Technologies of Social Enframing and the Impact on the Psychosocial Landscape: A Comparative Analysis of Turkle and Heidegger

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In his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger contrasts the original essence of technology, which lies in *poeisis*, with the orientation of modern technology which "enframes." Enframing, as used by Heidegger, represents a kind of "boxing" or instrumental control via measuring, categorizing, or other scientific or mathematical means. In today's era, mobile, media, and Internet technologies[1] provide tools for new kinds of control in social spheres and the emergence of a kind of "social enframing." I use the term "social enframing" to refer to the phenomenon that sociologist of technology, Sherry Turkle, describes as the novel kind of "dials" new technology allows for controlling both the intensity of human contact and the presentation of the self. This essay aims to extend this line of thought through a comparative analysis of Heidegger and *The Question Concerning Technology* with Turkle's present day ethnographic work, *Alone Together.* The novel controls of social enframing can significantly reshape our "psychosocial landscape," especially for youth (but also adults). These controls may titrate certain risks, but may introduce a new kind of socialization that takes on greater dangers. These include the loss of acquiring social skills involving vulnerability, the stifling of the natural psychosocial development and identity maturation of youth, the loss of communal spaces and multifaceted modes of sharing presence with others, and ultimately the acquisition of narcissistic treatment of humans as objects. In analyzing Turkle through Heidegger, we can see the potential pervasiveness of a new way of being

[1] Rather than keep repeating this long phrase, I use "new technology" in its stead.

that ultimately reshapes human development, identity, and social relations, while connecting the dangers that Turkle and Heidegger address in their own eras.

To an extent never seen before, the varied media for messaging and online presentation provide novel tools for an emerging kind of "social enframing." These tools enable us to greatly control two essential features of social interactions: first, we can titrate the intensity and demands of contact with others, and, second, we can fine-tune the presentation of ourselves, in messaging and in the appearance of our online identities. With social enframing, we do not reduce humans to numbers and mechanics as enframing typically implies. However, social enframing lies in tools that for the first time enable us to strongly manipulate the typical commitments and demands of relationships and to closely control our social personas.

Firstly, today's technologies give us the powers of control in titrating human contact. As Turkle succinctly puts it, "New technologies allow us to 'dial down' human contact, to titrate its nature and extent" (Turkle, p. 15). Traditional face-to-face interactions and telephone represent the greatest degrees of engagement in social interactions. These mediums often bring greater transparency and as a result may heighten emotional commitment and make risk harder to control. But these days, texting, Facebook, and Twitter provide alternative means of communication and "staying in-the-loop" with others. Turkle suggests that these technologies can turn us into modern Goldilockses. Youth gravitate toward texting over phone because texting allows them to be "not too close, not too far, but just the right distance" (ibid., 15). Adults in the workforce and in academics, likewise, have

grown fond of texting or email over face-to-face or making a phone call. We can bring people close enough as we need for social communication while simultaneously keeping them at a safe enough distance that avoids real-time commitment and emotional risk. We can strike what feels like just the right balance with new tools for control.

Just as we can titrate the distance toward others, we can titrate the self by controlling how we present ourselves to others. In line with a mode of social enframing, Turkle once again draws the comparison to measurements and the tools of robotic craft to describe the novel phenomenon at work. "Just as we can program a made-to-measure robot, we can reinvent ourselves as comely avatars. We can write the Facebook profile that pleases us. We can edit out messages until they project the self we want to be. And we can keep things short and sweet" (ibid., 12). This new set of working tools provides greater control over presenting ourselves. Youth and even adults now fear the phone because it "reveals too much" (ibid., 11). We feel safer in the modes of texting and typing because we can edit our thoughts and communication outside the bounds of "real-time." According to Turkle, with our Facebook profiles, we now have the ability to groom and fine-tune the precise image we want our identities to fit. These tools enable us to better "box" ourselves into the categories of our ideal self. We have, again, a novel kind of social enframing at work.[2]

[2] I do not have the space to consider the debate surrounding this issue; the purpose here is to use Turkle's work as the point of discourse. However, there is counter-evidence, see Back et al. (2009), which suggests that Facebook profiles reflect actual personality, not self-idealization. However, there are suggestions that

Through these different kinds of social enframing, individuals learn and become accustomed to a novel set of social practices; these practices allow for control of comfort and short-term risk, but may give rise to greater risk in the loss of skills that buffer against loneliness and social disconnect. For some, one of the most salient side-effects of this control can be an underdeveloped comfort and skill with social risk and vulnerability. Hubert Dreyfus (2009) has emphasized the importance of risk and vulnerability in education, which he argues should not be supplanted by "telepresence" technologies that may remove risk and vulnerability. The point can generalize well to social learning. Learning to be comfortable with one's vulnerabilities requires practice. However, an individual who constantly opts out of phone calls and face-to-face interaction risks not acquiring certain skills because the practice is short-circuited. Turkle describes a high school student who typifies this danger: "A phone call, she explains, requires the skill to end a conversation 'when you have no real reason to leave… It's not like there is a reason. You just want to. I don't know how to do that. *I don't want to learn*'" (ibid., 191; emphasis in original). We may risk becoming so overly attached to the control provided by Facebook, messaging, and texting that we no longer wish to engage with less controllable, real-life social dynamics. Phone calls and face-to-face require greater risk. However, by forgoing this more short-term risk, we take on greater

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Facebook may lead to only posting happier contents among everyone leading to an overestimation of other people's happiness (see Slate's "The Anti-Social Network: By helping others look happy Facebook is making us sad" or Jordan et al. (2011)'s "Misery Has More Company Than People Think: Underestimating the Prevalence of Others' Negative Emotions."

long-term cumulative risk. We may lose the ability to acquire the basic social skills that bring us closer to others.

The psychological appeal of these newer technologies lies in the ease in which we can mask what we do not want to be seen, which can have a further array of undesirable effects. As Turkle describes, new technologies attract us more than predecessor mediums like phone and the human voice because "in text, messaging, and e-mail, you hide as much as you show. You can present yourself as you wish to be 'seen'" (ibid., 206). Ironically, this ability to now be seen in the best light can lead to greater anxiety. This may be particularly so for the youth. Teenagers may spend up to 10 minutes trying to get a text to be just right before they send it, all the while thinking that they are the only ones who spend this much time painstakingly perfecting their response (ibid., 200). On their profiles, teens worry about balancing what they actually believe vs. what they think peers deem cool vs. what college admissions might think if they had access to their profiles. Consequence-free exploration has been considered an integral part of adolescent development, providing what developmental and social psychologist Erik Erikson called a necessary "moratorium" for maturing youth. But high school now allows for far less of this when photos go up online and when conversations are archived "forever." For young (and old as well), the online life can add to the anxiety that it will be increasingly difficult to start things afresh. Finally, in addition to these anxieties, by masking our vulnerabilities we may become less comfortable and trusting of ourselves in our "real-world" lives.

According to Turkle, this final relationship with the development of our identities becomes most strongly challenged as individuals experiment with online identities. Youth can now struggle to establish a core belief-system and a solidifying identity, which often interferes with simultaneously crafting one's persona online (273). But ironically, youth and adults, who have grown increasingly accustomed to living virtually via their Facebook or MySpace "avatars" or Second Life avatars, attest that they feel that they are more in touch with their "truer self" with these online personas. Turkle explains that the individuals who make these claims have developed not a whole, solidified self, but a protean one. In speaking of youth who experiment with various online personas, she explains: "People feel 'whole' not because they are one but because the relationships among aspects of self are fluid and undefensive. We feel 'ourselves' if we can move easily among our many aspects of self" (ibid., 194). Likewise, Turkle describes a father who has a disappointing family life, but says he prefers his Second Life relationship, as it "is where I can feel most myself."

I speculate here that the reason for this shift in what feels like our true self is a direct consequence of learning different social practices; mastery or control over these novel practices is different than mastery of social practices in Erikson's model. Traditionally, after one struggled with issues of identity through development and age, individuals exert a sense of *control* over the resolution of their prior identity crises. However, with the shift from this traditional Eriksonian model of self to the online protean self, individuals do not settle into a solidified, autonomous self.

Instead, the impulse for control becomes displaced toward control that happens with the dynamics of the protean self. When this sense of control emerges in the context of fluidly moving between protean identities, it displaces the sense of mastery that once came from resolving one's identity crises and settling into one's newfound whole, autonomous and "true" self. In short, the "true self" is tied to the gaining of control. Therefore, when we speak of social enframing and tools that enable novel means of control, the effects of this control can be far reaching. They can affect our vulnerabilities, loneliness, skills, anxieties, and who we think we truly are. These tools can powerfully shape the psychosocial social landscape of our development and constitutions.

The impact of social enframing and tools for control on the once more naturally unfolding psychosocial development can be placed in Heideggerian terms. Heidegger contrasts the orientation or essence of modern technology – which is enframing – with what Heidegger saw as the original essence of technology, which lies in *poeisis*. *Poeisis* means a "bringing-forth," and Heidegger differentiates two kinds of bringing forth. The first is creative or producing, such as in the creative nature of both the craftsman and the poet who bring-forth something into our presence. But the second kind of *poeisis* is *physis*, which involves a bringing forth of something out of itself. We can see *physis* unfolding in nature, where we see "the bursting open belonging to bring-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself" (Heidegger, 1977; p. 10). Some other entity does not create the blooming of the blossom, but the unfolding of the blossom's own nature brings this forth.

Similarly, one may suggest that just as a blossom unfolds according to a certain nature, human psychosocial development traditionally unfolds in a way that can bring forth potential maturing of well-being and identity. For Turkle, this natural unfolding involves the stages of maturity and identity formation outlined by psychologists like Erik Erikson. Youth and adolescents need to go through the natural struggles of confronting solitude, finding independence, experimenting with ideas and people in a consequence free environment or "moratorium," until one's psychosocial identity can unfold into a stable, whole self. One might say that such a process entails the psychological *physis* of maturing as a person. But Heidegger suggested that modern technology and its emphasis on our tools for enframing can conceal this nature of *poeisis* and bringing forth. If our tools are too overbearing and seductive, they can conceal and block this bringing forth. Turkle makes a similar argument. Youth may lose the *physis* of natural psychosocial development that once provided practice and learning of social skills surrounding vulnerability and the eventual mastery and solidification of an autonomous identity. And the thesis of Turkle's book suggests that with the ability for constant connectivity, we may conceal from youth a natural lesson: "If you don't teach your children how to be alone, they'll only know how to be lonely" (NPR, 2011; TEDx, 2011). Through these changes, the natural landscape of psychosocial development of youth may be severely challenged in each of the ways that contribute to the maturation of one's identity.

Learning of new social practices does not take place in a vacuum; there exists good reason to think that technology's radical changes to our physical environments may strongly reinforce a new kind of socialization that redefines what it means to be present with other people. Turkle argues that not only have our new technologies reshaped psychological development and social connection, but they have also significantly redrawn the geography of our social spheres, most notably our once communal places. Public spaces like parks, cafes, or airports were once places where people could share a communal presence, even though they may have not intentionally approached these places for socializing. Now, they have become places where people come together only to work individually on their screens and devices redirecting them to people and places that exist elsewhere (Turkle, p. 155). While many may dismiss this as something to be inevitably accepted as the way things progress, it is important to reflect on the nuances and phenomenology of these social dynamics that are changed with these developments. As we will see, in a later comparison to Heidegger, these factors may significantly reshape the spheres of socialization and culture that pervade how youth (and adults) situate themselves in the world.

Turkle's analysis of communal places can be recast to describe the phenomenon I'll call "tele-absence," a term for the simple "checking out" of a physical space and entering another via a screen or devise. Tele-absence can work by an individual signaling his absence from a communal sphere, ignoring the presence of others, or connecting to a virtual environment and rendering the

absence of the present environment. Perhaps most familiar to us, individuals can mark themselves as absent from a communal space. "Sometimes people signal their departure by putting a phone to their ear, but it often happens in more subtle ways--there may be a glance down at a mobile device during dinner or a meeting" (ibid., 156). Being in the same place with someone no longer means you have easy access to their attention. Furthermore, while a shared space may have once provided a background of a sustained social sphere that could be bridged, we now wonder if we are intruding or if someone is too busy to "disrupt." We may now may find it strange to "bother" someone in a café for directions or local recommendations if we know we can just get it via our phones on Google Maps or Yelp!.

Just as individuals can mark themselves as absent, we can also grow more accustomed to ignoring those in our environment. Turkle describes an autobiographical incident while riding a train beside a man who was talking on the phone with his girlfriend. He was talking about deeply personal and private matters, including troubles with alcohol, family, and money, all out loud as if those around him were not there. Turkle writes, "There was some comfort in the fact that he was not complaining to me, but I did wish I could disappear. Perhaps there was no need. I was already being treated as though I were not there" (ibid., 155). Ironically, communal spaces can become spaces where individuals can discuss very personal and private matters. But this happens not because of a sense of trust

between people, but because individuals treat others in their environment as if they were not present.

Finally, mobile technologies potentially risk rendering absent the environment as a whole. Turkle describes how collegiate study-abroad directors have lamented that American students no longer experience another country's culture because they bring their home environments with them via Facebook (ibid., 156). While in Paris, Turkle describes how her daughter was chatting online and arranging future visits with friends who did not even know she was out of the country (ibid., 156). Of course, most instances of tele-absence blend these three factors in less clear-cut ways. "Parents check e-mail as they push strollers. Children and parents text during family dinners" (ibid., 157). The tools of mobile technology therefore have significantly shaped our psychosocial landscape. They not only change our means of communication through their tools, but they also reshape how we experience our physical spaces and social surroundings. We live an altered social terrain and culture.

By framing this discussion in Heideggerian terms we may be able to see the pervasive and far reaching consequences of this new terrain. We in many ways become beings that are acculturated into a new world, with alternate kinds of being as we interact in this world. Heidegger emphasized that humans are born and raised into a mode of being human, or *Dasein*, which is intimately tied to *being-in-the-world*. Heidegger replaces the typical subject-object distinctions of philosophy and suggests that humans are enculturated into a way of life, through

language, culture, and their environment that shapes their way of being. This mode of *being-in-the-world* provides a kind of background, an inexhaustible repertoire of assumptions and nuance that shape our ways of being; it enables us to intuitively grasp, handle, and interact with the countless situations we confront in life.

In explaining Heidegger on this point, Hubert Dreyfus points out that we are all products of the cultures we are born into, not through a means of explicit instruction or knowledge of rules of conduct, but by simply being enculturated into them. In more concrete terms, for instance, different cultures socialize individuals into different distance-standing practices. North Africans naturally stand closely to each other in discourse and may make more bodily contact in comparison to Scandinavians (Dreyfus, 1992; p. 18). Similarly, a Japanese mother may without knowing it socialize her infant to react to the world in a more passive, quiet, and contented manner than an American who socializes her infant to take a more active, vocal, and exploratory disposition (ibid., p. 17).[3] Based on one's culture one will embody a different understanding of being. But Dreyfus emphasizes that like these infants and like the learning of distance-standing, we acquire this understanding of being, or ontology, without necessarily knowing we have learned it. Similarly, with modern tech culture, like the Japanese and American babies, youth are enculturated into a novel psychosocial landscape; and likewise, older generations also become acculturated like an immigrant entering a new culture in the way one who becomes accustomed to the novel distance-standing practices of new land. We can pick up

[3] Dreyfus admits while this example may be inaccurate in fact, it better serves to make a point as a hypothetical.

these modes of being without explicitly knowing how we are being shaped, whether as a digital native or immigrant.

While Turkle's analysis sheds light on the many rules, habits, and background assumptions youth (and adults) may pick up without any explicit instruction, Heidegger underscores the potential pervasiveness of this socialization. Dreyfus draws on the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, who writes of the pervasive bodily and psychosocial nuance and spectrum of socialization involved:

> In all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult—a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience.
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> (ibid., p. 17)

Dreyfus explains this further. "Bourdieu sees that our practices embody pervasive responses, discriminations, motor skills, etc., which add up to an interpretation of what it is to be a person, an object, an institution, etc." (ibid., p. 17).

Similarly, what may be emerging with our new technologies may be a novel psychosocial landscape that can pervade into the structures and nuances of our culture and socialization. Children may pick up very different nuances and habits of interacting when the default mode of our public spaces shifts away from communal presence to risk of interrupting isolated work and personal "bubbles." And we may have similar analogs to the distance-standing practices with new messaging communications. We learn what kinds of intrusions or intensities of contact fit certain circumstances. This socialization may include the many implicit rules,

mannerisms, and habits we see in digital natives and immigrants, but as stressed above, the pervasiveness may extend beyond all that we analyze. Of course, one may suggest that none of this is new. Cultures change with the tides of history, very often shifting as a result of technological innovation that seeps into the fabric of people's lives. This may be so, but there are reasons to think that the degree of impact of these technologies may be qualitatively different.

If Turkle's analysis is accurate and representative[4], new technologies may represent a kind of novelty: they give us powerful tools of psychological and social control, which if not used wisely, can strongly play into our psychological vulnerabilities. There will remain many unpredictable consequences and unseen long-term risks of how these changes will affect inhabitants of our new culture. How will newborns, who have known no other kind of parenting, be affected by parents who raise them while glued to their BlackBerries? How will the "protean" adolescents of today eventually mature against social forces that may inhibit natural identity resolutions? There are many questions we cannot answer. Indeed, Heidegger would suggest we can never explicate all the effects of a background that seep into socialization. Nonetheless, Heidegger astutely observed and articulated what he saw as some of the pivotal changes in culture with the emergence of the technology of his age. Turkle in many ways does the same for our age. This brings us to a final danger, drawing another potential parallel between Heidegger's analysis of technology and Turkle's.

[4] An open question that I cannot take up fully in this paper because of space.

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger describes a danger in our society that has come to manipulate the world via technology into "standing-reserve." This means that we can come to convert everything in the world into resources, to be efficiently tapped and discarded once they are used. Dreyfus gives the emblematic example of the styrofoam cup. "When we want a hot or cold drink it does its job, and when we are through with it, we simply throw it away" (ibid., p. 18). We no longer see things in the world as objects of value in and of themselves, but they only acquire *instrumental* value: they are good *for* something. An airplane, for instance, is nothing in and of itself, but becomes an object *for* transportation. The power of technology lies in being able to extract and store this instrumentality for our on-demand usage. Heidegger provides the imagery of damning up a river and storing hydroelectric power. But Heidegger goes a step further. He suggests that the even greater danger lies in coming to treat humans as standing-reserve.

Turkle similarly suggests that, with new technologies, we risk treating others as objects or resources to be tapped for our own individualized needs. She writes, "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (Turkle, 154). Our tools for access give us the control to only extract the bits and pieces of an individual we may want at a given time. In other words, our instruments of social enframing may bring us to treat others instrumentally. But

not only do we have these tools, our technologies enable us to store and conglomerate this on-demand social instrumentality. This becomes apparent with Facebook and Twitter when a network of "friends" and followers can guarantee response on any trivial thought or need that can be broadcast. Turkle describes, "When we Tweet or write to hundreds or thousands of Facebook friends as a group, we treat individuals as a unit. Friends become fans" (ibid., p. 168). We have in some sense a large reservoir, a conglomerate unit that lays waiting for our on-demand use. This may not be a bad thing in and of itself. However, Turkle stresses we gamble with great psychological dangers.

The risk with this resource becomes the development of narcissism; here a narcissist entails one who in the psychoanalytic sense seeks constant support for a fragile self by selectively using people for his own needs, giving rise to what can be dubbed a "narcissist's standing-reserve." Turkle describes this kind of narcissism and how it thrives on utilizing "made-to-measure representations:"

> I have said that in the psychoanalytic tradition, one speaks about narcissism not to indicate people who love themselves, but a personality so fragile that it needs constant support. It cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use. So, the narcissistic self gets on with others by dealing only with their made-to-measure representations. These representations (some analytic traditions refer to them as "part objects," others as "self-objects") are all that the fragile self can handle. (ibid., 177)

Technology of today provides the narcissist with the ideal tools for dealing with others in made-to-measure representations. Today's tools of social enframing can provide these individuals easy means to split off the pieces of information they seek, all the while titrating away the demands of dealing with people as whole individuals.

Turkle goes on though to describe that not only are the tools for social enframing available, but there also lies a virtually endless, on-demand resource for feeding this narcissism. She continues:

> A fragile person can also be supported by selected and limited contact with people (say, the people on a cell phone "favorites" list). In a life of texting and messaging, those on that contact list can be made to appear almost on demand. You can take what you need and move on. And, if not gratified, you can try someone else." (ibid., 177)

And the Facebook and Twitter networks provide the same potential reservoir. Such seems like a description of a modern day, psychological spin on Heidegger, providing us with a "narcissistic standing-reserve." The imagery of this standing-reserve may not be the typical dystopian imagery of "human resources" and exploitation of workers that Heidegger had in mind. But it catches in psychosocial terms a great danger that is at hand with today's technology.

Yet, Heidegger was not an anti-technologist, for he concluded: *But where danger is, grows the saving power also* (Heidegger, 34). But before he concludes so, Heidegger stresses the importance of revealing and unconcealing the layers that hinder a proper view of technology. One may fittingly re-interrupt this aim of unconcealing and revealing truth as first requiring modern discourse to adopt a ground for honesty on different sides of the technological debate. Tech enthusiasts may be quick to shun arguments like Turkle's, just as Turkle may shy away from complexities that run counter to her claims.[5] But if such unconcealing could take

[5] I did not have space to discuss this in full here. Two things to note in particular: Firstly, Turkle may over-stress the role of today's technology in creating loneliness. Putnam (2000) has argued that social capital has been on the decline and loneliness and isolation on the rise since the 1970s. Among a host of contributing factors, his

place, we could begin to ask how we can re-design given what we know can produce a more vibrant and healthy psychosocial landscape.

But once we have done the unconcealing, Heidegger saw the saving power of technology as ultimately pointing back toward *poeisis*, the original essence of technology. Heidegger drew on the power of art and poetry to compliment the modern orientation of technology. And perhaps art can play a new role in crafting novel design and solutions. Indeed, even more fun-oriented examples like "flashmobs" conducted by synchronized Ipod instructions show artistic expressions that reshape social boundaries and craft novel communal spaces. Ultimately, Heidegger expresses hope in continuing the conversation and questioning. For, *The Closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the questioning we come. For questioning is the piety of thought* (ibid., 35). As Turkle says, "Reclaiming conversation. That's the next frontier."

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descriptions of the influence of TV's parallel and foreshadow Turkle's claims with new technology (though, to Turkle's credit, claims like narcissism appear new). But he makes explicitly clear: the cyber-revolution was certainly not the cause of increases in loneliness, as social capital was already plummeting while Bill Gates was in grade school; technology may more likely be an aggravator, but certainly not the origin of loneliness. Secondly, there has been existing research tying greater use of Facebook to increased social capital, increased psychological well-being especially with those with low self-esteem (though more recent studies may challenge this), and blogging can lead to building social support and eventual building of intimate, real life relationships. As a review of Turkle's book put it, "One recurring theme to emerge from much of this research is that most people, at least so far, are primarily using the online world to enhance their offline relationships, not supplant them" (Lehrer, 2011).

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