



The Inner History of Devices

Sherry Turkle (Editor)

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For more than two decades, in such landmark studies as *The Second Self* and *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle has challenged our collective imagination with her insights about how technology enters our private worlds. In *The Inner History of Devices*, she describes her process, an approach that reveals how what we make is woven into our ways of seeing ourselves. She brings together three traditions of listening--that of the memoirist, the clinician, and the ethnographer. Each informs the others to compose an inner history of devices.

We read about objects ranging from cell phones and video poker to prosthetic eyes, from Web sites and television to dialysis machines. In an introductory essay, Turkle makes the case for an "intimate ethnography" that challenges conventional wisdom. One personal computer owner tells Turkle: "This computer means everything to me. It's where I put my hope." Turkle explains that she began that conversation thinking she would learn how people put computers to work. By its end, her question has changed: "What was there about personal computers that offered such deep connection? What did a computer have that offered hope?"

The Inner History of Devices teaches us to listen for the answer. In the memoirs, ethnographies, and clinical cases collected in this volume, we read about an American student who comes to terms with her conflicting identities as she contemplates a cell phone she used in Japan ("Tokyo sat trapped inside it"); a troubled patient who uses email both to criticize her therapist and to be reassured by her; a compulsive gambler who does not want to win steadily at video poker because a pattern of losing and winning keeps her more connected to the body of the machine. In these writings, we hear untold stories. We learn that received wisdom never goes far enough.

The Inner History of Devices Details

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Jesse says

So, this book has been on my shelves for a while (years), without being read. I think that's because it's very outside of what I normally read, so I've always found other things more interesting at the moment. Also, I don't tend to read a lot of non-fiction for pleasure, because I do a lot of non-fiction reading at work. The only reason I have this book was that it was a gift.

With all that said, it was interesting. It is a collection of essays or short articles by different authors, all related to the theme of how we (people, but particularly Americans) interact and form relationships with our technological devices. Of them all, I particularly enjoyed the memoirs, while the ethnographies and case studies were intellectually interesting at times, but not compelling.

I don't think I'm going to reread it, but I don't regret having read it.

Amber Case says

For more than two decades, in such landmark studies as *The Second Self* and *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle has challenged our collective imagination with her insights about how technology enters our private worlds. In *The Inner History of Devices*, she describes her process, an approach that reveals how what we make is woven into our ways of seeing ourselves. She brings together three traditions of listening -- that of the memoirist, the clinician, and the ethnographer. Each informs the others to compose an inner history of devices. We read about objects ranging from cell phones and video poker to prosthetic eyes, from Web sites and television to dialysis machines.

In an introductory essay, Turkle makes the case for an "intimate ethnography" that challenges conventional wisdom. One personal computer owner tells Turkle: "This computer means everything to me. It's where I put my hope." Turkle explains that she began that conversation thinking she would learn how people put computers to work. By its end, her question has changed: "What was there about personal computers that offered such deep connection? What did a computer have that offered hope?" *The Inner History of Devices* teaches us to listen for the answer.

In the memoirs, ethnographies, and clinical cases collected in this volume, we read about an American student who comes to terms with her conflicting identities as she contemplates a cell phone she used in Japan ("Tokyo sat trapped inside it"); a troubled patient who uses email both to criticize her therapist and to be reassured by her; a compulsive gambler who does not want to win steadily at video poker because a pattern of losing and winning keeps her more connected to the body of the machine. In these writings, we hear untold stories. We learn that received wisdom never goes far enough.

Margaret Sankey says

Fascinating collection of short ethnographies of technology--a blind scholar angry at the prosthetic maker for criticizing her decision to change the eye color of her new prosthetic eyeballs, elderly Israeli women

watching TV in defiance of their Ultra-Orthodox sons, internal cardiac defibrillator users and their dependence on and resentment of a machine that keeps them alive, but seems to randomly cause them excruciating pain (with a digression on Dick Cheney's increased fatalism after getting one), medical students distressed by the "Visible Woman" computer scan, Turkish teenagers and dialysis machines, an exchange student in Japan and her Hello Kitty phone and middle-aged women hooked on video poker.

Chris Beiser says

It's an anthology, so it's necessarily a mixed bag

Worth reading:

Inner History
The Prosthetic Eye
Cell Phones
Television
The ICD
Video Poker

The Patterning Table, The World Wide Web and Slashdot.org are maybes. Skip the rest.

Gina says

A collection of essays examining people's complex interactions with machines and websites. Turkle does an introduction that explains the methodological approaches of the essayists--memoir, clinical practice, and fieldwork.

Mark says

Found via Margaret's review. She said it is short and a fast read, also, via tweet.

Margaret Heller says

This volume is edited and with an introduction by Sherry Turkle, and each chapter is written by someone else, so the "by" in the bibliographic data should really read "ed.". Anyway.

This work examines people's personal relationships with technology through three formats: memoir, ethnography, and case report. In each case, the point is to understand how the technology either builds or elides a sense of self. Not surprisingly, results show that participative environments help people to build a sense of self, though this is frequently pathological. In other cases, the technology masks people's humanity, usually with deleterious effects; the chapters on addiction and disease are the most striking examples of this. In these cases, a life and death dependence on technology such as in the case of dialysis can quickly lead to despair or feeling like a cyborg. It seems to me that a frequent criticism of Sherry Turkle is that she tends to

see the pathological in people's relationships with technology. My personal view on the matter is that she might be right, though of course I don't change my own behavior to account for it. But even when new social or learning spaces are created as technology advances, we have to recognize their limits. The chapter "Cyberplaces" by Kimberlyn Leary had the example that most resonated with me. Melissa has just discovered that her "knight" in a medieval online RPG is really a 15 year old boy. He insists nothing has changed about their relationship. Melissa feels differently.

Most clinicians would not fault Melissa's comment for showing a lack of imagination but would find it a healthy adaptive response. She has come to an important realization, absent in much of the over-enthusiastic literature on cyberspace: the computer makes multiple selves possible--but only to a point. Melissa can live on the surface, but at a critical moment, the need for depth returns. (pp. 89-90)

I am sure we could all name a similar "critical moment" in our own lives.

Meghan Fidler says

I was overjoyed to encounter a less reactionary piece by Sherry Turkle; it feels that her latest books and articles burn most of their wordcount in long renditions damning new technologies as causes of detriments, ailments, and alienation. The introduction to "The Inner History of Devices" was refreshingly tempered.

With Professor Turkle as editor, the book is heavy in authors practicing psychiatry, a few of which are genuinely thought provoking.

My favorite section by far, however, was the first one called "Through Memoir." These are skilled authors and the four short autobiographical memoirs are shining examples of the entanglement of technology and social life. My favorite was Alicia Kestrell Verlager's piece, "The Prosthetic Eye."
