This critical reflection will examine the way social relationships are changing alongside the growth of technology, focusing particularly on Castells’ (2005) Network society but also considering globalisation, risk, and intimacy. When discussing ideas of changing intimacy and risk, this critical reflection will not examine “online dating” per se, but will however, discuss the idea that individuals are now able to create social and romantic relationships online through the use of social networking websites, chat rooms and the like, with people they have never met, and often never will meet – and the dangers involved with creating such relationships. I began thinking about the changes to relationships in relation to the Internet after watching the documentary Catfish (2010) which highlighted the risks of starting online relationships through the use of social networking website Facebook, by following the story of one man and his friendship with a “family” and romance with whom he believed to be the elder daughter.

According to the OxIS (Oxford Internet Survey) (2005, as cited in Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007) 60% of Britons are using the Internet, and one-fifth of them are using it to construct “friendship networks” (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007).

Haythornthwaite (2002, as cited in Baym, 2010: 101) coined the term “latent tie” to describe the “potential relationships within a social circle that are structurally enabled, but have not been activated”. Social networks aid the process of having the opportunity to meet new people and actually meeting them, at first online but potentially in an offline “virtual” setting.

In today’s society, it is thought that we are living in a network society. A network society is one which revolves around an information network, created by the vast amount of advancing technology we find ourselves surrounded by. The networks we see created in a network society can push boundaries, the main one being global – technology and increasing access to information means we can create global connections defying time and space (Castells 2005). Although this idea is often applied to the economy, it is also demonstrated in the way we form social networks with other people. Breaking such boundaries means we are now able to begin relationships with people from the other side of the country, or even the other side of the world, with ease. Practically instant communication through the use of technology intensifies the concept of globalisation; we
have the world at our computer screen and must accept other ways that people live their life (Slevin, 2000).

Computer-mediated communication (Walther, 1996) allows users to form relationships with real meaning, over a perhaps short length of time – as they can spend longer chatting to people they meet over the Internet, especially with many hand held devices now having Internet access therefore defying time or space constraints face to face meetings may encounter. Individuals can easily slot a person and their virtual relationship into their life without it hindering their reality. The fact we have such easy access to our social relationships means our experience becomes “hyper-social” or “hyper-personal” – we have heightened emotions towards those that we meet online, usually more than we would feel in a face to face meeting (Walther, 1996, as cited in Baym, 2010).

There is a longstanding debate as to whether the Internet encourages people to socialise more or less in an offline setting. Although more people are communicating via the Internet, face-to-face communication is still thriving, if not more so. The image of people as slaves to their computers in isolation is not a realistic one – individuals who are using the Internet to communicate actually have increased contacts and friends, and are more socially active in a reality setting. Castells (2005) claims this is the “transformation of sociability”.

Young people who have grown up alongside the growth of technology are more likely to find using it a natural and easier way to meet people (Dutton & Helsper, 2007, as cited in Dutton et al., 2008). Gross (2004, as cited in Mishna, McLuckie & Saini, 2009) found that students were on average, spending 40 minutes a day Instant Messaging. Young people are easily adapting to the changes technology brings around and this includes the way they form friendships and romantic relationships. Children and youths are using social networks to communicate with existing friends but also to establish new friendships – and they consider the Internet as a “legitimate forum through which to make and maintain both friendships and romantic relationships” (Mishna, McLuckie & Saini, 2009: 109). Some youths as young as 13 years old had established romantic and even sexual relationships purely over the Internet – often lying about their age and using fake photographs.

Technology and the way it has developed mean that anonymity is becoming more of a choice for those using the Internet, for example, Facebook allows users to alter their privacy settings. The anonymity the Internet provides allows an individual to disclose little information about their real self, and sometimes create a persona far from their true lives (Slevin, 2000) as can be seen in Catfish (2010) and the TV series following the documentary.

Despite the dangers, and risks involved, the Internet is a “powerful” tool in enabling individuals to create and develop social relationships with people they may never have had the chance to meet before. It is a real risk that when using the Internet to social network we will come across somebody who is “fake”, but it is also a fairly rare occurrence, and often one found amongst young users of the Internet (Castells, 2005) who may not fully understand the consequences.

To conclude this critical reflection, I reveal my feelings and experiences, as a young adult surrounded by technology, living in a “network society” characterised by “hyper-personal” relationships. Technology rapidly advanced as I hit my pre-teens, and it has continued to do so right through until now, on the brink of 21
years old, and along the way I have had a desktop computer to a laptop, a tiny tablet and my smartphone that now offers me Internet access wherever I go – and with that, technology has also offered me a constant link to my friends, family and partners. I must admit, because of this, our friendships and my relationships have sometimes felt too intense. It can often feel like there is little escape from technology. I cannot fully grasp the idea of having an Internet-only friendship or romantic relationship but I also do not see it as a crazy idea that should be dismissed. Most of our lives now seem to be focused on technology of some description, and many a time has my mother told me to “get off that thing and socialise!” unbeknownst to her, that is what I spend most of my day doing from the comfort of my own home.

Bibliography:


Image 1: http://remotive.co.uk/features/401-catfish-it-sounds-terrible-the-worst-show-mtv-could-come-up-with-but-somehow-it-works/