

# The dying art of conversation – has technology killed our ability to talk face-to-face?

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Credit: Tom Swinnen from Pexels

What with Facetime, Skype, Whatsapp and Snapchat, for many people, face-to-face conversation is used less and less often.

These apps allow us to converse with each other quickly and easily – overcoming distances, [time zones](#) and countries. We can even talk to [virtual assistants](#) such as Alexa, Cortana or Siri – commanding them to play our favourite songs, films, or tell us the [weather forecast](#).

Often these ways of communicating reduce the need to speak to another human being. This has led to some of the conversational snippets of our daily lives now taking place mainly via technological devices. So no longer do we need to talk with shop assistants, receptionists, bus drivers or even coworkers, we simply engage with a screen to communicate whatever it is we want to say.

In fact, in these scenarios, we tend to only speak to other people when the [digital technology](#) does not operate successfully. For instance, human contact occurs when we call for an assistant to help us when an item is not recognised at the self-service checkout.

And when we have the ability to connect so quickly and easily with others using technological devices and software applications it is easy to start to overlook the value of face-to-face conversation. It seems easier to text someone rather than meet with them.

## **Bodily cues**

My research into digital technologies indicates that phrases such as "word of mouth" or "keeping in touch" point to the [importance of face-to-face conversation](#). Indeed, face-to-face conversation can strengthen [social ties](#): with our neighbours, friends, work colleagues and other people we encounter during our day.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It acknowledges their existence, their humanness, in ways that instant messaging and texting do not. Face-to-face conversation is a rich experience that involves drawing on memories, making connections, making mental images, associations and choosing a response. Face-to-face conversation is also multisensory: it's not just about sending or receiving pre-programmed trinkets such as likes, cartoon love hearts and grinning yellow emojis.

When having a conversation using video you mainly see another person's face only as a flat image on a screen. But when we have a face-to-face conversation in real life, we can look into someone's eyes, reach out and touch them. We can also observe the other person's body posture and [the gestures they use when speaking](#) – and interpret these accordingly. All these factors, contribute to the sensory intensity and depth of the face-to-

face conversations we have in daily life.

## Speaking to machines

[Sherry Turkle](#), professor of social studies of science and technology, warns that when we first "speak through machines, [we] forget how essential face-to-face conversation is to our relationships, our creativity, and our capacity for empathy". But then "we take a further step and speak not just through machines but to machines".

In many ways, our everyday lives now involve a blend of face-to-face and technologically mediated forms of communication. But in my teaching and research I explain how digital forms of communication can supplement, rather than replace face-to-face conversation.

At the same time though, it is also important to acknowledge that some people value online communication because they can express themselves in ways they might find difficult through face-to-face conversation.

## Look up from your phone

[Gary Turk](#), is a spoken word poet whose poem Look Up illustrates what is at stake by becoming entranced by technological ways of communicating at the expense of connecting with others face-to-face.

Turk's poem draws attention to the rich, sensory aspects of face-to-face communication, valuing bodily presence in relation to friendship, companionship and intimacy. The central idea running through Turk's evocative poem is that screen-based devices consume our attention while distancing us from the bodily sense of being with others.

Ultimately the sound, touch, smell and observation of bodily cues we experience when having a face-to-face [conversation](#) cannot be fully

replaced by our technological devices. Communicating and connecting with others through face-to-face discussion is valuable because it is not something that can be edited, paused or replayed.

So next time you're deciding between human or machine at the supermarket checkout or whether to get up from your desk and walk to another office to talk to a colleague – rather than sending them an email – it might be worth following Turk's advice and engaging with the human rather than the screen.

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