Consumer Reports WebWatch
Cybercrime Prevention Project
Fact Sheet #11: Don't be Misled by Fake Pictures and Video Online

This is the eleventh consumer fact sheet in the Consumer Reports WebWatch "Look Before You Click" campaign, supported by a grant from the New York State Attorney General's office, to help educate New York Consumers about Internet fraud. It's about fake pictures and video online, and how to protect yourself from being misled by them.

"Manipulation" of imagery has been around since people could draw pictures. However, the Internet can make distribution of fake images more rapid and widespread than ever before. Is this a big deal? Perhaps not, if it's one of those e-mails from your friends with a couple of dozen cc's and "Have You Seen This?" typed in the subject line.

Also, you might say that in U.S. culture, we are used to the idea of celebrity pictures in glossy magazines being "retouched" or "photoshopped." Of course, this kind of technology and dissemination can be abused. What if, in the critical closing weeks of a presidential campaign, someone circulated an altered image of a leading candidate in a compromising position? That actually happened in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. For the purposes of daily living and digital image literacy, here are some tips from Consumer Reports WebWatch to keep in mind:

1. Be wary of pictures used to advertise items in online auctions. Scammers often steal photos from other auctions or Web sites to use on their phony auction pages. If you're not sure, do an image search on Google describing the item and if you see the same picture more than once, think twice. Photo "watermarks" can be easily faked.

2. As anyone who has tried to take a family picture with young children and pets knows, the "perfect" photographic moment is hard to achieve. The well-worn consumer caution, "if it looks too good to be true, it is," can be applied to photos and video on the Internet.

3. On the Web, context is critical. "Before-and-after" images demonstrating weight loss, the miracles of skin creams, and attractive potential mates just waiting to talk to you should be treated with skepticism.

4. Technically, it's easier to alter a single image than hundreds of them, as would appear in frames in video. However, digital video editing software can raise similar concerns.

5. Manipulated or not, if placing images of yourself or your family online on community, social networking or video sites such as Flickr, Facebook and YouTube, you should consider the ramifications carefully. Photos and video that enter the digital domain, remain. They may present a picture to a future employer you might regret.

6. You may decide to play around with software such as Photoshop. Consider your responsibility as a Web publisher and tell people on your Web site, blog or photo file if you drastically alter the composition of a photo in order to make a point.