

## Chapter XXIII

# Deceptive Communication in E-Collaboration

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### ABSTRACT

*Much research within the field of MIS has been devoted to the use of collaborative technology by decision makers and the impact computer-mediated communication (CMC) has on collaborative work. Yet, there may be some unintended consequences for users of CMC, if someone involved in the joint effort decides to take the opportunity to deceive the others involved. In this chapter, we posit that CMC offers would-be deceivers advantages that otherwise do not exist with more traditional, richer media, using past research and established theories to help explain why. We review some of the findings from our ongoing research effort in this area and explain how difficult it is for computer users to detect deception, when it occurs. Finally, we discuss how the art of deception in computer-mediated collaboration potentially can affect both the current effort and future efforts of those involved, and we offer our thoughts on some of the factors CMC practitioners should consider when trying to combat computer-mediated deception..*

### INTRODUCTION

Work related to collaboration and computing takes many forms, from computer-supported collaborative work, to groupware, to group support systems. Yet common to all of these research streams is the idea of enabling individuals to work together as a group on some typically intellectual effort with the aid and support of information systems. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools are at the heart of any group effort

that depends on the use of computing for collaboration. Even though many of the early efforts dealing with collaboration through computing involved small groups of individuals working face-to-face (Stefik et al., 1987; Nunamaker et al., 1991), these individuals used computing for communication and task support. As is so well known, CMC enables collaboration across space and time, and hence the name “e-collaboration” is a good fit for the type of CMC-enabled group work we take for granted today. Working and

communicating through CMC has its advantages, above and beyond the ability of groups to meet across time and space mentioned above. Among these advantages are improved task performance (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994), better access to information (Siegel et al., 1986), and flexibility in synchronicity and proximity that traditionally groups have not had.

Yet we sometimes forget that CMC still fosters human communication, and human communication, and the group work it supports, is not always a positive and enlightened activity. As Rob Kling wrote, “Many CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) articles impede our understanding of the likely use and impact of CSCW since they rely on concepts with strong positive connotations such as ‘cooperation,’ ‘collaboration,’ and images of convivial possibilities to characterize workplace relationships, while understating the levels of conflict, control, and coercion—also common in professional workplaces....*In practice, many working relationships can be multivalent with and mix elements of cooperation, conflict, conviviality, competition, collaboration, commitment, caution, control, coercion, coordination and combat (the ‘c-words’)*” (Kling, 1991, original emphasis, pp. 84-85). Though Kling was speaking specifically about CSCW, he could just as easily have been writing about other type of CMC-supported collaborative effort. Computer-supported collaboration, or e-collaboration, can often be positive, just as collaboration itself can be positive, but typically, collaboration also involves aspects of working together that are less than positive, involving some of Kling’s alternate c-words, like combat and coercion and caution.

One particular aspect of human communication that is often seen as less than positive, which can have an impact on e-collaboration, is deception. Although an important part of every day communication (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), deception is often viewed negatively, as it can undermine trust (Aune, Metts, & Ebesu Hubbard, 1998) and

other key elements of successful collaboration. We have been studying deception for the past 10 years, the last three of which have been spent in a concerted research effort into deception over CMC and its successful detection.

Simply put, deception can undermine collaborative efforts in any context, and it can potentially taint the final outcome if it goes undetected. However, detecting deception is not cost free. The first costs incurred follow from publicly acknowledging that one or more of the people involved in the communication event are not being honest with the others. This simple recognition may alter how people communicate and work with each other, limiting what can be accomplished through limiting trust among communication partners. A second set of costs are incurred when individuals, now suspicious about the veracity of their colleagues, add deception detection to their regular communication and work activities. The time spent detecting lies is time that cannot be spent on more productive activities. A third set of costs come from verifying the falseness of statements that have been labeled as untrue. As we will discuss later, we have found that improved detection is often accompanied by an increase in false alarms, i.e., true statements labeled as false. The more false alarms, the more suspicious statements that have to be checked out, many of which were true all along. At some point, individuals, group members, and managers have to ask whether taking the time and effort to detect deception is worth it. At the same time, communicators have to ask whether the costs of ignoring the potential for deception are even higher than the costs of trying to detect it.

Our research effort is the basis for this chapter. In the next section, we review the literature on CMC and groups, and on CMC and deception. This is followed by some of our key findings about CMC and deception that apply to e-collaboration. We end with a discussion of the implications of our findings for e-collaboration.

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