

The Tethered Self: Technology Reinvents Intimacy and Solitude

SHERRY TURKLE

Sherry Turkle, born 1948 in Brooklyn, New York, is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has a B.A. in social studies from Harvard University and went on to earn her Ph.D. from Harvard in sociology and personal psychology. Turkle's more popular books include *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984), *Identity and the Age of the Internet* (1995), and *Simulation and Its Discontents* (2009). Turkle says that she writes "on the subjective side" of how people relate to technology, most importantly computers. She has been frequently published in periodicals such as the *New York Times*, *Scientific American*, and *Wired*. She was named Woman of the Year by *Ms. Magazine* in 1984, among other numerous awards and accolades. Most recently, she published, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (2015).

In this article, which is an excerpt from a Harvard Extension School Centennial Lowell Lecture delivered on May 14, 2010, Turkle points out how the Internet, and accompanying technology like smartphones, have changed the way people interact in real life. Indeed, especially for younger users, this new technology provides an escape from "real world" interactions, which are deemed as too difficult and too revealing. Technologies change how we interact, and in doing so, they also change us.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *What is your experience of social technology? How is your personal identity revealed, confirmed, or distorted in social media Web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or others? How often do you use your phone to send texts rather than talk?*

When I first came to MIT, in 1976, at the very birth of the personal computer culture, even the most cutting-edge faculty did not know what the new "home computers" would do. It did not seem that many people would want them for writing; they could be used for tax preparation, certainly, and there would be a market for simple games. But beyond that? I have been a witness to the birth of the personal computer culture, with its intense one-on-one relationships with machines, and then to the development of the networked culture, with people using the computer to communicate with each other. In my most recent work on the revolutions in

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social networking and sociable robotics, I see a world of new possibilities as well as perils. Technology is the architect of our intimacies, but this means that as we text, Twitter, e-mail, and spend time on Facebook, technology is not just doing things for us, but to us, changing the way we view ourselves and our relationships.

These days, we are on our e-mail, our games, our virtual worlds, and social networks. We text each other at family dinners, while we jog, while we drive, as we push our children on swings in the park. We don't want to intrude on each other, so instead we totally intrude on each other, but not in "real time," some of us sending many thousands of texts a month. And that's not counting our Twitters, e-mail, instant messages, or social networking messages and postings. When we misplace our mobile devices we become anxious, impossible. We archive our own lives as we upload photos to the Web. Indeed, many young people tell me they feel guilty, remiss, if they do not do so. Teenagers say that they sleep with their cell phones, and even when their phones are put away—relegated, say, to a school locker—they know when their phones are vibrating. The technology has become like a phantom limb, it is so much a part of us.

In technology's volume and velocity, we are not being satisfied. Often, our new digital connections offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We become accustomed to connection at a distance and in amounts we can control. Teenagers say they would rather text than talk. Like Goldilocks—not too close, not too far, just right. In other words, we become accustomed to connection made to measure: the ability to hide from each other even as we are constantly connected to each other.

But there is no simple story here of monolithic negative effects. Connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescence, the sense of a free space, what Erik Erikson called the moratorium. This is a time, relatively consequence free, for doing what adolescents need to do: fall in and out of love with people and ideas. Real life does not always provide this kind of space, but the Internet does. No handle cranks, no gear turns, to have us leave a stage of life and move on to another. So, adults, too, use the Internet as a useful place for experimentation—indeed, as an identity workshop. But there is a point in focusing on "discontents." They point us to what we miss, what we hold dear and don't want to lose. They point us to our "sacred spaces." In particular, the "nostalgia" of the young illustrates how young people try to reach for something they never fully knew as they dream the future. Young people reach, for example, for the idea of telephone calls made—as one 18-year-old puts it—"sitting down and giving each other full attention." Teenagers grew up in a culture of distraction. They remember that their parents were on cell phones when they were pushed on swings as toddlers. Now, their parents text at the dinner table and don't look up from their Black-Berries when they pick them up after school. From the moment this generation met technology, it was the competition. And significantly, young

people imagine a world in which information is not taken from them automatically, just as the cost of doing business.

One 16-year-old tells me that when he really wants privacy, he uses a pay phone, "the kind that takes coins . . . and that is really hard to find in Boston!" Another says she feels safe because "who would care about me and my little life." These are not empowering mantras.

Of technology's current effects on our experience of the self, perhaps the most important is how it redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting "rid" of our e-mails, as though these notes were so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid the telephone, fearful that it reveals too much. Besides, it takes too long; they would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world "unplugged" does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar-to-avatar talk in a networked game, we feel at one moment in possession of a full social life, and in the next curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook and wonder to what degree our followings are friends. We re-create ourselves as online personae in games or in a virtual world and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, do we abandon ourselves? Sometimes people tell me they experience no sense of having connected after hours of communication. And they report feelings near communion when they thought they were paying hardly any attention at all.

Distinctions blur. We are not sure whom to count on. Virtual friendships and worlds offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment. We know this, and yet the emotional charge of the online world is very high. People talk about it as the place for hope, the place where something new will come to them, the place where loneliness can be defeated. A woman in her late 60s describes her new iPhone: "It's like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet." People are lonely. Connectivity is seductive. But what do we have, now that we have what we say we want, now that we have what technology makes easy? We can communicate when we wish and disengage at will. We can choose not to see or hear our interlocutors. What we have is a technology that makes it easy to hide.

Mandy, 13, tells me she "hates the phone and never listens to voice-mail." She presents a downbeat account of a telephone call: "You wouldn't want to call because then you would have to get into a conversation." And conversation, "Well, that's something where you only want to have them when you want to have them." For Mandy, this would be "almost never. . . . It [that is, conversation] is almost always too prying, it takes too long, and it is impossible to say 'goodbye.'"

Stan, 16, will not speak on the telephone except when his mother makes him call a relative. "When you text," he says, "you have more time

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t," he says, "you have more time

to think about what you're writing. On the telephone, too much might
show."

This is not a teen problem. In corporations, among friends, within 10
academic departments, people readily admit that they would rather leave
a voicemail or send an e-mail than talk face-to-face. Some who say, "I live
my life on my BlackBerry," are forthright about avoiding the "real time"
commitment of a phone call. Here, we use technologies to dial down
human contact, to titrate its nature and extent. People are comforted by
being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT READING

1. Turkle says, "Technology is the architect of our intimacies" (1). What does that mean? Do you agree with her statement? Why or why not?
2. Turkle suggests that our daily lives and in-person interactions with our friends and loved ones have been superseded by the Internet and social media in particular. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? Why?
3. Turkle argues that in today's world, technology offers "the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (3). In your experience, is this true? Why or why not?
4. The Internet, with social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many others, as well as other functions such as e-mail and instant messaging, seems to have exposed its users to the entire world. Yet, Turkle says, "What we have here is a technology that makes it easy to hide" (7). How do you explain this paradox? In what ways do we deliberately expose or hide ourselves online?
5. Turkle says, "Here we use technologies to dial down human contact, to titrate its nature and extent" (10). What does she mean by this? Look up the word "titrate" in a dictionary if you're unfamiliar with it. How is Turkle using that as a metaphor in this sentence?