

C1. Reading – Part 5

“The truth is out there on the Net”

YOU ARE GOING TO READ A REVIEW OF A BOOK ABOUT SPORT AND PHILOSOPHY. FOR QUESTIONS 1-10, CHOOSE THE ANSWER (A, B, C OR D) WHICH YOU THINK FITS BEST ACCORDING TO THE TEXT.

Far from encouraging mass deceit, the web promotes honesty because we fear getting caught, writes Clive Thompson.

Everyone tells a little white lie now and then but Cornell University professor, Jeffrey Hancock, recently claimed to have established the truth of a curious proposition: we deceive less frequently when we're online than when talking in person. He asked thirty undergraduates to record all their communication and lies for a week. Tallying the results, he found the students had mishandled the truth in about one-quarter of all face-to-face conversations, and in 37 per cent of phone calls. But once in cyberspace, only one in five instant-messaging chats contained a lie, and barely 14 per cent of email messages were dishonest. While you can't make generalizations about society solely on the basis of college students' behaviour, and recognizing there's also something odd about asking people to be honest about how often they lie, Professor Hancock's results were intriguing, not least because they upend some of our primary expectations about life on the net.

Wasn't cyberspace supposed to be the scary zone where you couldn't trust anyone? Back when the Internet first went mainstream, those pundits in the government, media and academia worried that the digital age would open the floodgates of deception. Since anyone could hide behind an anonymous chat-room nickname, net users, we were warned, would be free to lie with impunity. Parents panicked and strictly monitored their children's use of cyberspace, under the assumption that anyone lurking out there in the unknown was a threat until proved otherwise. And to a certain extent, you can see their reasoning: if we go along with the basic introduction to any psychology course, we're more likely to lie to people when there's distance between us. Eventually, though, many suspicions turned out to be unfounded.

What is it, then, about online life that makes us more truthful? It's simple: we're worried about being exposed. In “real” life, after all, it's pretty easy to get away with deception. If you lie to someone at a party, you can always claim you said no such thing. On the Internet, your words often come back to haunt you. The digital age is tough on liars, as an endless parade of executives are finding out.

It isn't a problem for only corporate barons. We read the headlines; we know in cyberspace our words never die, because machines don't forget. “It's a cut-and-paste culture,” as Professor Hancock put it — though he said that on the phone, so who knows if he really meant it? And consider that many email programs automatically “quote” your words when someone replies to your message. Every time I finish an email message, I pause for a few seconds to re-read it just to ensure I haven't said something I'll later regret.

Maybe this helps explain why television programmes like CSI: Crime Scene Investigation are so popular. They're all about revealing the sneaky things that people do. We watch with fascination and unease as scientists inspect the tiniest of clues — a stray hair on a car seat, a latent fingerprint. After you've seen high-tech cops rake over evidence from a crime scene with ultraviolet light and genetic sequencers enough times, you get the message: Watch out — we've got files on you. Forensic science has become the central drama of pop culture, and our fascination with it may well add to our anxieties about technology. So no wonder we're so careful to restrict our lying to low-technology environments. We have begun to be keenly suspicious of places that might be bugged, conducting all of our subterfuge in loud restaurants and lonely parks.

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Still, it's not only the fear of electronic exposure that drives us to tell the truth. There's something about the internet that encourages us to "tell all", often in rather outrageous ways. Psychologists have noticed for years that going online seems to have a catalytic effect on people's personalities. The most quiet and reserved people may become deranged loudmouths when they sit behind the keyboard. Others conduct angry debates on discussion boards with total strangers. You can usually spot the newcomers in any discussion group because they're the ones **WRITING IN CAPITALS** — they haven't yet absorbed the Internet's heady combination of geographic distance and pseudo-intimacy.

Our impulse to discuss via cyberspace makes it much easier to think about honesty. What you used to be if you wanted to really trust someone, you arranged a face-to-face meeting. Our culture still dislikes the absence of physical contact, the shaking of hands, the lubricating chit-chat. Executives and politicians spend hours flying across the country merely for a five-minute meeting, at an enormous cost in time and money, rather than face accusations that they're hiding the truth in emails or faxes. Perhaps the prevalence of legal contracts, but perhaps the permanence of written records. But increasingly, we'll live in a world that will at least sometimes be slightly more truthful. With increasingly sensitive personal data being stored in machine memory, the internet might turn out to be the unlikely conscience of the world.

1 What does the writer suggest about Professor Hancock's findings?

- A They prove a higher than average level of dishonesty amongst students.
- B They are unreliable as students are not likely to have kept accurate records.
- C They only demonstrate what was already common knowledge to most people.
- D Students are less likely to lie while chatting online than on the telephone.

2 What does the writer state about the early days of internet use?

- A There was no discernible change in the general level of honest behaviour.
- B The Internet provided people with new ways to commit crime.
- C Children were frequently not permitted any kind of access to the Internet.
- D There was some over-reaction to the perceived dangers of the Internet.

3 What point is illustrated by the references to email records?

- A The corporate world has been forced to reassess its systems of communication.
- B People have developed a less trusting attitude towards others they deal with.
- C People are becoming more cautious with regard to the content of email.
- D Email and similar documentation has sometimes been used to manipulate the truth.

4 According to the writer, television programmes on forensic science have

- A led to people becoming more frightened of being exposed.
- B encouraged people to adopt more sophisticated methods of deception.
- C overtaken other types of television drama in terms of popularity.
- D given people a false impression of what science can currently achieve.

5 In the fifth paragraph, what are we told about the effect of Internet chatrooms on people?

- A They have had a beneficial influence on some naturally shy people.
- B They have allowed certain people to express themselves more concisely.
- C They have led to a transformation in some people's usual behaviour.
- D They have improved relations between people from different cultures.

6 What does the writer state about the future impact of online communication?

- A People will ensure that emails are strictly accurate and honest.
- B Instances of dishonesty will have more serious consequences.
- C People will feel the need for legal advice when preparing certain documents.
- D It will remove the need for face-to-face contact.