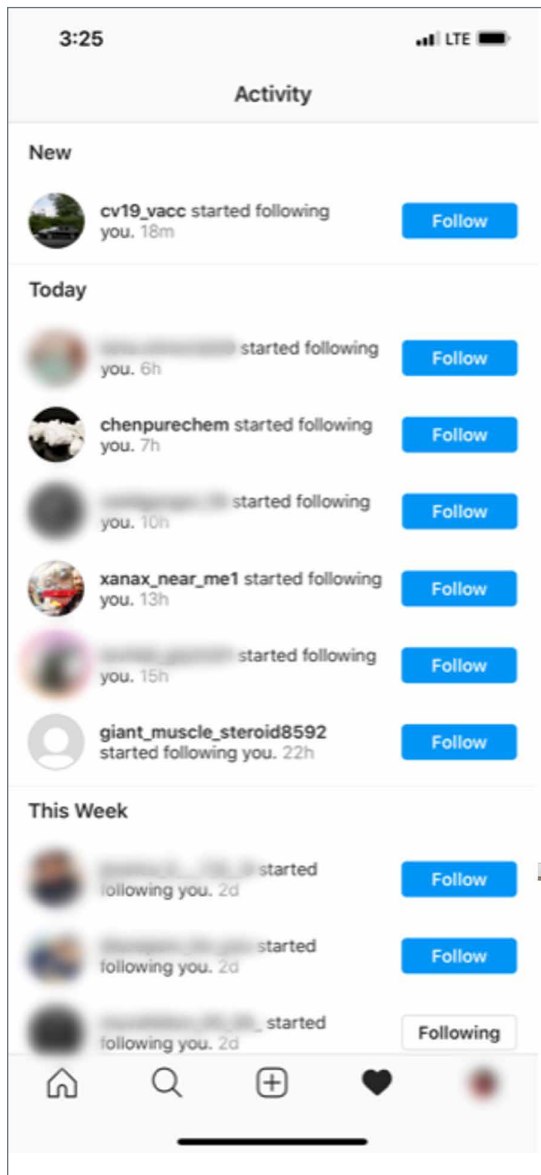


Image 25

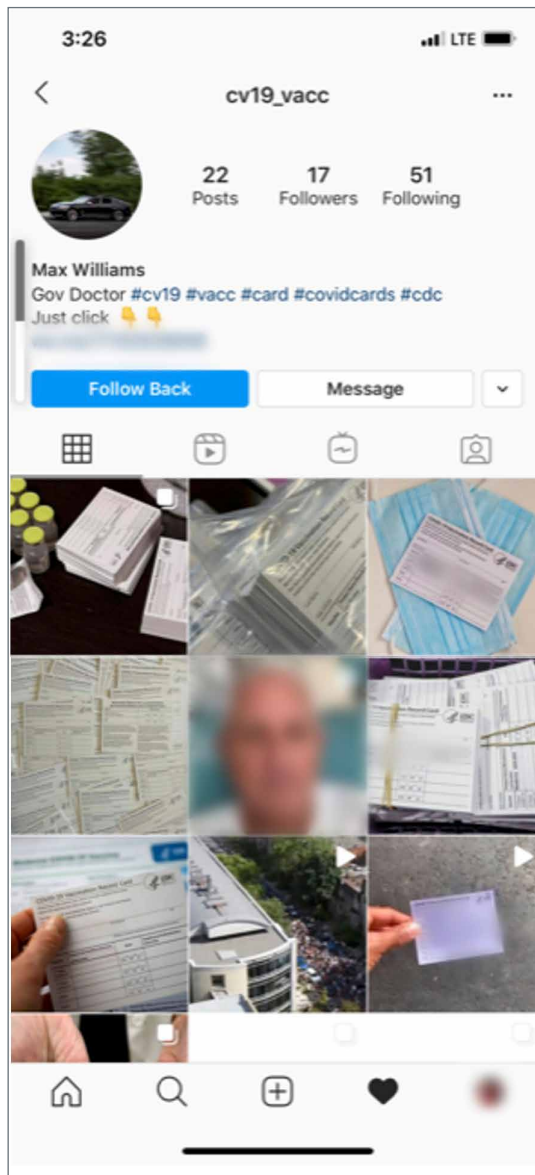


Image 26

Searches on Google and Facebook led researchers to ads for DHGate. According to the site's description, "DHgate.com is the world's leading online wholesale platform for goods made in China, connecting international buyers with Chinese wholesale sellers who offer the same quality products found elsewhere at a fraction of the price." Wikipedia calls it a "cross-border e-commerce marketplace that facilitates the sale of manufactured products from suppliers to small and medium retailers." It seems strange to find the CDC's COVID vaccine cards for sale on the site, but that's exactly what happened when they used certain search terms on Facebook (see Images 26-27 from a September 1 search) and Google (Image 28 from an August 28 search).

Images 27-28. How Did a Search Take Researchers to a Chinese Online Marketplace with COVID Vaccine Cards for Sale?

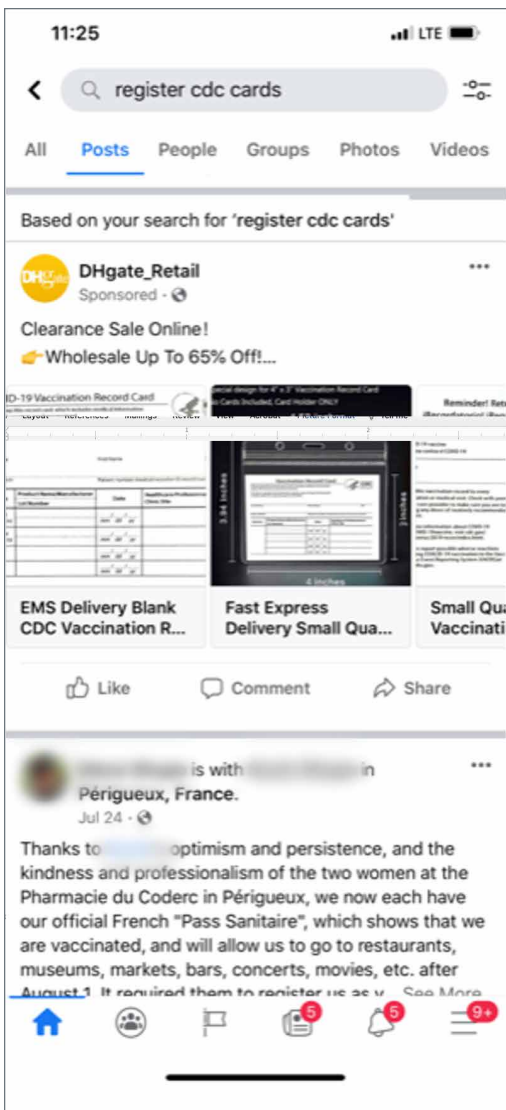


Image 27

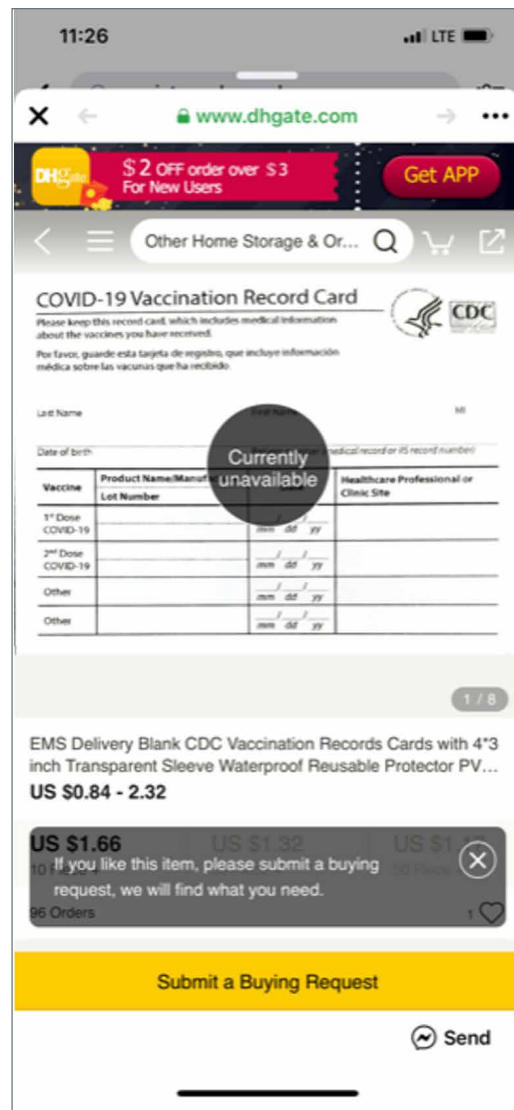


Image 28

Image 29. How Did a Search Take Researchers to a Chinese Online Marketplace with COVID Vaccine Cards for Sale?

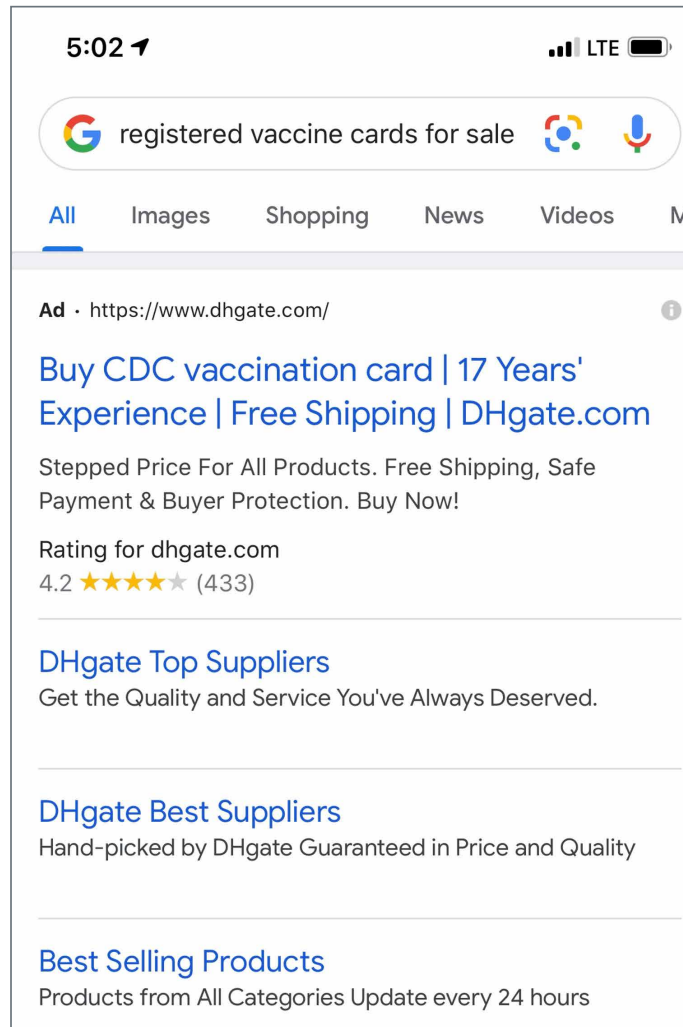


Image 29

Digital Citizens will share these findings with DHGate. The researchers are eager to learn about how items are posted on the site. There may be a perfectly reasonable explanation for how this would happen, and we're eager to hear it. Similarly, the world's advertising superpowers might also have an explanation as to why an ad from a Chinese company pushing illegally obtained COVID vaccine cards wound up featured in search results. We're sure that U.S. law enforcement, regulators, Members of Congress, and U.S. consumers will be eager to find out just what happened.

Conclusion

The Platforms Have to be Part of the Solution...
or They Will Continue to Be The Problem

Researchers discussed the purchase of cards with the operator of Joe Kim's Telegram page. The research wanted to know if "Joe Kim's" could sell cards from Maryland and/or Virginia. That's when "Joe Kim's" offered to share his database with the seller:

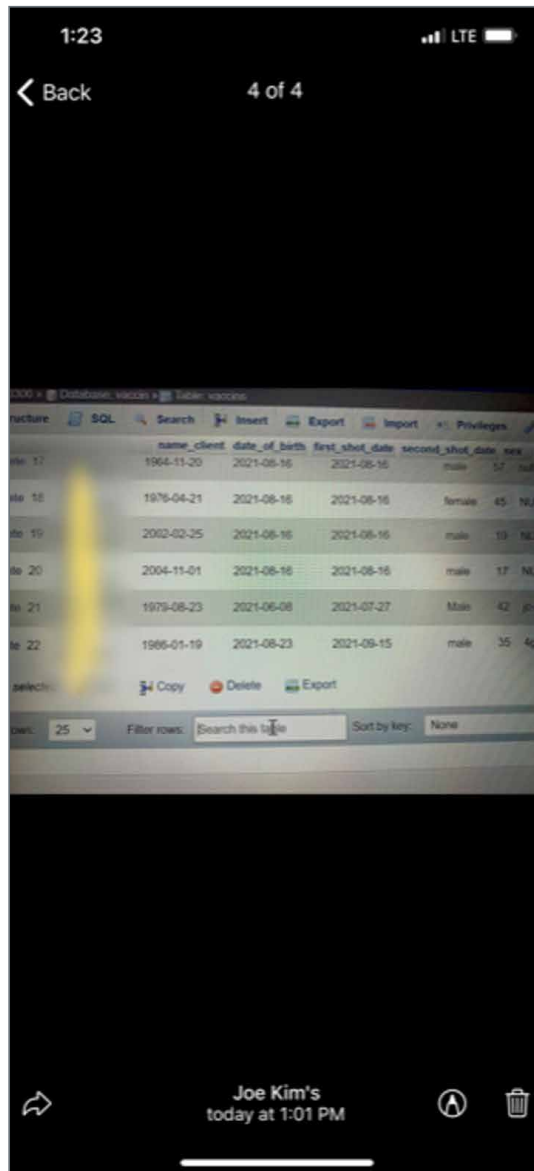


Image 30

The researcher pressed "Kim's" for more information – were they something home built to operate the business, or was this a look at a server operated by a state?

"Kim's" didn't offer a direct answer.

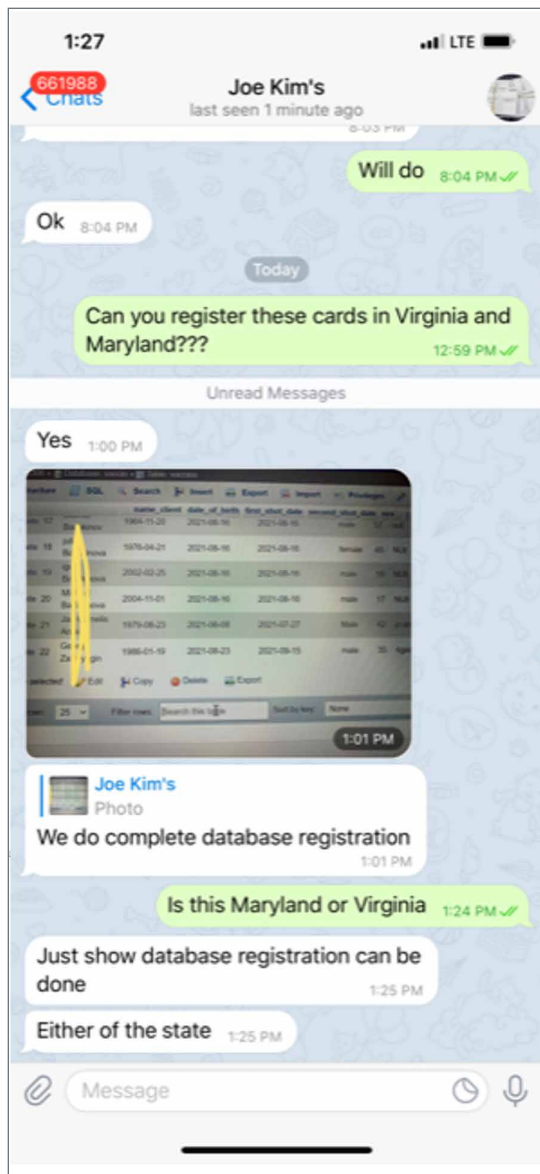


Image 31

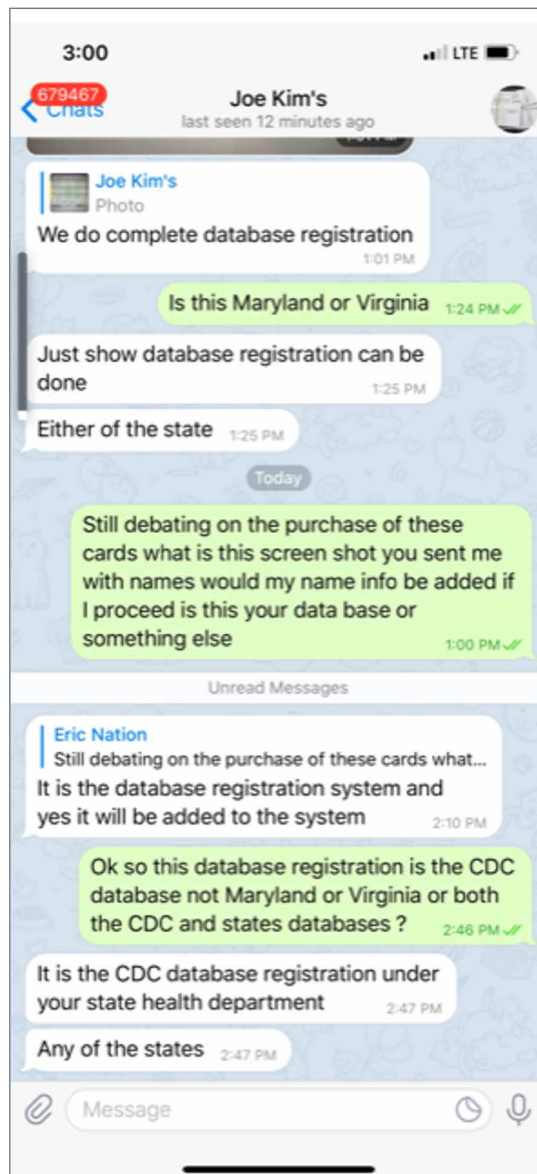


Image 32

Law enforcement will catch more than a few of these shadowy operators. Still, many will remain out of reach – either because they actually are literally out of reach operating from outside U.S. borders or they are sophisticated enough to stay under the radar of police. For every bad actor arrested, there will be many more evading capture.

These problems will continue until lawmakers crackdown on the platforms. The tech companies will keep saying they make very little money off criminal behavior. They will promise in Capitol Hill hearings that they are taking steps to prevent this activity, and they don't want it on their platforms. But organizations like Digital Citizens and CSW will continue to find these problems... and even worse, consumers will find them too.

The companies must come together to help crack down on this behavior. If YouTube can find a way to kick off the spreaders' anti-vax propaganda from the platform, wouldn't it benefit them to share what they know? The platforms prove every day, they are the most powerful non-military tools ever created. It's time for these company to turn their resources to truly fighting back against criminals instead of enabling them to continue this damaging, harmful activity.

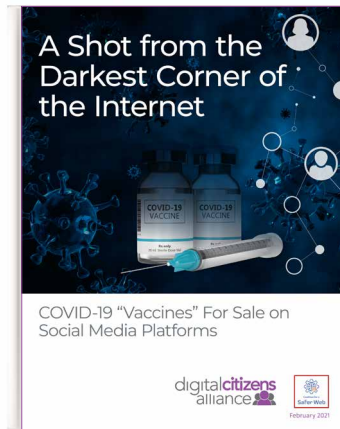
While even the platforms won't stop all bad actors from trying - and some succeeding – from manipulating social media to commit crimes. What other possibility is there? Will we all have to wait for Congress to solve this? Or a breakthrough in the courts that finally forces a change? Or maybe it will only come after a disaster of unthinkable consequence finally forces the platforms to re-think their ways?

For those of us who spend at least some of our lives on social media platforms, cheating remains.

Joint Digital Citizens | CSW / GIPEC investigations



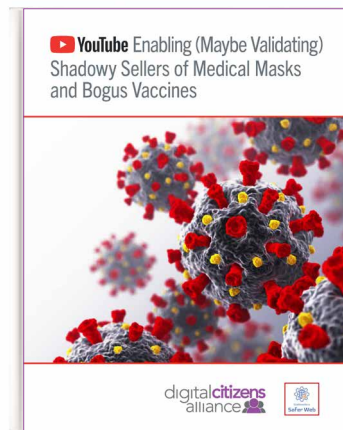
2021



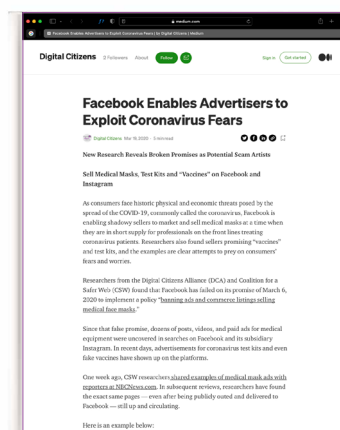
2021



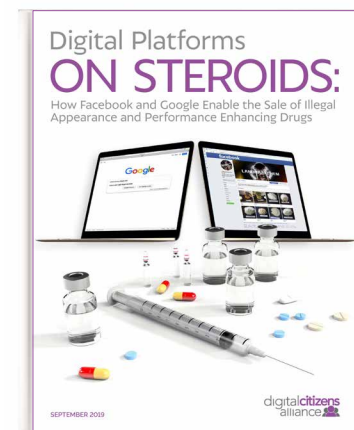
2021



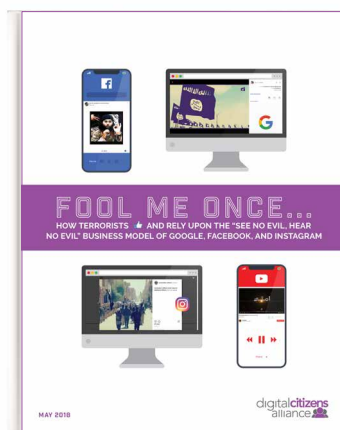
2020



2020



2019

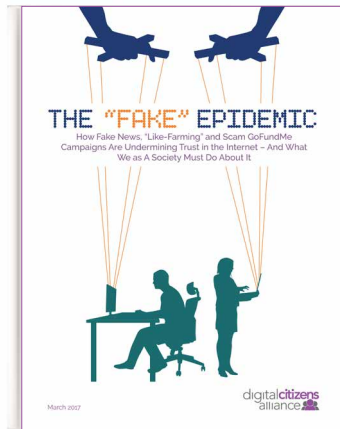


2018

Digital Citizens Research papers on illegal and/or illicit activities



2018



2017



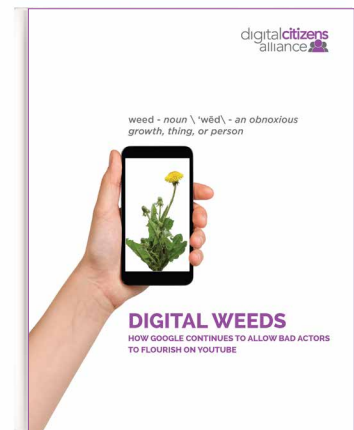
2017



2016



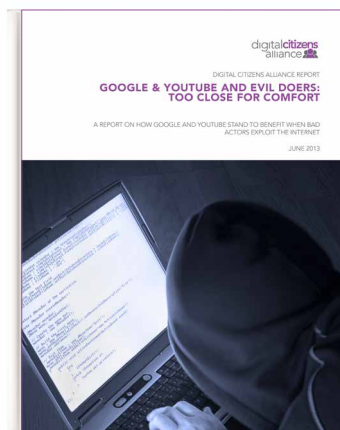
2015



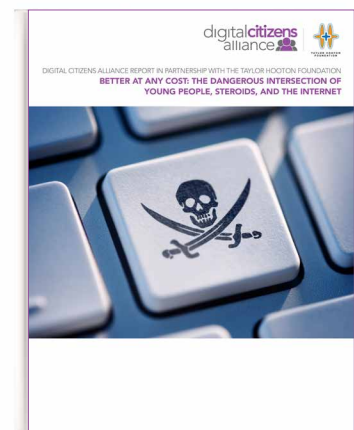
2014



2014



2013



2013

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, a cyber counter terrorism and anti-extremism non-profit organization whose mission is to prevent social media platforms from serving as pathways for extremists and terrorists to plot, incite, and execute domestic and foreign acts of violence. CSW currently advises Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and the National Security Council on social media-based extremist incitement and operational planning, as well as private industry and civil society organizations. Visit us at coalitionsw.org.

