



Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other

By Sherry Turkle

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Sherry Turkle is Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT. She is the author of two previous books, both quite positive about the prospects of technology for life enhancement. In this book she expresses concerns illuminated by her research. The first half of the book deals with the potential use of robots as "friends" to care for senior and children. The second half deals with life online.

"Digital natives" (those born after the introduction of personal computers and the internet) now can have a fully networked life, traversing endless landscape always there to be discovered ... BUT there are costs. "These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time." (xii) "We seem determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as things." (xiv)

"On Second Life (an online virtual reality game), a lot of people, as represented by their avatars, are much wealthier than they are in real life and a lot younger, thinner, and better dressed." (1) "Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship."(1)

"I find people willing to seriously consider robots as potential friends, confidants, and intimate partners. We don't seem to care what these artificial intelligences 'know' or 'understand' ..." (9)

"The blurring of intimacy and solitude...begins when one creates a profile on a social-networking site..." (12)

"We discovered the network--the world of connectivity--to be uniquely suited to the overworked and overscheduled life it makes possible. And now we look to the network to defend us against loneliness even as we use it to control the intensity of our connections." (13)

"Whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift." (16)

"Gradually, we come to see our online life as life itself. ... Technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives, but is it offering the lives we want to lead?" (17)

"We make our technologies, and they, in turn, shape us. So, of every technology we must ask, does it serve our human purposes?" (19)

Part One: The Robotic Moment - Solitude, New Intimacies

"For the elderly, the huggable baby seal robot Paro is now on sale. A hit in Japan, it now targets the American nursing home market." (24)

Tamagotchi (virtual creatures housed in a plastic egg) and Furby (small fur-covered creatures with big eyes and ears) presented themselves as emotional machines. A Furby held upside down says, 'Me scared,' and whimpers as though it means it. Children mourn the life the Tamagotchi has led. (30-34) It is very difficult to hold a Furby upside down for long without your emotions making you turn it back - even when you know better. "We are at the point of seeing digital objects as both creatures and machines." (46)

AIBO is a little robot dog. "Pets have been thought good for children because they teach responsibility and commitment. AIBO permits something different: attachment without responsibility ... With robot pets, children can give enough to feel attached, but then they can turn away. They are learning a way of feeling connected in which they have permission to think only of themselves." (60)

"Artificial intelligence is often described as the art and science of 'getting machines to do things that would be considered intelligent if done by people.' We are coming to a parallel definition of artificial emotion as the art of 'getting machines to express things that would be considered feelings if expressed by people.'" (63) Robots invite our attachments and such attachments change our way of being in the world. (79)

In her field research, the author provides a robot, Kismet, to children for a few weeks and periodically visits. The children in the study care about having the robots' attention and affection far more than she anticipated ... the most vulnerable children take disappointments with a robot very personally. "Even 'My Real Baby' was marketed as a robot that could teach your child 'socialization.' I am skeptical. I believe that sociable technology will always disappoint because it promises what it cannot deliver. It promises friendship but can only deliver performances. Do we really want to be in the business of manufacturing friends that will never be friends?" (101)

"Sociable robotics may augur the sanctioning of 'relationships' that make us feel connected although we are alone." (121) "As we learn to get the 'most' out of robots, we may lower our expectations of all relationships, including those with people. In the process we betray ourselves." (125) "The boundaries between people and things are shifting.

Part Two: Networked - In Intimacy, New Solitudes

Connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity, particularly in adolescence. "When part of your life is lived in virtual places ... a vexed relationships develops between what is true and what is 'true here,' true in simulation." (153) Our profile may end up as somebody else, the fantasy of who we want to be. Although we may feel "enhanced" online, we may be left with real lives of less. The online life may be enjoyable and fulfilling, making one even less satisfied with life at home. "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed - and only for the parts we find useful, or amusing."(154)

"Today, our machine dream is to be never alone but always in control. This can't happen when one is face-to-face with a person." (157)

"In the new etiquette, turning away from those in front of you to answer a mobile phone or respond to a text has become close to the norm. When someone holds a phone, it can be hard to know if you have that person's attention. A parent, partner, or child glances down and is lost to another place, often without realizing that they have taken leave." (161) "We have found ways of spending more time with friends and family in which we hardly give them any attention at all." (164)

Adolescents need to learn empathic skills, to think about values and identity, to manage and express feelings, but technology has changed the rules. "Sometimes you don't have time for your friends except if they're online." (175) "Teenagers report discomfort when they are without their cell phones. They need to be connected in order to feel like themselves." (176)

"In the psychoanalytic tradition, one speaks about narcissism ... [as] a personality so fragile that it needs constant support. It cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use." (177) The culture in which adolescents develop today "tempts them into narcissistic ways of relating to the world." (179)

Games, worlds, and social networking all ask you to compose and project an identity. "Creating the illusion of authenticity demands virtuosity. Presenting a self in these circumstances, with multiple media and multiple goals, is not easy work." (183) You make a character. And social media ask for simplified ways of presenting ourselves. You get reduced to a list of favorite things. Creating a proper character has turned out to be very stressful for young people.

Teenagers flee the telephone. So do adults. They claim exhaustion and lack of time. A phone call asks too much. It takes too much time. The new etiquette is efficiency. People reassured at a distance. On the phone they might say too much. Things could get "out of control." A call feels like an intrusion. (190)

Digital communication does not need to carry a message. It can simply trigger a feeling. Many teenagers discover their feelings by texting them.

First, we let the answering machine pick up the call. Then email gave us more control over our time. But it wasn't fast enough. Now we can communicate at the rate we live. But it backfires. We send so much and receive so much from so many, that we are 'consumed with that which we are nourished by.' (207)

"The gambler and video game player share a life of contradiction: you are overwhelmed, and so you disappear into the game. But then the game so occupies you that you don't have room for anything else. When online life becomes your game, there are new complications. If lonely, you can find continual connection. But this may leave you more isolated..." (227) "Connectivity becomes a craving... We are stimulated by connectivity itself. We learn to require it, even as it depletes us." (227)

Anxiety is part of the new connectivity. We think that on-line reading with all its linked pages is superior, but most often it is broken up by messaging, shopping, Facebook, etc. And multi-tasking degrades performance on everything we try to accomplish. (242) "Technology helps us manage life stresses but generates anxieties of its own. The two are often closely linked." (243)

Young people feel that they cannot turn off their phones in school because "there might be an emergency ... Having a feeling without being able to share it is considered so difficult that it constitutes an 'emergency.'" (245) Teenagers often reference 9/11. Julia's life is tied up with a kind of magical thinking that if she can be in touch, her friends will not disappear. Cell phones are a symbol of physical and emotional safety. This is a new nonnegotiable: to feel safe, you have to be connected. The phone then provides comfort.

We have not only helicopter parents (who hover over their children), we have helicopter children who text their parents multiple times every day, avoiding disconnection at all costs. They are never totally on their own.

Maintaining your image on Facebook, with all the communication with others, can require hours a day and generate considerable anxiety. "Teenagers seem to feel that things should be different but are reconciled to a new kind of life: the life they know celebrities live. So, you get used to the idea that if you are drunk or in erotic disarray--things that are likely to happen at some point during high school--someone will take a picture of you, probably by using the camera in their phone. And once on that person's phone, the image will find its way to the Internet, where you will lose control of its further travels." (252) !!

"We see a first generation going through adolescence knowing that their every misstep, all the awkward gestures of their youth, are being frozen in a computer's memory. Some put this out of mind, but some cannot, do not--and I think, should not." (259)

Texting makes promises that demand: the person will receive the message within seconds and will attend to it immediately. Texting is pressure. "Longed for is the pleasure of full attention, coveted and rare." "Teenagers describe childhoods with parents who were on their mobile devices while driving them to school or as the family watched Disney videos." (266)

"Today, children contend with parents who are physically close, tantalizingly so, but mentally elsewhere." (267) "It is commonplace to hear children, from age of eight through teen years, describe the frustration of trying to get the attention of their 'multitasking' parents." (268)

"Texting has evolved into a space for confessions, breakups, and declarations of love ... But there is a price. All matters ... are crammed into a medium that quickly communicates a state but is not well suited for opening a dialogue about complexity of feeling." (268)

"Overwhelmed by the pace that technology makes possible, we think about how new, more efficient technologies might help dig us out. But new devices encourage ever-greater volume and velocity ... The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy." (280) We have 'postfamilial' families, with their members alone together. "We defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other." (281)

Since the year 2000 young people have shown a dramatic decline in interest in other people. "One might say that absorbed in those they have 'friended,' children lose interest in friendship." (293)

"We don't need to reject or disparage technology. We need to put it in its place." (295)

"The narrative of *Alone Together* describes an arc: we expect more from technology and less from each other. This puts us at the centre of a perfect storm. Overwhelmed, we have been drawn to connections that seem low risk and always at hand ... If convenience and control continue to be our priorities, we shall be tempted by sociable robots, where, like gamblers at their slot machines, we are promised excitement programmed in, just enough to keep us in the game ... When we are at our best, thinking about technology brings us back to questions about what really matters." (295)

We can begin with simple things like just reclaiming good manners. "We now know that our brains are rewired every time we use a phone to search or surf or multitask. As we try to reclaim our concentration, we are literally at war with ourselves. Yet, no matter how difficult, it is time to look again toward the virtues of solitude, deliberateness, and living fully in the moment." (296)