

Reclaiming Media Ideologies

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Sherry Turkle. 2015. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. New York: Penguin Press. 436 pages.

Daniel Miller. 2016. *Social Media in an English Village*. London: University College London Press. 234 pages.

Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, et al. 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: University College London Press. 260 pages.

The absorptive appeal of the smartphone is hard to deny, as its buzzing tiny screen entices one into looping cycles of messaging, email, Facebook and other social platforms. As a parent and tech enthusiast, I have become increasingly conscientious about media in my household. But as a media anthropologist, I am fascinated by how diverse media practices can be, and what they illuminate about people's lives in varied cultural and historical moments. Sherry Turkle's new book, *Reclaiming Conversation*, builds on her prior studies of human-machine relations to respond to what she sees as increasing anomie and faltering empathy in the age of continuous digital connection. Though her previous works explored ways people experiment with identity through "second selves" online and in computing more generally, Turkle, a psychologist in MIT's Program in Science, Technology, and Society, sees troubling dynamics developing between humans and technology, especially with the onset of automation, artificial intelligence, and robotics.

Turkle's previous book, *Alone Together*, joined a number of widely-reviewed books (Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*, Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion*) on the hazards and temptations of new technologies. Like its predecessor, *Reclaiming Conversation* draws on Turkle's scholarly research—hundreds of interviews over a number of years—extending her previous arguments and proffering a proposed solution. Informed by Turkle's psychoanalytic background and interests, the work focuses on how interpersonal relationships are changing through engagement with mobile and social media. Many of her critiques resonated, and I often found myself putting down my phone around my family. But the narrow focus comes at the cost of the broader context, and conversations in anthropology, media studies, and science and technology studies around the mutual constitution of technology and society, beyond technology's positive or negative effects. Turkle's main argument is that networked digital communication technologies pull users away from "face-to-face" conversations, and replace them with something that seems comparable ("little sips of connection" as television personality Stephen Colbert phrased it), but actually undermines our capacity for connection and

empathy. Life online—on Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.—is more fun and “friction-free” than the messy reality of other people, but this “flight from conversation” has serious consequences for social life, notably the withering of empathy. Children are especially vulnerable, increasingly raised in homes where adults spend more time looking at mobile devices than talking with their families. This is a problem because talking builds the capacity for empathy through reading facial expressions and bodily gestures, making eye contact, sitting through awkward pauses, and allowing boredom to lead each other to greater creativity and connection. Mirroring one another, we learn to imagine and share each others’ feelings. We are lonely, she contends, because we do not know how to be alone: “if we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely.”

Turkle traces this precept through what she calls three different chairs, after Henry Thoreau’s reflections on conversation in *Walden*, in which he sets out chairs in his cabin for conversation. The first represents conversations with one’s self (alone but not lonely), the second, with an intimate other (close friends, children, partners), and the third, with wider society in contexts like school or the workplace. Finally, she proposes a fourth chair, comparable to Thoreau’s view of nature as his “withdrawing room,” a space for deeper conversations. For Turkle, virtual worlds and artificial life constitute a “second nature,” prompting her to return to the subject of previous works and human conversations with machines, especially robots. In Chair One, she portrays children who cannot bear to be bored and instead turn to mobile devices and media to keep themselves entertained, children for whom sharing online is a new form of selfhood (“I share, therefore I am”). She likens the lure of digital interfaces to the “zone” described by gamblers in Natasha Dow Schüll’s 2012 ethnography of digitized slot machines. Players Schüll studied isolate themselves from all human contact to lose themselves in the “zone,” a space where human subjectivity, digital interfaces, and capital extraction collapse into each other. Turkle quotes Alexis Madrigal on the social media equivalent, the “Facebook zone”; but in this analogy, the sort of context developed in Schüll’s work drops out — it’s precariously employed workers in Las Vegas’ casino economy who seek escape and whose structural malaise provides a lucrative mine for slot machine designers; Turkle develops no equivalent for the “Facebook zone.”

In Chair Two, she introduces families struggling over how to connect with the distraction of smartphones, tablets, and social media. Children she meets are frustrated with parents who violate house rules for screen time: parents who text under the dinner table, even as they limit their children’s media use. She compares the temptation (“a seductive undertow”) to that of unhealthy foods, and exhorts parents to create times and spaces without screens. Similar dynamics play out among college students who would rather send texts or converse on Whatsapp, even when hanging out in the same room, and in romantic relationships where texting allows would-be lovers to edit every conversation and hold each other at just the right distance, what Turkle calls “the Goldilocks effect,” or rather “fallacy”.

In Chair Three, Turkle advocates for the return of “unitasking,” which is the obverse of multitasking, in school and work settings. She contrasts Katherine Hayles’ embrace of “hyper attention,” as a fractured mode of attention better supported by tech-enabled teaching methods. But for Turkle, without “attentional pluralism,” that is, fluency in both multitasking and unitasking, students won’t learn the kind of deep attention that scholars take for granted. This dynamic plays out similarly in law firms and

tech companies, where devices distract from conversations that build trust, provide opportunities for mentoring, and foster creativity. As with families, companies can make spaces for device-free interactions to counter the allure of the machine zone—and generate better productivity.

The book is wide-ranging, examining an array of places where middle- and upper-middle class families and professionals interact with media instead of conversing. In considering the future of technology, Turkle muses on how big data, privacy, and surveillance of digital publics endanger democracy. In response, she advocates greater transparency, politicizing privacy, and reclaiming places for conversation. She returns to Chair Four to explore relationships between humans and new forms of automation and machine learning, such as digital assistants (like Apple's Siri), automated psychotherapists, and smart toys that provide companionship. In all these, she diagnoses a lack of human conversation as the fundamental flaw, paving over complex human relationships with imitation ones, furnishing technological solutions to a problem technology created to begin with.

Together, these stories paint a bleak picture of a world where the putative “we” (primarily, the urban US professional class) have lost the ability or desire to put down devices and talk, to experience boredom, or to engage in interactions that don't rack up Likes, allow users to revise themselves, or divine the meaning of every 140-character snippet. But this portrait of loss invokes a rosy past where parents' attention was undivided, children played checkers with grandparents rather than watching TV or playing video games, and couples became acquainted through dinner dates. This bygone era, if it ever existed outside primetime television, disappeared long before the advent of mobile and social media. This doesn't invalidate her poignant analysis of ways some users interact with technology, nor the concrete recommendations, like designing apps and devices to cultivate other kinds of attention or spending more time away from screens. It is worth pointing out that this last objective is one that will become challenging as screens give way to computerized objects and the Internet of Things. One case that stuck with me, for example, was her critique of “still face,” the unreadable countenance of those lost in their smartphone, a focused blankness that shuts out others, such as children looking for attention and engagement.

Scenarios like the above will resonate with many readers, from parents tussling over screen time at home to faculty whose students shop or game in class as easily as they take notes. Her diagnoses provide a language for addressing ways smartphones and social media distract many people, offering a “friction-free” engagement that promises freedom from boredom but not from loneliness. And if conversation is what's lost, then conversation can cure, in the tradition of the open-ended conversation of psychoanalytic therapy, the “talking cure.” Turkle offers two main approaches to reinstating talk, one concerned with design and the other with practice. She advocates, first, designing technologies that do not exploit human psychological vulnerabilities, such as notifications that demand continual attention. I agree that design could offer a means to redress features that are disruptive, but these features—like the interfaces that enable the “machine zone”—are essential to the business model of most mobile platforms. Redesigning them would entail tech companies relinquishing lucrative revenue streams. On the contrary, a broader critique is required of the social and economic context in which media technologies are produced, such as in Silicon Valley and other elite tech

hubs. Second, she recommends that parents, teachers, and corporate managers find ways to foster conversation by disconnecting periodically from mobile and social media. These recommendations are often concrete and sensible, but place the burden of addressing symptoms of broader social problems on individuals, in ways that are already playing out according to class formations. So-called “digital detoxing” or disconnecting, for example, has garnered media attention as the techno-minimalist equivalent of decluttering or mindfulness, from expensive device-free retreats to the alleged comeback of “dumb” feature phones. But disconnection risks becoming a new mark of class distinction in which opportunities to unplug are limited to those with sufficient economic and cultural resources.

New technologies, as Turkle concedes, typically provoke anxieties around upsetting the social order. Carolyn Marvin (1990), for example, has chronicled the introduction of electronic commodities like the electric light and the telephone, which rearranged social distances and required new competences, triggering class-based struggles over changing forms of expertise. That broader historical context is largely missing in *Reclaiming Conversation*. Turkle acknowledges briefly that new communication technologies have always inspired controversy. This is because they have been seen “as destructive to a cherished mode of thought.” Even so, Turkle asserts that mobile media have a “distinctive quality” because “[w]hen we write instead of speak, we are aware that we are making a choice, writing instead of speaking. In contrast, when we have our phones with us, we don’t consider that by this fact we have compromised our face-to-face conversations.” While this quote encapsulates the central theme of the book, it equally illustrates its limitations. She never elucidates who is included in this “we,” though it seems directed at those she studies—educated, middle- and upper-middle-class tech users in the US. This broad but nonetheless delimited group includes prep school students, MIT undergraduates and graduate students, lawyers, and tech workers in Silicon Valley, but obviously leaves out many other tech users. The tech practices of the predominantly white professional class merit study, but when the few stand in for “we,” the structurally-privileged for the whole, already marginalized experiences are doubly erased. There are, for example, racialized and gendered dimensions to mobile media use, such as affective forms of digital labor, which Turkle does not consider.

Anthropologists of mobile media are engaging precisely these questions in growing research on media in transnational and postcolonial contexts. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012), for example, have studied the lives of transnational Filipino families for whom mobile and social media are a lifeline connecting migrant mothers and children back home, in the face of profound economic need. In collaboration with other colleagues, Miller has spearheaded further studies. The new book, *How the World Changed Social Media*, part of a larger project called Why We Post, illustrates the diversity of emerging media practices in nine field sites over three continents. Miller’s own UK-based study describes a parallel version of the “Goldilocks effect,” in which English villagers use social media to maintain the right amount of social distance from acquaintances. For Miller, this practice articulates a form of Englishness, comparable to other ways English villagers managed social relations. But among tech workers in South India, class and caste differences unfold on social media, while in bleak workers’ quarters in industrial China, social media become a means for escaping a daily existence one person describes as “unbearable.” Media practices differ for and among urban elites,

transnational migrants, factory workers, or postcolonial middle classes. Just as their practices differ, so too do their media ideologies—their beliefs, strategies, and attitudes toward all the media they use and avoid. This diversity of media practices—and social formations—necessitates asking why US college students feel pressure to succeed when work has been outsourced and made contingent; why highly-involved parents—who spend more time with their children than previous generations—want to check one more work email, as work encroaches further onto family life; or why doctors must simultaneously listen to their patients and enter data into new healthcare systems, according to the demands of increasingly technocratic regimes.

In contrast to Miller et al.'s situated findings, Turkle's critique of social and mobile media provides insight into genuinely troubling shifts among an entire social class in the contemporary US. The psychoanalytic perspective raises questions about empathy and human development that are often absent from media anthropology accounts. But the proposed solutions do not address the conditions that produce these technologies or encourage their use in particular ways. In his classic exposition of technological determinism, Raymond Williams argued that technology cannot be analyzed in terms of its effects on society because "technology" is not a separate domain; it is produced through interlinked constellations of people, practices, histories, and built worlds. And in Marvin's historical account of "old" media, technologies like radio or television coalesce into stable systems retrospectively, but this stability belies the contested processes that reorganized social relations.

The interactive, networked platforms organized around interlinked user profiles and user-generated content that we now call "social media" were incipient in the early 2000s and gained momentum with the advent of Internet-enabled mobile phones in the late 2000s. As Turkle concedes, some younger users she interviews are already less enamored of media—neither rejecting them nor remaining obsessed, but assessing their benefits and applications more evenhandedly. For those who believe that the experiences detailed in *Reclaiming Conversation* are universal, then the problems Turkle identifies may indeed be caused by the disruptive and alluring features of mobile platforms. But given anthropological findings on mobile and social media, her observations may better illustrate an initial and narrow wave of responses, albeit dramatic, to emerging forms of communication and selfhood among professional middle classes in the context of globalizing capital. And if these technologies do not universally produce anomie, then further analysis must consider the broader conditions that shape design and practice, technology and society.

Further Reading

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BIO:

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