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Contact: Jim Kaitschuk, (217) 753-2372, jim@ilsheriff.org

That Video Looked Totally Real... But Was It Actually Fake?

Springfield, IL, — You open your phone and there it is, a crystal-clear video of a trusted public figure saying something shocking, or a voicemail from a family member asking for urgent help. Your heart races. But what if it's not real?

Thanks to today's generative AI tools, creating convincing fake videos, audio, and images now takes just minutes. These "deepfakes" are flooding our feeds, and they're getting harder to spot with every passing week. One well-timed fake can trick even the most careful person into believing something that never happened.

The result? Scammers impersonating loved ones, fake emergency alerts causing panic, or misleading clips that quietly shape what we believe about the world around us. The best defense is knowing they exist and learning how to protect yourself before you become the victim.

How Deepfakes Can Fool You Personally

Deepfakes aren't just political stunts or celebrity gossip anymore. They're being used in everyday scams:

- Fraudsters create synthetic voices that sound exactly like your kid, parent, or spouse calling in distress and asking for money.
- Fake videos of local officials or news events spread confusion during storms, accidents, or elections.
- Manipulated footage makes it tough to know what's happening in your own community.

Once you've seen something that feels real, it's natural to react first and question later. That split-second reaction is exactly what these fakes are designed to exploit.

What to Watch Out For

Even the best deepfakes usually leave behind subtle clues if you know where to look:

- **Facial glitches:** Pay attention to eyes, do they blink naturally? Look for blurry edges around the face, especially when the head moves.
- **Lighting and skin issues:** Inconsistent shadows, odd reflections, or skin that looks too smooth or waxy under certain light.
- **Audio mismatches:** Lips that don't quite sync with the words, strange breathing patterns, or background noise that doesn't match the scene.
- **Too perfect timing:** Content that appears out of nowhere and spreads extremely fast, often without original source footage.

Simple Ways to Protect Yourself

You don't need fancy software to stay safer, just a few quick habits:

- **Slow down when something feels off.** If a video or call triggers a strong emotional reaction (fear, anger, urgency), take a breath and verify before acting on it.
- **Verify the source directly.** Don't trust a social media post or forwarded message. Go straight to the official website, verified social accounts, or call the person back using a known number.
- **Use free checking tools.** Reverse image or video search on Google, fact-checking websites like Snopes or FactCheck.org, or apps like Microsoft's Video Authenticator can quickly reveal red flags.
- **Ask for proof.** If it's a personal message asking for money or action, request a live video call or a specific detail only the real person would know.
- **Stay updated on official channels.** Follow verified local news outlets and government alerts for the real story during developing situations.

By staying aware and taking that extra moment to check, you make it much harder for deepfakes to catch you off guard. The technology is advancing fast, but so is our ability to spot it and that starts with everyday vigilance.

About the Illinois Sheriffs' Association (ISA): Founded in 1928, the Illinois Sheriffs' Association is dedicated to supporting law enforcement professionals, enhancing public safety, and investing in community-based programs across Illinois. ISA provides training, resources, and educational opportunities to strengthen law enforcement and foster safer communities.

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