BOOK REVIEW

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

Reviewed by Christina Watts, University of Ottawa, Canada

Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other
Sherry Turkle
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Personal Experiences with Impersonal Things

Alone Together, written by Sherry Turkle is the third instalment in her trilogy focusing on the sociological and psychological affects of technology. Preceded by The Second Life, and Life on the Screen, this book employs the premise that “we are alone and imagine ourselves together” (p. 226). It depicts how technology has entered our lives, how it has shifted our sense of connection to others, and how we have come to prefer the impersonal to the personal.

Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She is also the founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, and is a licensed clinical psychologist. Her book is written as a public reflection as she recounts the hundreds of interviews that she has conducted with individuals of all ages. She tells the stories of people just like ourselves and their experiences with technology.

Her book is divided into two sections; the first discusses the possibilities and implications of technologies. It is also within this section that the majority of the ethical dilemmas she brings up for consideration come into place. As she recounts her interviews with children she describes their behaviours when interacting with Furby like toys and the strong attachments they are quick to make. What differentiates these toys from others before them is that they are more interactive than any toy had ever been, they communicate their supposed wants, needs, fears, and feelings, which are all designed to connect with and appeal to our human emotions. Even though we may consciously know that they are just machines when they ‘cry’ and when they are ‘scared’ we are drawn to comfort them. Seemingly, if such a toy has the potential

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to “provok[ing] enough emotion” (p. 97) to elicit a human response then it also has enough potential to provoke ethical discussion.

It is important to note, however, that it is not the technology itself which deserves moral consideration but it is the potential they have to affect us. The fact that we can be so influenced by them, and the fact that they “can inspire these feelings demonstrates that objects cross that line not because of their sophistication but because of the feelings of attachment they evoke” (p. 44). Ethical issues arise as Turkle believes that connections such as these will only ever be one-sided.

In the second part of her book she tapers some of her more grandiose predictions to something more relatable. Numerous personal accounts of people’s experiences with the wireless voiceless technologies of today are provided. Their preferences for these technologies over more personal means of communication soon surface as well. As we are in a world where having a private conversation with someone, i.e. hearing their voice and having them hear yours while they are not distracted by anything else, is a rarity. This is a world where a quick and simple phone call becomes too much of an inconvenience, and too “intrusive” on others (p. 206) simply put, there is “too much interruption” in comparison to texting or other forms of instant messaging (p. 217).

For many people the practice of speaking to someone one-on-one leaves them feeling vulnerable and unprepared for what might occur. It is these people who find solace in email as they are provided with a kind of shield allowing them to limit the boundaries of their interactions. It also allows people to intake information at their own pace and gives them time to derive an appropriate response without the pressure of someone standing in front of them, in effect it “gives them an alternative to processing emotions in real time” (p. 206). However, she warns that these newer technologies have a tendency to “leave us vulnerable in new ways” (p. 235). When online we “feel protected and less burdened by expectations”, however, do we always really know who is on the other side of that screen? For it is questions like these and notions of false connections that make up the majority of this book. Turkle provides a new and unique perspective regarding the human consequences of technology contributing to both social and psychological literature.

An interesting comparison can be made between her work and Malcolm Parks’ article What Will We Study When the Internet Disappears? While Parks fully acknowledges that the internet will never actually disappear his title implies that the internet itself is simply becoming less prevalent and “less visible as the result of widespread use and incorporation into everyday activity” (Parks, 2009, p. 724). Though reasonable Turkle’s beliefs lie in direct contrast. Seemingly, Turkle claims that technologies, including internet, will only become even more visible and commonplace in the future. Essentially, she proposes that these technologies will be even further engrained into our daily lives as we have a tendency to develop stronger ties and relationships to the technology we use rather than to the people we know.

While Turkle’s work is primarily that of an ethnographer Parks (2009) would argue that the last thing this area of research needs are more personal accounts of experiences with technology. Instead he is an advocate for more descriptive research. Parks states that research into the effects of the internet needs to go beyond the “surface features of technologies” and that we need to focus more on the theoretical aspect of these technologies and the “underlying communicative processes they serve” (2009, p. 725). Correspondingly, this is exactly what Turkle does. As is customary, Turkle brings something new in her latest book; the ‘sensibility of ethnographer and clinician’ together. Her work encompasses over fifteen years of field research and clinical studies with over 450 participants, both children and adults.
This aspect of her work would undoubtedly appease Parks’ concerns. Parks also claims that he would prefer future research not to focus on the technology itself but rather on the processes and needs they are serving. Accordingly, this is precisely what Turkle’s readers are given. Though she is a Professor at MIT Turkle does not concern herself with the inner workings or mechanics of the technology, she would much rather speak to the implications of such technologies on our communication habits, our relationships, and our lives.

Although these authors differ in their views concerning the abundance of technology both do share similar respects for the technological advancements brought forth. While Parks states that it is important not to take for granted the things that “are so commonplace and so integrated into our daily activities” (2009, p. 724) Turkle would agree as she prefers for her work to be regarded as that of a person who is truly appreciative of the technologies around them.

As an advocate for technology, Turkle once again differentiates herself from such works as Steven E. Jones’ Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism (2006). In contrast to the anti-technology way of life depicted in Jones’ work Turkle believes we do not need to be as drastic as to eliminate technology from our lives, we have simply “reached a point of inflection” (p. 296) where we must actively weigh the costs and rewards of our interactions with technology.

Though Turkle may possess more optimistic views regarding technology than Jones she remains somewhat pessimistic when compared to Kevin Kelly’s What Technology Wants (2010). Unlike Kelly, Turkle does not subscribe to the belief that technology will one day fulfill that empty void in our lives, however, she does see positive potential. Technology has the overarching power to keep us connected and the ability to allow us to juggle more things and people at once than ever before. By writing public posts about ourselves, sending hundreds of texts a month, creeping in on the lives of others through their photos, we are communicating with more people than we ever have, but what Turkle suggests is are we really ‘keeping in touch’ this way? Or, are we interacting more with the technology than with each other? These are some of the many questions the reader is left to ponder.

While it may sometimes feel impossible to resist the temptations Turkle believes it is important for us to “find a way to live with the seductive technology and make it work to our purposes,” and not the other way around (p. 294). Turkle does see hope for us as long as we remain in control, and as long as technology remains the tool we use to connect with and not the thing that we connect to. She also believes, unlike Kelly, that “love of technology is not going to help” and even more unlike Jones “nor is a Luddite impulse” (p. 294).

In conclusion, Alone Together reads as a cautionary tale of connecting more with technology than with each other and thus expecting more from it than we do from those around us. If the reader can take away any message from this book let it be that although it is easy to fall victim to the seductiveness and appeal of technology it is important not to let it run our lives. However, it is also important to appreciate the advances and conveniences we have and to note how incredibly different our lives would be without them.

REFERENCES


Christina Watts is currently completing her Master’s thesis at the University of Ottawa specializing in Organizational Communication. She is interested in the affects of computer-mediated communication on interpersonal relationships and perceptions of organizational productivity in the workplace.