



It's Not Just Talk

Conversation as the Cure for Technologically Induced Polarization

By Shayne Kavanagh



Reclaiming Conversation:
The Power of Talk
in a Digital Age
Sherry Turkle
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Sherry Turkle, a professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), believes that the technologies that have become omnipresent in our lives have had a profound — and negative — effect on the way we relate to one another. In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, she hones in on the degraded quality of our conversations and the simple cure: more face-to-face conversation.

The foundation for Turkle's thesis is a virtuous circle that links conversation to the ability for empathy and self-reflection. Perhaps counterintuitively, this virtuous circle starts with silent self-reflection, which is necessary for coming to grips with our own, authentic thoughts. This provides a solid foundation for listening to others and truly hearing what they have to say. Then, the thoughts of others provide the material for more productive self-reflection, which leads to richer conversation.

Technology breaks this circle by disrupting solitude. Our “always on,” “constantly connected” lifestyles have interfered with our ability to sit in silent contemplation. For example, Turkle cites an experiment where people were asked to sit quietly for 15 minutes, with no phones or books. Before the period of silence began, the subjects were asked if they would consider administering electroshocks to themselves if

they got bored. Although everyone said no, after just six minutes alone, a good number of participants had taken the electroshock option.

Outside of the laboratory, the consequences are far worse than an electric shock. If we can't stand to be alone with our own thoughts, we can't pay attention to ourselves and therefore can't pay attention to and empathize with others, much less engage them in conversation. Without conversation, we lose a valuable source of personal growth. A lack of empathy makes it impossible to discuss and solve difficult problems. This is not just a hypothetical problem; studies have shown a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy, most of it within the past ten years.¹ Studies have shown that people have a reduced sense of solidarity with their communities and an increasing sense of loneliness.²

The good news is that people are resilient and can reverse these effects. For example, Turkle cites a study where a summer camp banned all electronic devices and found a measureable increase in the children's capacity for empathy in just five days.³ However, regaining the benefits of conversation doesn't necessarily require sequestering yourself in the woods for a week. Turkle's book is a call to action, telling us that “reclaiming conversation begins with the acknowledgment that speaking and listening with

attention are skills. They can be taught. They take practice, and that practice can start now.”

Much of *Reclaiming Conversation* explores the negative effect of technology on domains as diverse as family life, friendship, romance, education, and the workplace. We will focus on the implications for democracy, civic engagement, and public management. However, it is important to note at the outset that Turkle is not a Luddite. She recognizes that technology has important benefits, but contends that we must also recognize the ways in which it can be harmful, and monitor our usage accordingly.

SMART PHONES IMPEDE CONVERSATION

Turkle focuses on two of the most ubiquitous technologies: smart phones and social media. Surprisingly, smart phones can negatively affect a conversation even when they are turned off! Just having a phone on a table reminds people that the conversation might be interrupted, which encourages people to keep conversations shallow and on topics of little consequence.⁴ The presence of a phone reduces feelings of connectedness and empathy.

Of course, the situation doesn't improve when phones (or other devices) are turned on. For example, open screens in a classroom, meeting, or similar setting damages the performance of everyone who can see them, not just the owners, largely because they encourage multitasking.⁵ There is a pervasive myth that multitasking improves productivity, but in fact it is just the opposite.⁶ When multitasking, the brain is not actually working on two or more tasks simultaneously. It is actually just

Turkle on the Importance of Solitude

“It's the capacity for solitude that allows you to reach out to others and see them as separate and independent. You don't need them to be anything other than who they are. This means you can listen to them and hear what they have to say. This makes the capacity for solitude essential to the development of empathy. And this is why solitude marks the beginning of conversation's virtuous circle. If you are comfortable with yourself, you can put yourself in someone else's place.”

switching between tasks quickly. Put another way, the mind is being constantly interrupted in order to change topics. It takes time for the mind to ramp up and reach its maximum productive thinking level, but constant switching prevents that from ever happening. What multitasking does, however, is stimulate the regions of the brain that reward novelty, providing a “neurochemical high.” So, while multitasking feels good, the actual results are bad. This applies to the individual multitasking alone in the office, but especially to efforts to multitask while engaged in conversation.

It is not difficult to imagine the negative consequences of these phenomena for one-on-one meetings, conversations, or just about any other personal interaction. In matters of public policy, where the stakes are often high and the issues under consideration are complex, the results could be potentially disastrous.

SOCIAL MEDIA DOESN'T FACILITATE OFFLINE ACTION

In the realm of public policy and public management there has been a great deal of interest in using social media to engage the public in policymaking. Turkle acknowledges that these technologies offer a good starting point for making people aware of opportunities to become engaged, building people's desire to take advantage of those opportunities, and imparting knowledge on how to take advantage of those opportunities. However, technology comes up short, often woefully short, when it comes to transforming that into the tangible action ultimately required.

As an example, Turkle relates the story of an online effort to counteract the atrocities of Joseph Kony, head of a militant group with operations in central Africa. An online group made a video that described Kony's use of child soldiers. Those who watched the video could then buy a sign to be displayed publically on a certain date, an effort to create a groundswell of public opinion that would force an international response. The video generated a great deal of interest, with more than 100 million views, and a poll indicated that 58 percent of people between 18 and 29 years old had heard about it. Then, the day for displaying the sign came and went with precious little action, and the online group dissolved.

Turkle contends that creating awareness of Kony's activities was certainly not a bad thing, and neither was building a desire to see him brought to justice. But this example highlights the fundamental limitation of online engagement: Connections formed with people you don't really know (in this case, fellow online activists) aren't

strong enough to support tangible action. In the case of the Kony video, the connections weren't even strong enough to get people to put a physical sign on their lawn. In a broader context, when people participate in public engagement online, they tend to talk about things they can do online, such as "like" something, sign an online petition, or even make a donation. This neglects or even ignores the hard work of public policy, such as researching the facts underlying the issue, conducting analysis, listening to stakeholders with divergent interests, talking through possibilities for solutions, and reaching a decision. Trust, consensus-building, and strategic thinking underlie many of these activities, and a lot of meaningful conversation is required. Turkle refers to the belief that participation in online and social media forums can supplant the traditional building blocks of public engagement in policymaking as "the illusion of progress without the demands of action."

The Kony video example probably illustrates the most serious problem with online engagement, but it isn't the only one. Another issue, which is probably familiar to anyone who has visited the comments section of a news website, is the incivility of online communication. People engage in aggression and vulgarity that they would probably not countenance in person. This is because social media decreases self-control while simultaneously creating a momentary spike in self-confidence⁷ — a combination that does not lend itself to productive civil discourse. Even among a friendly audience, social media works against meaningful conversation, with people preferring not to make posts that their friends

won't agree with because they want to maximize their "likes." Self-reinforcing intellectual conformity is not an ingredient for healthy civil discourse.

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"BITE-SIZED" ISN'T ALWAYS ENOUGH

The problems created by technology reach further than our interactions with each other. The "bite-sized" information chunks served up by social media limit our ability to understand facts and events. For instance, social media and the Internet have led to a style of leaner who "grazes" on information by moving from one source to another and gleaning few key phrases or images from each, occasionally diving deeper if the situation demands it. This form of learning, however, makes it difficult to understand the larger narrative and context that makes enables a deeper and truer understanding of issues. Turkle is not saying that web surfing or the like is inherently bad. The problem is the idea that bits and pieces of information can be substituted when a sustained narrative (e.g., a full article or a book) is needed—as is often the case in complex matters of public policy. It is not possible to simply "outsource" our memory of facts and figures underlying an issue to the Internet, to be

searched and called up whenever they are needed. These facts and figures are the building blocks of coherent thinking about public policy, so they need to be available at all times.

Finally, we'll cover a phenomenon that many public managers can probably appreciate, which Turkle calls "the catastrophe culture." She refers to the always-on, immediate gratification nature of the Internet and social media, which has conditioned us to expect immediate resolution to our problems. Translating this to public policy problems means that issues are now labeled a "crisis," like the infrastructure "crisis" or the pension "crisis." The reality is that these problems developed slowly, over many years, and are the consequence of many complex underlying forces, and, though these problems certainly need to be dealt with, the short-term consequences of failing to solve them are not great. When they are framed as a "crisis" or "catastrophe," however, the message is that *something* needs to be done immediately. That "something" does not usually include the careful analysis and consensus building needed to develop an effective and lasting solution. It usually means ad hoc reactions that often amount to little more than band-aids.

STEPS TO MITIGATE TECHNOLOGY'S ILL EFFECTS

Turkle makes a thorough and convincing case for reclaiming conversation, but she also offers a number of tangible steps, some big and some small, for what the reader can do to deepen conversations offline. Below are some examples.

Remember the Power of Your Phone. You may recall the negative

impact that even a powered-off phone can have on a conversation. Be cognizant of that power and don't let it cause harm. For example, don't multitask on your phone during conversations, and consider banning devices from meetings.

Think of “Uni-Tasking” as the Next Big Thing. Much research has been done on the leaps in productivity that can be achieved through focused concentration.⁸ Think about ways to design your space and work habits to promote focus and concentration and avoid distraction. For example, one hospital found that it was having serious problems with nurses giving patients the wrong medications. The underlying cause was that, during their rounds, nurses were being distracted by doctors with other requests, which reduced the quality of the nurses' work. The solution was to give nurses a vest to wear when on their rounds to dispense medication that signaled to the doctors that they were prohibited from distracting the nurse. Errors in medication decreased precipitously.

Slow Down. The speed and responsiveness encouraged by the online world discourages serious thinking and analysis in favor of immediate action. Build the time into your planning and decision making for research and analysis. *Government Finance Review* has featured a number of articles covering tools you can use to structure research and analysis.

Create Spaces for Conversation. Build in the time for both conversation and individual contemplation, both of which are indispensable. Because serious conversation and contemplation are skills that many people may have lost, they might need help regaining

them. Formats such as “liberating structures” — formats that are more open-ended than traditional presentations and discussions — provide easy-to-use and accessible techniques for designing meetings and discussions in a way that promote individual contemplation and authentic sharing of views (see liberatingstructures.com).

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Challenge a View of the World as Apps. The marketing catchphrase “There is an app for that” captures the view that if there is a problem, then technology can solve it. But the real world is a lot messier and requires difficult conversations to resolve difficult policy issues. Though technology can help, Turkle advises that we strongly resist the seductive idea that a technology application can allow us to dispense with this difficult work.

Don't Avoid Difficult Conversations. Social media encourages a retreat into a self-imposed bubble where we rarely have to confront views that don't agree with our own. This is obviously unhealthy. Make an effort to have difficult conversations when needed. In fact, some local governments, like King County, Washington, have already begun doing just that by training staff on “crucial conversations.”⁹ Difficult conversations are a skill

that can be mastered with practice, and that practice is as necessary as ever. ■

Notes

1. Sara Konrath, Edward H. O'Brien, and Courtney Hsing, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 15, No. 2 (May 2011).
2. A 2006 study showed that the number of Americans who feel they have no one to discuss important matters with tripled from 1985 to 2004. For a more recent review of research on this topic, consult: Marc J. Dunkelman. *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2014).
3. Measured by ability to identify the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people's faces.
4. Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, “Can You Connect with Me Now? How the Presence of Mobile Communication Technology Influences Face-to-Face Conversation Quality,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2012).
5. Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda, “Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers,” *Computers & Education* 62 (March 2013).
6. Zheng Wang and John M. Tchernev, “The ‘Myth’ of Media Multitasking: Reciprocal Dynamics of Media Multitasking, Personal Needs, and Gratifications,” *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012).
7. Keith Wilcox and Andrew T. Stephen, “Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Self-Esteem, and Self-Control,” *Journal of Consumer Research* (November 27, 2012).
8. One example is *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* by Cal Newport (Hachette Book Group, 2014).
9. Based on *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High* by Kerry Patterson (McGraw-Hill Education, 2002).

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