

Online Deception Types

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INTRODUCTION

Like all societies, online communities can be victimized by deception by their members. It is helpful to identify the forms in which deception can occur (“taxonomies”) to better prepare responses. While deception can often be ignored in informal interaction, it is more serious when online communities, subgroups, or pairs of members attempt to accomplish tasks together.

BACKGROUND

Online deception can occur in many ways. Many of these are “lies,” false statements intended to gain some advantage to the liar (Bok, 1978), but deception includes indirect methods as well. Common forms of deception in virtual communities are as follows (Grazioli & Jarvenpaa, 2003):

- Identity deception, pretending to be a different person or kind of person than one really is (Donath, 1998). This is intrinsic to online fantasy worlds but occurs not infrequently in other interactions, as when participants in a discussion group pretend to a different gender, background, or personality than their true one (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). It can also occur in failure to reveal a critical bias, as when an employee of a company endorses his/her company’s product in a discussion group without revealing his/her employment (“shilling”). The frequent lack of aural and visual clues in cyberspace particularly facilitates identity deception.
- Mimicking of data and processes. Examples are fake Web pages intended to steal credit card numbers, fake bills for services not rendered, and hijacking of sites and connections. Such events are increasingly common.
- Insincere responses to other people, including posturing and exaggeration of responses. This can include substitution of a different emotional response for the one actually felt (Ford, 1996), or “trolling” by deliberately seeming stupid to provoke people (Donath, 1998). Insincerity is also facilitated by the lack of visual and aural feedback.

- False excuses. Alleged reasons for not doing something (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983) are common online because they are often hard to confirm.
- False promises. False advertising is an example, where limited ability to view and feel a product online permits inflated claims by the seller. In newsgroups due to the sporadic appearance of members of a virtual community, there may not be as much social pressure to fulfill commitments as in the real world. This can lead to strange phenomena such as fake virtual suicide (Brundage, 2001).
- Coordinated “disinformation” campaigns to convince people of something false (Florida, 1996).
- Other forms of fraud, attempts to fool people to achieve criminal ends (McEvoy, Albro, & McCracken, 2001; Mitnick, 2002), either directly (such as fake investments or fake charities) or indirectly (such as stealing credit card numbers or sending e-mail with implanted viruses).

MOTIVATION FOR DECEPTION

Another way to classify deception is by its motivation. Ford (1996) and Eckman (1991) enumerate reasons for lying, most of which apply to nonverbal deception as well.

- Lies to avoid punishment, as when a member of a virtual community violates its rules about secrecy and denies it.
- Lies as an act of aggression, as when a member lies to someone by whom they have been hurt.
- Lies to create a sense of power, as when a member lies to provoke a reaction from another.
- Lies as wish fulfillment, as when a member lies about his/her job or sex.
- Lies to assist self-deception, as when a member lies about the state of his/her marriage to justify an extramarital affair to him-/herself.
- Lies to help someone, as when a member feigns interest in a subject important to a friend.
- Lies to assist another’s self-deception, as when a member lies to approve of lies by a friend.
- Lies to resolve role conflict, as when a member pretends to enjoy an exercise to impress other members.

- Lies for enjoyment, as when a member enjoys tricking a new member.

MECHANISMS OF ONLINE DECEPTION

Deception can be classified with respect to mechanism used. Whaley (1982) proposes a six-part taxonomy with “masking,” “repackaging,” and “dazzling” as forms of “hiding the real,” and “mimicking,” “inventing,” and “decoying” as forms of “showing the false.” Grazioli and Jarvenpaa (2003) suggest for online deception the categories of “masking,” “dazzling,” “decoying,” “mimicking,” “inventing,” “relabeling,” and “double playing,” and gives statistics of their online use. Rowe and Rothstein (2004) propose a comprehensive taxonomy based on case grammars for linguistics, or ways to categorize how events can have associated concepts:

- deception involving the participants
 - agent (the person who initiates the action), as when a person pretends to be someone else (easy to do online)
 - beneficiary (the person who benefits), as when someone lies that they intend to do something for another person
 - experiences (a psychological feature associated with the action), as when someone pretends to be angry (easy to do online)
 - instrument (something that helps accomplish the action), as when someone lies about the method they used to reach a Web site
 - object (what the action is done), as when someone lies about fixing a bug
 - recipient (the person who receives the action), as when someone lies about whose approval he/she obtained
- deception in space (rarely relevant in cyberspace because “locations” are abstract)
- deception in time (rarely relevant in cyberspace because of automatic time-stamping of messages)
- deception in causality
 - cause, as when someone lies about his/her system crashing to excuse his/her absence, or lies about why he/she joined a newsgroup (easy to do online)
 - contradiction to (what this action contradicts, if anything), as when someone claims installing certain software will protect your system when it actually makes it more vulnerable
 - effect, as when an e-mail attachment installs a virus (hard to do online because of available confirmation)
- purpose, as when someone lies about why he/she wants you to open a file
- precondition, as when someone lies that he/she cannot download your file (easy to do online)
- deception in quality
 - accompaniment, as when someone sends an e-mail with an attachment containing a virus
 - content, such as an e-mail containing a picture instead of text as stated (easy to do online)
 - manner, as when someone dumps e-mail into a directory rather than forwarding it as stated
 - material, as when someone sends a file in Spanish rather than English as stated
 - measure, as when someone labels a 10-page message as a “short message”
 - order (not applicable online because action sequences cannot be changed by the system)
 - value (not applicable online because distortion cannot occur in transmission of messages)
- deception in essence
 - supertype, as when someone sends a useful program that deliberately damages your computer system
 - whole, as when a useful free program primarily is intended to spy on the user’s activities

Besides these general mechanisms, there are additional opportunities for deception in particular virtual communities. Mintz (2002) surveys common deceptions on the World Wide Web, including misleading Web sites and Web scams such as the many forms of the “Nigerian letter” soliciting money for bogus enterprises. Mitnick (2002) provides a good survey of “social engineering” deceptions aimed at stealing information and money from computers by manipulating the people who use them. Cohen (1999) provides a general taxonomy of malicious deceptions used to attack computer systems themselves.

FUTURE TRENDS

As a broader range of society is represented in virtual communities, deception will become more prevalent. New deception methods are unlikely to appear—plenty of good scams from millenia of deception have already been conceived. However, many old scams and ploys will appear in new disguises in cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

Many forms of deception are possible in virtual communities due to the difficulties of confirming information

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