

Book Reviews

Title: Alone Together: Why We Expect MORE From Technology and LESS From Each Other. By Sherry Turkle (2017) Third Edition. New York: Basic Books
Title: Tools and Weapons: The Promise and the Perils of the Digital Age. By Brad Smith and Carol Browne (2019). New York: Penguin Press

Review by: Daniel B. German

Both books are about the age of computer technology and its effects on humanity. However, they come from different directions. The Alone Together is written by a clinical psychologist focusing on individual and interpersonal observations. Tools and Weapons is authored by the President of Microsoft and discusses the macro world of computer's information and communication gift to mankind, but points to the challenges of dealing with privacy/civil liberties and the dissemination of misinformation/cyber-attacks. The books compliment each other since Alone Together deals with computer/cell phone effects at the micro personal level while Tools and Perils addresses how technology firms and governments must deal with looming problems nationally and internationally.

In Alone Together the author sums up the dramatic change in interpersonal communication by asking her daughter who is going to Dublin, Ireland for a year of college to send her a letter. The daughter seems to think that this is a novel idea for she mainly text messages. She responds: "Maybe if I could find a subject." This is a reference to the compose an email process where it directs you to put a to whom email address, a subject and finally a message. The daughter finally says "So send me a letter." The mother responds by dedicating her book "TO REBECCA." "My letter to you, with love." (Turkle, 2017, p.305 and book dedication) The younger generation gets robots for pets/ friends, texts on mobile phones and uses personal computers for information and communications. In person relationships become awkward and often solitude, i.e., being alone with digital devices is preferred. Seeking solitude can be real problem. Solitude is a state of being alone and in the case of this book to be together with technological entities.

The author noted that her daughter at a young age turned to a robot Tamagotchi for emotional attachment and even love. (Ibid. pp.30-32) The Tamagotchi Uni is a handheld digital pet created in Japan. Computers are considered to be intelligent, but Tamagotchi is emotional to the user. Turkle refers to Zhu Zhu pet hamsters, "...the 'it' toy of the 2009-2010 holiday season, are presented as 'better' than any real pet could be." (Ibid., p.1) The point here is that we are turning to robots instead of actual animals again resorting to machines.

In a recent book Johathon Haidt discusses how an overreliance on digital devices has resulted in the mental illnesses particularly of depression and anxiety among Generation Z (Zoom-

ers). (*The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, 2024. New York: Penguin Random House)

The concern is that whereas children used to play and interact with real children, today many spend their day with digital devices. A recent Surgeon General's release indicates that in our society the loneliness of non-human interaction has contributed to an increase in a number of health problems. These include heart disease, strokes, dementia (elderly), premature death, depression, anxiety, suicidality, infectious disease and reduced immune system. (U.S. Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*)

When it comes to politics Turkle refers to being raised in Brooklyn by her grandparents who moved there from Eastern Europe. The mail was delivered by the U.S. Postal Service and arrived in total privacy. That is, in Eastern Europe the government looked at everything including one's mail. This is democracy American style. She wonders at one point whether we can have a democracy without privacy. Computer reliance translates into the politics of Michel Foucault who cites government by a panopticon (a Greek word "all seeing"). With the use of a smartphone or computer the need for government surveillance becomes unnecessary because anyone can know what you are doing online. "The panopticon serves as a metaphor for how, in the modern state, every citizen becomes his or her own policeman. Force becomes unnecessary because the state becomes its own obedient citizenry." (Turkle, p. 262)

One answer to young peoples over reliance on digital devices is to improve and build ways for them to get 1) exercise and 2) connectedness with actual human beings. Communities need to enhance parks with walkways, playgrounds for children, playing fields for baseball/softball, soccer, and tracks for children beginning at age three. Swimming pools and outdoor adventure facilities for boating, hiking, bicycling, and running need to be upgraded or built anew. Parents need to be fully supportive of and involved in these kinds of physical activities.

The trajectory of mankind seems to portray a history of individuation. Humans banded together into tribes for survival. Then, they began to explore moving away from the tribe relatives followed creating an extended family. With the industrial revolution the nuclear family emerged - parents and children who could survive financially on their own living with state services such as law and order and national defense. With the digital age mankind has an individual financial structure which crosses sexual lines enabling a single person to work and communicate with others via digital devices. We should attempt to maintain civilization by continuing to interact with each other in person, dropping the digital device and getting exercise.

The second book comes at us with a wholly different set of problems emanating from the digital age. *Tools and Weapons: The Promise And The Peril Of The Digital Age* is written by the chief lawyer and President of Microsoft along with Carol Ann Browne. Microsoft is the third most valued company in the world. (CompaniesMarketCap.Com. 2020) It should be noted that the main author, Brad Smith, is hardly likely to denigrate Microsoft. In fact, large technology companies only receive a 26% Great Deal/Quite a lot of confidence in a recent Gallup survey of the American public. (Lydia Saad. 2023) Questions always arise as to whether these companies value profit over public service, individual privacy and if they are simply too large and powerful to regulate. However, Smith and Browne raise some very appropriate questions about government's use of digital technology and citizen privacy in a democracy and the use of disinformation by non-democratic states. As a lawyer with Microsoft, Smith has a bird's eye view of looming problems in the tech world.

With regard to tools Smith and Browne note that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the ability to "... understand human speech, recognize images, translate languages, and reach new conclusions based on an ability to discern patterns." (Smith and Browne, p.224) But this tool, they note, can be used to surveil citizens. Digital cameras are every where and AI can enter a facial image and track people's movements.

They state that a court order issued by a judge should be an absolute necessity to use this tool. To illustrate how government can misuse its power the German Democratic Government's (GDR - also East Germany) Stasi (State Security Service) is used as an example (Ibid., pp39-40) The Stasi "...employed almost ninety thousand operatives backed by a secret network of more than six hundred thousand 'citizen watchdogs' who spied on their coworkers, neighbors and own family." (Ibid., p.40) This reviewer visited East and West German before and after German reunification. In a village just outside the Berliner Ring only the bus driver and the Stasi agent were allowed to have a telephone. People were kept in the dark. Not only were there numerous Stasi agents an estimated 400,000 Soviet Union troops were stationed in East Germany in part to assure order was kept. Furthermore, a wall was built to keep people from going West. Walls are usually built to keep people OUT. The Great Wall of China was built to keep Mongol armies out (it was finally breached). The GDR was designed to keep citizens IN. The East German economy was so stagnant that the government did not want its citizens to see the ultra-modernized West Germany. Innovation was so stifled in the GDR that its mass-produced Trabant two-stroke engine with two cylinders which could run on lead gas and belched black smoke was a joke. The government did not want its people to go to West Germany and see BMW, Mercedes Benz, and Audi powerful, luxury automobiles.

Regarding a second major issue with digital communication, it may be used by rogue states to spread disinformation. Russia is a major player in disseminating disinformation. The authors indicate that: "In 2016, the Russians had weaponized email to harvest and leak stolen communications, publicly embarrassing the leaders of Hilary Clinton's campaign [for President] and the Democratic National Committee with its content." (Ibid. p. 81) The Russians also went after Emmanuel Macron: "In 2017 they [the Russians] took their scheme one step further in France, leaking a combination of genuine and falsified emails attributed to Emmanuel Macron's presidential campaign" (Ibid. p.81). The Russians are still at it. Microsoft has set up a Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC) to track disinformation and communicate the findings with our government, media and citizens. MTAC indicates that Russia is attempting to infuse into the 2024 United States (US) Presidential race a portrait of Volodymyr Zelensky as corrupt. (Microsoft Threat Analysis Center, 2024) The Russians are also trying to undermine Emmanuel Macron's support for the war in the Ukraine by claiming French mercenaries were involved whereas the French Army says this is fake information. (The Economist, April 20th, 2024, p. 43)

The final words of Smith and Browne are: "Technology innovation is not going to slow down. The work to manage it needs to speed up." (Smith and Browne, P.304). Microsoft has set up MTAC. Disinformation via AI is going to be a future risk for the user. A suggestion is not to believe anything you hear or read for the first time. Let the dust settle and get corroboration from authoritative sources.

Both books reveal that technology is the wave of the future, But, at the individual and the nation and international levels challenges loom very large on the horizon. There is no international organization to correct disinformation. The United Nation's International Court of Justice located in the Hague is not adhered to by the US. No international body can dictate laws for superpowers.

References

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