INTRODUCTION

Deception is an infrequent but inevitable part of human social interaction. Deception fulfills important human social needs despite its disadvantages. An obvious question is to what extent deception can be justified in virtual communities, and whether the justification could be different than that for deception in traditional societies. While animals and plants blithely use deception (Mitchell & Thompson, 1986), humans are subject to many social constraints that affect the feasibility and suitability of deception.

BACKGROUND

Deception is a key issue in ethics with many important applications in law, business, politics, and psychology. Deception has several potential negative consequences (Ford, 1996). It damages relationships once discovered since they require trust; it can hurt a community by focusing its attention on false issues and devaluing its communications; it can hurt the deceiver’s reputation and make him/her unable to function in a community; and even if not discovered, it supports a deceiver’s self-deception and can ultimately hurt him/her (Sztompka, 1999).

Several studies have focused on the ethics of one form of deception, lying. Bok (1978) has been influential in arguing for more discriminate use of lying. This work analyzes a wide range of cases for lying and suggests relatively stringent guidelines, with the main categories being:

- White lies (small lies that are seemingly harmless). These are often unnecessary since carefully chosen truthful statements or silence may easily serve the same purposes.
- False excuses (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983). Although these are passive lies, told to prevent something else, they can indirectly cause as much harm as active lies.
- Lies to prevent harm in a crisis. Serious crises do not occur very often, so it is tempting to mislabel non-critical situations as critical.
- Lies to liars in retaliation. However, this lowers the retaliator to the same moral level as the offender.
- Lies to enemies on general principles. However, “enemy” is a fluid and poorly defined concept that is often used to justify bigotry.
- Lies protecting peers and clients. Again, carefully chosen truthful statements or silence is often possible and preferable.
- Lies for the public good (as by politicians) (Levi & Stocker, 2000). These are very difficult to justify since everyone has a different definition of “public good.”
- Paternalistic lies (as to children). Guidance and persuasion can often eliminate the need for such lies.
- Lies to the sick and dying. This violates the right of patients to make informed decisions.

As a rule of thumb, Bok suggests that a justifiable lie must satisfy three criteria: (1) that there are no alternative courses of action to lying; (2) that the moral arguments for the lie outweigh the moral arguments against it; and (3) that a “reasonable person” with no personal interest in the outcome would approve of the lie.

Nyberg (1993) takes a more tolerant view of lying, arguing that truth telling is only an instrumental value, not an intrinsic moral value. Most arguments against deception, including Bok’s, take a “slippery slope” argument that permitting any deception will encourage more deception. However, in fact, deception is intrinsic to all societies and few societies have collapsed in a cycle of increasing deception. Deception is often necessary in law (including police work), business (including negotiation), politics (including diplomacy), and psychology (as an object of therapy). Deception helps maintain civility of a society by permitting concealment of thoughts in an often more effective way than silence, thereby regulating the information conveyed from one member to another in a judicious way. Deception is an essential tool in maintaining privacy as an alternative to creating ambiguity about one’s self. Deception is essential in maintaining friendships as a way of avoiding hurt feelings; contrary to popular belief, friends do not expect truth from friends but expect that friends serve their best interests. Deception is also essential in crises when confronted with evil forces.