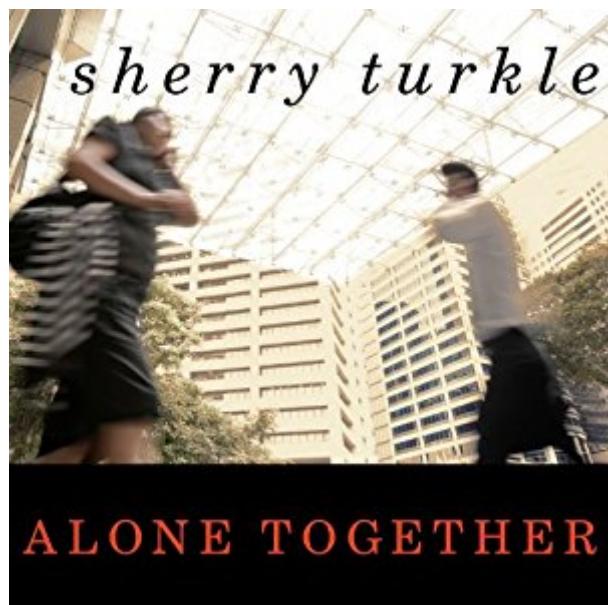


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Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other



Synopsis

Consider Facebook - it's human contact, only easier to engage with and easier to avoid. Developing technology promises closeness. Sometimes it delivers, but much of our modern life leaves us less connected with people and more connected to simulations of them. In *Alone Together*, MIT technology and society professor Sherry Turkle explores the power of our new tools and toys to dramatically alter our social lives. It's a nuanced exploration of what we are looking for - and sacrificing - in a world of electronic companions and social-networking tools, and an argument that, despite the hand-waving of today's self-described prophets of the future, it will be the next generation who will chart the path between isolation and connectivity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

That was one of my thoughts as I read Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together*: no matter what robots learn to do, they will never learn to write a book as thoughtful, informative, and intense as *Alone Together*. They would not know how to pose the questions, let alone use such discernment in addressing them. It is interesting that Turkle chose to discuss robots in the first part of the book and the Internet in the second part. By presenting the "strange" part first, she gives us a sense of how strange our everyday lives actually are, how far we have moved away from enjoying each other's presence. Turkle quotes children and adults who hesitate to use the phone because it seems awkward and intrusive; it is much easier, they say, to dash off a text or email. At the same time, Turkle points out, because of this very convenience, people expect quick responses. She describes

the anxiety of teenagers when they do not get an immediate reply to their text messages. One girl talks about needing her cell phone for "emergencies"; it turns out that what she means by "emergency" is having a feeling without being able to share it. Turkle shows how our Internet communications mix the deliberate with the unconsidered. On the one hand, people put great effort even into short email messages. On the other, they "test" ideas and expressions in formation to see how others react. Some create fake online profiles just to try out different sides of their personality. The problem with such experimentation is that it is conditioned almost entirely by online reactions, often reactions of strangers. There is little room to form thoughts independently. Throughout the book, Turkle brings up the question of solitude. What happens to our solitude when we are able to get responses to anything and are expected to provide responses in turn? What happens to our sense of dissent when everything we say and do online bears a trace? She points out how important privacy is to dissent, for if we have no place where we can think and act unseen, we end up policing ourselves and censoring our own thoughts. We tame and restrain ourselves, knowing that anything we do and say may end up "out there" forever. "But sometimes a citizenry should not simply 'be good,'" Turkle writes. "You have to leave space for dissent, real dissent." Also, Turkle points out, when we have no privacy we lose the ability to privilege some thoughts and actions over others. She quotes Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, who says that "if you have something you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." Like many others, he ignores the possibility that there might be privacy without shame or crime. We might want to keep things to ourselves for any number of reasons; when we "put everything out there," that "everything" is somehow trivialized. Turkle quotes a girl who claims there's nothing much to know about her; "I'm kind of boring." Will the loss of privacy lead more people to dismiss themselves as boring? One of Turkle's most powerful points is that we have come "to take the performance of emotion as emotion enough." Who cares, some might say, if the robot cannot feel? It behaves as though it feels, and that's enough. But is it? I see similar assumptions in education, where test scores are equated with learning, and students' visible activity in class is equated with "engagement." How do you go about defending something that is not tangible, visible, or measurable? It is difficult, but Turkle does it. Because this book is so informative, because Turkle understands the complexities of technologies, she can make bold statements. She insists that we have the capacity and obligation to question the principles behind new inventions. She suggests that the touch of a human hand is indeed different from a robot's, that a handwritten letter is different from a text, that thinking and remembering have value even when it seems there's no more time for them. I won't give away the ending, but it left me with a surprising sadness, as though in a movie theater, when it's over and the

place is dark, and you sit there for a few minutes, stunned, before getting up and walking out into the blink-provoking street.

What I love about this book is that a whole person wrote it. Turkle includes both original research and her everyday experiences as a mother and a friend. Unlike many books about technology, this book does not try to tell a simple story about it being good or bad. Its goal seems to be to help us live a better life in partnership with technology. Do we really want to give up privacy online? Do we really want to text during family dinners? Do we really want our companionship to be replaced by robotic companionship? Instead of pretending you must take a side for or against technology, "Alone Together" asks us to look out for ourselves and what is good for us. My favorite idea is that the point is not to get rid of technology but that each individual must stop and think where it fits in his or her life. "Alone Together" is a great read. The language is sometimes poetic and sometimes funny, but always compelling. Its ideas and questions are powerful and are long-lasting. Highly recommended for everyone.

'Alone Together' is the third volume in a trilogy produced over three decades by Sherry Turkle, a psychoanalyst based at MIT, the preceding volumes being 'The Second Self' (1984) and 'Life on the Screen' (1995). I read each one soon after publication and found them engrossing, thought-provoking and well-illustrated with illuminating case-studies and insightful observations. The current volume is in two parts: the first develops themes from 'The Second Self' (here related to 'sociable robots'), the second from 'Life on the Screen' (which focused on the construction of identities online). Because of the limitations of space, my comments here focus on Part Two. Whereas the earlier volumes were relatively upbeat about the implications of new technologies, the tone of the current volume feels markedly more jaundiced, alerting us to some potential social costs of 'social media'. Provocatively, the main refrain is that in an online culture we are always connected (Turkle says 'tethered'), but are rarely (meaningfully) connecting. Although (somewhat ironically) one may hear the same sentiment in a current commercial for a well-known matchmaking website, Turkle's nuanced stance 'is not romantically nostalgic, not Luddite in the least'; indeed, she remains 'cautiously optimistic'. This is a seriously reflective work well-informed by extensive ethnographic studies. The focus on authenticity and intimacy recalls the concerns voiced by Socrates in Plato's 'Phaedrus' about an earlier technological development--publishing one's ideas in written form--in particular the fear that communication at a distance would undermine genuine (face-to-face) human discourse. This has been a recurrent anxiety throughout the history of communication technologies.

As the title suggests, this book reveals and explores unresolved tensions and contradictions in our attitudes and behaviour in relation to the latest manifestations of these technologies. Distance communication in all of its forms (print media, broadcasting, telecommunications, online) tends to facilitate what the sociologists call 'weak (or loose) ties'. One sociological argument is that society at large depends on the maintenance of loose ties between distant acquaintances and those we know only indirectly, functioning as a sort of social glue, in addition to the strong ties and commitments that bind us rather more closely to our 'immediate' family and 'close' friends. As a psychoanalyst, however, the author argues that the personal cost may be that we are coming to rely too much on online communication with relative strangers at the expense of intimacy with, and commitment to the people we know from face-to-face interaction. For instance, her earlier enthusiasm for online worlds as 'identity workshops' is tempered by a concern that the mediation of a screen encourages more premeditated behaviour, which has in turn led many teenagers to prefer texting to speaking on the phone because speech 'reveals too much'. Ethnographic approaches are particularly useful in highlighting illuminating instances that may raise broader issues. Although such studies do not enable global generalizations, they can help to frame hypotheses for further research and reflection. This is indeed a book to be read and re-read. Sherry Turkle's timely critique reminds me of Marshall McLuhan's caveat that 'we are all robots when uncritically involved with our technologies.' The always accessible style of her writing encourages engagement rather than closure, so that anyone who has paused to reflect on the implications of Facebook for friendship or of mobile phones for solitude is likely to find themselves entering into an imaginary debate with the author, countering the Platonic anxiety that reading is antisocial, and thus reminding us that whatever the apparent affordances of a particular technology, maintaining a well-informed critical perspective can reduce our vulnerabilities.

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