

Stella



All hail Hailee Steinfeld

A teenage film star
made of true grit

Mothering
against the odds
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on how they cope

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Preppy fashion in
quietly confident shades

Only disconnect
Why technology is
driving us apart

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Turkle at home in Boston.
Opposite Turkle's main
concern is teenagers, who
can become emotionally
attached to digital devices



‘When a 16-year-old says some day he wants to learn how to have a conversation – that’s what I’m worried about’

In the early 1980s the acclaimed academic Sherry Turkle was evangelical about the good technology would bring to our lives. Now, 30 years on, all she’s talking about is the bad.
By *Marcia DeSanctis*

Sheathed in a sea-blue blouse and fitted trousers, Prof Sherry Turkle is both ultra-feminine and formidable, even in her stockinged feet. A pair of black lizardskin stilettos is strewn at the foot of the stairs. Another identical pair lies beside the rose toile love-seat in her elegant Boston town house, just across the river from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where she is a professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology. Turkle is the bestselling author of *Alone Together*, a brilliant portrait of how digital connectedness may be isolating us more than uniting us. It represents a sobering conclusion to her groundbreaking trilogy of books. Written over 30 years, they examine the impact of technology on, in her words, “our ways of thinking about ourselves, our relationships and our sense of being human”.

It is a cloudy summer morning and the view from Turkle’s bay window is of slate roofs and emerald-green treetops – more 16th-arrondissement Paris than the heart of Boston, Massachusetts. It’s fitting that she speaks fluent French, perfected over many years studying in France, including a year at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques



while still a Harvard undergraduate.

At 65, the Brooklyn-born professor is youthful, with a generous laugh, a touch of exactitude and a relaxed self-confidence that exudes from her like steam off coffee. She shows her nurturing streak, inquiring about my recent surgery and the photographer’s new baby. But although I’m meant to be asking the questions, there is no mistaking who is in charge. It is an authority earned, perhaps, as one of the world’s most celebrated philosopher-gurus on a subject of ever-increasing importance.

But as she pads around her house, she is having a refreshingly everyday moment. “Where’s my phone?” she muses to no one in particular, as she scans the sofa cushions and the surfaces of her French and Chinese furniture. “Has anybody seen my phone?”

It’s a question that neatly captures the fallible humanity of the people tethered to the technologies crowding modern life. Turkle believes that some of that humanity is being sacrificed to the blessing and curse of digital connectedness. Her feelings about technology were once evangelical, but have been transformed by her own

emotions, adding, "I start to have happy feelings as soon as I start to text."

Paradoxically, this need for constant connection is making our children's – and perhaps our own – relationships suffer. "People cannot tolerate a moment of aloneness," says Turkle. "But kids and adolescents need solitude. They need to be able to gather themselves and feel contentment within themselves instead of always sharing, sharing, sharing."

Turkle describes this new-normal as "I share, therefore I am" – where the reaffirmation offered by sharing provides a fleeting sense of identity. "We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings as we are having them," she has said. "Now our

'As I interview teenagers, what I see as most problematic is they can't stand to be alone, they feel pressure to perform'

impulse is, 'I want to have a feeling – I need to send a text.'" Sharing material online is now routine in adolescents' lives – even when it's extremely intimate. An estimated 40 per cent of people under 18, some as young as 11, have sent or received sexually explicit photos, with the same proportion believing there is "nothing wrong" with sending or receiving a topless photograph. On Snapchat, an app that is often used for so-called "sexting", 150 million photos are sent daily. (The app promises those pictures will self-destruct after 10 seconds but, inevitably, people have found ways to circumvent the function.)

In Turkle's experience, it is the illusion of privacy that makes teenagers unwittingly reckless with their safety and reputation. The internet deceives us into feeling like an intimate place, which can make many teenagers (and some adults) disconnect from good judgment. No one expects their private pictures to be disseminated among strangers. Yet the Internet Watch Foundation says that 88 per cent of sexting images will end up on public sites. "The experience of using the internet is so different from the reality of the internet," Turkle says.

What adults and teenagers alike are sometimes unaware of is that we are being actively encouraged to share information about ourselves. As Turkle explains in *In Real Life*, online media companies have a commercial imperative to get us sharing as much as possible.

The fact that there's a generation hitting adulthood that has never known a world without social media is undoubtedly significant. The other sea change compared with a generation ago is the availability of online pornography. One of the most startling segments of *In Real Life* shows Ryan, a laddish 18-year-old who is a shamelessly enthusiastic consumer of pornography. "I'm highly thankful to whoever made these websites," he laughs. Later, he compares his daily pornography habit to a drug addiction. "It's ruined the whole sense of



Turkle speaking at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1996

love," he says. His voice cracks as he goes on, "It hurts me, because I find now that it's so hard for me to actually feel a connection for a girl." Popular concern about pornography's possible corroding effects is such that David Cameron has led a controversial drive for internet service providers to change access to porn from opt-out to opt-in, so that it will be available only to those who want it.

"I think pornography is a big issue," says Turkle. "But... it is not the thing in the long run that worries me most. As I interview teenagers, what I see as most problematic is that they can't stand to be alone, they feel a pressure to perform. When someone dies, they are afraid to

make a phone call. When a 16-year-old says some day he wants to learn how to have a conversation. To me, in terms of their capacity to be who we need them to be, that's what I'm worried about."

She is also sanguine about the unrealistic expectations with which pornography may burden teenagers. "This is an issue, but it was an issue with *Playboy* magazine, it's an issue when you open up *Vogue* and you can't find a 45-year-old woman who looks as if she ever had a wrinkle," she says. Nor does she think there is a direct link between porn and sexting. "I think [sexting] happens because it feels private, it feels intimate," she says. "Not because they watch porn."

Interestingly, Turkle's most recent interviews with teenagers are revealing that children are overwhelmed by being always "on" – they're tired of sleeping with their phones next to them and

getting texts during class. She has just returned from western Massachusetts, where she interviewed teenagers who had relinquished their mobile devices during a stay at summer camp. What she heard them describe was a sense of relief.

"This is genuinely new. What keeps me optimistic is that I think

this generation is beginning to articulate this pressure as a problem." What's more, they're starting to chide their parents, who are perhaps too enamoured of the miracles their digital toys can perform. One teenager begs her father not to do Google searches mid-conversation. "I just want to talk to you," she tells him.

Turkle's words reverberate as I catch myself automatically checking my iPhone for the 100th time while I settle in for dinner. Neither of my teenagers has brought their mobiles to the table. Chastened, I "power off" and we launch into our meal – and a conversation. ●
"In Real Life" opens on 20 September with a nationwide screening and live satellite Q&A with Jon Snow, Beeban Kidron and special guests at 1pm on 22 September (see inreallifefilm.com). It will air on Sky Atlantic later this year