



# What Lies Behind the Screen

MICHAEL WOODWORTH, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, PSYCHOLOGY

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“Deception is one of the most significant and pervasive social phenomena of our age. On average, people tell one to two lies a day, and these lies range from the trivial to the more serious. Deception lies in communication between friends, family, colleagues and in power and politics.”

These opening lines from forensic psychologist Michael Woodworth’s research summary provide a mere glimpse into the complex, fascinating and seemingly endless work of his laboratory at UBC Okanagan.

Initially focused on detecting deception in face-to-face environments, Woodworth saw the invasion of information and communication technologies into nearly all aspects of human communication and interaction as an opportunity to study how technology affects “digital deception”—defined as any type of technologically mediated message transmitted to create a false belief in the receiver of the message.

“When people are interacting face to face, there is something called the ‘motivational impairment effect,’ where your body will give off some cues as you become more nervous and there’s more at stake with your lie,” says Woodworth. “In a computer mediated environment, the exact opposite occurs.”

He’s coined the term “the motivational enhancement effect,” which essentially implies that people

motivated to lie in a computer-mediated environment, are not only less likely to be detected but are actually better at being deceptive than people who are less motivated.

As he finishes describing one project, Woodworth quickly moves on to another—and there are many given his prodigious research activity. His focus is forensic psychology—the combination of psychological principles with legal issues. He’s taken a particular interest in the study of psychopathy, and the projects are endless.

Identified by some of their colleagues as a “real powerhouse,” Woodworth and fellow researcher Stephen Porter, a previous supervisor, are determined to build a forensic science centre at UBC Okanagan destined to become renowned as home to one of the most unique programs in the world.

The reunion of two prominent forensic psychologists in a forensic centre will benefit both the academic and local communities, says Woodworth.

“In the back of my mind I’m always thinking ‘how is this going to potentially have some applied value?’—whether it be the community in general, or specifically for law enforcement, or by furthering our knowledge within a certain area. All of these applications ultimately assist with both assessment and treatment.”