

## Rejecting the Sirens of the "Friction-Free" World

**SHERRY TURKLE**

*Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. She is the author of five books and three edited collections, including four landmark studies on our relationship with digital culture.*

More than fifty years ago, during the early days of protests against the Vietnam War, the University of California at Berkeley became famous for its free speech movement. From my perch as a senior in a Brooklyn public high school, I understood this: Students demanded the right to speak their mind about the war or civil rights or university policy without fear of reprisal. I grew up thinking of that campus as sacred space.

Now it's spring 2019, and I'm teaching at Berkeley, the recipient of an honorary lectureship for my research on digital culture. I get to speak and take meals with Berkeley students across all schools. The students I meet are well informed. They are aware of Facebook's complicity with Cambridge Analytica in an assault on privacy. They know that online, untrue things are placed before them and made to look like true things. They understand that in our current information regime, every consumer creates a data stream that is resold for profit. These students say that they have

“always” known that Apple, Facebook, and Google try to keep them at their devices the way Las Vegas gaming casinos keep gamblers at slot machines.

Yet I also hear that this is the price of their “luxuries”—the food, books, clothing, films, music, transportation, and communications that their “free” apps summon on demand. *Luxuries*, that’s their word. They are critical, from the start, of their use of the word, but I feel a generational responsibility that they use this apolitical word in this political circumstance.

In the late sixties and early seventies, I belonged to a cohort that talked about political power as “the system.” We argued that when you made the system transparent and showed how it worked, you could begin to have leverage over it. But we did not step up in the same way when we confronted the technological system. On the contrary, we were smitten and avoided necessary conversations about what it could become.

Indeed, my generation shaped a world where when people looked for solutions, one of the first places they looked was to technology. We made our love of the digital technology that came of age with us central to our identity. The creators of that technology used our generational language of liberation: “Think different.” “Do no evil.” “Connection as a universal social good.” My generation liked being identified with this force for the new.

The crown jewels of the digital revolution—from personal computers and sociable robots to the apps on our phones—shared a vision. Digital technology would change the rules: The difficult will be made easy; the rough will become smooth; that which has friction will become friction-free. Digital technology wasn’t just going to make things go more smoothly when you used an app to pay your bills or find your way home. The vision was more ambitious: to minimize and even eliminate social friction, from the face-to-face conversations that are the meat of political organizing

to intimate conversations that almost always bring emotional stress. In due course, as we got used to texting rather than talking and to email rather than conversation, “real time” became everyone’s enemy, because taking life out of real time meant a life with less vulnerability.

But in that move, technology encouraged us to forget what we knew about life. And we made digital worlds where we could forget what life was teaching us.

Life taught that face-to-face political organizing builds strong connections and institutions. The internet made political expression and organizing exponentially more convenient but just as exponentially more toxic. Face-to-face conversations taught that when we stumble and lose our words, it can be painful, but we reveal ourselves most to one another. Screen life allowed us to edit our thoughts and appear closer to our ideal selves than we knew ourselves to be. We preached authenticity but practiced self-curation.

After a professional lifetime studying where digital technology has taken us, I end up with an intergenerational call-to-arms. For educators. Policymakers. Parents. The young. And the very young. *The value of the friction-free has been overrated. Hiding behind a screen protects you from vulnerability, but a life without vulnerability can be no life at all.* It’s time to associate the digital with new values. Instead of smooth and friction-free, the digital can give us greater mastery over the complex, the challenging, and the demanding.

It is time to embrace complexity and challenge in what we fund, in what we write, in what we publish, in what we teach, and in our expectations for relationships.

We can’t be afraid to embrace friction. We have to brush up on all those skills we have not been practicing behind our screens. These are emotional skills but also the capability to participate fully in the debates of the public square.

To fix what is broken now we can't look to smoother apps. We need the rough and tumble of the real. So, for our crisis of intimacy and empathy, we need humans, talking to one another; we are the empathy app. When it comes to politics, that, too, is human work, not the work of supersmart machines.

My generation, the generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, took technology as it presented itself—as an opaque force that determined outcomes. Today's students who look at apps and see luxuries are living out the limitations of our vision. Technology, like politics, can be analyzed, made transparent, and brought under control. All of this came out in those conversations at Berkeley, those conversations that balanced current luxuries and those long ago echoes of a campus that went to war over speech.

These days, a call for free speech has to claim the right not only to say what's on your mind but to own it. More than that, when we listen or read on screens, we need to know the provenance of speech. Did someone, a person, actually say or produce it? Is it the product of a simulation? Something a program thought might influence a person just like you?

It took a generation to dispel the notion that digital technology was “just” a tool and that a communication technology that brought “everyone” together could only be a force for good. Now we must face our inventions with new rigor and skepticism. And embrace what we don't share with machines: the human-specific clarity of the friction-filled life.