My name is Liam Keywood, I am 24 and I am a third year student at Leeds Metropolitan University studying Criminology and Sociology. I currently live in Leeds, although I moved here from a relatively large town in Kent called Tonbridge. I have a brother named Jack and in case you wondered; I am single. In terms of hobbies; I have a keen interest in film, I also played in a band a while back with three other friends from Kent, you will not be able to books us though as we are no longer playing any gigs (mostly due to the fact that I moved to the north of the country to study at university).

Giving you this information at the beginning of a critically reflective report on contemporary society and social futures may seem somewhat out of place, even a little personal, right? Yes, it is; the information that I’ve provided you with gives you a glimpse into my identity, my hobbies, my family life, my re previous residences and even my relationship status. However, I am not handing out this information to you as a gesture of trust, nor do I want you to write my autobiography. This information (and much more) is all available by typing my name into Facebook; a simple search will trawl up enough information to provide a fairly comprehensive outline of my profile.

Social networking has taken its position at the forefront of communication within contemporary society. In 2012, social networking giants Facebook announced that they had reached a milestone of over a billion users a month (BBC News, 2012). That is a billion people who just like me, disclose their details to the rest of the online community. Many users make additional details available to the general public; those with a more relaxed approach to privacy settings allow their photos, videos and personal movements to be visible to anyone who wishes to have a little nose at their profile.

Aside from the formation of globalized networks of communication, self-identity has become the prominent feature of social networking. Sociologists such as Anthony Giddens provide assessments of self-identity and electronic media in the age of what he refers to as high modernity:

“With the development of mass communication, particularly electronic communication, the interpenetration of self-development and social systems, up to and including global systems, becomes ever more pronounced [...] a universe of social activity in which electronic media have a central and constitutive role, nevertheless is not one of “hyper reality”...” (Giddens, 2008: 4)
This development of mass communication allows those who embrace it (and to some extent, even those who do not) to form a structural identity for themselves from which they can then project to a globally connected society. The personal information I provided you with at the beginning of this essay provides credence to Giddens’ assessment; my details, my identity, the framework from which I construct my “self” is projected to the world via a form of electronic communication; a process which I myself feel relatively detached from, yet a process that is very real indeed.

The formation of online identities presents an interesting focus for social sciences. Why are we so keen to place so much personal data into the public domain? Furthermore, what are the repercussions of doing so? Bauman and Lyon (2013) provide an interesting assessment of these questions:

“The condition of being watched and seen has been reclassified from a menace into a temptation. The promise of enhanced visibility, the prospect of “being in the open” for everybody to see and everybody to notice, chimes well with the most avidly sought proof of social recognition, and therefore of valued, “meaningful” existence” (Lyon and Bauman, 2013, n.p.)

An interesting assessment indeed; whereas previously the idea of being watched has been akin to a more Orwellian sense of surveillance where “Big Brother is watching you” (1949, referenced in 1st World Library p.7), contemporary society holds visibility within the public domain as a form of social acknowledgement; the more details about my life I provide my chosen form of social media with, the more I will find a sense of meaning and recognition among my peers.

This recognition and meaning can then be transferred into other aspects of our lives. Thus far we have discussed the formation of a self-identity via social media and the types of data which users place in the virtual public domain in order to form such identities. It is clear that this information can provide virtual curriculum vitae’s of one’s personal interests and habits. But what is the use of constructing a comprehensive CV if it is not used to its full potential? This information can also be used to form and maintain relationships; a process which is ever changing in today’s information society.

In his book “Liquid Love”, Bauman (2003) assesses the nature of relationships within a contemporary post-modern era, arguing that relationships in contemporary society are based less on the real proximities and connections which held together the more traditional relationships of former generations. Instead, relationships are based more on virtual connections; the mobile telephone and social media have created a society within which we are never less than a phone call or instant message away from the ones that we hold dear. Social media provides us with a platform from which we can seek out, form and maintain close relationships, all without the tiresome process of maintaining proximity with those we love.

Another of Bauman’s assessments which can be applied to the sphere of social networking is the frailty of human bonds, and the ease with which relationships can be terminated;

“Termination on demand-instantaneous, without mess, no counting, losses or regrets-is the major advantage of internet dating. A reduction of the risks coupled with the avoidance of option-closing” (Bauman, 2003: 65)

Once the advent of a breakup is upon them, social media users are able to instantaneously break all ties from their now ex-partner; making their virtual world aware by changing their relationship status or maybe even deleting them as a friend if necessary. Then it is
time to move on with the perpetual process of placing one's emotional and personal curriculum vitae back into the public sphere in the hopes of finding another relationship.

All this information sharing and virtual proximity, coupled with the convenience of a system whereby the formation and termination of relationships is made more efficient makes social media appear relatively helpful. But is there a deeper level to social media websites such as Facebook and the ways in which information technologies use our personal data?

Placing information such as that which I supplied in the beginning of the essay online may seem fairly harmless; this is all information that I would happily give out to the general public, so why worry about it? However, more recently Facebook and other social media sites have come under scrutiny for their retention of personal data. BBC News (2013) reported that Facebook received up to 10,000 requests for user data from US government entities in the second half of 2012 alone.

Furthermore, The Guardian (2012) recently reported that Britain is attempting to opt out of a European initiative which enabled social media users to delete their data from online service providers. These reports provide an alternative viewpoint on the data which we openly supply to social media websites. It appears that the government are interested in this data, and that it has every intention to continue collecting this data in the future. Maybe now the formation of a globalized network of data seems a little less appealing?

This is where the third contemporary theme within modernities comes into play; this is the theme of self-surveillance. Surveillance has long been an issue within social science, playing a large part in the prevention and punishment of crime. However, more recently the age of information technologies and globalization has facilitated the collection of data on a massive scale. This has led to the formation of a vast network of existing data from which behaviours, trends and personal information can be assessed. This data is supplied by the users themselves. It appears that we are providing a level of surveillance ourselves whether we know it or not.

The concept of self-surveillance arises from the principle work of the “panopticon” or “inspection house” (Bentham, 1791). Bentham’s panopticon was originally formulated as a prison design which allowed the three-hundred and sixty degree observation of prisoners by one officer. Fundamentally, this meant that all behaviour was essentially observable and thus, prisoners would regulate their behaviour to that of the prison norm accordingly. This principle was later expanded on by French philosopher Foucault (1977), inciting that the panopticon provided a metaphor for society’s reliance on the observation of its citizens and the normalization of behaviour.

When applied to modern information technologies such as social media, this principle provides a relevant assessment of the ways in which we provide self-surveillance; we willingly place ourselves within the public domain as Lyon and Bauman (2013, n.p) note for the purposes of “social recognition”. However, at the same time we project a self-image to other people, thus regulating our own behaviour. For instance, many people who are on Facebook may deem it necessary to hide or delete pictures of themselves that they may deem incriminating from family members or prospective employers as that behaviour is not considered to be within the norm.

It is clear that social networking has its benefits; the ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere in the world definitely has its merits. Social media may also be responsible for the formation of relationships where previously relationships may not have blossomed. However, when taking into account the theories of post-modern writers such as Bauman and Giddens, which shed light on the identities and relationships we form, and how frail they can become when they are placed into information technologies such as social media, it becomes a bit less appealing.

Moreover, the work of Bentham, Foucault and the panopticon shows an alarming trend in the ways in which we are providing a level of self-surveillance which is shaping our identities and norms.
Bibliography:


**Picture 1:**
http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/hanrahian20131205

**Picture 2:**
http://relationship.com/find_love_online/