

# Truth and trust in cyberspace

Paula Tompkins

Part the appeal of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the ease and freedom of communicating with unseen Others. We create long distance relationships, even communities, as if we were physically present to one another. Can we trust the truthfulness of those we never meet?

To continue a relationship or remain in a community communication requires a minimum of truthfulness to develop relational trust. Cyberspace transforms our reference points for checking the accuracy of our perceptions about others and what they say, raising anew questions of truth and trust. We use proximity, time, perceiving consequences of our actions, performance, and our bodies as reference points to check perceptions. These reference points become attenuated in cyberspace, sometimes disappearing.

Cyberspace has reinvigorated the position of Descartes, that the only thing of which one can be certain is private subjective experience. This leads to debates of what is real and how we recognize what is real. Sissela Bok (1978) argues that the relevant question is whether there is a preference for truth, as one understands it. We may not be able to know with absolute certainty, but we can communicate to the best of our abilities and with truthful intent.

Three qualities of CMC influence our ability to discern and act truthfully and with trustworthiness – its asymmetry, the anonymity of communicators, and telepresence.

## Asymmetry

Senders create messages with little assurance that anyone will receive them, because receivers also create the messages they receive. Receivers use hardware, software, and network technologies to create messages when they choose settings for software, use a search engine, or set up message filters, for example. Receivers construct individual, personalized messages by selecting from the pool of messages available in cyberspace. Because receivers have greater control over the messages they receive, their communication may create a self-reflexive feedback loop that reinforces what they already think (Walther, 1996; Johnson, 1997).

Communication becomes less a dynamic interplay of messages between communicators that encourages relational connection and understanding, than a process of individual reinforcement. Thus, it is not surprising that research of on-line communities often find that they do not respond productively to conflict or crisis, for they lack the resiliency and flexibility of interpersonal and social resources, such as trust (see Haythornthwaite, Wellman, & Garton, 1998).

## Anonymous communicators

When verification of their on-line persona is unlikely, communicators are free to be anonymous. Even limited to text, communicators project a personality by using stereotypical qualities of personality, gender or ethnicity. Such personae lack the flexibility and nuance characteristic of face-to-face (F2F) communication. This condensed style reinforces stereotypical perceptions and thinking. Without the corrective of physical proximity, the asymmetry of CMC may encourage communicators to inflate their perceptions of similarity or dissimilarity with their partners. Heightened perceptions can stimulate intense emotions, creating what Walther (1996) calls a “hyperpersonal” relationship in which individuals experience intense feelings of trust that surpass that found in F2F relationships. The result may be a relationship between cyber-personae who have limited correspondence with their creators in physical reality and whose creators may have limited awareness of the lack of correspondence.

## Telepresence

Telepresence is a psychological state in which an individual does not recognize that experience is either filtered through or generated by a human made technology (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Telepresence is conceived either as sensory richness, where software and hardware simulates or conveys the sensory richness of F2F interaction, or as flow, a state of mind in which the user immerses herself so much in a task that outside stimuli recede from awareness (Draper, Kaber & Usher, 1998).

In telepresence as flow, the sound message that you received an email triggers a response to read the email and reply immediately. The sound also is an immediacy cue triggering a script and rules characteristic of F2F communication – it is impolite to ignore someone who is speaking to you. So you stop to respond to the email. Research by Reeves and Nass (1996; 2002) suggests that when technology becomes psychologically transparent, it triggers a cognitive script of communication, so we mindlessly interact with technological artefacts as if they were human. If we become aware of the trigger, we begin to manage the technology, e.g. we turn off the warning sound for incoming email.

As increasingly sophisticated technology provides more cues that trigger scripts of communication, e.g. the reciprocity and interactivity of chat and instant messaging, technology mindlessly evokes the flow of private F2F communication. This could be why we have difficulty internalizing that CMC is public communication, despite repeated media reports of the ease with which presumably private CMC can be publicly distributed.

The psychological transparency of technology may diminish a communicators' awareness of how technology influences their communication. Telepresence can leave a user psychologically immersed in CMC, as if communicating F2F. In this medium how accurate can communicators be in discerning truthfulness and trustworthiness of an Other's presence? How can we communicate a truthful or trustworthy presence to Others?

#### Rhetorical presence and dialogic presentness in CMC

Rhetorical presence assumes that existence is not enough to convey presence, as shown in this Chinese story. "A king sees an ox on its way to sacrifice. He is moved to pity for it and orders that a sheep be used in its place. He confesses he did so because he could see the ox, but not the sheep" (Perelman, 1982, p. 33). Rhetorical presence is communicated by rhetorical tropes that convey qualities of a person, object, event or idea. In CMC stereotypical language or visual cues can be a synecdoche (a part representing a whole) of actual gender or ethnicity of senders.

When CMC is anonymous, it is difficult to discern the accuracy of a synecdoche. This grants users pseudonymity, which changes the trope from synecdoche to metonymy. Metonymy is a symbol or name used in place of an idea, often represented by another symbol or name. In "Direct your eyes here," "eyes" is a metonymy of sight. In CMC we may erroneously presume that stereotypical language is a synecdoche of a particular ethnicity or gender. Successful pseudonymity in cyberspace relies on the confusion of synecdoche with metonymy in evoking presence.

An infamous instance of pseudonymity is Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1998). Dibbell's attempt to locate those involved in events in LambdaMoo, including Mr. Bungle the rapist, illustrates how metonymy can be confused with synecdoche. Dibbell discovered that "the Mr. Bungle account had been the more or less communal property of an entire NYU dorm floor, that the young man at the keyboard on the evening of the rape had acted not alone but surrounded by fellow students calling out suggestions and encouragement" (p. 30). Victims and observers drew inferences about the qualities of the person they believed created Mr. Bungle, using textual elements of his communication and his vaguely threatening, yet clownish graphic persona as synecdoches of personal qualities of his creator. However, the graphic image and the form of his messages was a metonymy for the idea of a single creator, rather than as a synecdoche of the actual creators. Observers and victims thought Mr. Bungle had a split personality, not that he was created by a group. Unable to check the correspondence between the on-line persona and the physical reality of its creator(s), participants confused metonymy with synecdoche, facilitating deception and cyber violence.

Confusing metonymy with synecdoche may produce unfounded charges of deception. Women with a communication style more aggressive than that of the stereotypical female, may be accused of gender crossing (Herring, 1995). When we are unable to verify a cyber persona, the difference between synecdoche and metonymy in evoking presence is indistinguishable.

Arguably, increasing the sensory and social richness of CMC would increase perceptual accuracy, as if one is F2F. However, when our capabilities to assess a message's correspondence with physical reality are limited, communicators would be well served to be sceptical of and withhold trust.

Buber's concept of dialogic presentness, of full attention and involvement with an Other, provides an alternative view of telepresence. Dialogic presentness is opening one's self to an Other in supportive communication. It also appears in honest, yet intense disagreement, as when understanding an Other's position from his viewpoint. Dialogic presentness would appear to compensate for the mindlessness engendered by the tropic qualities of telepresence. As technology improves, providing greater visual and auditory sensory richness, there may be a reduction in pseudonymity. Yet, questions about the accuracy or reliability of messages will arise with concerns about either the integrity of the computer network or infrastructure, or the relative technological sophistication of users. While relatively simple technology may deceive unwary users, increasingly sophisticated software or "bots" that simulate human communicators are being developed, with some available for downloading (see Botspot, 2003; Leider Institute, 2003).

Suppose that interaction in CMC is truthful. There is a relatively accurate correspondence between virtual personae and communicators and the integrity of the systems and infrastructure is not compromised, laying the foundation for negotiating relational trust. To achieve dialogic presence communicators need to be aware of how the technology influences the process of communication in CMC. The asymmetry of the technology empowers receivers to construct their individualistic meanings in a process of self-reflexive message construction. This self-reflexivity can amplify the meaning of messages or the tropic tokens of presence of which receivers are perceptually aware, creating a feedback loop that magnifies the intensity of those meanings. This self-reflexivity would contribute to the heightened sense of trust and intimacy characteristic of hyper-personal relationships or the anger and frustration of flaming.

The spontaneity of CMC, facilitated by the speed and interactivity of presence as richness, could encourage the construction of self-referential "relationships" of simulated mutuality based upon tropic tokens of a person. The tendency toward mindless self-reflexive cycles of interpretation drawing upon tropic condensation of the humanity of communicators may unintentionally attenuate authentic human connection, precluding dialogue. Communicators mindful of self-reflexivity and tropic condensation within CMC have three choices: 1) strive to create authentic human connection despite the limitations of the technology, 2) embrace these processes as a playful simulation and forego authentic communication, or 3) approximate truthful and trustworthy communication as best as they can.

#### Truth and trust in cyberspace

Some advocates of CMC uncritically presume that increasing the perceptual transparency of the digital interface would help CMC approximate F2F communication, making more accurate, truthful, and trustworthy CMC possible. Rhetorical presence and dialogic presentness reveal limitations of CMC in enacting and discerning truthful and trustworthy communication. By selecting which messages or tropes within messages they will attend to, receivers construct the messages they receive, producing a more individualistic, than a socially constructed process of communication. The tropic quality of CMC, particularly the confusion of metonymy with synecdoche in evoking the presence of communicators, creates a fertile environment for deception. The self-reflexive form of CMC also may magnify inaccurate perceptions, creating a fertile environment for self-deception, even when a sender's message is truthful.

I am not claiming that CMC is inherently deceptive because of its technological form. Rather, my claim is that truthfulness and trustworthiness is possible but more difficult when all communication is computer-mediated. This is comparable to the criticism of the "new" technology of writing made by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (274c-276a) or alarms about the dangers of manuscripts or of excessive book reading made by leaders of the Christian church over the centuries, criticisms which raise questions about what it means to be literate. Literacy includes competently using available technology. Individuals often differ in their capacity for competence, which may be the case with CMC.

Research by Kraut et al. (2001) indicates that extroverts, who have more "suitable" communication qualities, gain social support from CMC, while introverts, who have "deficient" communication qualities, gain less social support. Facility with the technological interface does

not compensate for a lack of communication competence in CMC. We need to broaden our understanding of CMC competence to include a theoretical understanding of communication processes, how the technological form influences those processes, and sensitivity to communication ethics.

Competent communicators need to be aware of how the form of CMC not only influences messages and relationships, but also encourages us to draw inferences mindlessly--to trust too much or too soon and create hyperpersonal relationships, or to distrust too much or too soon and engage in flaming. Communicators need to become more mindful, simultaneously sceptical and open to their interpretations and also simultaneously sceptical and open to the interpretations of others. This would appear to preclude truthful and trustworthy communication, for how can one be sceptical yet open to one's self and to an Other and create trust?

The notion of dialogical presence may be helpful here. Dialogue is an attitude toward another, not a technique or skill, occurring when we open ourselves to the authentic human presence of an Other. Ethical CMC competence could employ a dialogical attitude in which we acknowledge the limits of what we understand and know, to be open to possibility. One possibility may be that we are being duped by tropes, which create a simulated identity that has little correspondence with its creator. Another could be that our suspicions about a communication partner may be unfounded or exaggerated by the self-reflexive tendencies inherent within CMC.

When resources for checking perceptions are limited, both of these possibilities exist in tension with one another. This is not a new communication problem. Students of communication recognize that language can obscure the humanity of Others. Mindless engagement in the computer-mediated context may also obscure the humanity of our communication partners. Developing a notion of CMC competence that encourages communicators to manage the dialectical tensions between skepticism and openness may allow us to suspend our self-reflexive cycles of meaning construction, and aid us in discerning the humanity of an Other amidst the digital.

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Paula S. Tompkins (Ph.D. University of Minnesota, 1987) is Professor of Communication Studies at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where she teaches a course in communication ethics. She also is interested in communication and apology.