

ENGLISH 203
FINAL EXAM
SPRING 2003-2004



The Honesty Virus
by
Clive Thompson

Time Allowed: 2 ½ Hours

DIRECTIONS: Read the following passage and write a well-organized and well-developed summary-analysis essay of 5-6 paragraphs. Your essay should have a clear thesis statement, solid arguments, and supporting evidence. Throughout, you are required to use direct quotes and paraphrases from the passage itself.

1. Everyone tells a little white lie now and then. But a Cornell professor recently claimed to have established the truth of a curious proposition: We fib less frequently when we're online than when we're talking in person. Jeffrey Hancock asked 30 of his undergraduates to record all of their communications—and all of their lies—over the course of a week. When he tallied the results, he found that the students had mishandled the truth in about one-quarter of all face-to-face conversations, and in a whopping 37 percent of phone calls. But when they went into cyberspace, they turned into Boy Scouts: only 1 in 5 instant-messaging chats contained a lie, and barely 14 percent of e-mail messages were dishonest.
2. Obviously, you can't make sweeping generalizations about society on the basis of college students' behavior. (And there's also something rather odd about asking people to be honest about how often they lie.) But still, Hancock's results were intriguing, not least because they upend some of our primary expectations about life on the Net.
3. Wasn't cyberspace supposed to be the scary zone where you couldn't trust anyone? Back when the Internet first came to Main Street, pundits worried that the digital age would open the floodgates of deception. Since anyone could hide behind an anonymous Hotmail address or chat-room moniker, Net users, we were warned, would be free to lie with impunity. Parents panicked and frantically cordoned off cyberspace from their children, under the assumption that anyone lurking out there in the ether was a creep until proved otherwise. And to a certain extent, the fear seemed justified. According to Psych 101, we're more likely to lie to people when there's distance between us—and you can't get much more distant than a hot-chat buddy in Siberia who calls himself Ominous-1.
4. Why were those fears unfounded? What is it about online life that makes us more truthful? It's simple: We're worried about being busted. In "real" life, after all, it's actually pretty easy to get away with spin. If you tell a lie to someone at a cocktail party or on the phone, you can always backtrack later and claim you said no such thing. There's probably no one recording the conversation, unless you're talking to Linda Tripp (in which case you've clearly got other problems).

5. On the Internet, though, your words often come back to haunt you. The digital age is tough on its liars, as a seemingly endless parade of executives are learning to their chagrin. Today's titans of industry are laid low not by ruthless competitors but by prosecutors gleefully waving transcripts of old e-mails, filled with suggestions of subterfuge. Even Microsoft was tripped up by old e-mail messages, and you would figure its employees would know better. This isn't a problem for only corporate barons. We all read the headlines; we know that in cyberspace our words never die, because machines don't forget. "It's a cut-and-paste culture," as Hancock put it (though he told me that on the phone, so who knows? There's only a 63 percent chance he really meant it).

6. Indeed, the axiom that machines never forget is built into the very format of e-mail—consider that many e-mail programs automatically "quote" your words when someone replies to your message. Every day, my incoming e-mail reminds me of the very words I wrote yesterday, last week or even months ago. It's as if the gotcha politics of Washington were being brought to bear on our everyday lives. Every time I finish an e-mail message, I pause for a few seconds to reread it before I hit "send" just to make sure I haven't said something I'll later regret. It's as if I'm constantly awaiting the subpoena. And it's not only e-mail that records our deeds for future scrutiny. Before going on a first date, people Google their partners to see what they can learn. Mobile phones take photographs. The other day I saw an ad promoting the world's first "terabyte" hard drive for consumers' use: it can store two years' worth of continuous music, or about 200 million pieces of average-size e-mail. In a couple of years, that sort of hardware will be standard issue in even the cheapest Dell computer. We are facing an age in which virtually nothing will be forgotten.

7. Maybe this helps explain why television programs like: "Crime Scene Investigation" (C.S.I.) have become 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 on a CD-ROM. After you've seen high-tech cops rake over evidence from a crime scene with ultraviolet light and luminal and genetic sequencers enough times, you get the message: Watch out, punk. We've got files on you. Forensic science has become the central drama of pop culture, and its popularity may well increase our anxieties about technology. So no wonder we're so careful to restrict our lying to low-fi environments. We have begun to behave like mobsters, keenly suspicious of places that might be bugged, conducting all of our subterfuge in loud restaurants and lonely parks, where we can meet one-on-one.

8. 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 spill our guts, 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, staying up until dawn and conducting angry debates on discussion boards with total strangers. You can usually spot the newbies in any discussion group because they're the ones WRITING IN ALL CAPS—they're tripped out on the Internet's heady combination of geographic distance and pseudo-invisibility.

9. One group of psychologists found that heated arguments—so called flame-war fights, admittedly a rather fuzzy category—were far more common in online discussion boards than in comparable face-to-face communications. Another researcher, an Open University U.K. psychologist named Adam Joinson, conducted an experiment in which his subjects chatted online and off. He found that when people communicated online, they were more likely to offer up personal details about themselves without any prompting. Joinson also notes that the Samaritans, a British crisis-line organization, has found that 50 percent of those who write in via e-mail express suicidal feelings, compared with only 20 percent of those who call in. This isn't because Net users are more suicidally depressed than people offline. It's just that they're more comfortable talking about it—"disinhibited," as the mental-health profession would say.
10. Who knew? When the government created the Internet 30 years ago, it thought it was building a military tool. The Net was supposed to help the nation survive a nuclear attack. Instead, it has become a vast arena for collective therapy—for a mass outpouring of what we're thinking and feeling. I spend about an hour every day visiting blogs, those lippy Web sites where everyone wants to be a pundit and a memoirist. (Then I spend another hour writing my own blog and adding to the cacophony.) Stripped of our bodies, it seems, we become creatures of pure opinion.
11. Our impulse to confess via cyberspace inverts much of what we think about honesty. It used to be that if you wanted to know someone—to really know and trust them—you arranged a face-to-face meeting. Our culture still fetishizes physical contact, the shaking of hands, the lubricating chitchat. Executives and politicians spend hours flying across the country merely for a five-minute meeting, on the assumption that even a few seconds of face time can cut through the prevarications of letters and legal contracts. Remember when George W. Bush first met Vladimir Putin, gazed into his eyes and said he could trust him because he'd acquired "a sense of his soul"?
12. So much for that. If Bush really wanted the straight goods, he should have met the guy in an AOL chat room. And maybe, in the long run, that's the gratifying news. As more and more of our daily life moves online, we could find ourselves living in an increasingly honest world, or at least one in which lies have ever more serious consequences. Bush himself can't put old statements about Weapons of Mass Destruction (W.M.D.) behind him partly because so many people are forwarding his old speeches around on e-mail or posting them on Web sites. With its unforgiving machine memory, the Internet might turn out to be the unlikely conscience of the world.

Clive Thomspson writes frequently for the magazine about science and technology.

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