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news BY EVA SYLWESTER

Robot Companions

Can reliance on technology make us vulnerable?

Technology, such as cell phones and the Internet, has created unprecedented efficiency by keeping people accessible to their friends and colleagues at all times. But this tethering also prepares us for superficiality, which is in turn preparing us to have relationships with robots, said Sherry Turkle, professor of the social studies of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Turkle explained in an Oct. 12 lecture at the UO that the tethering now begins early, when children get cell phones from their parents. The children have the freedom of being able to go places and make plans on the fly, but in return, they're expected to keep their parents updated on their activities, especially if they run into any trouble. The consequence is that children never have the experience of having to solve problems for themselves.

As the mother of a teenager, Turkle sym-

less obvious. When she first heard of robots being used at hospitals to wheel patients from one room to another, she thought it was an example of "non-problematic technology," where a robot performs a purely instrumental

function. Then she broke her pelvis, and as she recuperated at a hospital, she found that interaction with the human attendants who wheeled her around helped keep her sane.

"There are a lot of times we think technology is just instrumental when it really is having a very powerful subjective effect," Turkle said.

Turkle said her goal is "not to put technology down, but to put technology in its place."

"This network is here to stay, but we may be using it in ways that are counter to our best interests," she said.

Turkle noted that many young adults today are indifferent to the protection of their personal information because they are used to distributing personal information freely on



One can have the illusion of companionship without the demands of sustained friendship.

-Sherry Turkle

pathizes with parents' desire to spare their children fear, but as a clinical psychologist, she knows having to figure things out independently is necessary for personal growth. Meanwhile, many adults now measure their daily success by number of phone calls made and e-mails answered.

"We are creating a communications culture with less time to sit and think," Turkle said. "Children growing up this way may never know another way."

Turkle said technology facilitates a narcissistic style of interacting with the world. In psychodynamic theory, the term narcissistic refers to someone whose view of his or her self is so fragile that he or she needs constant validation from others. This often involves attributing one's own thoughts and desires to another person, a narcissistic self-object, which ultimately winds up disappointing because the other person has ideas of his or her own.

To some extent, interacting with other people through online personas allows more objectification than would happen in person. "One can have the illusion of companionship without the demands of sustained friendship," Turkle said. But the ultimate perfect object is a robot. If a robot cannot disappoint, some may consider robot companionship preferable to human companionship and thus miss opportunities to develop skills for relating to other humans.

What are appropriate uses of robot technology? Turkle can tell easily that robot nannies, of which rudimentary versions currently exist, would not be able to give children the emotional feedback they need for healthy social development, but other distinctions are

MySpace and Facebook. She said this mindset leaves society vulnerable to political abuse.

Also, people at business conferences now spend every spare moment emailing or talking on the phone with colleagues from home, whereas in the past idle time was spent developing valuable relationships with new acquaintances, Turkle observed. It might sound simple to just turn off the cell phone, but she said people are now starting to consider their gadgets part of their bodies.

Other people who study technology have noted similar situations. In his 2005 book *Radical Evolution*, reporter Joel Garreau of the *Washington Post* wrote about people who experience withdrawals when separated from their electronic devices, and counselors for people whose computers have crashed. "Your machines have not only changed you, they have become you," Garreau observed. "Not metaphorically, but in a way as real and tangible as that keyboard you clutch."

Turkle was on campus for the UO School of Architecture and Allied Arts' biennial Koehn Colloquium. Assistant professor of art history Kate Mondloch, who taught a seminar in conjunction with the event for graduate students in disciplines ranging from psychology to architecture, said one of the mandates of the Koehn Colloquia is that the research of speakers must not be specific to any one discipline.

"I think the things she's talking about are issues that impact us all," Mondloch said, adding that working with computers and dealing with the subjective effects of technology are now universal experiences in an academic environment.

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