Interview with:

Professor Sherry Turkle

Sherry Turkle, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society, is the founder and current director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. She is the author of several books including The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit *and* Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.

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Why is it crucial to understand how technology is affecting humans and their cultures?

We are all attentive to what technology does for us, the instrumental technology. We are, however, less attentive to the subjective technology — what technology does not for us but to us, to our ways of dealing with each other, to our children as they grow up, to our ways of thinking about ourselves. Though this has always been true, recently the pace and depth of technology's effects on identity have increased. The Internet has become a space for new forms of self-exploration and social encounter.

Psychopharmacology, genetic engineering, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and robotics are among the technologies now raising fundamental questions about selfhood, subjectivity, relationships, development, and what it means to be human. An unstated question lies behind much of our current preoccupation with the future of technology. The question is not what will technology be like in the future, but rather, what will we be like, what are we becoming as we forge increasingly intimate relationships with our machines?

In 2001, I founded the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self to focus attention and serve as a center of reflection and research on the many ways contemporary technologies have become

enmeshed in the formation of human identity.
Additionally, I thought it was very important to raise
the level of public discourse on the social and
psychological dimensions of technological change.
Too often, in the case of information technology,
just to take one example, the conversation gets
stuck on an unhelpful level: Are computers good or
bad? Is the Internet addictive (as though "the
Internet" or "the computer" was one thing whose
effects could be generalized.)

**What do you see as the best way to engage
people in new kinds of conversations about
technology and identity?**

At the Initiative, we have found that the best way to
do this is concretely, by getting them to talk about
an object in their lives that might be deemed
"evocative," that had special meaning for them.
Objects carry ideas, memories, ways of thinking
about the world, ways of framing arguments. So, at
the Initiative we have instituted an (Evocative)
Objects Seminar in which a wide variety of people
— people from the worlds of journalism and
industry as well as the academy — present an
object that has caused them to think differently
about such categories as self, other, intention,
desire, emotion, the body. We have had such
speakers as Peter Kramer, the psychiatrist and
author of *Listening to Prozac* speaking about
antidepressants, Mitchel Kapor, the founder of
Lotus presenting *Lindenworld*, a new virtual
environment in which you are encouraged to "live,"
to create a parallel life, and Glorianna Davenport of
the Media Lab, presenting on video objects and
memory. Upcoming seminars range from
presentations on brain imaging and email to the
Moog Synthesizer and rolling pins.

**What encourages people to take on different
identities in their computer-based interactions?**

Several years ago, a classic *New Yorker* cartoon
depicted two dogs talking to each other. One, with
paw on keyboard, says to the other: "On the
Internet, nobody knows you are a dog." What the
Internet offers is the possibility to play with multiple
aspects of self, ways of being, styles of presenting
oneself. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson spoke
about the need in adolescence to experiment with
different personae in a relatively consequence-free
way as necessary to the formation of identity. The
need and the desire for this identity-play does not
end in adolescence. It is hard to find opportunities
for this kind of play in our physically-embodied life.
The Internet is rich in possibility. People can "cycle
through" being motorcycle_man in one chat room,
Armani_boy in another, and Merlin in a third.

In your own (Evocative) Objects presentation at

social encounter."
more...

the Initiative on Technology and Self, you spoke about Ramona, Ray Kurzweil's virtual alter-ego. What makes Ramona evocative?

Ray Kurweil '70 has created a female rock star who is a virtual person. She lives in two embodiments. One version of Ramona has been endowed with an "artificial intelligence," albeit of a limited scope, and serves as the hostess on his website. In another version, Kurzweil is physically linked to the virtual Ramona. She moves when he moves; she speaks when he speaks (his voice is electronically transformed into that of a woman); she sings when he sings. Life as Ramona enables Kurweil an experience of living in a dreamscape. He suggests that such experiences will become culturally commonplace in the near future.