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Special Report

Can You Hear Me Now?

Sherry Turkle 05.07.07

Thanks to technology, people have never been more connected--or more alienated

I have traveled 36 hours to a conference on robotic technology in central Japan. The grand ballroom is Wi-Fi enabled, and the speaker is using the Web for his presentation. Laptops are open, fingers are flying. But the audience is not listening. Most seem to be doing their e-mail, downloading files, surfing the Web or looking for a cartoon to illustrate an upcoming presentation. Every once in a while audience members give the speaker some attention, lowering their laptop screens in a kind of digital curtsy.

In the hallway outside the plenary session attendees are on their phones or using laptops and pdas to check their e-mail. Clusters of people chat with each other, making dinner plans, "networking" in that old sense of the term--the sense that implies sharing a meal. But at this conference it is clear that what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks. It is good to come together physically, but it is more important to stay tethered to the people who define one's virtual identity, the identity that counts. I think of how Freud believed in the power of communities to control and subvert us, and a psychoanalytic pun comes to mind: "virtuality and its discontents."

The phrase comes back to me months later as I interview business consultants who seem to have lost touch with their best instincts for how to maintain the bonds that make them most competitive. They are complaining about the BlackBerry revolution. They accept it as inevitable, decry it as corrosive. Consultants used to talk to one another as they waited to give presentations; now they spend that time doing e-mail. Those who once bonded during limousine rides to airports now spend this time on their BlackBerrys. Some say they are making better use of their "downtime," but they argue their point without conviction. This waiting time and going-to-the-airport time was never downtime; it was work time. It was precious time when far-flung global teams solidified relationships and refined ideas.

We live in techno-enthusiastic times, and we are most likely to celebrate our gadgets. Certainly the advertising that sells us our devices has us working from beautiful, remote locations that signal our status. We are connected, tethered, so important that our physical presence is no longer required. There is much talk of new efficiencies; we can work from anywhere and all the time. But tethered life is complex; it is helpful to measure our thrilling new networks against what they may be doing to us as people.

Here I offer five troubles that try my tethered soul.

There is a new state of the self, itself

By the 1990s the Internet provided spaces for the projection of self. Through online games known as Multi-User Domains, one was able to create avatars that could be deployed into virtual lives. Although the games often took the forms of medieval quests, players admitted that virtual environments owed their holding power to the opportunities they offered for exploring identity. The plain represented themselves as glamorous; the introverted

could try out being bold. People built the dream houses in the virtual that they could not afford in the real. They took online jobs of responsibility. They often had relationships, partners and even "marriages" of significant emotional importance. They had lots of virtual sex.

These days it is easier for people without technical expertise to blend their real and virtual lives. In the world of Second Life, a virtual world produced by Linden Lab, you can make real money; you can run a real business. Indeed, for many who enjoy online life, it is easier to express intimacy in the virtual world than in rl, that being real life. For those who are lonely yet fearful of intimacy, online life provides environments where one can be a loner yet not alone, have the illusion of companionship without the demands of sustained, intimate friendship.

Since the late 1990s social computing has offered an opportunity to experiment with a virtual second self. Now this metaphor doesn't go far enough. Our new online intimacies create a world in which it makes sense to speak of a new state of the self, itself. "I am on my cell ... online ... instant messaging ... on the Web"--these phrases suggest a new placement of the subject, wired into society through technology.

Are we losing the time to take our time?

The self that grows up with multitasking and rapid response measures success by calls made, e-mails answered and messages responded to. Self-esteem is calibrated by what the technology proposes, by what it makes easy. We live a contradiction: Insisting that our world is increasingly complex, we nevertheless have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think, uninterrupted. We are primed to receive a quick message to which we are expected to give a rapid response. Children growing up with this may never know another way. Their experience raises a question for us all: Are we leaving enough time to take our time on the things that matter?

We spend hours keeping up with our e-mails. One person tells me, "I look at my watch to see the time. I look at my BlackBerry to get a sense of my life." Think of the BlackBerry user watching the BlackBerry movie of his life as someone watching a movie that takes on a life of its own. People become alienated from their own experience and anxious about watching a version of their lives scrolling along faster than they can handle. They are not able to keep up with the unedited version of their lives, but they are responsible for it. People speak of BlackBerry addiction. Yet in modern life we have been made into self-disciplined souls who mind the rules, the time, our tasks. Always-on/always-on-you technology takes the job of self-monitoring to a new level.

BlackBerry users describe that sense of encroachment of the device on their time. One says, "I don't have enough time alone with my mind"; another, "I artificially make time to think." Such formulations depend on an "I" separate from the technology, a self that can put the technology aside so as to function apart from its demands. But it's in conflict with a growing reality of lives lived in the presence of screens, whether on a laptop, palmtop, cell phone or BlackBerry. We are learning to see ourselves as cyborgs, at one with our devices. To put it most starkly: To make more time means turning off our devices, disengaging from the always-on culture. But this is not a simple proposition, since our devices have become more closely coupled to our sense of our bodies and increasingly feel like extensions of our minds.

Our tethering devices provide a social and psychological Global Positioning System, a form of navigation for tethered selves. One television producer, accustomed to being linked to the world via her cell and Palm handheld, revealed that for her, the Palm's inner spaces were where her self resides: "When my Palm crashed it was like a death. It was more than I could handle. I felt as though I had lost my mind."

The tethered adolescent

Kids get cell phones from their parents. In return they are expected to answer their parents' calls. On the one hand this arrangement gives teenagers new freedoms. On the other they do not have the experience of being alone and having to count on themselves; there is always a parent on speed dial. This provides comfort in a dangerous world, yet there is a price to pay in the development of autonomy. There used to be a moment in the life of an urban child, usually between the ages of 12 and 14, when there was a first time to navigate the city alone. It was a rite of passage that communicated, "You are on your own and responsible. If you feel frightened, you have to experience these feelings." The cell phone tether buffers this moment; with the parents on tap, children think differently about themselves.

Adolescents naturally want to check out ideas and attitudes with peers. But when technology brings us to the point where we're used to sharing thoughts and feelings instantaneously, it can lead to a new dependence. Emotional life can move from "I have a feeling, I want to call a friend," to "I want to feel something, I need to make a call." In either case it comes at the expense of cultivating the ability to be alone and to manage and contain one's emotions.

And what of adolescence as a time of self-reflection? We communicate with instant messages, "check-in" cell calls and emoticons. All of these are meant to quickly communicate a state. They are not intended to open a dialogue about complexity of feeling. (Technological determinism has its place here: Cell calls get poor reception, are easily dropped and are optimized for texting.) The culture that grows up around the cell phone is a communications culture, but it is not necessarily a culture of self-reflection--which depends on having an emotion, experiencing it, sometimes electing to share it with another person, thinking about it differently over time. When interchanges are reduced to the shorthand of emoticon emotions, questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" are reformatted for the small screen and flattened out in the process.

Virtuality and its discontents

The virtual life of Facebook or MySpace is titillating, but our fragile planet needs our action in the real. We have to worry that we may be connecting globally but relating parochially.

We have become virtuosos of self-presentation, accustomed to living our lives in public. The idea that "we're all being observed all the time anyway, so who needs privacy?" has become a commonplace. Put another way, people say, "As long as I'm not doing anything wrong, who cares who's watching me?" This state of mind leaves us vulnerable to political abuse. Last June I attended the Webby Awards, an event to recognize the best and most influential Web sites. Thomas Friedman won for his argument that the Web had created a "flat" world of economic and political opportunity, a world in which a high school junior in Brooklyn competes with a peer in Bangalore. MySpace won a special commendation as the year's most pathbreaking site.

The awards took place just as the government wiretapping scandal was dominating the press. When the question of illegal eavesdropping came up, a common reaction among the gathered Weberati was to turn the issue into a nonissue. We heard, "All information is good information" and "Information wants to be free" and "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." At a pre-awards cocktail party one Web luminary spoke animatedly about Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon, an architectural structure of spokes of a wheel built out from a hub, used as a metaphor for how the modern state disciplines its citizens. When the panopticon serves as a model for a prison, a guard stands at its center. Since each prisoner (citizen) knows that the guard might be looking at him or her at any moment, the question of whether the guard is actually looking--or if there is a guard at all--ceases to matter. The structure itself has created its disciplined citizen. By analogy, said my conversation partner at the cocktail hour, on the Internet someone might always be watching; it doesn't matter if from time to time someone is. Foucault's discussion of the panopticon had been a critical take on disciplinary society. Here it had become a justification for the U.S. government to spy on its citizens. All around me there were nods of assent.

High school and college students give up their privacy on MySpace about everything from musical preferences to sexual hang-ups. They are not likely to be troubled by an anonymous government agency knowing whom they call or what Web sites they frequent. People become gratified by a certain public exposure; it is more validation than violation.

Split attention

Contemporary professional life is rich in examples of people ignoring those they are meeting with to give priority to online others whom they consider a more relevant audience. Students do e-mail during classes; faculty members do e-mail during meetings; parents do e-mail while talking with their children; people do e-mail as they walk down the street, drive cars or have dinner with their families. Indeed, people talk on the phone, hold a face-to-face meeting and do their e-mail at the same time. Once done surreptitiously, the habit of self-splitting in different worlds is becoming normalized. Your dinner partner looks down with a quick glance and you know he is checking his BlackBerry.

"Being put on pause" is how one of my students describes the feeling of walking down the street with a friend who

has just taken a call on his cell. "I mean I can't go anywhere; I can't just pull out some work. I've just been stopped in midsentence and am expected to remember, to hold the thread of the conversation until he wants to pick it up again."

Traditional telephones tied us to friends, family, colleagues from school and work and, most recently, to commercial, political and philanthropic solicitations. Things are no longer so simple. These days our devices link us to humans and to objects that represent them: answering machines, Web sites and personal pages on social networking sites. Sometimes we engage with avatars who anonymously stand in for others, enabling us to express ourselves in intimate ways to strangers, in part because we and they are able to veil who we really are. Sometimes we engage with synthetic voice-recognition protocols that simulate real people as they try to assist us with technical and administrative issues. We order food, clothes and airline tickets this way. On the Internet we interact with bots, anthropomorphic programs that converse with us about a variety of matters, from routine to romantic. In online games we are partnered with "nonplayer characters," artificial intelligences that are not linked to human players. The games require that we put our trust in these characters that can save our fictional lives in the game. It is a small jump from trusting nonplayer characters--computer programs, that is--to putting one's trust in a robotic companion.

When my daughter, Rebecca, was 14, we went to the Darwin exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, which documents his life and thought and somewhat defensively presents the theory of evolution as the central truth that underpins contemporary biology. At the entrance are two Galápagos tortoises. One is hidden from view; the other rests in its cage, utterly still. "They could have used a robot," Rebecca remarks, thinking it a shame to bring the turtle all this way when it's just going to sit there. She is concerned for the imprisoned turtle and unmoved by its authenticity. It is Thanksgiving weekend. The line is long, the crowd frozen in place and my question, "Do you care that the turtle is alive?" is a welcome diversion. Most of the votes for the robots echo Rebecca's sentiment that, in this setting, aliveness doesn't seem worth the trouble. A 12-year-old girl is adamant: "For what the turtles do, you didn't have to have the live ones." Her father looks at her, uncomprehending: "But the point is that they are real."

When Animal Kingdom opened in Orlando, populated by breathing animals, its first visitors complained they were not as "realistic" as the animatronic creatures in other parts of Disney World. The robotic crocodiles slapped their tails and rolled their eyes; the biological ones, like the Galápagos tortoises, pretty much kept to themselves.

I ask another question of the museumgoers: "If you put in a robot instead of the live turtle, do you think people should be told that the turtle is not alive?" Not really, say several of the children. Data on "aliveness" can be shared on a "need to know" basis, for a purpose. But what are the purposes of living things?

Twenty-five years ago the Japanese realized that demography was working against them and there would never be enough young people to take care of their aging population. Instead of having foreigners take care of their elderly, they decided to build robots and put them in nursing homes. Doctors and nurses like them; so do family members of the elderly, because it is easier to leave your mom playing with a robot than to leave her staring at a wall or a TV. Very often the elderly like them, I think, mostly because they sense there are no other options. Said one woman about Aibo, Sony's household-entertainment robot, "It is better than a real dog. ... It won't do dangerous things, and it won't betray you. ... Also, it won't die suddenly and make you feel very sad."

Might such robotic arrangements even benefit the elderly and their children in the short run in a feel-good sense but be bad for us in our lives as moral beings? The answer does not depend on what computers can do today or what they are likely to be able to do in the future. It hangs on the question of what we will be like, what kind of people we are becoming as we develop very intimate relationships with our machines.

Sherry Turkle is professor of the social studies of science and technology at mit and the author of the upcoming Evocative Objects: Things We Think With.

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