

Interview with Jeff Hancock

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Jeff Hancock is founding director of the Stanford Social Media Lab and is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Stanford University. Professor Hancock and his group work on understanding

psychological and interpersonal processes in social media. The team specializes in using computational linguistics and experiments to understand how the words we use can reveal psychological and social dynamics, such as deception and trust, emotional dynamics, intimacy and relationships, and social support. Recently, Professor Hancock has begun work on understanding the mental models people have about algorithms in social media, as well as working on the ethical issues associated with computational social science.

Professor Hancock is well-known for his research on how people use deception with technology, from sending texts and emails to detecting fake online reviews. His TED Talk on deception has been seen over 1 million times and he's been featured as a guest on "CBS This Morning" for his expertise on social media. His research has been published in over 80 journal articles and conference proceedings and has been supported by funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Defense. His work on lying and technology has been frequently featured in the popular press, including the New York Times, CNN, NPR, CBS and the BBC.

Professor Hancock was a Customs Officer in Canada before earning his PhD in Psychology at Dalhousie University, Canada. He was a Professor of Information Science and Communication at Cornell prior to joining Stanford in 2015. He currently lives in Palo Alto with his wife and daughter, and he regularly does his best to stop pucks as a hockey goalie.

AL: How did you first get involved in research, and how have your interests evolved or changed into your current topics?

JH: I still remember the day that started my involvement in research. It was back when my friend, Bob Woodward, and I were just hanging out as undergraduates one day. We still had lots of time, and this older student came up to us and asked if we were willing to be participants in one of his studies. I'd never even heard of anything like that before, but it seemed interesting, so I said, "Sure."

It was a cognitive science study, so we went into this little room where we had to react to stimuli on a computer. Within twenty minutes, it was done and both my friend and I were really surprised. We were thinking, "That's it, that's research?" And he said, "Yeah, that's it, and if you're interested, the study we're running right now is another version of this one right here in this textbook." After that, my friend and I were just taken aback. When you think about research in a textbook, it's always this nice, polished, glossy thing, and research in the lab is much more messy. After that, the two of us felt that research was something that we could do. We both got involved in research during our undergraduate years, and that started it all. I was most interested in how we understand each other as people—our incredible ability to make sense of each other. To me, this communication is just amazing.

Then I went to Japan, because my advisor forced me to take some time before going for a Ph.D. While I was there, there was this new, crazy thing called "email" that was coming online and becoming popular. In addition, there was this thing called ICQ where you could instant message someone else and also see whether they were online or not with a little button—that was invented then for the first time. It was really interesting, these basic questions of, "How can we communicate and understand each other?" but including the role of technology. I loved these questions, so this is what I focused on when I did my Ph.D.: How do we understand irony and sarcasm online? How do we form impressions of each other online? And as I started doing more and more research as a professor, I got more interested in issues of deception and trust, questions about emotions and relationships, and now technology plays a role in so many parts of our lives, it's like almost everything can be studied!

AL: What do you think has been the most exciting thing about the introduction of social media and technology into your research?

JH: Initially, I thought that the interaction of technology and communication was so cool because it produces changes. Right now, as we're talking face-to-face, you as a writer are going to have to transcribe this to get it all into text. It's really hard, and the act of transcribing is actually really great because it shows you how messy language actually is. But now, we can do all of the transcription process with technology by recording it. What's cool about this is it isn't just more convenient, but it also captures literally everything that is being said between two people. You aren't missing the ums, the sounds, some of the stutters in words. And to me, this is all incredibly cool because the most fundamental, amazing thing is that so much of communication is evanescent and just disappears. Yet now, so much of it is now recorded and can be studied. For example, before, lies just disappeared and we couldn't know very much about them because there was no record. Now, we know a lot more about these phenomena that just used to vanish into air without a trace.

AL: Can you tell me more about the studies that you have done to study lies and deception?

JH: We've looked at many of the different levels of deception. At one level, I love understanding butler lies, such as why people tell you they couldn't respond to your message on Facebook or why they can't talk to you right now, sort of as a response to technology connecting us so much. It's one of my favorite interests: looking at how people go about lying in their everyday lives, and why. At the second level examining more high-level deception, I've worked with the Secret Service and various parts of the Department of Defense to try to help them analyze and deal with all of the information they receive now in order to decide what is true and what is not. We've had the opportunity to work with everything from national security staff all the way down to the little everyday stuff.

AL: What do you think that people need to most understand about your work and social media?

JH: I think there are a lot of negative aspects about social media. Right now, just listening to the radio after the horrible shooting at the synagogue, there is a lot of discussion right now about hate speech and how platforms allow it to happen. I think this is an incredibly important discussion for us. There are two parts to it, one of which is to what degree are we now seeing this kind of hatred that we just never saw before? Is this the kind of hatred that existed when people would say things to each other, and the speech would disappear? The other part involves thinking about how technology is changing the way that we can access these kinds of speech and the ways that we create communities. I think we have to address both parts if we want to tackle this issue. We should not allow for communities of hate to form, places where this gets normalized. However,

at the same time, we also need to be thinking about that the fact that these are people and we need to question how they have all this hate. What can we do to mitigate all of that? It's going to be a question of how to change the technology so it does not show any of this hate and make the technology more responsible, while also getting at the source and reducing the hate in the first place.

AL: How do you feel about how social media is covered in the news?

JH: This is a very interesting question, because I feel like I've seen a huge trajectory over my time studying social media. Social media first got its name around 2006. At the time, all the social media companies were the darlings and people thought they couldn't do anything wrong. It was all about everyone getting on them and the excitement of being able to connect. Now, there is a very different view where people are highly suspicious about social media and believe it is harming society. I think the main view right now is one of "harm," and I think there are lots of legitimate concerns about issues such as cyberbullying, attention spans, young women's body image, and more. However, I think that overall, social media is quite beneficial for people and relationships. I think that fear sells a little bit in the media, and I think we are seeing a lot of media coverage and books that are fear-based. I almost want to give parents a hug and tell them that their kids are going to be okay!

AL: On the question of parents and children, what is one thing that you want to tell parents about raising kids in this generation?

JH: One of our last projects was working on a huge meta-analysis of all the studies that have examined social media and well-being, and what we've found essentially is that there is a very, very, very small effect. We see really tiny effects for people who use social media in very large amounts. You see it increasing a little bit of anxiety and boosting a little bit of relational benefits. However, there is very little overall effect at the individual well-being level. So, I would tell parents to not worry so much there. I do think that parents need to be thoughtful about what their values are and that it is important to be thoughtful about what your kids are watching on media, for example. In addition, it's really important to pay attention to the kids! We've been working in collaboration with our partners at My Digital Tat2, a local non-profit dedicated to understanding children's online lives, and one of the major findings they see with their kids is that students as young as fourth-graders complain about how hard it is to get their parents' attention—because their parents are always on their phones! I think that the more families can talk about the role of technology and media in their family lives, the better it's going to be, and kids should have a say in it as well.

AL: When you're doing presentations and talks, what is the question you receive the most about your work and what are the questions that you most enjoy receiving?

JH: One of the questions that's been coming up frequently in the talks I've been giving recently and in my lectures with freshman in my Introduction to Communication class is, "Are the ways we interact with social media and our online identities authentic?" There are a lot of questions about authenticity, such as if I were to post something online and it's just one nice, perfect image of a fun night out yesterday even though it does not capture my experience of the whole night. Is this really authentic? My view is that yes, it is. There are many studies that show we can understand who people are and assess their personalities based on how their behavior online, ranging from what things they like to if they are more likely to be depressed. I think online behavior and representation is authentic, but I think that people have really deep concerns about this. Authenticity is a central question of our time right now, too. I think it's part of the reason why some people are attracted to people like Donald Trump because authenticity is about being genuine, speaking your mind, and being really simple in what you say. People are attracted to that! I was just talking to my colleague, Byron Reeves, about this. Much of the media in the last century was constructed, such as sitcoms. In the 1980s, there were talk shows which were just people talking, usually with famous people. In the 1990s, we see reality TV. Today, my daughter loves watching YouTube videos where she watches other families living their lives and in a way it's strange, but in another way, it's not because it's part of this increasing shift towards authenticity. It's closer to genuine, "real life," and we want to see that. I love talking about this, it's a really deep and rich question.

AL: In the context of historical trends, what do you think about how people have been talking about social media and media technologies?

JH: I think that the way people talk about social media and media technologies fits a pattern of technological determinism. I think that people can quickly slip into the mentality of, "Technology is causing this," which is a common error we make. We forget that we are the humans and to some degree we get to decide how we use the technology. It's always the case that there are corporations involved and there's profit to be made. It's not simply just you and I wanting to message each other. However, I do think we need to avoid giving all of the power to technology because technological determinism has been shown to be wrong over and over again. The more that we can grasp that we get to decide things, the better. I think we need to be on guard against slipping into technological determinism.

AL: How do you think that technological determinism influences how people talk about politics?

JH: I think that what is happening right now is not a crisis of social media or a crisis of trust, but rather a crisis of polarization. People are no longer debating, they're arguing against each other. We're forming up into two tribes that hate each other, and it's a war instead of a conversation about what we think is the right thing to do. It feels a little far away from all of those old notions of compromise and seeing the value of another person's position. Unfortunately, I do think that social media plays a role in polarization because it allows you to think of others in a more one-dimensional way. We know from concepts such as the Hyperpersonal Model that if we only know one thing about a person—such as that Person A is a liberal—then we infer that this is all there is to Person A. This is something we do as humans. When we only know a little bit about someone, we tend to overgeneralize and make our attributions. While polarization is the main problem, social media certainly doesn't help. What I always say to my family, colleagues, and friends is that Facebook is a great place to connect with people, stay in touch with people, and reach out to people in your network, but it's not a great place for getting your news and it's not a great place for talking about politics.

AL: How do you feel about the current state of social media research and where do you hope to see the field going in the future?

JH: One thing that's really exciting is just the amount of work that's being done. We're seeing radical increases in the amount of work in this space, and people are really starting to work on these questions. For example, Communication started investigating this early on, Psychology was a little slower to get in on this, and Sociology was even slower. But now everyone is seeing that this is important, and that's great. I think the biggest challenge of our field is understanding how to measure the use of social media. In our big meta-analysis, the number one problem we encountered is that we are terrible at measuring how people use technology. Right now, our approaches include asking people, "How often do you use social media?" on a scale of 1-7 or "How many conversations did you have on social media yesterday?" People are terrible at answering these questions, they just don't know. It's hard! I think the biggest challenge is how to measure this. It's a massive challenge, but we are seeing some great innovation in methodology. Byron Reeve's Screenomics approach of taking screenshots of people's screens to track their behavior is one approach, and Gabby Harari's methods of using sensors inside the phone to track usage is another.

In addition, something that is also becoming increasingly important in our field is the role that AI is playing in communication. We have this idea of AI-Mediated Communication, because now machines aren't just

moving our messages around between us, but they are also doing some work on them. This can range from small, little things such as smart reply on Google emails to more concerning things like deep fakes. I think this is a major trend in our field that we're seeing now that we're starting to work on in the lab.