"What"s on your mind?": A Critical Reflection of Facebook

Ellie Gardner

Criminology & Sociology

LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

School of Social, Psychological and Communication Sciences

This critical reflection will explore Facebook and its relationship to contemporary society in relation to themes of technology, network and surveillance society (Castells, 2010; Lyon, 1994). It will also compare the virtual community of Facebook to Foucault's disciplinary society and how it can lead to the discipline of the self (1979, cited in Barker, 1998). The increased use and popularity of social media sites like Facebook and their influence on society could lead to a future in which the importance of privacy is forgotten and constant updating and broadcasting of the self is the norm. Elton sets his book, Blind Faith (2007), in a society such as this and his dystopia will be used as a comparison throughout the critical reflection.

Recent years have seen a massive increase in the number of people using social networking sites. Facebook now has an estimated 1.1 billion users worldwide (Jin, 2013). Some may argue that the increased use of Facebook has allowed easier international communication and provides a platform to share information and pictures with friends. The advent of new technologies and ICT"s, like smart phones, has enabled some people almost unlimited access to the internet and with it social networks, new forms of communication and relationships. This is reflective of ideas that contemporary society is a technology society which allows "placeless connectivity- anytime, anywhere, always - the user is in touch with the network" (Webster, 2006: 10). New technologies have impacted the way we interact with one another and how we build and maintain our relationships.

A network society is characterised by its interconnectivity. New technologies and the internet allow people to communicate globally, without being restricted by space, place or time, enabling individuals to create their own networks and virtual societies (Castells, 2010). Facebook reflects these ideas as it is an online community which provides a platform for both communication and global social networking. Users are encouraged to add more friends to their profile (or network) as the site suggests "people you may know". The creation of shared groups or adding your place of work also helps to create smaller communities within the larger network.

Facebook users are asked for much personal information when signing up, for example their education, workplace, where they live, relationship status, birthday and films and books they like. If this information is not provided Facebook asks users to update their profile so others can access this information. This is reflective of ideas of the information society which is characterised by its reliance on informational technologies in both public and private spheres (Castells, 2010) and its abundance of available information about individuals (Webster, 2006). However, Webster (2006) questions the validity of this analysis as the classification of an information society depends on the quality of the

information available. The information we publicise on Facebook could be argued to be mundane and useless. However, if we are interested in the normalcy of each other's lives perhaps it is this ordinary information that has become a characteristic of our society.

When logging onto Facebook, users are greeted with a box asking "What's on your mind?" encouraging them to update their status. Status updates include sharing information about what you are doing, uploading photos or sharing websites you find interesting. Facebook has recently extended the update to allow users to tag friends or places and attach emotions to their status. This is reflective of ideas of surveillance, in which individuals'

information about each other has left the public realm and moved into the privacy of the home.

The future depicted by Elton displays characteristics of Lyon's surveillance society (1994) in which individuals are not only constantly watched but personal information about them is collected and stored on online databases. In this sense Facebook could be likened to an online database. The process through which it collects the information is subtle; over the last few years Facebook has asked users to provide more and more details about themselves via the premise of improving their profile. If this process is followed blindly it could lead to the creation of a society like the one which Elton depicts. A society in which

behaviours and actions are monitored or watched, usually with the aim of security or social control. Within his discussion of modern society Lyon states that "surveillance (is) an institutionally central and pervasive feature of social life" (1994: 24). Facebook users broadcast private information at a public level allowing others to watch or survey their behaviour; by adding more information to our updates we are letting others see in more detail the activities and people within our personal lives.

Ideas of all encompassing pervasive surveillance have been the basis for many settings of dystopian futures. Ben Elton's novel, "Blind Faith" (2007), is set in a society in which the sharing of private information online has spiralled out of control. Privacy is socially unacceptable, individual's blog every aspect of their lives and people's homes are linked up to live stream webcams. The main character (who craves privacy) is discriminated against and stigmatised as he is reluctant to upload intimate and personal videos. Elton's society is one in which the need to survey and gain

social networking has become mandatory, removing the voluntary aspect (or individual agency) of membership and the choice of what is broadcast.

Linked to this is the key criticism on the scale of modern surveillance; that it is pervasive and intrudes in our private lives (Lyon, 1994) However, as Facebook demonstrates, many people voluntarily broadcast personal information about themselves in the hope that others will see it; actively participating in a surveillance society. But the voluntary nature of Facebook can also be questioned. Society and peer pressure encourage people to conform to a norm and that norm could include membership of sites like Facebook. As Elton's novel suggests, not everyone wants to publicise their private lives but may be encouraged to do so by those around them, removing their agency regarding which information is uploaded.

The virtual community created by Facebook is reflective of Foucault's disciplinary society and discipline of the self (1979, cited in Barker, 1998). Based upon ideas of Panopticism individuals are encouraged to believe that they

are constantly being watched via the use of unverifiable surveillance. This leads to people normalising their behaviour and becoming the disciplined subject or self. Facebook displays ideas of a disciplinary virtual society as users watch each other's posts, showing approval or objections via likes and comments. This form of regulation effectively governs the behaviour of the Facebook population leading to conformity; individuals select which information about themselves they choose to broadcast as to what they deem is acceptable (or that which they believe others will). Therefore disciplining their virtual self and also allowing them to manage their online identity. This links to Goffman's presentation of the self in which he uses the metaphor of a stage and actors to show how individuals choose which aspects of their identities to reveal in different situations (1956). Facebook is the stage and a users profile is the actor within Goffman's metaphor.

The prominence of sites like Facebook in contemporary society is reflective of Mathieson's ideas of a viewer society, or Synopticism (1997). Linked with the themes of surveillance and an increase in the availability of mass media technologies, Mathieson proposes that we are not only watched in a top down model of institutional surveillance, but also take part in surveying others. By joining sites like Facebook we are allowing others to survey us by creating a public profile, yet we are also signing up to survey others. Gane (2012) develops the idea of Synopticism to fit contemporary society's increased reliance and use of the internet in what he terms Synoptican 2.0. Gane presents an interactive society in which the many watch the many, yet individuals also watch themselves. This suggests that society has become voyeuristic, deriving pleasure from access to the lives of others but also from the thought of others watching us. Synoptican 2.0 presents worrying comparisons to Elton's dystopian future in which there is no private space and sharing on the internet has become a central feature of life.

The increased popularity of sites like Facebook suggests that contemporary society displays aspects of a technology, information and network society. Technology allows easier access to the website, increases global interconnectivity creating networks and allows users to upload personal information onto the site. Facebook also shows elements of surveillance, both of one another and the self. The virtual society created by Facebook is both disciplinary and voyeuristic. Although Facebook provides an enjoyable online platform to stay connected with friends, users should be wary of the boundaries between sharing public and private information. This could therefore prevent a dystopian future, such as the one depicted by Elton, from becoming a reality.

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