Deception: 
The Dark Side of 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 paper, 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.

Keywords: collaborative technologies; computer-mediated communication; deception

INTRODUCTION

The American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines collaboration as being able “to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort.” Collaboration has become a central aspect of computing and information systems, brought to the attention of researchers and practitioners alike through the seminal work of scholars like Lucy Suchman, Thomas Malone, and Jonathan Grudin. Work related to collaboration and computing takes many forms, from computer-supported col-
laborative work to groupware and 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, Foster, Bobrow, Kahn, Lanning, & Suchman, 1987; Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991), these individuals used computing for communication and task support. The centrality of CMC becomes obvious when group members are not in the same room nor meeting at the same time. 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, as mentioned previously. 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; human communication and the group work it supports are 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, pp.84-85).

Though Kling was speaking specifically about CSCW, he just as easily could have written about other types of CMC-supported collaborative efforts. Computer-supported collaboration, or e-collaboration, often can be positive, just as collaboration 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, coercion, and caution.

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