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Review: Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other
by Sherry Turkle

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Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other by Sherry Turkle. New York: Basic Books, 2011. 384 pp. ISBN 978-0465010219.

Most of us hold the digital technologies we own close to our heart. We rarely leave our home without our cellular phones, and our personal computers have become the center of our social, economic, and professional interactions. Coupled with access to the Internet, our digital devices allow us to accomplish more and more daily tasks; we can wish our friends a happy birthday on Facebook while we grocery shop. Furthermore, the line between the tasks we accomplish in our personal lives and those we undertake in public is blurring. Fewer people are finding it taboo to engage in a sensitive phone conversation with a disgruntled partner on the bus. Thus, while our digital technologies are helping us “keep in touch” with each other, they are also changing the nature of our relationships. In her most recent book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), Sherry Turkle explores how our dependence on technology has affected our human relationships.

As the title suggests, Turkle argues that we are increasingly demanding and expecting more from technology while demanding less from our friends, family, and coworkers. In previous works, such as *Life on the Screen* (1997), Turkle was optimistic about the affordances of technology and the Internet. She argued that the Internet was allowing us to explore our identity and challenge traditional notions of the self and the world. However, her tone concerning the effect of technology and the Internet on the self has changed in *Alone Together*. Instead of hailing our new decentered and multiple senses of self, Turkle criticizes the way we have come to treat each other – like objects on the other side of digital screens.

Using an ethnographic approach, Turkle completes fifteen years of interviews and observations, which form the basis for the book. The main focus of her research in *Alone Together* is children and young adults (between the ages of five and twenty) who are considered “digital natives.” Although her interview participants vary in age, her selection of interview participants is limited; Turkle openly states that her analysis is limited to those who can afford digital technologies. The book is separated into two sections: “The Robotic Moment” and “Networked.”

In “The Robotic Moment,” Turkle discusses the human relationship with sociable robots. Beginning with toys like Furbies and Tamagotchis, digital natives were trained to interact with robots that demanded care. From the minute a child turned on a Tamagotchi, it noisily requested to be feed and loved. Beeps emanating from the small egg-shaped toy reminded children to care for the Tamagotchi; otherwise, their new digital friend would “die” of neglect. The

beginning of the “robotic moment” occurred when children found companionship with robotic toys that seemed to project emotions such as happiness and sadness.

Soon after the burst of popularity of toys such as these, Turkle argues, sociable robots began to enter our lives in more profound ways. Advanced sociable robots like Paro, a robotic baby seal, began to serve therapeutic functions and were introduced into nursing homes at a price of approximately \$6,000 per robot. The robot’s Japanese designers claimed that the robotic baby seal had positive psychological effects on patients in nursing homes. For example, Turkle interviews an elderly woman named “Miriam” who suffers from depression; she had been frequently quarreling with her son who travels from the West Coast to visit her in Boston. During her interview, Turkle noticed that the woman weepily discussed her situation and continually comforted the Paro sitting on her lap. Miriam seemed to find comfort in holding Paro in her lap while stroking its fur, while Paro responds with purring and loving eye contact, as it had been programmed to do. Miriam experiences a moment of intimacy with the robotic baby seal and this experience seems to lessen her sadness.

On the surface, the interaction between Miriam and her Paro seems harmless. However, Turkle believes that demanding these acts of intimacy from sociable robots means we demand less from each other. Instead of talking to her son about their arguments, Miriam comforts her Paro. The danger, Turkle argues, lies in the fact that Miriam feels as if she has experienced a moment of intimacy with another when she has actually been alone. Her Paro is a robot and not capable of truly sharing intimate moments. The moment our interactions with sociable robots began substituting for our interactions with other humans is the moment we truly entered “The Robotic Moment.” Turkle cautions that we may further retreat into our relationships with technology to avoid the “messiness” of our human relationships.

The second section of the book, “Networked,” explores the effects that constantly being “tethered” to digital technologies and the Internet exert on everyday life. The pressure of living two lives, an online life where identity is constructed mainly through profiles and an offline life where human interactions require time and effort, has led us to multi-task our entire lives. Although digital technologies allow us to accomplish many things at once, our multi-tasking has come at a great price: we have lost the ability to give each other our full attention. To make her argument, Turkle introduces “Audrey,” a teenager who avoids telephone conversation and prefers texting. Audrey does not feel she has the time to engage in a full telephone conversation. She believes texting allows her to stay in contact with more people at once because she can bounce from conversation to conversation. Audrey seems more interested in the quantity of her conversations than their quality.

Using anecdotal evidence from her personal life, Turkle reveals that she is uncomfortable with our growing dependence on technology to keep in touch. She has constant communication with her daughter who is overseas through Skype, text messages, and email. However, she longs for a letter, which she believes can be saved and used to memorialize a moment of emotional exchange between a daughter and mother. Ultimately, Turkle argues that we are constrained by the technologies that we use, condensing our lives into tweets and texts.

While these arguments may seem to adhere to a form of Neo-Luddism, Turkle is certainly not advocating that we stop using technology. Instead, she is critiquing our technophilia – our unquestioned belief that technology will solve our problems. *Alone Together* is a call for action, a request to think critically about our relationship with technology. She urges her readers to take simple actions, like not allowing cellular phones at the dinner table, and encourages them to consider deeper issues, such as reclaiming our online privacy. While Turkle does provide simple suggestions for ways to change our relationships with technology, the aim of the book is not to provide a comprehensive solution to our dependence on technology. Turkle sets out to describe the phenomenon of digital dependency, especially among digital natives, and its effects on our personal relationships. Although she focuses primarily on digital natives, Turkle also includes interviews with the elderly, thereby revealing how the phenomenon of digital dependency is widespread and not age-dependent. Despite the limited sample of interviewees, *Alone Together* is work that provokes a critical inward glance at our use of technology and our ability to maintain genuine human connections.

Reviewer

Patricia Garcia is a PhD student in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her interests include information access, archival theory, and the use of primary materials in K-12 classroom settings. She is particularly interested in how professional archivists and classroom teachers can collaborate to develop policies for increasing student access to cultural records at archival institutions.