

breaching psychological revolutions. For example, Turkle and many of her subjects worry that people might interact with nonhuman simulacra, like robots, as if they were people, and might lose themselves in imaginary worlds like *Second Life*.

Not, after all, a majority of young children communicate extensively with imaginary companions, creatures who are even more elusive than robots and they don't exist at all. All normal children become immersed in unreal pretend worlds. And their elders do the same. Is the Turklean child who cherishes a Furby really all that different from the Dickensian one who weeps for a doll? Is the lonely widow who talks to a robot really all that different from the one who talks to her dead husband's picture? Or religiously follows the lives of soap opera characters? Is a *Second Life* romance all that different from a *Harlequin* one?

And what about the fact that we communicate through highly abstract signals, rather than face to face? Take texting, surely the most baffling technological success of our age. We've harnessed vast computational power to let us write telegrams with our thumbs. Turkle and the teenagers contrast texting nostalgically, not only with live conversation, but with that day-before-yesterday Eden of the telephone—a technology that once seemed equally threatening.

But, at least since writing began, perhaps even since language itself began, human beings have conducted their most intimate lives through abstract, digital symbols. Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell carried on their love affair through the London post, writing several times a day, and Proust used the equally rapid and frequent pneumatic *petits bleus* of Paris. London letters were delivered 12 times a day and a *petit bleu* arrived two hours after it was sent (not much more slowly than an AT&T connection and probably more reliably). The Henry James story "The Great Good Place" is a utopian fantasy about unhooking from the grid and begins with a bitter lament at the inundation of telegrams and overflow of obligations that will be familiar to anyone with a bulging inbox.

Another worry is about attention. It is certainly true that by the time we're adults attention is a limited resource and attentional patterns are hard to change. But the exaggerated highlyfocused attention we consider appropriate in a contemporary classroom is itself a recent cultural invention, and one with costs as well as benefits. Guatemalan Mayan mothers successfully teach their children to divide their attention, as Western mothers teach children to focus theirs.

Despite all this, Turkle and the digital pessimists may be on to something. There is something about the Internet that seems genuinely different—a telegraphlike transformation. But it isn't the result of changes in the speed or character of communications. Texts and e-mails travel no faster than phone calls and telegrams, and their content isn't necessarily richer or poorer.

Turkle may be right, though, that there is a transformative difference in how many people we interact with, though it would be nice to have some objective evidence. There is an anthropological observation that most of us can keep track of only a couple of hundred people—a village-worth. The rise of cities just led us to define that village sociologically instead of geographically. City dwellers learn not to acknowledge, or even see, most of the people they pass on the street, a skill that seems baffling and obnoxious to rural visitors. The post and the *petit bleu* connected a relatively small urban literary circle.

The Web expands that circle exponentially. When we do a Google search we aren't consulting a brilliant computer, but the aggregated opinions of millions of other people. Facebook, which began as a way of digitally defining your social network, rapidly increases it beyond recognition. On the Web we communicate with the planet relying on a psychology that was designed for the village. You used to listen to your friends and Walter Cronkite, and, unless you were Walter, you could assume that your friends were the ones listening to you. Now it's much harder to tell whom we should listen to and who is listening to us, or at least we haven't yet figured out how to do it. We can edit out the obnoxious guy on the street more