

TECHNOLOGY

The Flight From Conversation

The psychologist Sherry Turkle argues that replacing face-to-face communication with smartphones is diminishing people's capacity for empathy.

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JELENA ALOSKINA / SHUTTERSTOCK

Many of my daily conversations don't involve eye contact. My roommate texts me from a neighboring bedroom. My boss sends me an instant message from a few feet away. Sometimes, the substitution of face-to-face talk for words on a screen makes me uneasy. Yet other days, it slips past unnoticed, and I too reach for a keyboard instead of finding someone's gaze.

Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and sociologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has spent the past 30 years observing how people react and adapt to new technologies that change the way we communicate. In her latest book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Turkle argues that texts, tweets, Facebook posts, emails, instant messages, and snapchats—simultaneous, rapid-fire “sips” of online communication—have replaced face-to-face conversation, and that people are noticing the consequences. Over-reliance on

devices, she argues, is harming our ability to have valuable face-to-face conversations, “the most human thing we do,” by splitting our attention and diminishing our capacity for empathy.

The book combines Turkle’s research from the past five years—interviews and anecdotes from children, teenagers, college students, parents, educators and managers—with her own insights from her background in psychology. Together, the stories she presents offer a snapshot of people grappling with the social consequences of changing communication technology.

In her previous book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, Turkle documented the wholehearted embrace of smartphones and other new technologies. Now, she writes about growing discontent: children begging their parents to put down their phones at dinner, people feeling neglected as their friends put conversations “on pause” to disappear into their smartphones. Turkle’s central diagnosis: “We turn to our phones instead of each other,” in friendships, in families, in romantic relationships, and at work.

Turkle's prescriptions: Carve out “sacred spaces” for conversation in day-to-day life—no devices at the dinner table, study and lounge spaces that are wi-fi free. Abandon the myth of multitasking for good—it is neither efficient nor conducive to empathy, she says—and instead embrace “unitasking,” one thing at a time. Resist the urge to see the smartphone as the universal tool that should replace everything.

While Turkle paints a bleak portrait of what devices may be doing to the social and emotional development of digital natives, she writes that ultimately, she is encouraged by “young people’s discontent.” I can’t help but agree, as a member of the generation somewhere between digital natives and web-neophytes—I got my first iPhone at 16, and it marked a profound inflection point in my life. But Turkle is also an outsider to the younger generation. It remains to be seen whether, and how, my peers and those younger than us will “reclaim conversation” for themselves.

I talked to Turkle about all of this and more. Here’s a lightly edited and condensed transcript of our conversation.

Lauren Cassani Davis: What exactly do you mean when you say we’re experiencing a “flight from conversation”?

Sherry Turkle: You watch people at dinner tables, where they're both at their phones and talking to their dinner partners. Ask what's happening there, and they explain to you what some call "the rule of three": You wait for three people to have their heads up before you put your head down to your phone, so you make sure that some kind of conversation persists. But then people admit that it's not the same as the kind of conversation they'd have if everybody were paying attention. Experimental evidence backs this up, because if you have a phone on the table between two people, the people in the conversation feel less connected to each other.

Davis: You use the word "empathy" a lot to describe what's being lost in these situations. How do you define empathy?

Turkle: The empathy that I'm talking about is a psychological capacity to put yourself in the place of another person and imagine what they are going through. It has neurological underpinnings—we know that we're "wired" to do it, because when you put young people in a summer camp where there are no devices, within five days their capacity to watch a scene, and then successfully identify what the people in the scene might be feeling, begins to go back up again from being depressed when they first arrived, armed with their devices. We suppress this capacity by putting ourselves in environments where we're not looking at each other in the eye, not sticking with the other person long enough or hard enough to follow what they're feeling.

I interviewed this group of college students, and one of them said, "Our texting is fine, it's what our texting is doing to our conversations when we're together, that's the problem." I think social media is great. The question is, are we on a diet of social media that's hurting our face-to-face conversation? And if we are, how can we put ourselves on a different kind of diet? That's the conversation I'm trying to start.

Davis: You also say that another bedrock of conversation is solitude and self-reflection. Why do you think technologies, specifically, are responsible for eroding our ability to be alone?

Turkle: I don't want to say technologies are responsible as if they're the only [factor]. ... But I think technology has a very big role, because [mobile devices], I think unlike other similar technologies, make three promises. I call it "three gifts

from a benevolent genie”: that you’ll never have to be alone, that your voice will always be heard, that you can put your attention wherever you want it to be. And that you can slip in and out of wherever you are to be wherever you want to be, with no social stigma. [These devices create] a new set of social mores that allow for a split attention in human relationships and human community.

I grew up with the book, and when I was talking to my best friends, I really couldn’t, without penalty, say “Oh, excuse me” and just open up a book in the middle of a conversation. You didn’t have permission to slip back and forth from Nancy Drew to your friends.

We are telling people that they are not as interesting or informative as where we can go in a flash [on our devices]. People have to work to not feel devalued when they’re put “on pause.” ... Because I’ve interviewed people and they say, “It makes me feel terrible—I’d never say that, but it does. I feel I’m being put on pause. It’s bad when I do it to other people, but then I don’t really think of how they feel when I do it to them.” You need to suppress your empathy “gene” in order to participate fully in the mobile revolution.

Davis: In some ways what you’re describing is a culture of individualism where codes of etiquette aren’t restraining us from going on our phones. We’re not feeling that sense of, “I feel bad that I’m not giving you my attention.” And could that predate phones? I don’t know.

Turkle: That’s such a fascinating question. You could say that this is a radical code of individualism—so radical that we deny the power of all communal affiliations even as we participate in them. And at the same time, when we’re online, we talk about new communities and the importance of our participation in new communities. So we are in one confusing soup. It certainly leads right back to people [being] in conflict, which is one of my big themes.

The statistics I like are the Pew numbers. It’s a very confusing report. Over 80 percent say that a phone was out during their last social interaction, and they describe what kinds of ways in which that was positive for them—they were sharing, they were looking things up. We have many positive ways to describe how we’re using our phones—I take it out and I show you this or that—but when it came to the bottom-line question, “What do you think it did to the conversation?,” 82 percent say it deteriorated the conversation.

We're living in an environment where we're doing something that we sense is—and the research shows is—putting us in conflict, and is not really helping community and friendship. We text during funerals. We text during religious services of all sorts. When I ask people why they do that, they admit it—they say, we text during the boring bits. What does it mean for somebody to say, I went to a funeral and when the funeral got boring, I texted? What have they forgotten about the purposes of a funeral? And what are they teaching their children? They forgot that the point of the funeral is just to be together with the other people there.

Davis: What do you think distinguishes the period of technological change we've experienced in the past decade or two with the Internet and mobile devices, and other significant periods of technological shift such as the invention of the telephone, the invention of the telegraph, or even the shift from spoken word to writing? Crises of human values are an inevitable part of technological change and of human evolution—what's different about this one we are going through right now?

Turkle: It's speed, and our degree of self-awareness about the downside of what our devices are doing to us. What we are experiencing is not an ideological reaction ("Oh, the novel will make us immoral!"). We are seeing, with our children, in our romantic relationships, in our educational system, at work, that we are not paying attention to each other. We are not talking to each other with full attention. And we can do something about it.

Davis: How do you think that your own training in psychotherapy has shaped the way you gathered your research, and the values you espouse?

Turkle: I am very shaped by my psychoanalytic and psychodynamic training. It's a technology of talk! Whether or not you believe in its specifics, [the psychoanalytic tradition] sensitizes us to our histories, to the ways we say things, not just the content of what we say, to things that we forget but that we can remember in the right context, with the right person. It sensitizes us to the power of conversation as a way of reclaiming ourselves, to the power of self-reflection as a privileged kind of conversation with the self. Psychoanalysis teaches the virtues of solitude.

Davis: You mention the idea that future technologies might be designed with our vulnerabilities in mind, such as encouraging us to disengage after we use them. Do you know of anyone who is actively pursuing this kind of research?

Turkle: Yes, Tristan Harris at Google, who distinguishes between time on our devices and time well spent. Gilles Philips, who has done brilliant work on how our devices hold us in state close to hyper-vigilance, not a good state to be in. Both engineers, both looking toward a very different future.

Davis: During your research you spent some time at device-free camps for kids. Do you think that these should become more widely available? What about device-free camps for adults?

Turkle: I think that different people will find different ways to take a bit of device-free time. For some it will be a camp. For some it will be a kind of sabbath day. Or a daily time out. But I think this will happen.

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