

# Chapter 78

## Lying on the Internet

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### ABSTRACT

*Mass media often presents a warped image of the Internet as an unreliable environment in which nobody can be trusted. In this entry, the authors describe lying on the Internet both in the context of lying in the real world and with respect to the special properties of computer-mediated communication (CMC). They deal with the most frequent motives for lying online, such as increasing one's attractiveness or experimenting with identities. They also take into account the various environments of the Internet and their individual effects on various properties of lying. The current methods for detecting lies and the potential for future computer-linguistic analysis of hints for lying in electronic communication are also considered.*

### INTRODUCTION

We may consider lying online from a communication functionality perspective as both a behavioral goal and a means of reaching certain goals. The purpose of lying is the intentional deception of our communication counterparts via electronic communication. This by itself presents a perfect means of manipulating information so that our counterpart creates a desirable presentation of ourselves. Since the self-presentation options available online

are nowadays comparable with self-presentation options in real life, self-presentation is rapidly becoming an important part of the individual's identity on the internet. In real life, people are viewed through the information observed by us (e.g. by observing their behavior) and through information the individual has given us. However, on the internet this more-or-less balanced relation dramatically shifts to the latter, i.e. intentionally provided information about an individual. In this perspective, the internet represents a world without the possibility of immediate verification of presented information. The only ways to detect

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lies seem to be inconsistencies or contradictory claims. The online environment offers individuals the option to present information in a relatively free way, with a high chance of persuading others that a provided self-presentation is real.

### **Lying Offline vs. Online**

Lying has been thoroughly studied in psychological literature. Clinical psychology considers lying as a symptom of problematic behavior (e.g. Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986), on the other hand social psychology focuses on the personality and situations (DePaulo, Kirkendol, Kashy, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). In this second area lying is studied as one form of self-presentation, which can be considered as a common part of our life (DePaulo, et al., 1996; Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002).

Many lies are unplanned and occur in casual conversations with other people. Some studies (DePaulo, et al., 1996; Hancock, Thom-Santelli & Ritchie, 2004) show that we usually say one to two lies per day. However, what do people usually mean by a “lie”? When does exaggeration become a lie? Lies may vary in severity, from trivial lies to severe lies. Communication can in fact be viewed as a continual transition between truth and lies. Lying usually means the conscious deception of people; however, in some cases we ourselves are not absolutely sure about the truth. A fundamental property of all lies is that they contain purposeful deception. This excludes statements which are ambiguous, vague, ironic or funny but which are misinterpreted. By virtual lying we mean intentional deception in a technologically mediated manner with the intent of misleading or creating false beliefs in the target.

Lying on the internet is uniquely related to a special property of the internet – anonymity. The potential for alternating personalities and typical behavior is almost infinite in such an anonymous environment (Rheingold, 1993; Suler, 2004; Turkle, 1995). The measure of accepting

responsibility for one’s behavior is often related to the current or expected identifiability. The classic non-individualistic theory, as described by, e.g., P. G. Zimbardo (1969), claims that anonymity can lead to a status of non-individualism (characterized by lower self-awareness), leading to ignorance of social norms and anti-normative behavior. The classical theory of “normative influence” (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) additionally assumes that the group influence on an individual in the group depends on the social pressure of the others. This effect is also obvious for outside observers as long as the group members can be identified and monitored, i.e. responsible towards the group for their reactions. B. Latane (1981) has expanded the normative influence theory with his theory of social effect – specifically, he added the assumption that social effects will grow with the “vicinity” of its members. By vicinity Latane means their vicinity in time or space. The self-categorization theory replaces group influence on identifiability and group monitoring by an internal voluntary process as a tool of internal cohesion (Turner, 1982). This voluntary regulation depends on the amount of identification of the individual with the group. Self-categorization is then a cognitive process, in which the individual uses his or her own criteria to incorporate into various social groups. Some researchers believe that vicinity or the co-presence of other group members is sufficient to evoke feelings of belonging to the group (group unit salience) and to increase identification with the group (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990). The feeling of anonymity in CMC can also lead to feelings of non-individualization (Dubrovsky, Kolla, & Sethna, 1991) or behavior which challenges common social norms; the additional claim is that this kind of behavior would remain hidden in real life (Reid, 1991).

Thanks to the text-oriented forms of communication characteristic for the internet, people can present themselves in ways that would not be possible face to face (Berman & Bruckman, 2001; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002;

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