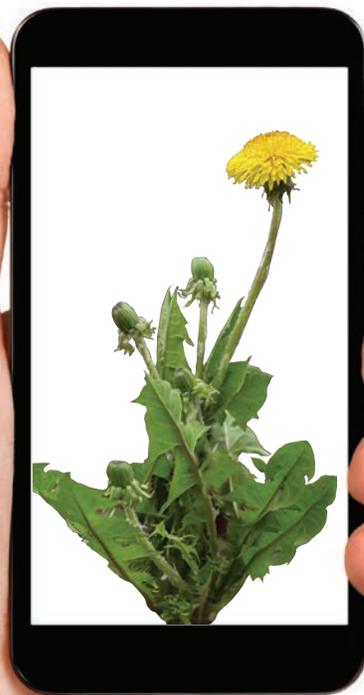


weed - noun \ 'wēd\ - an obnoxious growth, thing, or person



DIGITAL WEEDS

**HOW GOOGLE CONTINUES TO ALLOW BAD ACTORS
TO FLOURISH ON YOUTUBE**

LET'S FACE IT, WE ALWAYS FIGURED WE'D BE RIGHT BACK HERE.

[In June 2013, Digital Citizens published a troubling report that demonstrated how bad actors – drug dealers, content thieves, passport peddlers and others exploited the Internet for financial gain.](#) And how Google stood to benefit by collecting ad revenue from the videos these bad actors posted on YouTube.

[That report, entitled “Google & YouTube and Evil Doers: Too Close for Comfort,” made a difference:](#) within days Google scrubbed YouTube of hundreds, if not thousands of videos promoting the illegal sale of drugs, fake passports and counterfeits. Google also deleted videos tied to searches for “find underage prostitute” and other escort services.

Many of these videos had been on YouTube for months, some years, and only were taken down when major media outlets such as USA Today published articles and Google came under scrutiny from state attorneys general.

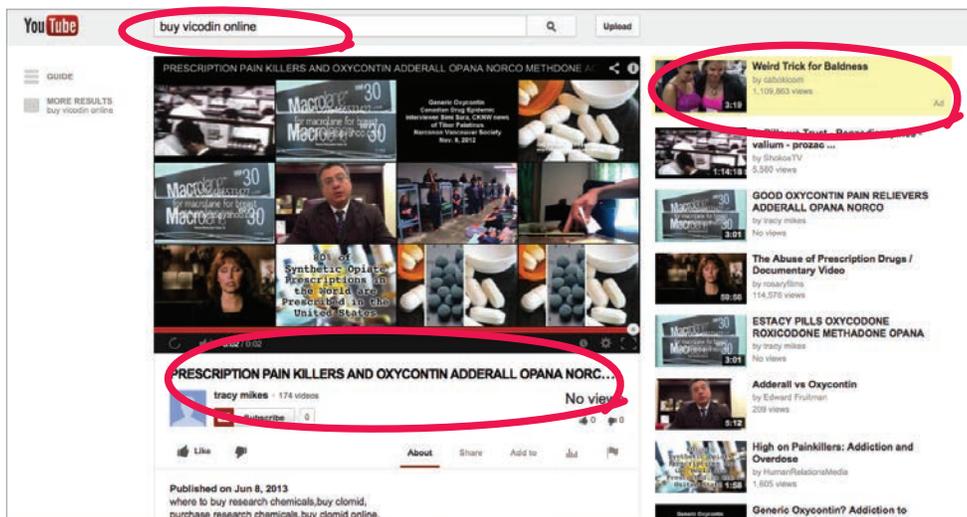
What was most startling was not only did Google allow these videos to remain on YouTube – one of the most popular websites for teens and pre-teens – but also that the company directly profited from these shady videos. How? Google ran ads tied to those videos and split the revenue with these would-be bad actors. If you believe in the adage “the company you keep,” then how could you reconcile Google’s willingness to not only profit from videos promoting dangerous and even illegal activities? Google even gives a kick back – a percentage of that revenue to those bad actors. This from the company with the motto, “Don’t be evil.”

When Google made its “Don’t be evil” pledge, it said: “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.”

Fast forward eight months and unfortunately many of those videos that Google hastily removed in June in light of public condemnation have resurfaced. Once again, Digital Citizens must question whether Google is living up to its “Don’t be evil” promise, and more fundamentally, its commitment as an Internet leader.

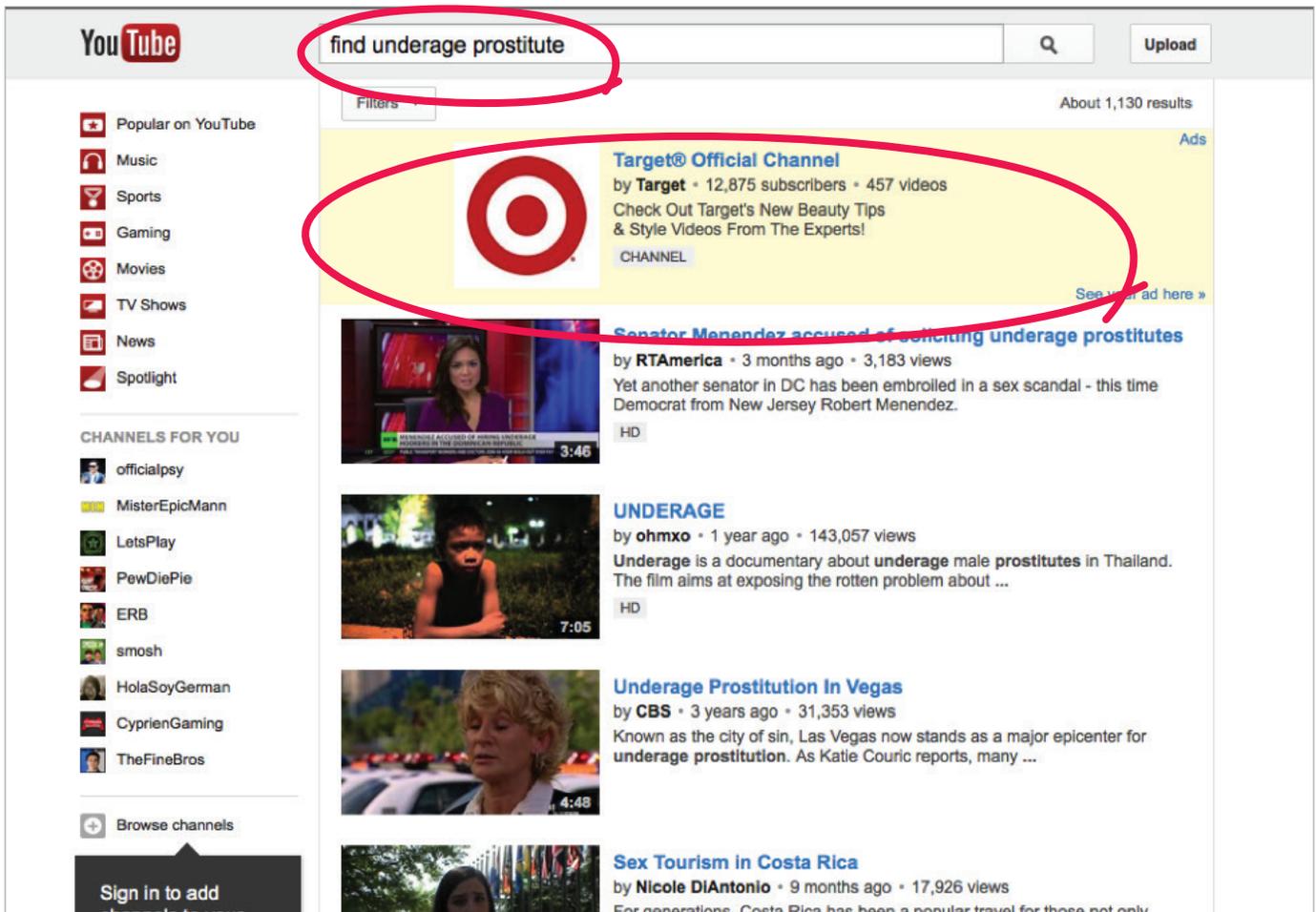
Google’s business is built on ads, and YouTube is just one platform that contributes to the \$55 billion juggernaut. According to YouTube, the site receives more than a billion unique visitors each month and more than 6 billion hours of video are watched on a monthly basis.

Google’s business may seem complicated, but it’s actually pretty basic. Google makes money by selling ads – to a search term, or a video. Think about when you click on a YouTube video. Sometimes you have to watch an ad before it will run, sometimes there is a banner ad that shows up on the bottom during the video, and other times there are ads that run around the video.



Here are examples from our June 2013 report. In the first example, you see the ad in yellow to the right for a video promoting how to purchase prescription painkillers.

In the second example, we see how Google makes money by simply running an ad connected to a search term, in this case a Target ad when the term “find underage prostitute” is searched.



After negative publicity, Google removed those videos and contended its system to police YouTube of objectionable content is working. That policy: “YouTube’s review teams respond to videos flagged for our attention around the clock, removing any content that violates our policies...We also have stringent advertising guidelines, and work to prevent ads appearing against any video, channel or page once we determine that the content is not appropriate for our advertising partners.”

No, Google’s system is not working. In fact, it’s failing badly.

Citing the illegal sale of pharmaceutical, content theft and sex trafficking; state law enforcement officials have demanded that Google do better. Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood in December said Google seems “unwilling to take basic actions to make the Internet safe from unlawful and predatory conduct, and it has refused to modify its own behavior that facilitates and profits from unlawful conduct.”

Google continues to treat this as a PR problem, not an issue of Internet safety. When faced with criticism, it removes controversial videos while boasting of how many it takes down a year. But Google has thus far refused to make the kind of systemic changes to YouTube and the YouTube Partner Program that would address the problem for good.

Ultimately, that means that like weeds, videos are pulled, simply to return. This report focuses on how a new batch of “digital weeds” – objectionable videos on everything from drugs to counterfeits to ID theft to fakes – have resurfaced on YouTube. No doubt, that shortly after the publication of this report Google will once again pull these weeds. And it’s just as certain that once the attention slips away, these objectionable videos will resurface. There must be a better way.

PRESCRIPTION NARCOTICS & STEROIDS

Prescription drugs have been a staple of YouTube ever since Google in 2011 reached a \$500 million settlement with the Department of Justice to settle charges that it knowingly allowed ads for fraudulent foreign and Canadian pharmacies in the United States. As part of the agreement, Google admitted its knowledge of the ads and even helping advertisers circumvent systems designed to prevent illegal ads from ever appearing. Additionally, the DOJ required Google to implement strict new policies and procedures to prevent foreign and illegal pharmacies from ever appearing on AdWords again.

Like drug dealers on a corner the police busted, the “pharmacies” simply migrated from Google to YouTube that has no such policies and procedures. After the Digital Citizens June 2013 report and Google’s superficial scrubbing of YouTube, the drug dealers on YouTube went underground for a bit, but now they never really left.

Here’s how many results appear on YouTube:

- “Buy drugs without a prescription”: 17,000 results
- “Buy Percocet without a prescription”: 725 results
- “Buy tramadol without a prescription”: 1,310 results
- “Buy Oxycontin without a prescription”: 2,000 results

For example, here’s a YouTube video promoting the sale of Oxycontin and Roxicodone without a prescription. Note the 2014 Winter Olympics ad on the right:

The screenshot shows a YouTube search results page. The search bar at the top contains the text "Buy percocet without a prescription" and is circled in red. The main video player displays a hand holding several pills, with the text "Order Pain Relief Medication." overlaid. Below the video player, the title "Looking to Buy Oxycontin and Roxicodone without Prescription" is circled in red. The channel name is "lawson files" with 22 videos and 2 views. The video was published on Feb 9, 2014. On the right sidebar, a "2014 Winter Olympics" ad is circled in red.

In another video, seen below, three ads are connected to this drug video that offers narcotic painkillers and steroids “without a prescription:”

The screenshot shows the website for Pharmaceutical Supplies PLLc. The navigation bar includes Home, About Us, Pain Relief Medications, Steroids/ Musclegear, and Contact Us. A central banner features a 'Medication Directory' with categories like Weight Loss, Women's Health, Men's Health, Sexual Health, Skin Care, Headache, and Anti Depressants. Below this is a 'LIVE HELP' chat button. A red circle highlights the text: 'Buy Canada Pills Here! Affordable Prices for Rx Meds! PRESCRIPTION NOT REQUIRED. 100% Money Back Guarantee. Buy from our Pharmacy Professionals and Order Cheap Pills Now!'. Below this is a 'Special Offer From Prime Pharmacy Partners' section. Logos for GEN-SHI, Kalpa Pharmaceuticals, and Super Dimes are visible at the bottom.

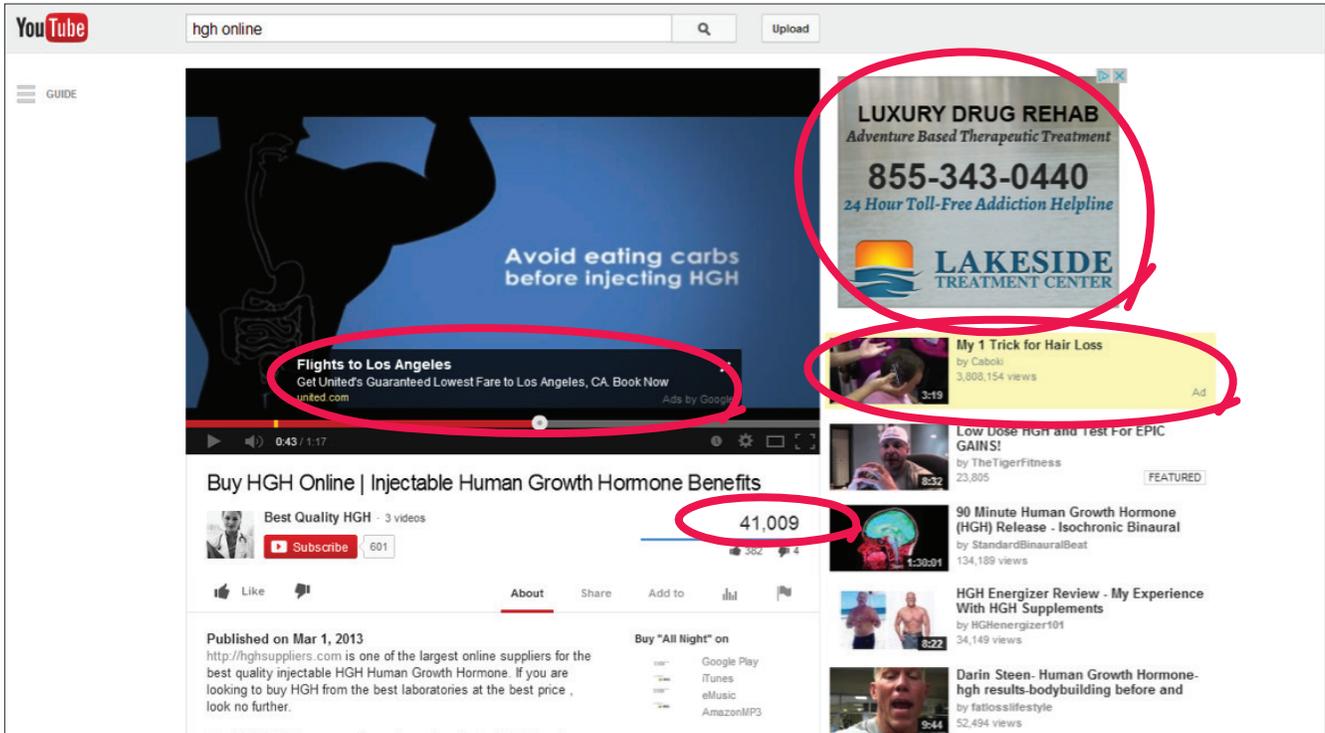
It's common for ads for major brands to accompany videos promoting the illegal online sale of controlled substance. In this case, an ad for the Discover Card is flanked next to a video offering the stimulant Adderall and other drugs.

[In October 2013, Digital Citizens followed the June report with a look at how easy it was to acquire appearance and performance enhancing drugs \(APEDs\) after searching through videos for steroids and Human Growth Hormone on YouTube.](#)

Steroids remain popular on YouTube. Note the ShareFile ad to the right.

The screenshot shows a YouTube search for 'Buy Steroids online'. The search bar is circled in red. The main video player shows a video titled 'Bud Light® Super Bowl Ads' with a thumbnail of a hand holding pills. Below the video is an advertisement for 'Sustanon 250 - Buying Steroids Online, Best | Top Quality Steroids' by Jenz Niels, published on Feb 1, 2014. To the right of the video player is a large ShareFile advertisement for 'Get up to 40GB storage at no extra cost!' which is also circled in red. Below the ShareFile ad are several video thumbnails related to steroids, including 'Science of steroids', 'Esteroides y el pago final', 'Epic 1 year Steroid Transformation', 'Hi Tech Pharmaceuticals Anavar Supplement Review', 'Steroids VS Natural Bodybuilding inspiration', and 'Serious Side Effects of STEROIDS'.

This HGH video, on YouTube since March 2013, has over 41,000 views. It has an ad embedded promoting flights to Los Angeles, one for hair loss and another for drug rehabilitation. Google analytics enable it to connect ads that are relevant to the video, but apparently those same analytics won't flag illegal activity.



Steroid use, especially among teens trying to get an athletic edge or enhance their looks, is reaching epidemic proportions. It's no accident that steroid dealers target YouTube given its popularity among its target audience: teens and pre-teens.

It's an alarming YouTube combination: supply (drug dealers) and demand (teens).

FINANCIAL FRAUD/ID THEFT

Financial fraud and ID theft are a scourge and growing threat to Internet commerce. One in 10 Americans have been victimized by credit card fraud, according to Consumer Sentinel Network and the U.S. Department of Justice. Nearly half of financial fraud is related to credit cards, costing more than \$5 billion a year.

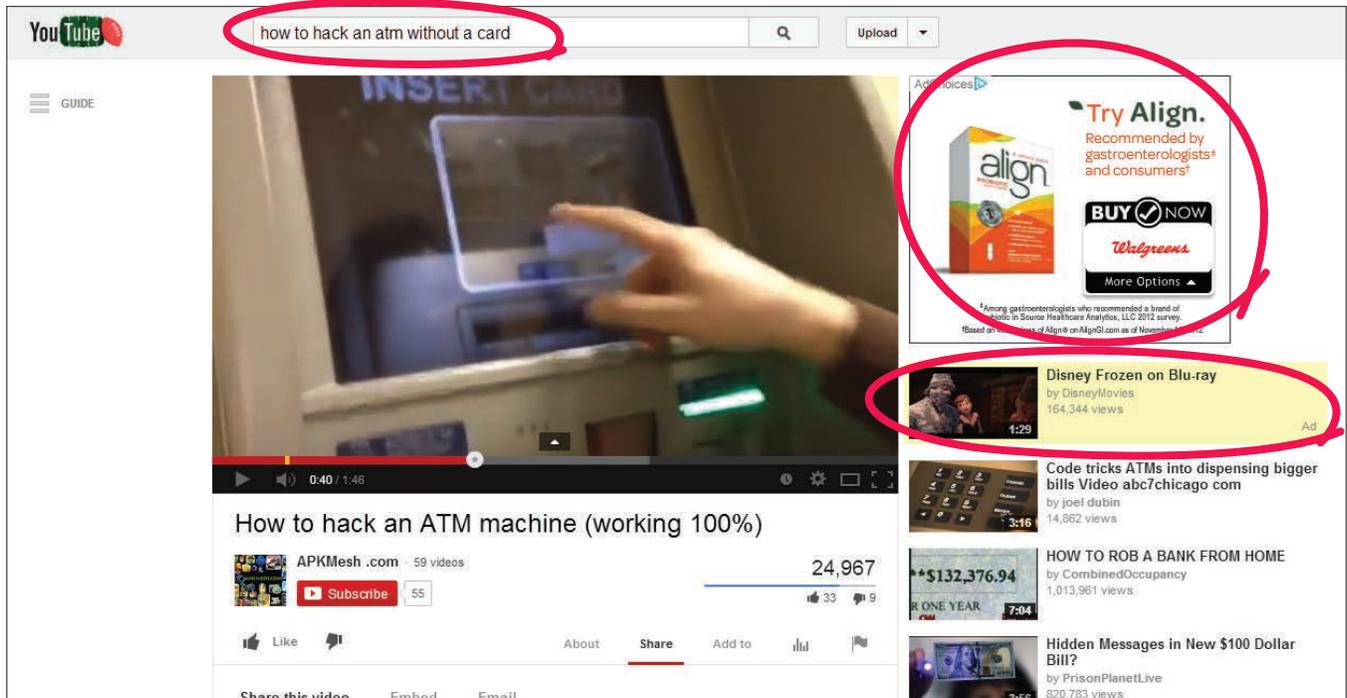
That is why it's so disheartening when ads from premium brands - in the case below a Honda ad - not only give credibility to criminals selling stolen credit card numbers, but enrich them too.

The screenshot shows a YouTube search for "Buy Stolen cc numbers". The main video is a Honda advertisement for an "all access" debit card. The card number "5189 1999 9999" is circled in red. Below the video, a search result for "buy / sell credit card number cvv2, dump track1&2 verified seller" is highlighted with a red circle. To the right, a sidebar of recommended videos includes titles like "How to Hack an ATM without a card", "Credit Card Skimmers More Advanced, Harder to Detect", and "How To Hack a website using Manual sql injection". A red circle highlights the video "Credit Card Skimmers More Advanced, Harder to Detect".

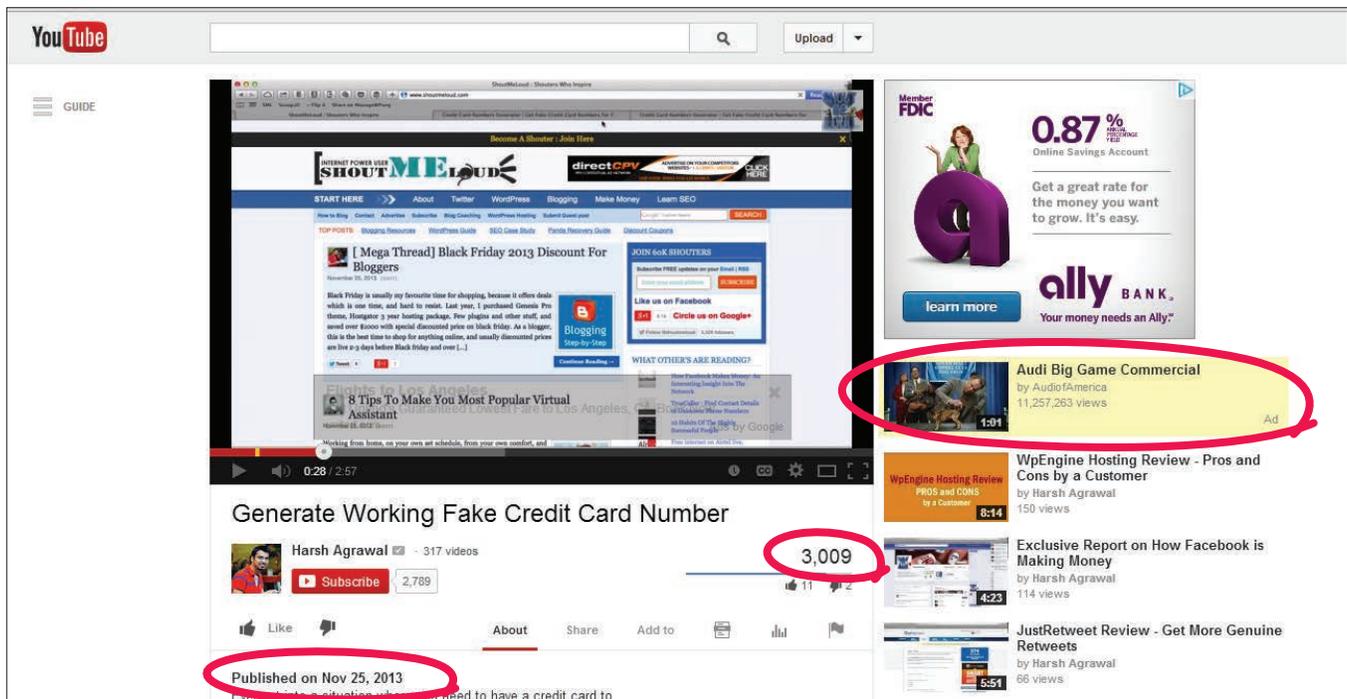
It's also remarkable to realize that Google is essentially business partners with stolen credit card sellers with Honda duped into helping these criminals as well (the company may have no idea its ad is providing criminals additional revenue).

But it goes beyond stolen credit cards. Google makes money off "how-to" videos on such activities as "how to hack an ATM without a card."

The hacking video below features at least three ads, including an ad for Disney's "Frozen" on Blu-Ray.



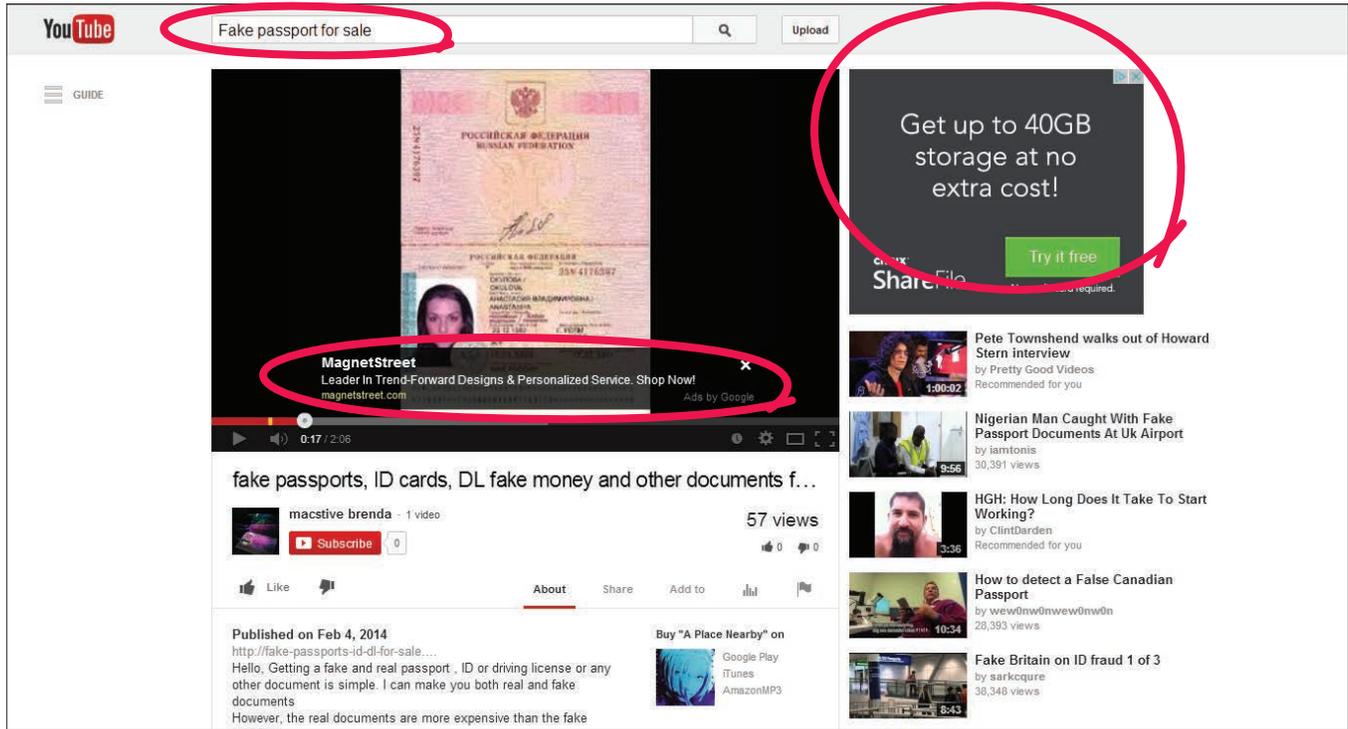
Audi is a victim in this next video, with an ad connected to generating a fake credit card number. This video has been up since November and has over 3,000 views.



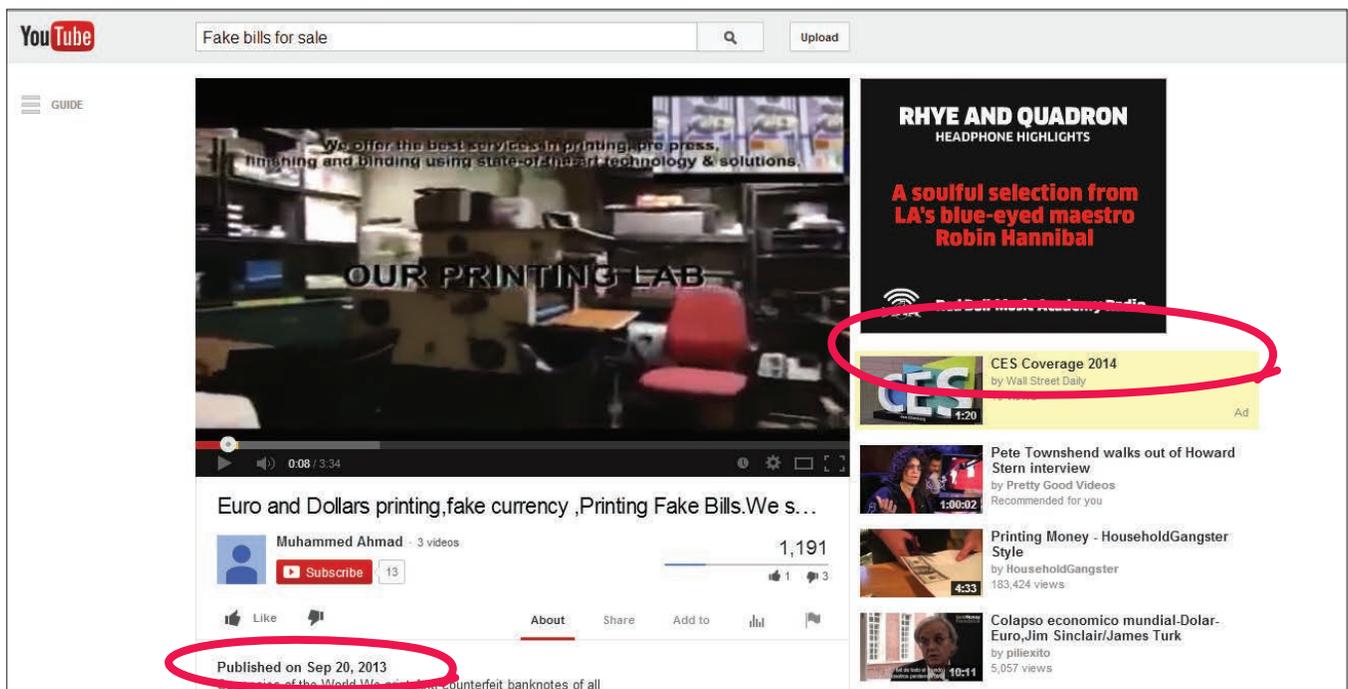
FAKE PASSPORTS AND CURRENCY

Perhaps the most alarming finding from the Digital Citizens June 2013 report was videos promoting the sale of fake passports and other forms of identification. These “services” ranged from bogus U.S. passports to fake drivers licenses and utility bills – all the documents needed to establish an illegal residency.

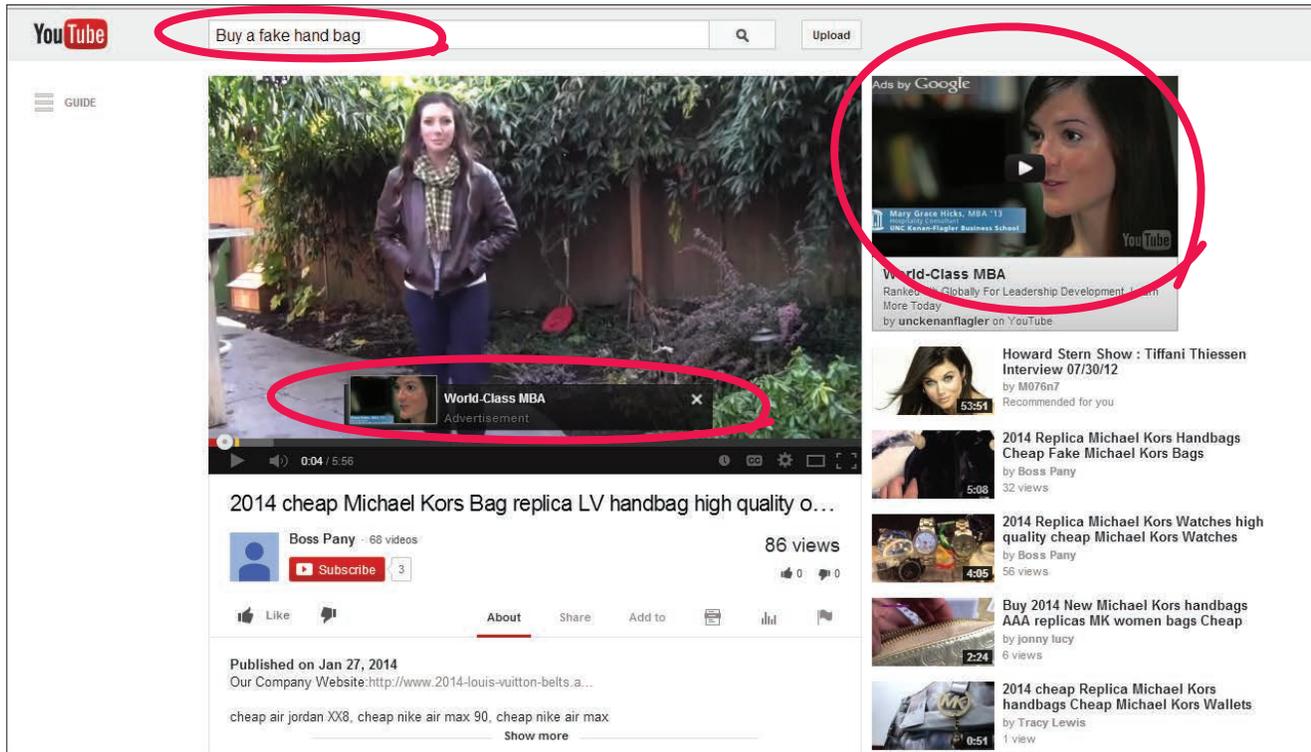
In the video below, a ShareFile and MagnetStreet ads are embedded in a video promoting the sale of fake drivers’ licenses, ID cards, fake money and other documents.



In the video below for “fake bills,” an ad for the annual Consumer Electronics Show is featured to the right. This video has been on YouTube since September 2013.

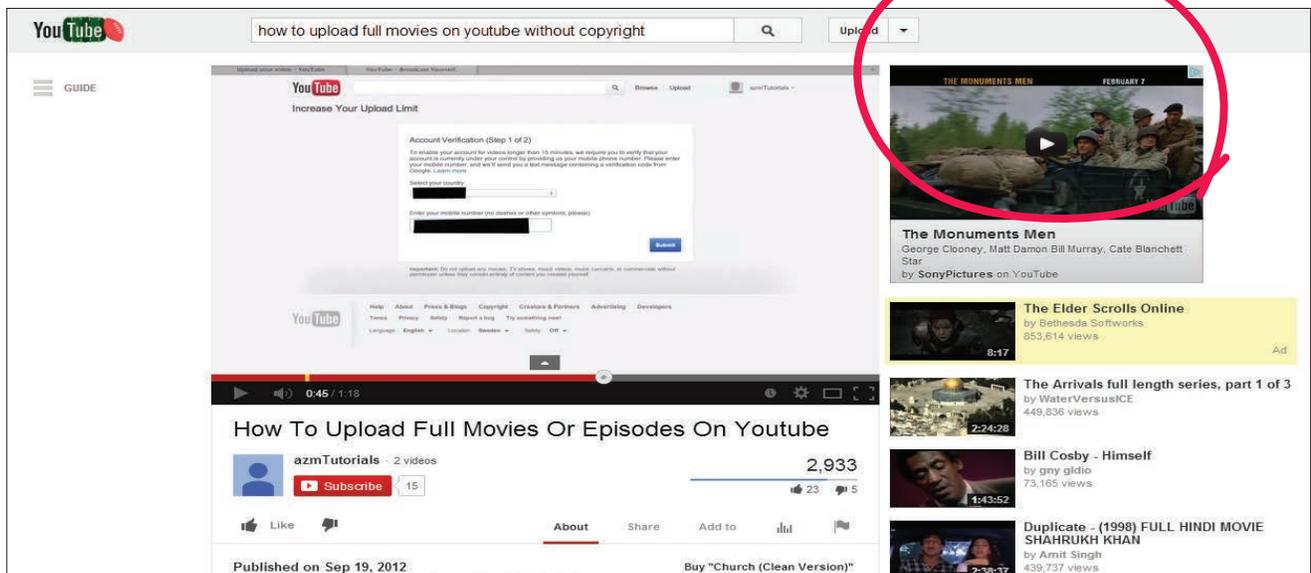


Fakes go well beyond IDs, of course. In this video promoting knock-off Michael Kors handbags is an ad for the University of North Carolina's Business School. It's unfathomable that UNC would want their brand connected to counterfeits.



CONTENT THEFT

In this video promoting "how to upload full movies on YouTube without copyright" is an ad promoting Sony's movie "The Monuments Men."



DÉJÀ VU, ALL OVER AGAIN

Eight months ago, the Digital Citizens Alliance called on Google to take a greater responsibility to make the Internet safer. A safer Internet is vital to keeping it free and open. At the time, Google responded by removing hundreds, if not thousands of videos promoting objectionable content and cancelling the YouTube Partner accounts for many of these bad actors. Now that content is back and Google appears to be letting many of the same criminals back into its YouTube partner program – ensuring both YouTube and the criminals can continue to profit from these videos.

Digital Citizens fully expects that with the release of this report Google will once again superficially scrub YouTube. But until it makes a systemic change, we'll continue to play Whac-A-Mole: with drug dealers, identity thieves, and other bad actors disappearing when scrutiny is high and reappearing as soon as the media and law enforcement turn their attention elsewhere.

There has to be a better way. We know that a free and open Internet comes at a cost. There will always be content that some may find objectionable. But the current system is screaming for a solution.

First, Google can and must do better at keeping illegal content off of YouTube. With more than 100 hours of new content uploaded to YouTube every minute, the task for Google is formidable but far from impossible. In fact, no company is better positioned than Google to proactively tackle this problem using its vast collections of data and unparalleled analytics capabilities.

When YouTube came under scrutiny last summer, it unilaterally scrubbed hundreds if not thousands of videos that were questionable. In that case, it didn't wait for a report from users. There is nothing stopping Google from doing the same thing on a monthly, weekly or daily basis – other than having the will to do so.

Additionally, Google further proved its capabilities here by successfully keeping YouTube virtually free of child pornography despite the same challenges inherent to YouTube's massive size.

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.

Second, and most importantly, Google needs to bar criminals and those promoting illegal goods and services from the YouTube Partner Program and kick those already in the program out immediately. While Google openly worries that overly aggressive policing of YouTube content could harm "free speech," no such excuses exist for the addressing the company's advertising partnerships with criminals and other bad actors. Kicking criminals out of the YouTube partner program may harm Google's profits, but certainly not free speech.

Google and YouTube should not benefit financially from videos that promote potentially illegal or unscrupulous actions. 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.

Waiting for users to complain and acting reactively is not a solution to this part of the problem. Google apparently agrees and states that it does review all applicants to the YouTube partner program to ensure they own the copyright to all the videos they upload and adhere to all applicable laws. Unfortunately, however, the massive number of YouTube partners dealing in illegal goods and service already identified by Digital Citizens suggests Google is not living up to this promise.

Additionally, 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.

The simple reality is that Google seems to have no incentive to deal with these problems on its own.

Google is maniacally focused on increasing advertising revenue from YouTube and creating new procedures and requirements that would potentially slow that growth are not in Google's interests.

There is a lot at stake when it comes to Internet crime. The safety of consumers who get dangerous or illegal goods online, the loss of jobs and economic opportunity caused by criminal actions, the degradation of leading brands, and, the faith that the Internet can be trusted and is a safe place to work, live, play and learn.

Hopefully, Google will step up and be the leader it should be.

digital **citizens**
alliance 