It takes some effort in today's world to avoid an encounter with artificial intelligence (AI). Businesses are discovering ways to replace workers with AI. Students and professionals use AI to write papers, letters, or emails. Aspiring artists or just those with vivid imaginations prompt AI to create videos and images of whatever can be dreamed up. A few people on social media have wondered if our office uses AI to create our social media content. I can assure you that the only AI employed in our office is the magic 8 ball I might consult to determine which donut to try first.

Advancements in AI have created a wild west like environment online. Audio or video of virtually anything can be created using AI. Having seen footage of an event can no longer be taken as face value proof the incident really happened. The truth is out there, but it takes some digging to find it.

AI has created a new level in scams too. Every day it seems that AI gets better and more difficult to distinguish from reality. With each of these advancements, it becomes more difficult to recognize the criminals and scammers and avoid falling victim to their crimes. Through the use of AI, criminals are able to create realistic looking images and videos of virtually anyone, especially if that person has any kind of on-line presence. Criminals have long worked to scam money from victims with "grandparent scams" and other scams that rely upon deception. For example, in grandparent scams, an older relative is contacted by someone pretending to be a family member, often a grandchild, with a story that they are in danger or are being held against their will. The criminals make a demand of money for the release of the victim, working to make their made-up situation sound as desperate as possible. In another kind of scam, the criminal pretends to be a member of a large corporation and attempts to authorize payment to the criminal's bank account. In all these scams, no family member is in danger and no money is due, but the criminals depend upon successful deception to carry out their crime. Criminals can now send a very convincing photograph or video made with AI to back up a claim of a person in trouble, convince someone they are an authorized corporate officer, or any other proof to further their scam. Thankfully, these scams are still relatively uncommon, but they can be devastating to a family or business caught up in this crime.

As with any scam, regardless of the story given by the criminal, skepticism is your best defense. If someone contacts you unexpectedly, regardless of the reason they give for reaching out, you should be on your guard. Especially if the message they give has a tone of urgency. Pay your taxes or you'll be arrested. You failed to show up for jury duty and have a warrant. You've won a lottery but must pay the taxes today or forfeit your prize. Your grandchild is being held hostage. This invoice is past due and we will lose this client. Any message that makes you feel something must be done now should set off alarm bells. If you think the person contacting you might be legitimate, find out who they represent and research a telephone number on your own to contact that entity. In the case of the grandparent/hostage scam, work to confirm on your own the safety of the family member allegedly in trouble. No matter how convincing a

scammer might be or what kind of proof offered, trust your instincts and verify on your own the truth of the message.

Being skeptical, cautious, and suspicious has kept people alive for thousands of years. This same primal instinct that kept our ancestors from becoming a tiger's next lunch can serve to protect you from the most advanced AI powered criminals out there. Harness your gut instinct and skepticism to steer clear of scams. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.