



Deepfakes in the News — Check a Viral Photo or Video Before You Share

How to tell a real news image from an AI fake — and why a moment's pause matters.

————— **An Extended Guide · No. 1642 · SAFETY** —————

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What's Inside

Everything in this guide, with page numbers. Skip to whichever chapter answers your question right now.

The 60-Second Version	4
1. Why I Wrote This One	4
2. What AI Can Now Fake	5
3. Why Fakes Spread So Fast	6
4. The One Habit — Check Before You Share	7
5. Check the Source First	7
6. Does It Want You to React?	8
7. The Visual Tells	9
8. The Reverse Image Check	10
9. Old Photos, New Lies	11
10. The Deepfake of a Public Figure	11
11. The Harm of Sharing a Fake	12
12. When Fakes Become Scams	13
13. How to Check, Step by Step	14
14. Trustworthy Sources and Fact-Checkers	15
15. Talking to Family About This	16
16. Keeping a Steady, Not Cynical, Eye	16
17. A Word on Elections and Crises	17
18. If You've Shared a Fake	18
19. Questions People Ask Me	19
20. A Five-Minute Media-Literacy Setup	19

21. Reporting It — and Why It Helps 20

22. When to Just Call Me 21

23. Contact Card & a Warm Close 21

Everyday Cheat Sheet 22

A Picture to Follow Along 23

A Second Look 24

A Note From Bill 24

Your Visit — and My Promise 25

SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

AI can now create realistic fake photos and videos of events that never happened, and these spread fast online, especially when they're shocking or make us angry. Before you share a startling image, video, or story, pause and check: is it from a source you trust, are reputable news outlets reporting it, and does it seem designed to provoke a strong reaction? A moment's pause before sharing keeps you from unknowingly spreading a lie — and that moment is the whole habit.

- 1 A startling photo, video, or story appears and you want to share it.
- 2 Pause — especially if it makes you angry, afraid, or triumphant.
- 3 Check the source: is it a reputable outlet, or an unknown account?
- 4 See if trusted news organizations are reporting the same thing.
- 5 Share only once you're confident it's real — when in doubt, don't.

GOOD TO KNOW

The strongest feelings — anger, fear, outrage — are exactly what fakes are designed to trigger, because strong feelings make us share without checking. A surge of emotion is your cue to pause.

1. Why I Wrote This One

Seeing is no longer believing — in the news, too.

In more than thirty years of helping folks across Portage County with their technology, I have watched how we get our news change completely. So much of it now comes through our feeds — photos, videos, and stories shared by friends, family, and strangers. And a troubling new problem has arrived alongside that: artificial intelligence can now create convincing fake photos and videos of events that never happened, so a startling image racing across your screen may be a complete fabrication.

This is not quite a scam in the money sense, but it causes real harm, and it is close kin to the other AI fakes in this series. A fake image or video can spread misinformation, stir up fear or anger over something that never occurred, damage reputations, and make honest people unwittingly spread a lie to everyone they know. In a time when so much flows through our feeds, being able to tell a real news image from an AI fake, and knowing to check before sharing, has become a genuine life skill.

The reassuring news is that you do not need to become a technical expert or a professional fact-checker to protect yourself and others. A few calm habits — pausing before sharing, checking the source, noticing when something is designed to provoke you — go a very long way. We will walk through why fakes spread so fast, how to tell real from fake, and the simple habit of checking before you share. The goal is to let you stay informed and engaged without being fooled, or unwittingly fooling others. No fear, just a steadier eye.

WATCH OUT

You don't need to be a fact-checker. A few calm habits — pause, check the source, notice when something's designed to provoke you — are enough to keep you from spreading a fake.

2. What AI Can Now Fake

The plain picture of the technology.

It helps to understand plainly what artificial intelligence can now do, so you neither underestimate nor overestimate the problem. AI tools can generate realistic photographs of people, places, and events that do not exist and never happened. They can create fake videos of real public figures appearing to say or do things they never said or did. They can produce fake 'news' images of disasters, protests, crimes, or dramatic events that are entirely invented. And they can write fluent, convincing fake news stories to go with the images.

Crucially, the quality has crossed a line. These fakes used to be catchable by obvious flaws, but many are now convincing enough to fool a casual, or even a careful, glance. A fabricated photo of a dramatic event can look exactly like real news photography; a faked video of a famous person can look and sound authentic. So the old reassurance of 'I saw it with my own eyes, there's a photo' no longer holds, because the photo itself may be a fabrication produced in seconds.

At the same time, keep it in proportion: the vast majority of what you see is still real, and AI fakes, while a genuine and growing problem, are a minority of the content in your feed. The goal is not to distrust everything or to become cynical, which would be its own kind of harm, but to add a sensible layer of caution, especially for the startling, emotional, or convenient-seeming content that fakes tend to be. A steady, discerning eye, not blanket suspicion, is what you are after.

GOOD TO KNOW

AI can fake photos, videos, and whole news stories convincingly now — so 'there's a photo' is no longer proof. But most of what you see is still real; the aim is discernment, not blanket distrust.

3. Why Fakes Spread So Fast

The feed rewards the sensational.

To defend against fakes, it helps to understand why they spread so quickly, because the very design of social media works in their favor. Feeds are built to show us content that gets strong reactions — things that are surprising, outrageous, heartwarming, or infuriating — because that content keeps us engaged and sharing. Fakes are often crafted precisely to be maximally shareable, engineered to provoke the strong emotions that make people pass them along without pausing to check.

This creates a troubling dynamic: a shocking fake can race around the world, shared by millions, long before anyone verifies it, and even after it is debunked, the correction rarely travels as far as the original lie. The emotional punch that makes a fake spread is the same thing that short-circuits our judgment, because when we are angry, afraid, or thrilled, we are far more likely to hit 'share' on impulse and far less likely to stop and ask whether it is true.

Understanding this does two things. It explains why you encounter fakes at all — they are selected and amplified by the feed precisely for their emotional pull — and it points to the defense: the moment of strongest feeling is exactly the moment to pause. When something makes you want to share it immediately because it is so shocking or so perfectly confirms what you already believe, that urgency is your cue to slow down and check, because that is exactly the reaction a fake is engineered to produce.

WATCH OUT

The feed amplifies whatever provokes the strongest reaction, and fakes are built to do exactly that. The urge to share something immediately because it's shocking is your cue to pause and check.

4. The One Habit — Check Before You Share

The whole defense in four words.

Here is the entire defense, in four words: check before you share. Before you pass along a startling photo, video, or story — to your friends, your family, your groups — you take a moment to confirm it is real. That is it. You do not have to catch every fake with your own eyes or become an investigator; you simply refuse to share anything you have not checked, which breaks the chain that lets fakes spread through you to everyone you know.

This habit is powerful for a reason beyond protecting yourself: it stops you from becoming a link in the chain that spreads a lie. Fakes travel through ordinary, well-meaning people who share them in good faith, so every person who pauses to check before sharing is a break in that chain. By checking before you share, you protect not just your own understanding but your whole circle, who trust what you pass along. It is a small act with a real public benefit.

Checking does not have to be elaborate. For most things, a quick look — is this from a source I trust, are reputable outlets reporting it, does a quick search confirm or debunk it — is enough, and takes under a minute. For the rest, the safe default is simply not to share something you cannot confirm. 'When in doubt, don't share' is a perfectly good rule, and it costs you nothing, since nothing is lost by not spreading an unverified image. The habit is light; its benefit is large.

TIP

The whole habit is four words: check before you share. And the safe default when you can't quickly confirm something is simply not to share it. Nothing is lost by not spreading the unverified.

5. Check the Source First

Where did this actually come from?

The first and most useful check is the source: where did this image, video, or story actually come from? A great deal of truth or falsehood is revealed just by asking that question. Content from established, reputable news organizations with a reputation to protect is far more likely to be real and verified than content from an unknown account, a random page, a meme, or a stranger's post, however convincing the image itself looks.

So when something startling appears, look at who is behind it before you react or share. Is it from a known, credible news outlet, or from an account or page you have never heard of? Was it reported and attributed, or does it just float as an image with a dramatic caption? Does the account that posted it have a track record, or does it exist mainly to post provocative content? An anonymous or unknown source for a shocking claim is itself a reason for caution, regardless of how real the image appears.

Be aware, too, that sources can be faked or impersonated — a fake 'news' image can carry a real outlet's logo copied onto it, and fake accounts can mimic real organizations. So checking the source means more than glancing at a logo; it means asking whether the claim actually traces back to a credible outlet you can verify. The simplest version: if a dramatic story is real, reputable news organizations will be reporting it, and you can check whether they are. If only unknown sources carry it, that is a strong sign to doubt it.

GOOD TO KNOW

If a dramatic story is real, reputable news outlets will be reporting it. If it's only circulating from unknown accounts and provocative pages, that absence is itself a strong reason to doubt it.

6. Does It Want You to React?

Emotion as a warning sign.

A powerful check is to notice how the content makes you feel, because fakes and misinformation are very often engineered to provoke strong emotions — anger, fear, outrage, triumph, disgust. When a photo, video, or story hits you with a surge of strong feeling and a powerful urge to share it immediately, that reaction itself is a reason to pause, because that is exactly what a piece designed to deceive and spread is built to do.

This is especially true when something perfectly confirms what you already believe or fear, or perfectly vilifies those you already oppose. Fakes are often crafted to tell people exactly what they want or expect to hear, because content that confirms our existing views slips past our skepticism — we are far less likely to question something that fits what we already think. So the images and stories that feel most satisfying to share, that most neatly confirm your side, deserve the most scrutiny, not the least.

None of this means your feelings are wrong or that everything emotional is fake — real news is often genuinely upsetting. It means that a strong emotional reaction is a signal to

engage your checking habit before you share, not a license to skip it. 'This made me so angry I have to share it right now' is precisely the moment to pause, check the source, and confirm it is real. The stronger the pull to share immediately, the more important the pause. Let your feelings alert you, then let your checking decide.

WATCH OUT

Content that perfectly confirms what you already believe slips past your skepticism — which is why fakes are built to do exactly that. The most satisfying thing to share deserves the most scrutiny.

7. The Visual Tells

Clues in the image itself — with low expectations.

There are visual clues that can sometimes reveal an AI-generated image, and they are worth knowing, as long as you hold them with low expectations — because the technology improves constantly and a good fake may show none of them. Treat these as a bonus that might confirm a suspicion, never as a reliable test, since the absence of flaws does not prove an image is real.

- Hands and fingers that look wrong — extra or missing fingers, odd shapes — a classic AI giveaway, though improving.
- Garbled or nonsensical text in the image — signs, labels, logos that are misspelled or gibberish.
- Faces or objects that are subtly off, or backgrounds that blur, warp, or don't make sense on close look.
- Details that don't add up — wrong shadows, impossible reflections, things that couldn't physically be.
- A too-perfect or oddly 'smooth' quality to the image, or elements that repeat strangely. For video, you might notice unnatural movements, lip-sync that doesn't quite match, odd blinking, or shimmering around a face — the same tells as in deepfake video calls, and equally unreliable as the technology advances. So by all means glance for these clues, and if you spot one, trust it. But do not rely on spotting them, and never conclude that a polished image must be real just because you cannot find a flaw. The source check and the emotion check are far more reliable than hunting for visual giveaways.

GOOD TO KNOW

Odd hands, garbled text, and impossible details can reveal a fake — but a good fake shows none of them. Use visual tells as a bonus, never a test; checking the source is far more reliable.

8. The Reverse Image Check

A simple tool to find where a picture came from.

One genuinely useful tool for checking a photo is a reverse image search, which lets you find where else a picture has appeared online. This can quickly reveal a great deal: whether an image is actually an old photo being passed off as new, whether it has been debunked by fact-checkers, whether it traces to a credible source or only to dubious ones, or whether it is a known fake. It is one of the more powerful checks available to an ordinary person, and it is free.

The idea is simple: instead of searching with words, you search with the picture itself, and the search shows you other places that image appears. Major search engines offer this, and you can usually do it by uploading the image or, on a phone, through the search app's camera or image options. If a 'breaking news' photo turns out, via reverse search, to be a stock image, a years-old photo from an unrelated event, or something fact-checkers have already flagged as fake, you have your answer without needing any technical expertise.

If reverse image searching sounds unfamiliar, it is exactly the kind of small, handy skill I am glad to show you — it takes just a few minutes to learn and is useful far beyond spotting fakes. A common and revealing result is discovering that a shocking 'current' photo is actually a real but old image recycled to mislead, which is a frequent trick. Learning this one tool gives you a quick, concrete way to check many images before you share them, turning a vague doubt into a clear answer.

GOOD TO KNOW

A reverse image search — searching with the picture itself — can reveal that a 'breaking' photo is actually old, recycled, or already debunked. Ask me to show you how; it takes just a few minutes to learn.

9. Old Photos, New Lies

Not all fakes are AI-made.

It is worth remembering that misinformation is not only AI-generated fakes; a huge amount of it is real images and videos used dishonestly. A common and effective trick is taking a genuine photo or video from one time and place and presenting it as something else — an old disaster photo relabeled as a current event, footage from one country passed off as another, a real image stripped of its true context to tell a false story. No AI is involved; the deception is in the caption and the framing.

This matters because such content can pass every test for being a 'real' image — because it is real — while still being used to spread a lie. The visual tells won't catch it, since there is nothing fake about the image itself. What catches it is the source and context check: when and where was this actually taken, and does it really show what the caption claims? A reverse image search is especially powerful here, often revealing that a 'current' image is years old or from somewhere entirely different.

So broaden your checking beyond 'is this AI-generated' to 'is this what it claims to be.' A dramatic image with a dramatic caption deserves the question: is this image really from this event, at this time, in this place? Often the image is genuine but the story attached to it is false, which is just as misleading as a wholly fabricated picture. Checking the true origin and context of an image, not just its authenticity, is key to not being fooled by this very common form of misinformation.

WATCH OUT

Much misinformation is real photos used dishonestly — an old or unrelated image with a false caption. Ask not just 'is it fake?' but 'is this really from this event, time, and place?'

10. The Deepfake of a Public Figure

Fake videos of people in the news.

A particularly concerning kind of fake is the deepfake video of a public figure — a politician, official, celebrity, or business leader appearing to say or do something they never did. These can be used to spread misinformation, manipulate opinion, damage reputations, or, as covered elsewhere in this series, to sell scams by faking an endorsement. A convincing fake video of a well-known person saying something inflammatory can spread rapidly and do real damage before it is debunked.

The defense is the familiar one, adapted: do not trust a shocking video of a public figure based on the video alone, especially one shared by an unknown source or designed to provoke. Check whether credible news organizations are reporting that the person actually said or did this. Real, significant statements and actions by public figures are covered by mainstream news; if a dramatic video of a famous person is circulating only on social media from questionable sources, with no credible outlet confirming it, that is a strong sign it may be fake.

It also helps to know that public figures and news organizations increasingly respond to deepfakes, so a search may turn up the person or outlet debunking a fake video directly. As with everything here, the key is to treat a startling video of a public figure as something to verify before believing or sharing, not as self-evident proof. The ability to fake a familiar face and voice means that, for consequential claims, you confirm through credible reporting rather than trusting the clip in your feed.

GOOD TO KNOW

If a public figure really said or did something significant, credible news will report it. A shocking video of them circulating only from questionable sources, unconfirmed by real news, may well be a deepfake.

11. The Harm of Sharing a Fake

Why your pause matters to everyone.

It is worth dwelling on why checking before you share matters beyond your own understanding, because the harm of spreading a fake is real and often underappreciated. When you share a fake, even innocently, you lend it your credibility: your friends and family trust what you pass along, so your share helps a lie reach and convince people it might not have otherwise. You become, without meaning to, part of the machinery that spreads misinformation.

The consequences can be serious. Fakes have falsely damaged reputations, stirred up fear and anger over events that never happened, spread dangerous health or safety misinformation, influenced opinions with lies, and caused real-world confusion and harm. During crises especially, fake images and false claims can spread panic or send help to the wrong places. Every person who shares a fake, however well-meaning, adds to that harm, and every person who pauses to check reduces it.

So think of checking before you share as a small act of responsibility to the people who trust you and to the broader community. You would not knowingly pass along a lie; checking simply ensures you do not do so unknowingly. In a time when so much flows through ordinary people's feeds, that individual discipline adds up to a real public good. Your pause is not just self-protection; it is a quiet service to everyone who sees what you share, and a refusal to let your good name be used to spread a falsehood.

GOOD TO KNOW

When you share a fake, you lend it your credibility — your friends trust what you pass along. Checking before you share protects not just you but everyone who sees what you post.

12. When Fakes Become Scams

The overlap with the money cons.

News and social-media fakes connect directly to the money scams covered elsewhere in this series, and seeing the overlap reinforces why the checking habit matters. The same deepfake technology that fakes a news video also powers fake celebrity investment pitches, fake disaster-relief charity appeals built on AI-made victim images, fake product endorsements, and the fabricated 'news' stories that lend scams false credibility. A fake in your feed is sometimes the front door to a fraud.

For instance, a fake video of a famous investor 'announcing' a can't-miss opportunity, a fabricated 'news article' about a miracle health product, or AI-generated images of disaster victims attached to a fraudulent donation link all use the techniques of news fakery in service of taking your money. When you apply your checking habit to startling content, you are protecting not only against misinformation but against the scams that ride on it, which is a double benefit of the same simple pause.

So let the two habits reinforce each other. The same instinct that makes you pause before sharing a shocking image should make you pause before acting on a startling 'opportunity,' 'news,' or 'appeal' that moves you toward your wallet. Check the source, resist the manufactured emotion and urgency, verify through credible and independent channels, and never let a convincing image or video alone move your money or your beliefs. The media-literacy habit and the scam-defense habit are, at root, the same calm skepticism applied to a world full of convincing fakes.

GOOD TO KNOW

The same tech that fakes news videos powers fake investment pitches, charity appeals, and product endorsements. Checking startling content protects you against misinformation and the scams that ride on it.

13. How to Check, Step by Step

A simple routine before you share.

Let me put the checking into a simple routine you can run in under a minute before sharing anything startling. You will not need all of it every time; often the first step or two settles it. But having the routine in mind makes checking quick and natural, so it becomes something you just do rather than a chore.

- 1 Pause, especially if it made you feel a strong emotion or a powerful urge to share.
- 2 Check the source: is it a reputable, credible outlet, or an unknown account or page?
- 3 See if trusted news organizations are reporting the same thing — if it's real and big, they will be.
- 4 For a photo, consider a reverse image search to find where it really came from and whether it's old or debunked.
- 5 Ask whether it's designed to provoke you or confirm what you already believe — a reason for extra scrutiny.
- 6 If you can't confirm it, don't share it. When in doubt, leave it out.

The beauty of this routine is that it scales to the stakes. For a mildly interesting item, a quick glance at the source may be all you need. For a shocking, consequential claim you feel driven to share widely, do the fuller check — source, credible reporting, maybe a reverse image search — before passing it on. And always keep the safe default in your back pocket: if you cannot confirm something and it matters, simply don't share it. That single fallback protects you even when you are unsure how to check.

WATCH OUT

The fallback that always works: if you can't confirm it and it matters, don't share it. 'When in doubt, leave it out' protects you even when you're not sure how to check.

14. Trustworthy Sources and Fact-Checkers

Where to turn to confirm or debunk.

Part of checking well is knowing where to turn, so it helps to have a sense of trustworthy sources in mind. Established news organizations with professional standards, a track record, and accountability are your mainstay — not because they are perfect, but because they verify before publishing and can be held responsible for errors, unlike an anonymous account. When a dramatic claim is real and significant, these outlets will be reporting it, and their coverage is a strong confirmation.

There are also dedicated fact-checking organizations whose whole job is to investigate viral claims, images, and videos and report whether they are true, false, or misleading. A quick search of a dramatic claim along with the word 'fact check' will often turn up whether reputable fact-checkers have already examined it, which can settle the question instantly for widely-circulating fakes. These organizations are a valuable resource precisely for the startling, shareable content that fakes tend to be.

The broader principle is to weigh information by the credibility and accountability of its source. An image or claim gains trustworthiness when it traces to sources that verify and can be held responsible, and loses it when it comes only from anonymous, provocative, or unaccountable places. You do not need to trust any single outlet blindly; you are looking for whether credible, independent sources confirm a claim, and whether fact-checkers have weighed in. That triangulation — does this hold up across trustworthy sources — is the heart of checking before you share.

GOOD TO KNOW

Searching a dramatic claim plus 'fact check' often instantly reveals whether reputable fact-checkers have already debunked it. It's one of the quickest ways to settle a viral image or video.

15. Talking to Family About This

Spreading the habit, gently.

Because fakes spread through families and friend groups, helping the people around you adopt the check-before-you-share habit protects everyone, and it is worth doing gently. Many people, especially those newer to social media, have not fully absorbed that photos and videos can now be convincingly faked, and may share startling content in complete good faith, trusting that 'there's a photo' means it is real. A kind heads-up can save them from unwittingly spreading misinformation.

Approach it without condescension. Rather than correcting someone who shared a fake in a way that embarrasses them, share the general idea warmly: 'Did you know they can make completely fake photos and videos now? I've started checking before I share anything surprising.' Framing it as something you do, and as a surprising development that affects everyone, lands far better than 'that thing you shared was fake.' The goal is to spread the habit, not to shame anyone for not having it yet.

If you do need to let someone know they shared something false, do it privately and kindly, with understanding that they shared in good faith. And teach the practical habit, not just the warning: pause before sharing, check the source, be wary of things that provoke strong emotions. When a family makes checking-before-sharing a shared, normal practice — much like the scam-defense habits — it protects the whole group from spreading and being fooled by fakes, and it models good citizenship for the younger members watching.

TIP

Spread the habit warmly: 'Did you know they can fake photos and videos now? I check before I share surprising stuff.' That lands far better than 'what you shared was fake.'

16. Keeping a Steady, Not Cynical, Eye

Discernment without despair.

There is a real risk, in learning about fakes, of swinging too far into cynicism — concluding that nothing can be trusted, that everything might be fake, that it is all hopeless. I want to steer you away from that, because it is both inaccurate and harmful. Most of what you see is real, honest journalism and genuine images still vastly outnumber fakes, and the answer to a world with some fakes in it is discernment, not despair or blanket distrust.

Blanket cynicism actually plays into the hands of those who spread fakes, because if people conclude that nothing can be known or trusted, then real evidence loses its power too, and anyone can dismiss any true but inconvenient fact as 'probably fake.' A healthy information diet is not 'trust nothing' but 'trust wisely' — giving credence to credible, accountable sources and verified claims, while withholding it from anonymous, provocative, or unverified ones. Discernment keeps truth meaningful; cynicism dissolves it.

So aim for a steady, discerning eye: appropriately cautious about startling, emotional, or unverified content, but still able to recognize and trust genuine information from credible sources. You can stay informed, engaged, and connected without being either naive or paralyzed by suspicion. The checking habit is not about doubting everything; it is about a sensible extra moment of care for the content most likely to be designed to fool you. Keep your trust, but place it wisely, and you can navigate even a world full of fakes with confidence.

GOOD TO KNOW

The answer to fakes is discernment, not cynicism. 'Trust nothing' actually helps those who spread lies, because it lets real evidence be waved away too. Trust wisely — credible sources yes, anonymous provocation no.

17. A Word on Elections and Crises

When fakes do the most damage.

Fakes are especially prevalent and damaging around certain high-stakes moments — elections, disasters, major breaking news, and times of public tension — so it is worth being extra vigilant then. During these periods, there is both a flood of fabricated content aimed at influencing opinion or sowing confusion, and a heightened emotional climate that makes people more likely to share without checking. The combination makes these exactly the times to slow down the most.

Around elections, for instance, fake images, videos, and stories may aim to mislead about candidates, voting, or results, designed to provoke and to spread. During disasters, fake images and false claims can spread panic, misdirect aid, or exploit sympathy for scams, while real information is urgently needed. In both cases, the stakes of spreading a fake are high, and the pressure to react quickly is intense — which is precisely why your checking habit matters most in these moments.

So during elections, crises, and major news events, lean extra hard on the habit: pause before sharing, rely on credible and official sources, be especially wary of provocative unverified content, and resist the heightened urge to react instantly. For practical matters during a disaster especially — safety information, where to get help — turn to official sources like emergency management and established news rather than unverified social posts. The more consequential and emotionally charged the moment, the more valuable a calm, checking pause becomes.

WATCH OUT

Fakes flood in during elections, disasters, and big breaking news — exactly when emotions run high and the stakes of sharing a lie are greatest. These are the moments to slow down the most and rely on credible, official sources.

18. If You've Shared a Fake

No shame — just set it right.

If you realize you have shared something that turned out to be fake, do not be hard on yourself — it happens to thoughtful people, especially before the checking habit becomes second nature, and sharing in good faith is an honest mistake, not a character flaw. The useful thing is simply to set it right, which is easy to do and models exactly the responsibility you would want from others.

- 1 Delete the fake post or share once you know it's false, so it stops spreading through you.
- 2 Consider posting a brief, honest correction: 'I shared this earlier — turns out it's not real, my apologies.'
- 3 Don't dwell in embarrassment; a graceful correction actually builds trust and models good habits.
- 4 Learn the small lesson — what would have caught it — and carry the checking habit forward.
- 5 Be gentle with others who make the same mistake, since you now know how easy it is. A willingness to correct yourself openly is, if anything, a mark of integrity, and it helps undo the harm by alerting the people who saw your share. Far from diminishing you, a gracious 'I got this wrong, here's the correction' tends to raise your credibility, because it shows you care about truth over ego. So treat a shared fake as a minor, correctable event and a nudge toward the habit, not as a cause for lasting embarrassment. We are all learning to navigate a world of convincing fakes together.

GOOD TO KNOW

Shared a fake? Just delete it and, if you like, post a graceful correction. Owning an honest mistake actually builds trust — it shows you value truth over ego.

19. Questions People Ask Me

The ones that come up again and again.

How can I possibly tell a really good fake from a real image? Sometimes you can't, by looking — which is exactly why the reliable checks aren't about the image itself but about the source and the reporting. If you can't confirm something through credible sources, the safe move is simply not to share it, regardless of how real it looks.

Isn't checking everything exhausting? You don't check everything — you check the startling, emotional, or consequential content you're about to share, which is a small slice. A quick source glance settles most of it in seconds, and the fallback 'when in doubt, don't share' covers the rest. Ordinary everyday content needs no investigation.

What if it's from a friend or family member — surely they wouldn't share something fake? Well-meaning friends and family share fakes in good faith all the time, because they trusted it too. A fake reaching you from someone you trust is not evidence it's real; it just means the chain of good-faith sharing reached you. Check it the same way regardless of who shared it.

Does this mean I shouldn't trust the news at all? Not at all. Credible, accountable news organizations that verify before publishing are exactly what you should rely on to confirm things. The habit isn't 'trust nothing' — it's 'trust credible sources, and be wary of unverified content from anonymous or provocative ones.' Discernment, not cynicism.

20. A Five-Minute Media-Literacy Setup

Habits that keep your feed honest.

A little setup and a few habits let you navigate your feed with a steady, discerning eye, informed without being fooled. These are simple to adopt and quickly become second nature, protecting both you and everyone who sees what you share.

- 1 Adopt the four-word rule: check before you share — and 'when in doubt, leave it out.'
- 2 Treat a strong emotional reaction as a cue to pause, not to share immediately.

- 3 Make checking the source your first move: reputable outlet, or unknown account?
- 4 Learn to do a reverse image search (ask me — it takes minutes) for checking photos.
- 5 Keep a mental shortlist of credible news sources and fact-checkers to confirm or debunk claims.
- 6 Share the habit gently with family, so your whole circle stops spreading fakes.

GOOD TO KNOW

If you do just one thing, make it the pause: check before you share, and don't share what you can't confirm. That single habit keeps you from spreading a lie and protects everyone who trusts you.

21. Reporting It — and Why It Helps

A few minutes that protect the next person.

Reporting a scam can feel pointless once the money is gone, but it genuinely matters. Reports help investigators link cases together, give platforms and phone carriers the evidence to shut fakes down, and warn others before they are caught. You do not need to have lost money to report — flagging an attempt is valuable too. It takes only a few minutes, and it turns a bad experience into something that helps your neighbors.

- Report to the Federal Trade Commission at [ReportFraud.ftc.gov](https://reportfraud.ftc.gov), the national clearinghouse for scams. You can also call 1-877-382-4357.
- Report online or financial crime to the FBI at ic3.gov, their internet-crime complaint center — especially for larger losses or cryptocurrency.
- Contact the Ohio Attorney General's consumer protection team at 800-282-0515 or through ohioattorneygeneral.gov.
- If your identity may be exposed, visit IdentityTheft.gov for a step-by-step recovery plan.
- Report spam texts by forwarding them to 7726 (SPAM), and use the 'report' button inside apps and email.

I wrote a separate, step-by-step guide on reporting to the FTC, the FBI, and the Ohio Attorney General, with exactly what to write down and what to expect afterward. If the reporting steps feel like a lot, that is a perfect thing to call me about. I am glad to sit with you and help you file, so that your report actually reaches the people who can use it.

GOOD TO KNOW

You will usually not hear back from a report, and that is normal. Your report still joins a bigger picture that helps investigators and warns others, even when nothing lands in your own inbox.

22. When to Just Call Me

A calm second opinion costs you nothing.

If something about a startling photo, video, or story before you share it has you second-guessing yourself, or you just want a steady second opinion before you do anything, please call me. There is never a charge to ask a scam question, and never any judgment. I would far rather spend a few minutes on the phone talking it through with you than hear later that something cost you money or worry. That is genuinely what I am here for, and it is some of the most satisfying work I do.

If you would like a hand in person, I come to homes all across Portage County. I can help you check something safely, tighten up your accounts and passwords after a close call, set your devices and routine so these scams have a harder time reaching you, and walk your whole family through a simple plan. We go at your pace, with no pressure and no rushing, and you come away feeling steadier.

GOOD TO KNOW

The best time to call is before you act — before you click, pay, or share anything. A quick 'does this seem right to you, Bill?' is one of my favorite kinds of call to get.

23. Contact Card & a Warm Close

Keep this page where you can find it again.

Bill's Home Tech — your local tech, Bill Davis, owner and only tech. Phone or text: (330) 200-8042. Email: bill@billshometech.com. Web: billshometech.com. Service area: Atwater, Ravenna, Kent, Streetsboro, Aurora, Rootstown, Mantua, Garrettsville, Windham, Edinburg, Suffield — all of Portage County, Ohio.

- Free phone call: any scam question or close call, always free, with no judgment and no rushing.
- In-home scam-check visit: \$99 flat for the first visit, with a 30-day follow-up included.
- Remote help by screen-share, for when you would rather not wait for a visit.

A moment's pause before sharing protects your friends, your family, and your own good name — and it's a quiet act of good citizenship in a noisy time. Check before you share, and call me anytime you'd like help verifying something. I am a phone call away, and glad to help.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

The one habit

Check before you share. And when you can't confirm something startling, don't share it — nothing is lost by not spreading the unverified.

How to check

- Pause if it made you angry, afraid, or triumphant.
- Check the source — reputable outlet or unknown account?
- Are trusted news organizations reporting it too?
- Reverse-image-search a photo to find its real origin.
- Search the claim plus 'fact check.'

Red flags

- From an anonymous or unknown account.
- Designed to provoke strong emotion.
- Perfectly confirms what you already believe.
- Only on social media, no credible outlet confirms it.
- A real-looking image with a dramatic, unverifiable caption.

GOOD TO KNOW

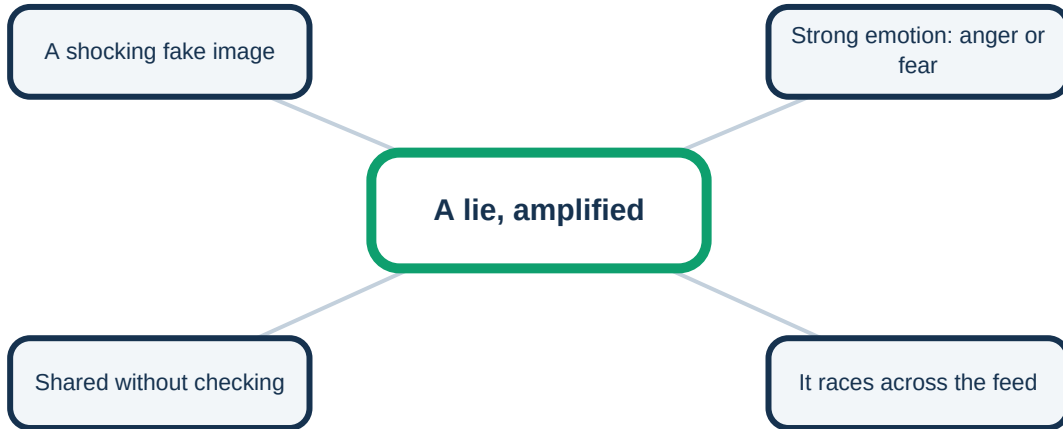
A strong feeling and an urge to share right now is exactly the reaction a fake is built to trigger. Let the emotion alert you — then let your checking decide.

AT A GLANCE

A Picture to Follow Along

Why Fakes Spread

The feed rewards whatever provokes us most.



The urge to share instantly is your cue to pause and check.

Illustration - a schematic; details vary by device and setup.

AT A GLANCE

A Second Look

Check Before You Share

A one-minute routine that stops the spread.

- 1 A startling photo, video, or story appears
- 2 Pause - especially if it stirs strong emotion
- 3 Check the source: reputable outlet or unknown?
- 4 Are trusted news organizations reporting it?
- 5 Reverse-image-search a photo; search 'claim + fact check'
- 6 Can't confirm it? Don't share it

When in doubt, leave it out - nothing's lost by not spreading it.

Illustration - a schematic; details vary by device and setup.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.



HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

In-home visit — \$99 flat for your first visit. No contracts and no surprise charges, and a 30-day follow-up is included.

Remote Support — \$49 for a screen-share session. I only connect with your permission, you watch the whole time, and you can end anytime. If I can't fix it over the screen-share, I refund the \$49 — and if it turns out you need me in person, that \$49 goes toward your visit. It's included free for Support Plan members (\$39/mo).

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full \$99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Call or text **(330) 200-8042** · Book a visit: **billshometech.com/book** · **bill@billshometech.com**

This free guide is for general information only — not professional advice, and no substitute for your device's own manual. Any prices or outside products mentioned can change; please confirm current details before you buy. Please use your own good judgment and follow it at your own risk — for anything involving electricity, gas, water, or heights, stop and call a licensed professional. Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results. © 2026 Bill's Home Tech, LLC.