

and how changing your technology will change your life?

Sherry Turkle has been chronicling the impact of the digital revolution for some 20 years. In her *Alone Together* she focuses on two developments, social robots and Internet communications (texting, Second Life, e-mail, Facebook). Her method is ethnographic—she interviews people, especially children and adolescents, at length about how they feel about those technologies. Turkle is a sensitive interviewer and an elegant writer, and her book captures the anxiety and ambivalence that children and adolescents (and adults, too) feel about the new developments. Her general conclusion is that those anxieties are justified. Both robots and the Web will have a profound, and bad, effect on human psychology. Technology will lead to devalued and alienated lives rather than enriched ones.

When the ethnographic “clinical interview”¹⁰ method is done well, as Turkle does it, it can give us an excellent picture of what people think about the effects of technology. The trouble is that it doesn’t tell us what those effects actually are. The children she talks to are remarkably thoughtful, but they are also contradictory: Robots are sort of people, but then again they’re just machines; cell phones make parents more intrusive, or maybe more distant. Turkle quotes Niels Bohr’s statement that the opposite of a profound truth is sometimes another profound truth, but fails to mention his preamble that the opposite of a fact is a falsehood. Facts about the effects of technology are thin on the ground. For example, there are remarkably few firm scientific conclusions from 50 years of psychological research on children and television.

There is also the problem of what psychologists call the “cultural ratchet effect.” We learn differently as children than as adults. For grown-ups, learning a new skill is painful, attention-demanding, and slow. Children learn unconsciously and effortlessly. Because of this, each new generation rapidly acquires all the accumulated innovations of the past without even knowing it. The story of The Device is startling because we were born with print. The new

generation, in turn, will consciously alter those earlier practices and invent new ones. They can take the entire past for granted as they move toward the future.

These generational shifts are the engine of cultural innovation, and they are particularly relevant for technological change—our children will talk digital as a native language, while we speak it haltingly with an immigrant accent. But generational shifts go beyond technology. They also produce entirely arbitrary changes, like the historical changes from Elizabethan words or dances or dresses to ours. Even in the Neolithic period, pottery decorations changed over generations. These changes can feel significant even though they actually don’t alter much of anything. The telegraph really did mean The End of Civilization As We Knew It, but the waltz and the crinoline caused just as much angst.

This immediate generational transformation, the click of the ratchet, is so vivid that the long historical changes and constancies are hard to see. The year before you were born looks like Eden, the year after your children were born looks like Mad Max.

Which of the effects that Turkle and other digital pessimists attribute to technology really are radical transformations, and which are relatively small changes magnified by the ratchet effect? Is the Internet the telegraph or just the crinoline? Some of the stories Turkle tells seem awfully like false nostalgia. A young woman feels guilty because she surreptitiously writes e-mail while she is Skyping (for hours!) with her distant grandmother. A teenager complains that her mother is distracted by her cell phone when she picks her up from school. Did we really once listen to our grandmothers with undivided attention? Were adolescent girls delighted by the rich and meaningful conversations they had with their mothers? Is the teenager who comes home from school and IMs her friends while she updates her Facebook page really much worse off than the one who came home and watched Gilligan’s Island reruns? (More autobiography there.)

Turkle and her interviewees sometimes seem to treat minor variations on human nature like