

internet hurts

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Techno-psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle knows the field of cyber-psychology more profoundly than most - being a key psychoanalyst at MIT during the internet's uprise in the 90s and founding/still directing MIT's Initiative on Technology and Self. In her novel *Alone Together*, she raises concerns with the current state of social interaction and how predominant technologies are inhibiting genuine social interactions. As a starting point for defining ideal social interaction, Turkle defines human authenticity as "the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: we are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death."¹ This definition can be cross-logged to the word empathy. I would add to empathy's definition that this relationship, or "putting of oneself in the place of another", comes from a cognitive mechanism of imitation called the "ideomotor framework". "According to this framework, when I see somebody else's actions and their consequences, I activate the representations of my own actions that would produce those consequences."² This framework has only recently become widely accepted in cognitive science as a primal instinct of humans.

How does this process exist in the case of screen communication? In order to enact the ideomotor process, or, empathy, it is important that the imitator is viewing the intentions of the imitated. When communicating with someone through a screen, the

¹ Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2013).

² Marco Iacoboni. "Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons." *Annual Review of Psychology* 60.1 (2009): 655.

body is not present; we are not seeing the smile behind “shut up”, the hesitation before saying “I love you”, the wince between words “ok” and “sure”. This enables a totally independent meaning-making process, one in which the interpreter is totally free of the source’s context, inflection, and intention. Philosopher Richard Dreyfus states “There can be no understanding of relevance without commonsense understanding, and no common sense of understanding without a sense of how the world meshes with our embodiment.”³

This limitation of empathy essentially comes from a framework of distorted perception. 20th century French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1962 classic *Phenomenology of Perception* preeminently prepared us for an understanding of how our perception is altered through screen communication. This distortion of perception through the screen comes from a loss of our “optimal grip”. This is the idea that for each object there is an optimum distance from which we view it as the best version of that object. A body viewed microscopically close with no context doesn’t remotely look like a body and therefore can’t be perceived as a person. Though we can know that we are talking to “a friend of a friend” or online user *riribesti99* - the lack of a visual grip diminishes the person’s personhood. “Again, seen from too great a distance, the body loses its living value, and is seen simply as a puppet or automation.”⁴ This is especially dire on the internet given that it’s a habitat for ‘chatbots’—computer programs designed to simulate conversation with human users—and the likelihood that *riribestie99* is not a person, but a script programmed to gain your trust.

³ Hubert L. Dreyfus. *On the Internet*. (S.I.: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. (London: Routledge, 1962).