

be exploring carefully if we wish to make sense of our lives today. These writers discover meanings that may surprise you in the many pastimes, entertainments, and guilty pleasures that tempt us every day. When scholars study what we do for fun—enjoying online avatars, movies, and glossy advertising, to name just a few of the pleasures analyzed in these texts—we learn how every cultural artifact, no matter how seemingly insignificant, carries meaning that shapes our lives in often quite significant ways.

In this chapter, you will be invited to consider very different perspectives about the effects of online culture on our identities. Sherry Turkle suggests that there are clear downsides to our “tethered” or “collaborative” selves, particularly on social media. Jane McGonigal offers a different perspective on the problem-solving potential of collective game playing, which might offer inspiration for solving real-life challenges, too. Where would you chime into this complex conversation?

Some of the authors in this chapter focus specifically on television and films, such as Joni Adamson, who reveals the surprising popularity of the film *Avatar* among some indigenous environmental activists. Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden examine unexpected role models for a new kind of masculinity in Pixar films, while bell hooks notes that films and television shows may not be so forward-thinking when it comes to depictions of poverty. Jean Kilbourne also examines the ways media can reinforce damaging stereotypes that limit the ways we see both women and men. What solutions do these writers offer?

The readings in this chapter acknowledge the positive potential of media culture, but they also help us understand that the past is always with us in our concerns for the present and hopes for the future. Whether you see media today as the end of culture as we knew it, the same old stuff, or something entirely new—or perhaps all three—these readings raise provocative questions about the significance of our “just-for-fun” pastimes.



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## SHERRY TURKLE

### Growing Up Tethered

Sherry Turkle is a professor in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), where she also directs the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. In her research and writing, Turkle focuses on people’s subjective experiences with technology, and she has published many books and articles on this rich topic, both for scholarly and popular audiences. She is a frequent media commentator on the intersections of technology, media, psychology, and sociology, on programs that include NPR, *Nightline*, and *The Colbert Report*. Turkle gave

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a TED talk in 2012 titled, “Connected, but Alone?”, which indicates one of her concerns about the effects of screen culture.

This piece comes from Turkle’s 2011 book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, from a chapter titled, “Growing Up Tethered.” What do her book and chapter titles suggest about her perspective on our use of technology? You might pause after reading the first five paragraphs to reflect on the conversations she reports having with teenagers, and her evaluation. Is it fair to call this generation a “tethered” one? What problems does Turkle find in not being able to separate from one’s parents, and from one’s friends?

As you read, weigh Turkle’s description of this new way of being (what she calls the “tethered” or “collaborative self”) against her analysis of this media-moderated behavior as either a “pathology” or as just a new norm—or perhaps both. (See paras. 22 to 26 in particular.) Turkle raises some different theories of the self in paragraphs 29 and 30. Slow down and be sure you understand the ideas she attributes to Erik Erikson, Jay Lifton, and her own theory of the narcissistic self. To what extent do her examples and explanations support this claim?

In her sections titled “The Avatar of Me” and “Presentation Anxiety,” Turkle offers some extended examples of the ways we self-consciously craft our public personas on social media, whether through games like the Sims or in profiles on Facebook. Evaluate your own earliest—and then later—experiences with Facebook or other social media sites that require a kind of crafting of online identity. We suspect you could have some lively discussions with your classmates (or friends and family outside of your class) about the good and bad and stress-producing aspects of this form of media. How would you respond to Turkle’s claims about the benefits versus the deficits of being a “tethered” or “collaborative” self? (And would you respond differently if you were speaking to her *in person* versus via text, tweet, or on another social media platform?)

Roman, eighteen, admits that he texts while driving and he is not going to stop. “I know I should, but it’s not going to happen. If I get a Facebook message or something posted on my wall . . . I have to see it. I have to.” I am speaking with him and ten of his senior classmates at the Cranston School, a private urban coeducational high school in Connecticut. His friends admonish him, but then several admit to the same behavior. Why do they text while driving? Their reasons are not reasons; they simply express a need to connect. “I interrupt a call even if the new call says ‘unknown’ as an identifier—I just have to know who it is. So I’ll cut off a friend for an ‘unknown,’” says Maury. “I need to know who wanted to connect. . . . And if I hear my phone, I have to answer it. I don’t have a choice. I have to know who it is, what they are calling for.” Marilyn adds, “I keep the sound on when I drive. When a text comes in, I have to look. No matter what. Fortunately, my phone shows me the text as a pop up right up front . . . so I don’t have to do too much looking while I’m driving.”



These young people live in a state of waiting for connection. And they are willing to take risks, to put themselves on the line. Several admit that tethered to their phones, they get into accidents when walking. One chipped a front tooth. Another shows a recent bruise on his arm. "I went right into the handle of the refrigerator."

I ask the group a question: "When was the last time you felt that you didn't want to be interrupted?" I expect to hear many stories. There are none. Silence. "I'm waiting to be interrupted right now," one says. For him, what I would term "interruption" is the beginning of a connection.

Today's young people have grown up with robot pets and on the network in a fully tethered life. In their views of robots, they are pioneers, the first generation that does not necessarily take simulation to be second best. As for online life, they see its power—they are, after all risking their lives to check their messages—but they also view it as one might the weather: to be taken for granted, enjoyed, and sometimes endured. They've gotten used to this weather but there are signs of weather fatigue. There are so many performances; it takes energy to keep things up; and it takes time, a lot of time. "Sometimes you don't have time for your friends except if they're online," is a common complaint. And then there are the compulsions of the networked life—the ones that lead to dangerous driving and chipped teeth.

Today's adolescents have no less need than those of previous generations to learn empathic skills, to think about their values and identity, and to manage and express feelings. They need time to discover themselves, time to think. But technology, put in the service of always-on communication and telegraphic speed and brevity, has changed the rules of engagement with all of this. When is downtime, when is stillness? The text-driven world of rapid response does not make self-reflection impossible but does little to cultivate it. When interchanges are reformatted for the small screen and reduced to the emotional shorthand of emoticons, there are necessary simplifications. And what of adolescents' need for secrets, for marking out what is theirs alone?

I wonder about this as I watch cell phones passed around high school cafeterias. Photos and messages are being shared and compared. I cannot help but identify with the people who sent the messages to these wandering phones. Do they all assume that their words and photographs are on public display? Perhaps. Traditionally, the development of intimacy required privacy. Intimacy without privacy reinvents what intimacy means. Separation, too, is being reinvented. Tethered children know they have a parent on tap—a text or a call away.

### Degrees of Separation

Mark Twain mythologized the adolescent's search for identity in the Huck Finn story, the on-the-Mississippi moment, a time of escape from an adult



world. Of course, the time on the river is emblematic not of a moment but of an ongoing process through which children separate from their parents. That rite of passage is now transformed by technology. In the traditional variant, the child internalizes the adults in his or her world before crossing the threshold of independence. In the modern, technologically tethered variant, parents can be brought along in an intermediate space, such as that created by the cell phone, where everyone important is on speed dial. In this sense, the generations sail down the river together, and adolescents don't face the same pressure to develop the independence we have associated with moving forward into young adulthood.

When parents give children cell phones—most of the teenagers I spoke with were given a phone between the ages of nine and thirteen—the gift typically comes with a contract: Children are expected to answer their parents' calls. This arrangement makes it possible for the child to engage in activities—see friends, attend movies, go shopping, spend time at the beach—that would not be permitted without the phone. Yet, the tethered child does not have the experience of being alone with only him- or herself to count on. For example, there used to be a point for an urban child, an important moment, when there was a first time to navigate the city alone. It was a rite of passage that communicated to children that they were on their own and responsible. If they were frightened, they had to experience those feelings. The cell phone buffers this moment.

Parents want their children to answer their phones, but adolescents need to separate. With a group of seniors at Fillmore, a boys' preparatory school in New York City, the topic of parents and cell phones elicits strong emotions. The young men consider, "If it is always possible to be in touch, when does one have the right to be alone?"

Some of the boys are defiant. For one, "It should be my decision about whether I pick up the phone. People can call me, but I don't have to talk to them." For another, "To stay free from parents, I don't take my cell. Then they can't reach me. My mother tells me to take my cell, but I just don't." Some appeal to history to justify ignoring parents' calls. Harlan, a distinguished student and athlete, thinks he has earned the right to greater independence. He talks about older siblings who grew up before cell phones and enjoyed greater freedom: "My mother makes me take my phone, but I never answer it when my parents call, and they get mad at me. I don't feel I should have to. Cell phones are recent. In the last ten years, everyone started getting them. Before, you couldn't just call someone whenever. I don't see why I have to answer when my mom calls me. My older sisters didn't have to do that." Harlan's mother, unmoved by this argument from precedent, checks that he has his phone when he leaves for school in the morning; Harlan does not answer her calls. Things are at an unhappy stalemate.

Several boys refer to the "mistake" of having taught their parents how to text and send instant messages (IMs), which they now equate with



letting the genie out of the bottle. For one, "I made the mistake of teaching my parents how to text-message recently, so now if I don't call them when they ask me to call, I get an urgent text message." For another, "I taught my parents to IM. They didn't know how. It was the stupidest thing I could do. Now my parents IM me all the time. It is really annoying. My parents are upsetting me. I feel trapped and less independent."

Teenagers argue that they should be allowed time when they are not "on call." Parents say that they, too, feel trapped. For if you know your child is carrying a cell phone, it is frightening to call or text and get no response. "I didn't ask for this new worry," says the mother of two high school girls. Another, a mother of three teenagers, "tries not to call them if it's not important." But if she calls and gets no response, she panics:

I've sent a text. Nothing back. And I know they have their phones. Intellectually, I know there is little reason to worry. But there is something about this unanswered text. Sometimes, it made me a bit nutty. One time, I kept sending texts, over and over. I envy my mother. We left for school in the morning. We came home. She worked. She came back, say at six. She didn't worry. I end up imploring my children to answer my every message. Not because I feel I have a right to their instant response. Just out of compassion.

Adolescent autonomy is not just about separation from parents. Adolescents also need to separate from each other. They experience their friendships as both sustaining and constraining. Connectivity brings complications. Online life provides plenty of room for individual experimentation, but it can be hard to escape from new group demands. It is common for friends to expect that their friends will stay available—a technology-enabled social contract demands continual peer presence. And the tethered self becomes accustomed to its support.

Traditional views of adolescent development take autonomy and strong personal boundaries as reliable signs of a successfully maturing self. In this view of development, we work toward an independent self capable of having a feeling, considering it, and deciding whether to share it. Sharing a feeling is a deliberate act, a movement toward intimacy. This description was always a fiction in several ways. For one thing, the "gold standard" of autonomy validated a style that was culturally "male." Women (and indeed, many men) have an emotional style that defines itself not by boundaries but through relationships.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, adolescent conversations are by nature exploratory, and this in healthy ways. Just as some writers learn what they think by looking at what they write, the years of identity formation can be a time of learning what you think by hearing what you say to others. But given these caveats, when we think about maturation, the notion of a bounded self has its virtues, if only as a metaphor. It suggests, sensibly, that before we forge successful life partnerships, it is helpful to have a sense of who we are.<sup>2</sup>

But the gold standard tarnishes if a phone is always in hand. You touch a screen and reach someone presumed ready to respond, someone



who also has a phone in hand. Now, technology makes it easy to express emotions while they are being formed. It supports an emotional style in which feelings are not fully experienced until they are communicated. Put otherwise, there is every opportunity to form a thought by sending out for comments.

## The Collaborative Self

Julia, sixteen, a sophomore at Branscomb, an urban public high school in New Jersey, turns texting into a kind of polling. Julia has an outgoing and warm presence, with smiling, always-alert eyes. When a feeling bubbles up, Julia texts it. Where things go next is guided by what she hears next. Julia says,

If I'm upset, right as I feel upset, I text a couple of my friends . . . just because I know that they'll be there and they can comfort me. If something exciting happens, I know that they'll be there to be excited with me, and stuff like that. So I definitely feel emotions when I'm texting, as I'm texting. . . . Even before I get upset and I know that I have that feeling that I'm gonna start crying, yeah, I'll pull up my friend . . . uh, my phone . . . and say like . . . I'll tell them what I'm feeling, and, like, I need to talk to them, or see them.

"I'll pull up my friend . . . uh, my phone." Julia's language slips tellingly. When Julia thinks about strong feelings, her thoughts go both to her phone and her friends. She mixes together "pulling up" a friend's name on her phone and "pulling out" her phone, but she does not really correct herself so much as imply that the phone is her friend and that friends take on identities through her phone.

After Julia sends out a text, she is uncomfortable until she gets one back: "I am always looking for a text that says, 'Oh, I'm sorry,' or 'Oh, that's great.'" Without this feedback, she says, "It's hard to calm down." Julia describes how painful it is to text about "feelings" and get no response: "I get mad. Even if I e-mail someone, I want the response, like, right away.<sup>3</sup> I want them to be, like, right there answering me. And sometimes I'm like, 'Uh! Why can't you just answer me?' . . . I wait, like, depending on what it is, I wait like an hour if they don't answer me, and I'll text them again. 'Are you mad? Are you there? Is everything okay?'" Her anxiety is palpable. Julia must have a response. She says of those she texts, "You want them there, because you need them." When they are not there, she moves on with her nascent feelings, but she does not move on alone: "I go to another friend and tell them."

Claudia, seventeen, a junior at Cranston, describes a similar progression. "I start to have some happy feelings as soon as I start to text." As with Julia, things move from "I have a feeling, I want to make a call" to "I want to have a feeling, I need to make a call," or in her case, send a text. What is not being cultivated here is the ability to be alone and reflect



on one's emotions in private. On the contrary, teenagers report discomfort when they are without their cell phones.<sup>4</sup> They need to be connected in order to feel like themselves. Put in a more positive way, both Claudia and Julia share feelings as part of discovering them. They cultivate a collaborative self.

Estranged from her father, Julia has lost her close attachments to his relatives and was traumatized by being unable to reach her mother during the day of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers. Her story illustrates how digital connectivity—particularly texting—can be used to manage specific anxieties about loss and separation. But what Julia does—her continual texting, her way of feeling her feelings only as she shares them—is not unusual. The particularities of every individual case express personal history, but Julia's individual "symptom" comes close to being a generational style.<sup>5</sup>

Sociologist David Riesman, writing in the mid-1950s, remarked on the American turn from an inner- to an other-directed sense of self.<sup>6</sup> Without a firm inner sense of purpose, people looked to their neighbors for validation. Today, cell phone in hand, other-directedness is raised to a higher power. At the moment of beginning to have a thought or feeling, we can have it validated, almost prevalidated. Exchanges may be brief, but more is not necessarily desired. The necessity is to have someone be there.

Ricki, fifteen, a freshman at Richelieu, a private high school for girls in New York City, describes that necessity: "I have a lot of people on my contact list. If one friend doesn't 'get it,' I call another." This marks a turn to a hyper-other-directedness. This young woman's contact or buddy list has become something like a list of "spare parts" for her fragile adolescent self. When she uses the expression "get it," I think she means "pick up the phone." I check with her if I have gotten this right. She says, "'Get it,' yeah, 'pick up,' but also 'get it,' 'get me.'" Ricki counts on her friends to finish her thoughts. Technology does not cause but encourages a sensibility in which the validation of a feeling becomes part of establishing it, even part of the feeling itself.

I have said that in the psychoanalytic tradition, one speaks about narcissism not to indicate people who love themselves, but a personality so fragile that it needs constant support.<sup>7</sup> It cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use. So, the narcissistic self gets on with others by dealing only with their made-to-measure representations. These representations (some analytic traditions refer to them as "part objects," others as "self-objects") are all that the fragile self can handle. We can easily imagine the utility of inanimate companions to such a self because a robot or a computational agent can be sculpted to meet one's needs. But a fragile person can also be supported by selected and limited contact with people (say, the people on a cell phone "favorites" list). In a life of texting and messaging, those on that contact list can be made to



appear almost on demand. You can take what you need and move on. And, if not gratified, you can try someone else.

Again, technology, on its own, does not cause this new way of relating to our emotions and other people. But it does make it easy. Over time, a new style of being with each other becomes socially sanctioned. In every era, certain ways of relating come to feel natural. In our time, if we can be continually in touch, needing to be continually in touch does not seem a problem or a pathology but an accommodation to what technology affords. It becomes the norm.

The history of what we think of as psychopathology is dynamic. If in a particular time and place, certain behaviors seem disruptive, they are labeled pathological. In the nineteenth century, for example, sexual repression was considered a good and moral thing, but when women lost sensation or the ability to speak, these troubling symptoms were considered a disease, hysteria. With more outlets for women's sexuality, hysterical symptoms declined, and others took their place. So, the much-prescribed tranquilizers of the 1950s spoke to women's new anxieties when marginalized in the home after a fuller civic participation during World War II.

Now, we have symptoms born of fears of isolation and abandonment. In my study of growing up in the networked culture, I meet many children and teenagers who feel cast off. Some have parents with good intentions who simply work several jobs and have little time for their children. Some have endured divorce—sometimes multiple divorces—and float from one parent to another, not confident of their true home. Those lucky children who have intact families with stable incomes can experience other forms of abandonment. Busy parents are preoccupied, often by what is on their cell phones. When children come home, it is often to a house that is empty until a parent returns from work.

For young people in all of these circumstances, computers and mobile devices offer communities when families are absent. In this context, it is not surprising to find troubling patterns of connection and disconnection: teenagers who will only "speak" online, who rigorously avoid face-to-face encounters, who are in text contact with their parents fifteen or twenty times a day, who deem even a telephone call "too much" exposure and say that they will "text, not talk." But are we to think of these as pathologies? For as social mores change, what once seemed "ill" can come to seem normal. Twenty years ago, as a practicing clinical psychologist, if I had met a college junior who called her mother fifteen times a day, checking in about what shoes to buy and what dress to wear, extolling a new kind of decaffeinated tea, and complaining about the difficulty of a physics problem set, I would have thought her behavior problematic. I would have encouraged her to explore difficulties with separation. I would have assumed that these had to be addressed for her to proceed to successful adulthood. But these days, a college student who texts home fifteen times a day is not unusual.



High school and college students are always texting—while waiting<sup>27</sup> in line at the cafeteria, while eating, while waiting for the campus shuttle. Not surprisingly, many of these texts are to parents. What once we might have seen as a problem becomes how we do things. But a behavior that has become typical may still express the problems that once caused us to see it as pathological. Even a typical behavior may not be in an adolescent's developmental interest.

Consider Leo, a college sophomore far from home, who feels crippling<sup>28</sup> loneliness. He tells me that he “handles” this problem by texting and calling his mother up to twenty times a day. He remarks that this behavior does not make him stand out; everyone he knows is on a phone all day. But even if invisible, he considers his behavior a symptom all the same.

These days, our relationship to the idea of psychological autonomy<sup>29</sup> is evolving. I have said that central to Erik Erikson's thinking about adolescents is the idea that they need a moratorium, a “time out,” a relatively consequence-free space for experimentation. But in Erikson's thinking, the self, once mature, is relatively stable. Though embedded in relationships, in the end it is bounded and autonomous.<sup>8</sup> One of Erikson's students, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, has an alternative vision of the mature self. He calls it *protean* and emphasizes its multiple aspects.<sup>9</sup> Thinking of the self as protean accents connection and reinvention. This self, as Lifton puts it, “fluid and many-sided,” can embrace and modify ideas and ideologies. It flourishes when provided with things diverse, disconnected, and global.

Publicly, Erikson expressed approval for Lifton's work, but after<sup>30</sup> Erikson's death in 1994, Lifton asked the Erikson family if he might have the books he had personally inscribed and presented to his teacher. The family agreed; the books were returned. In his personal copy of Lifton's *The Protean Self*, Erikson had written extensive marginal notes. When he came to the phrase “protean man,” Erikson had scrawled “protean boy?”<sup>10</sup> Erikson could not accept that successful maturation would not result in something solid. By Erikson's standards, the selves formed in the cacophony of online spaces are not protean but juvenile. Now I suggest that the culture in which they develop tempts them into narcissistic ways of relating to the world.

### The Avatar of Me

Erikson said that identity play is the work of adolescence. And these days<sup>31</sup> adolescents use the rich materials of online life to do that work. For example, in a game such as *The Sims Online* (think of this as a very junior version of *Second Life*), you can create an avatar that expresses aspects of yourself, build a house, and furnish it to your taste. Thus provisioned, you can set about reworking in the virtual aspects of life that may not have gone so well in the real.



Trish, a timid and anxious thirteen-year-old, has been harshly beaten by her alcoholic father. She creates an abusive family on The Sims Online, but in the game her character, also thirteen, is physically and emotionally strong. In simulation, she plays and replays the experience of fighting off her aggressor. A sexually experienced girl of sixteen, Katherine, creates an online innocent. "I want to have a rest," she says. Beyond rest, Katherine tells me she can get "practice at being a different kind of person. That's what Sims is for me. Practice."

Katherine "practices" on the game at breakfast, during school recess, and after dinner. She says she feels comforted by her virtual life. I ask her if her activities in the game have led her to do anything differently in her life away from it. She replies, "Not really," but then goes on to describe how her life is in fact beginning to change: "I'm thinking about breaking up with my boyfriend. I don't want to have sex anymore, but I would like to have a boyfriend. My character on Sims has boyfriends but doesn't have sex. They [the boyfriends of her Sims avatar] help her with her job. I think to start fresh I would have to break up with my boyfriend." Katherine does not completely identify with her online character and refers to her avatar in the third person. Yet, The Sims Online is a place where she can see her life anew.

This kind of identity work can take place wherever you create an avatar. And it can take place on social-networking sites as well, where one's profile becomes an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be. Teenagers make it clear that games, worlds, and social networking (on the surface, rather different) have much in common. They all ask you to compose and project an identity. Audrey, sixteen, a junior at Roosevelt, a suburban public high school near New York City, is explicit about the connection between avatars and profiles. She calls her Facebook profile "my Internet twin" and "the avatar of me."

Mona, a freshman at Roosevelt, has recently joined Facebook. Her parents made her wait until her fourteenth birthday, and I meet her shortly after this long-awaited day. Mona tells me that as soon as she got on the site, "Immediately, I felt power." I ask her what she means. She says, "The first thing I thought was, 'I am going to broadcast the real me.'" But when Mona sat down to write her profile, things were not so straightforward. Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The "real me" turns out to be elusive. Mona wrote and rewrote her profile. She put it away for two days and tweaked it again. Which pictures to add? Which facts to include? How much of her personal life to reveal? Should she give any sign that things at home were troubled? Or was this a place to look good?

Mona worries that she does not have enough of a social life to make herself sound interesting: "What kind of personal life should I say I have?" Similar questions plague other young women in her class. They are starting to have boyfriends. Should they list themselves as single if they are just starting to date someone new? What if they consider themselves in a



relationship, but their boyfriends do not? Mona tells me that “it’s common sense” to check with a boy before listing yourself as connected to him, but “that could be a very awkward conversation.” So there are misunderstandings and recriminations. Facebook at fourteen can be a tearful place. For many, it remains tearful well through college and graduate school. Much that might seem straightforward is fraught. For example, when asked by Facebook to confirm someone as a friend or ignore the request, Helen, a Roosevelt senior, says, “I always feel a bit of panic. . . . Who should I friend? . . . I really want to only have my cool friends listed, but I’m nice to a lot of other kids at school. So I include the more unpopular ones, but then I’m unhappy.” It is not how she wants to be seen.

In the Victorian era, one controlled whom one saw and to whom one was connected through the ritual of calling cards. Visitors came to call and, not necessarily expecting to be received, left a card. A card left at your home in return meant that the relationship might grow. In its own way, friending on Facebook is reminiscent of this tradition. On Facebook, you send a request to be a friend. The recipient of the request has the option to ignore or friend you. As was the case in the Victorian era, there is an intent to screen. But the Victorians followed socially accepted rules. For example, it was understood that one was most open to people of similar social standing. Facebook is more democratic—which leaves members to make up their own rules, not necessarily understood by those who contact them. Some people make a request to be a Facebook friend in the spirit of “I’m a fan” and are accepted on that basis. Other people friend only people they know. Others friend any friend of a friend, using Facebook as a tool to expand their acquaintanceships. All of this can be exciting or stressful—often both at the same time, because friending has consequences. It means that someone can see what you say about yourself on your profile, the pictures you post, and your friends’ postings on your “wall,” the shared communication space for you and your friends. Friending someone gives that person implicit permission to try to friend your friends. In fact, the system constantly proposes that they do so.

Early in this project, I was at a conference dinner, sitting next to an author whose publisher insisted that she use Facebook as a way to promote her new book. The idea was to use the site to tell people where she would be speaking and to share the themes of her book with an ever-expanding potential readership. Her publisher hoped this strategy would make her book “go viral.” She had expected the Facebook project to feel like business, but instead she described complicated anxieties about not having enough friends, and about envy of her husband, also a writer, who had more friends than she. It also felt wrong to use the word “friends” for all of those she had “friended,” since so many of the friended were there for professional reasons alone. She left me with this thought: “This thing took me right back to high school.”

I promised her that when I joined Facebook I would record my first feelings, while the site was still new to me. My very first feelings now seem



banal: I had to decide between “friending” plan A (this will be a place for people I actually know) and plan B (I will include people who contact me because they say they appreciate my work). I tried several weeks on plan A and then switched to the more inclusive plan B, flattered by the attention of strangers, justifying my decision in professional terms.

But now that I had invited strangers into my life, would I invite myself into the lives of strangers? I would have anticipated not, until I did that very thing. I saw that one of my favorite authors was a Facebook friend of a friend. Seized by the idea that I might be this writer’s friend, I made my request, and he accepted me. The image of a cafeteria came to mind, and I had a seat at his virtual table. But I felt like a gatecrasher. I decided realistically that I was taking this way too seriously. Facebook is a world in which fans are “friends.” But of course, they are not friends. They have been “friended.” That makes all the difference in the world, and I couldn’t get high school out of my mind. <sup>40</sup>

### Presentation Anxiety

What are the truth claims in a Facebook profile? How much can you lie? And what is at stake if you do? Nancy, an eighteen-year-old senior at Roosevelt, answers this question. “On the one hand, low stakes, because no one is really checking.” Then, with a grimace, she says, “No, high stakes. Everyone is checking.” A few minutes later, Nancy comes back to the question: “Only my best friends will know if I lie a little bit, and they will totally understand.” Then she laughs. “All of this, it is, I guess, a bit of stress.”<sup>11</sup> <sup>41</sup>

At Cranston, a group of seniors describe that stress. One says, “Thirteen to eighteen are the years of profile writing.” The years of identity construction are recast in terms of profile production. These private school students had to write one profile for their applications to middle school, another to get into high school, and then another for Facebook. Now they are beginning to construct personae for college applications. And here, says Tom, “You have to have a slightly different persona for the different colleges to which you are applying: one for Dartmouth, a different one, say, for Wesleyan.” For this aficionado of profile writing, every application needs a different approach. “By the time you get to the questions for the college application, you are a professional profile writer,” he says. His classmate Stan describes his online profiles in great detail. Each serves a different purpose, but they must overlap, or questions of authenticity will arise. Creating the illusion of authenticity demands virtuosity. Presenting a self in these circumstances, with multiple media and multiple goals, is not easy work. The trick, says Stan, is in “weaving profiles together . . . so that people can see you are not too crazy. . . . What I learned in high school was profiles, profiles, profiles, how to make a me.” <sup>42</sup>

Early in my study, a college senior warned me not to be fooled by “any one you interview who tells you that his Facebook page is ‘the real me.’ It’s like being in a play. You make a character.” Eric, a college-bound senior <sup>43</sup>



at Hadley, a boys' preparatory school in rural New Jersey, describes himself as savvy about how you can "mold a Facebook page." Yet, even he is shocked when he finds evidence of girls using "shrinking" software to appear thinner on their profile photographs. "You can't see that they do it when you look at the little version of the picture, but when you look at a big picture, you can see how the background is distorted." By eighteen, he has become an identity detective. The Facebook profile is a particular source of stress because it is so important to high school social life. Some students feel so in its thrall that they drop out of Facebook, if only for a while, to collect themselves.

Brad, eighteen, a senior at Hadley, is about to take a gap year to do community service before attending a small liberal arts college in the Midwest.<sup>44</sup> His parents are architects; his passion is biology and swimming. Brad wants to be part of the social scene at Hadley, but he doesn't like texting or instant messaging. He is careful to make sure I know he is "no Luddite." He has plenty of good things to say about the Net. He is sure that it makes it easier for insecure people to function. Sometimes the ability to compose his thoughts online "can be reassuring," he says, because there is a chance to "think through, calculate, edit, and make sure you're as clear and concise as possible." But as our conversation continues, Brad switches gears. Even as some are able to better function because they feel in control, online communication also offers an opportunity to ignore other people's feelings. You can avoid eye contact. You can elect not to hear how "hurt or angry they sound in their voice." He says, "Online, people miss your body language, tone of voice. You are not really you." And worst of all, online life has led him to mistrust his friends. He has had his instant messages "recorded" without his knowledge and forwarded on "in a cut-and-paste world."

In fact, when I meet Brad in the spring of his senior year, he tells me<sup>45</sup> he has "dropped out" of online life. "I'm off the Net," he says, "at least for the summer, maybe for my year off until I go to college." He explains that it is hard to drop out because all his friends are on Facebook. A few weeks before our conversation, he had made a step toward rejoining but immediately he felt that he was not doing enough to satisfy its demands. He says that within a day he felt "rude" and couldn't keep up. He felt guilty because he didn't have the time to answer all the people who wrote to him. He says that he couldn't find a way to be "a little bit" on Facebook—it does not easily tolerate a partial buy-in. Just doing the minimum was "pure exhaustion."

In the world of Facebook, Brad says, "your minute movie preferences<sup>46</sup> matter. And what groups you join. Are they the right ones?" Everything is a token, a marker for who you are:

When you have to represent yourself on Facebook to convey to anyone who doesn't know you what and who you are, it leads to a kind of obsession about minute details about yourself. Like, "Oh, if I like the band State Radio and the band Spoon, what does it mean if I put State Radio first or Spoon



first on my list of favorite musical artists? What will people think about me?" I know for girls, trying to figure out, "Oh, is this picture too revealing to put? Is it prudish if I don't put it?" You have to think carefully for good reason, given how much people will look at your profile and obsess over it. You have to know that everything you put up will be perused very carefully. And that makes it necessary for you to obsess over what you do put up and how you portray yourself. . . . And when you have to think that much about what you come across as, that's just another way that . . . you're thinking of yourself in a bad way.

For Brad, "thinking of yourself in a bad way" means thinking of your-<sup>47</sup> self in reduced terms, in "short smoke signals" that are easy to read. To me, the smoke signals suggest a kind of reduction and betrayal. Social media ask us to represent ourselves in simplified ways. And then, faced with an audience, we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications. On Facebook, Brad represents himself as cool and in the know—both qualities are certainly part of who he is. But he hesitates to show people online other parts of himself (like how much he likes Harry Potter). He spends more and more time perfecting his online Mr. Cool. And he feels pressure to perform him all the time because that is who he is on Facebook.

At first Brad thought that both his Facebook profile and his college<sup>48</sup> essays had gotten him into this "bad way" of thinking, in which he reduces himself to fit a stereotype. Writing his Facebook profile felt to him like assembling cultural references to shape how others would see him. The college essay demanded a victory narrative and seemed equally unhelpful: He had to brag, and he wasn't happy. But Brad had a change of heart about the value of writing his college essays. "In the end I learned a lot about how I write and think—what I know how to think about and some things, you know, I really can't think about them well at all." I ask him if Facebook might offer these kinds of opportunities. He is adamant that it does not: "You get reduced to a list of favorite things. 'List your favorite music'—that gives you no liberty at all about how to say it." Brad says that "in a conversation, it might be interesting that on a trip to Europe with my parents, I got interested in the political mural art in Belfast. But on a Facebook page, this is too much information. It would be the kiss of death. Too much, too soon, too weird. And yet . . . it is part of who I am, isn't it? . . . You are asked to make a lot of lists. You have to worry that you put down the 'right' band or that you *don't* put down some Polish novel that nobody's read." And in the end, for Brad, it is too easy to lose track of what is important:

What does it matter to anyone that I prefer the band Spoon over State Radio? Or State Radio over Cake? But things like Facebook . . . make you think that it really does matter. . . . I look at someone's profile and I say, "Oh, they like these bands." I'm like, "Oh, they're a poser," or "they're really deep, and they're into good music." We all do that, I think. And then I think it doesn't matter, but . . .



the thing is, in the world of Facebook it *does* matter. Those minute details *do* matter.

Brad, like many of his peers, worries that if he is modest and doesn't put down all of his interests and accomplishments, he will be passed over. But he also fears that to talk about his strengths will be unseemly. None of these conflicts about self presentation are new to adolescence or to Facebook. What is new is living them out in public, sharing every mistake and false step. Brad, attractive and accomplished, sums it up with the same word Nancy uses: "Stress. That's what it comes down to for me. It's just worry and stressing out about it." Now Brad only wants to see friends in person or talk to them on the telephone. "I can just act how I want to act, and it's a much freer way." But who will answer the phone?

#### NOTES

1. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1952; New York: W. W. Norton, 1980) and *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).
3. In Julia's world, e-mail is considered "slow" and rarely used because texting has greater immediacy.
4. It is so common to see teenagers (and others) attending to their mobiles rather than what is around them, that it was possible for a fake news story to gain traction in Britain. Taken up by the media, the story went out that there was a trial program to pad lampposts in major cities. Although it was a hoax, I fell for it when it was presented online as news. In fact, in the year prior to the hoax, one in five Britons did walk into a lamppost or other obstruction while attending to a mobile device. This is not surprising because research reported that "62 per cent of Britons concentrate so hard on their mobile phone when texting they lose peripheral vision." See Charlie Sorrel, "Padded Lampposts Cause Fuss in London," *Wired*, March 10, 2008, [www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2008/03/padded-lampposts](http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2008/03/padded-lampposts) (accessed October 5, 2009).
5. New communications technology makes it easier to serve up people as slivers of self, providing a sense that to get what you need from others you have multiple and inexhaustible options. On the psychology that needs these "slivers," see Paul H. Ornstein, ed., *The Search for Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut (1950–1978)*, vol. 2 (New York: International Universities Press, 1978).
6. David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
7. Ornstein, *The Search for Self*. For an earlier work, of a very different time, that linked cultural change and narcissistic personality style, see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979). Lasch said that "pathology represents a heightened version of normality." This formulation is helpful in thinking about the "normal" self in a tethered society and those who suffer more acutely from its discontents. From a psychodynamic perspective, we all suffer from the same things, some of us more acutely than others.
8. See Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle and Childhood and Society, Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1958).



9. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self. Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
10. Lifton shared this story at a meeting of the Wellfleet Seminar in October 2009, an annual gathering that began as a forum for Erikson and his students as they turned their attention to psychohistory.
11. The performances of everyday life—playing the roles of father, mother, child, wife, husband, life partner, worker—also provide “a bit of stress.” There is room for considerable debate about how much online life really shares with our performances of self in “real life.” Some look to the sociology of “self-presentation” to argue that online and off, we are always onstage. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1959).



### Reading as a Writer: Analyzing Rhetorical Choices

1. In her opening two sections, Turkle demonstrates that comparison between the past and present is part of her argumentative strategy. As you read through her examples, consider the extent to which she is analyzing or judging (or both) these new strategies and habits of using technology. You might begin, for example, with her claims in paragraph 5: “Intimacy without privacy reinvents what intimacy means. Separation, too, is being reinvented.” Try marking places in her opening two sections where she offers examples, and places where she evaluates or makes claims about the examples. Where do they overlap?
2. Turkle opens with an example from an interview with an 18-year-old, and she uses interviews with teenagers and parents throughout her piece to help make her point. Discuss the effectiveness of this as a way of offering evidence. What are the strengths and limitations of these kinds of examples?

### Writing as a Reader: Entering the Conversation of Ideas

1. Turkle’s term “the tethered self” contrasts with Jane McGonigal’s optimism about the power of collective play. Compose an essay in which you apply these authors’ ideas to a specific video game, considering the interstrategies and goals of the game, and the significance you see in the intersection of technology, emotion, and social values. What conclusions can you draw?
2. How do Turkle’s concerns and insights about technology intersect with Constance Steinkuehler and Sean Duncan’s interest in technology and education (Chapter 12)? Write an essay that takes into consideration the multiple perspectives on technology in these readings in order to build your own argument about the extent to which technology improves our lives. Anchor your claims with specific examples, both from these readings and your own experiences.