Online communication boosts lying and E-mail is the medium that contains the most lies: study

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by University of Massachusetts Amherst researchers finds that communication using computers for instant messaging and e-mail increases lying compared to face-to-face conversations, and that e-mail messages are most likely to contain lies. The findings, by Robert S. Feldman, professor of psychology and dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Mattityahu Zimbler, a graduate student, are published in the October issue of the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

The research paper, titled "Liar, Liar, Hard Drive on Fire: How Media Context Affects Lying Behavior," looked at 110 same-sex pairs of college students who engaged in 15 minute conversations either face-to-face, using e-mail, or using instant messaging. The results were then analyzed for inaccuracies.

What Feldman and Zimbler found was that while there is some degree of deception present in all three forms of communication, it was increased in both instant messaging and e-mail, with e-mail messages the most likely to contain lies. Underlying this was the concept of deindividualization, where as people grow psychologically and physically further from the person they are in communication with, there is a higher likelihood of lying, they say.

In addition to the distance one person is from the other, e-mail

communication has the added component of being asynchronous, not as connected in real time as instant messaging or face-to-face conversation. Feldman and Zimbler conclude, "It seems likely that the asynchronicity of e-mail makes the users feel even more disconnected from the respondent in that a reply to their queries is not expected immediately, but rather is delayed until some future point in time."

"Ultimately, the findings show how easy it is to lie when online, and that we are more likely to be the recipient of deceptive statements in online communication than when interacting with others face-to-face," says Feldman.

"In exploring the practical implications of this research, the results indicate that the Internet allows people to feel more free, psychologically speaking, to use deception, at least when meeting new people," Feldman and Zimbler say. "Given the public attention to incidents of Internet predation, this research suggests that the deindividualization created by communicating from behind a computer screen may facilitate the process of portraying a disingenuous self."

Feldman, who has been the dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at UMass Amherst since 2009, is an expert on lying and author of the book "The Liar in Your Life," published in 2009.

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst