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## KEYNOTE I

# What is Real? Signals of Truth and Identity in Fashion, Networks & Faces

**Judith Donath**  
**MIT Media Lab**  
**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**  
**Cambridge, Massachusetts**  
**USA**

### ABSTRACT

Much of what we want to know about others is not directly perceivable - are you a nice person? did you really like the cake I baked? would you be a good employee, spouse, president? We rely instead on signals, which are the features or actions that indicate the presence of those hidden qualities. Yet not all signals are reliable. It is beneficial for the con-man to seem nice, for the guest to seem to like the burnt cake, for the unsuitable suitor to seem as attractive as possible. While these deceptions benefit the deceiver, they may be quite costly for the recipient. What keeps signals honest — and why are some signals more reliable than others?

Signaling theory provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. In this talk I will introduce signaling theory and show how it can be used to analyze and design social technologies. It is especially well suited for this domain, for in mediated interactions there are few qualities that can be directly observed: everything is signal.

### SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

**Judith Donath** is an Associate Professor at the MIT Media Lab, where she directs the Sociable Media research group. Her work focuses on the social side of computing, synthesizing knowledge from fields such as graphic design, urban studies and cognitive science to build innovative interfaces for online communities and virtual identities. She is known internationally for pioneering research in social visualization, interface design, and computer mediated interaction. She created several of the early social applications for the web, including the first

postcard service ("The Electric Postcard"), the first interactive juried art show ("Portraits in Cyberspace") and an early large-scale web event ("A Day in the Life of Cyberspace"). Her work has been exhibited at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston and in several New York galleries; she was the director of "Id/Entity", a collaborative exhibit of installations examining how science and technology' are transforming portraiture. Her current research focuses on creating expressive visualizations of social interactions and on building experimental environments that mix real and virtual experiences. She has a book in progress about how we signal identity in both mediated and face-to-face interactions. Professor Donath received her doctoral and master's degrees in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT, her bachelor's degree in History from Yale University, and has worked professionally as a designer and builder of educational software and experimental media. She is currently a Faculty Fellow at the Berkman Center of Harvard Law School.