The Pseudonym on the Internet: Identity Creation and Space of Freedom

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ABSTRACT

New Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC) are located out of time and out of space. Indeed, the permanent connectivity of people through digital interfaces (binary type) is at the origin of the implementation of completely new paradigms. Anonymity and privacy are two phenomena that oppose one another with respect to both the social practices and their concepts involved; they have a huge impact on the organizational structure of the various civil societies in the world. In addition, if the digital society is rooted in civil society, it does not duplicate. Moreover, on Internet users identify themselves by creating their pseudonymous and by the use of pseudonyms in a relationship without any hierarchy, while in civil society nomination is subject to the law.

Keywords: Internet, Onomastics, Proxemic distances, Identity, Creation.

1. PSEUDONYM AS PRIVATE SPHERE

In civil society, anthroponomy defines the social being within a group. More precisely, their patronymic or matronymic is used to position them along a genealogical line. In contrast, their first name is a means to identify them within the family group. So what can be said about the social being's identity in the context of a digital society? In order to join discussion forums or chat rooms, the internet user has to choose a pseudonym, the origins of which stem from various sources: the person's private life, cultural objects, individual traits, etc. (Martin, 2006.) However, using a pseudonym on the Web is not done for the sole purpose of naming an individual. In addition, in the course of a follow-up communication to the on-line publication of newspaper articles or while discussing a given theme in a forum, the *nomen falsum* (or 'false name') chosen by the user can be laden with meaning: antagonism, emotion, etc. This multidimensional status of a pseudonym on the Internet will be examined by using various examples taken from a newspaper on-line editions as well as discussion forums. Other questions arise from this observation. If a pseudonym is used for naming (identity) or protesting (opinion, emotion), does this not mean that its purpose is to express what cannot be said within civil society?

Generally, the name assigned to a social subject is a marker of identity that gives the individual a genealogical anchor (matronym or patronym), a family anchor (surname) and an affective anchor with emotional hypocoristic usage, such as nicknames or diminutives. Some types of nomination as the matronym or the patronym take place in the framework of the law and allow the inclusion of the individual in civil society. Ghasarian specifies that the noun of a new member of the group 'is a crucial moment that sets the group membership of kinship, the relationship to the collective memory and place in the network of social relations' (1996, pp. 48–49), he emphasizes: '[…] patronym, the noun of relationship that an individual receives at birth, demonstrating its identity' (ibid., p. 48). Always about the phenomenon of identity Chauchat mentions that: 'The act of naming is the beginning of any identity. It is the starting point as is the act of naming of the subject that gives it its name. In our society, the subject's name indicates its descent, that is to say his place in line. The noun is the first symbolic act, one that can have an identity, not only in the formal sense and administrative civil status, but also in the sense of inclusion in the symbolic order is that of language. Similarly, the identity of the group and its members originates in the name used to designate it. It indicates its origin, its history, its place in society' (1999, p. 62).

Various factors are responsible for these identity markers, such as nationality, sex, occupation, etc. and are constructed from various instances that bring together the group structure. Whereas the proper name, or nomen proprium, induces a relationship between an individual, on the one hand, and his or her 'I' and civil society, on the other hand, the nomen falsum represents the relationship of the Internet surfer and the virtual society of the Internet. The pseudonym is a particular type of nomination. It differs from other names discussed previously in relation to several characteristics (Martin, 2012, p. 57):

—The 'I' names himself or herself, and it is not the 'other' who names the 'I';
—It can be changed *ad libitum*;
—According to the French law, it does not have any penal consequences. On the site Légifrance, there are only regulations concerning the usage of pseudonyms in family names as well as with respect to the protection of authors' rights of works published under a pseudonym or anonymously: code intellectual property, art. L. 113-6 and L. 123-3.

However, I hypothesized that the onomastic choice of the user was related to various phenomena related to the individual use of the Internet connection (access to a machine located on private territory: home, microcomputer located in front of the user, etc.). In particular, concerning the Internet, the types of proxemic distance, as mentioned below, are no longer valid when using the Internet. In addition, the distance between the users, determined by the particular configuration of the user/machine type, can be referred to as a 'close personal distance', which is the symbolic distance that connects the user

to their peers. Factors, such as the absence of kinetic movements, which are a type of communication based on symmetrical interactions (peer to peer), where everyone is bound to the same rules with a dialogue engaged on the basis of a soliloquy (only with the representation of our alter ego), supports the validity of this paradigm.

What has emerged from my previous work is the concept of proxemic distance applied to Internet media. According to the anthropologist Hall, founder of the concept of proxemic distance, argues that proxemic distance is based on the fact that the territory is a place of communicative exchange, where 'man observes uniform distances in his relations with others' (1966, p. 143). In particular, he distinguishes between the following types of distances: intimate distance (direct contact to ~ 0.45 m), personal distance (0.45 m to 1.25 m), social distance (1.25 m to 3.60 m) and finally, public distance (3.60 m and above) irrespective of the socio-cultural environment (*ibid*., p. 143).

The empirical study I conducted on the pseudonyms on the Internet was presented in a previous book of mine with the title: *The Pseudonym of the Internet, a Name between Anonymity and Privacy* (2006) which is based on my doctoral thesis (2005). In this work, I analyzed the motivations of users for constructing their names. For this purpose, a questionnaire was put online (2002–2003). Subsequently, 300 responses were analyzed. The findings showed that some of the users derived their pseudonyms from objects belonging to their privacy (about 50%). Moreover, by connecting themselves in forums, chats and blogs, users have become part of a membership system (blog on sustainable development, etc.) which they identify with choices and some of which may be passed on to the civil society through social networks like *Facebook* (demonstrations, riots…).

For the book that was published in April 2012 by Editions *L'Harmattan* a questionnaire had been put online. This questionnaire covered all of the new social practices on the Internet including the notion of the hierarchy as well as social practice. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions. Its implementation, as well as the collection and compilation of data, were managed by IDRAC, a business school based in Montpellier (France). In particular, questions 19 and 20 focused on the notion of the hierarchy in society. They were formulated as follows: 'Do you feel that there is a hierarchy between you and some Net users (referring to skills, personality, seduction or other criteria, etc.)?'; 'In the case of an affirmative response, could you explain that in a few words.' 1,063 respondents of the sample (1209 respondents) answered question 19. In particular, 22% (229) answered 'yes' while 78% (834) answered 'no'. To put it differently, 78% of Internet users believe that the relationship between users of the digital world is a relation built on equality. This implies that instances, such as the hierarchy, which is an integral part of our civil society in France, are not entirely applicable to the virtual society. Hierarchy pervasive in civil society is connected to the conquest of territories and the survival of the dominant group. In contrast, the social practices on the Internet, such as the avoidance of the hierarchy, seem to result from two parameters: on the one hand, from a physically uniform territory common to all users and, on the other hand, the registration of the other on the screen, among other things, on the private territory of the Net user. I hypothesized that the proxemic distance generated by all the users/machines, corresponds to the intimate territory of the Net user who uses a

symbolic inscription of his alter ego and which is available on the screen, webcam, etc.

2. THE PSEUDONYM ON THE INTERNET: IDENTITY BUILDING AND HIDDEN DISCOURSE

The Net surfer can also use their pseudonym to position themselves as facing a challenge to the society. In general, there are Net surfers whose pseudonyms express their demands or opinions, and there are others who arouse emotions. With reference to news articles posted, Net surfers have the opportunity to make comments. To illustrate this phenomenon, I will present some pseudonymous which identify commentaries on important events, such as the World Cup of Football. The latter was held from June 11 to July 11, 2010, in Johannesburg in South Africa. The French team (the Blues) lost, their coach, Raymond Domenech was fired. This information, available through the MSN portal, has been the subject of an article whose coverage was as follows: AFP Last Updated: Monday, September 6, 2010, 18:15, Raymond Domenech dismissed 'for gross misconduct, without negotiation' according to the FFF. It was followed by 308 comments as of 6 September 2010. As of September 8, 2010, we identified 150 pseudonyms.

Thus, the creation of Internet onomastic may refer to the utterance of judgements in the world of football, membership in a particular football club, or the formulation of criticism of the protagonists of the events recounted by MSN (see Table 1). To understand the nature of these controversies, refer to a summary of the events that made the headlines of this portal. At this event, several incidents occurred including the refusal of the Blues (French football team) to train following the exclusion of Nicolas Anelka. This decision was subject to a statement read by Raymond Domenech, the coach. Furthermore, the costs of the hotel hosting the French team as selected by the State Secretary of Sports, Rama Yade, were sources of controversy.

Table 1 – Aliases referring to judgements or opinions about the world of football
anti_FFF = against the French Federation of Football
DecuDuFoot (déçu du foot) = disappointed by football
deal deal = association of the football universe to that of the commerce
vive Domenech
psg 91 = (Football Club du Paris Saint-Germain)
Poubelledu13 = Marseille'sdustbin or Rhône'sdustbin
politicards-profiteurs = political person and scroungers
Source: Martin, 2012 http://news.fr.msn.com/m6-actualite/france/article.aspx?ucpg=9&cp-documentid=154588161 # uc2Lst Accessed September 8, 2010

The analysis of the autonyms shows (Table 1) that some Net surfers wanted to show their disagreement or agreement with such tragic events that made the coverage section (dismissal of Raymond Domenech without serious negotiation) by employing the following pseudonyms: *anti_FFF* (against the French Federation of Football), *DecuDuFoot* (disappointed by football), *deal deal* (association between the world of football and that of commerce), *vive Domenech* (however, this Net surfer is an admirer of Domenech). Other Net surfers assume their pseudonyms as a reference to their memberships or their rejection of other clubs: *poubelledu13* (Marseille's dustbin or Rhône's dustbin), *psg 91* (Paris Saint-Germain Football Club). Finally, two names refer to Rama Yade and the controversy she

created in the selection of the hotel in South Africa: *monsieur le ministre, politicards-profiteurs* (political person and scrounger).

On MSN. fr, each Net surfer can write comments in which there is the use of words in relation to the law concerned. There are examples of blasphemy, obscenity and defamation, etc. Furthermore, the expression *political person and scrounger*, mentioned above corresponds, on the one hand, to the Net surfer's pseudonym and, on the other, to his or her judgement about Rama Yade. In this context, the French government has created an official portal:
https://www.internet-signalement.gouv.fr/PortailWeb/planets/Accueil!input.action.
They receive reports on illegal content found on the Internet.

If the Net surfers are building some of their pseudonyms as the holders of demands or opinions, there are others who bring emotional contents. Generally speaking, Plutchik (2003) identified eight families of basic emotions: grief, fear, anger, joy, trust, disgust, anticipation and surprise (in Blumenthal 2009: 44). For illustration purposes, refer to the following twenty-four autonyms whose contents refer to the item 'emotion' as well as to the statements that appeared on a separatist forum of the province of Quebec, Canada. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – opinions/emotions (24)				
Diantre! (Damn!)	*shokin*	*Héhé*	*Tabarnack*	*BéniOuiOui*
Insomnia	*Néant*	*necro99*	*Obi Wan Celeri*	*QuebecEnRuine*
shadow of light	*Somno-bulis*	*Temps Noirs*	*TestaMora*	*Deicidus*
JaYa	*qarnacier*	*Shacal*	*ViRuZ*	*Le Magnifique*
Respect	*The Godfather*	*Vielhomme*	*ZeRyT*	
Source: Martin, 2012 http://www.independance-quebec.com/forum/forum-18.html accessed August 27, 2010				

We find some interjections in the form of insults: *Damn!*, *Shokina* for 'shocking' with the meaning 'shocking' in French, *Hehe*, *Tabarnack* (Quebec insult created from the word 'tabernacle'), a group of pseudonyms revolved around feelings as doubt or defeat, *BéniOuiOui* (Yes man), *Insomnia*, *Néant* (None), *necro99* whose apocope 'necro' refers to an element from the Greek 'dead body' used to build the nouns and adjectives learned vocabulary, *Obi Wan Celery* autonym mocking the character Obi-Wan Kenobi, a hero of the film 'Star Wars', *QuebecEnRuine*, *shadow of light*, *Somnobulis*, *Temps Noirs* (Black Time), *TestaMora*, anthroponyms referring to the emotions of despair or disillusionment. As for the remaining autonyms, they are associated with the independence of Quebec: *Deicidus* (I've decided) neologism resembling a Latin form; *Jaya* for yes, yes. Some synthesize anger or fear as qarnacier for carnivorous, *Shacal* for jackal, *ViRuZ* for viruses. Finally, we find very different pseudonyms like: *Le Magnifique* (The Beautiful), *Respect*, *The Godfather*, and *Vielhomme*, *ZeRyT* (the rite).

The examples presented above were selected among 1,505 pseudonyms collected and studied (*in* Martin 2012, p. 186).

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it appears that the nomination on the Internet through pseudonyms serves two different purposes, namely identity creation and positioning in the virtual society through claims, emotions, etc. These social practices show a particular investment the Net surfer makes when creating their pseudonym, in general from his or her private space. Other questions arise from this observation. If a pseudonym is used for naming or protesting, does this not mean that its purpose is to express what cannot be said within civil society? Is this not confusion between private and public space? Finally, does digital society not stand as an opposing force to civil society?

The analysis of pseudonyms in this study shows that they are conjugated in the first person singular because both have the status of speaker and noun space. The personal pronoun 'I' is a deictic locating the speaker in the communication situation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980, p. 40). In this case, because the multidimensional status of the pseudonym covers a single entity, an autonym comes disguised in the form of an 'I'; its value could be that of a deictic. The status of multidimensional pseudonyms on the Internet also shows a specific over investment (demands, affiliations, opinions, emotions, etc.) which would take precedence over the role in anthroponomy in general. Indeed, these autonyms can also highlight expectations or supposed qualities on a dating site (Batard, 2007), be created from the personal story (Martin, 2006, p. 126). In the cases of comments relating to topics around forums or articles from online newspapers, it appears that users would use its noun space to amplify a point of view, a claim, an emotion, etc.

After this analysis of the construction of personal and public territories through cultural management proxemics distance, we find that the common invariant to the structuring of space remains precisely proxemics distance. As we have noted, the latter comes to moult ways: polychrony, monochrony and, within these same structures, it is again updated according to the culture. If proxemics distance written into the intimate space of the Internet can influence in the management of its relations on the Internet, other factors can infer that process. This representation has the user of the virtual society in general and, more specifically, areas which it wants to connect (blogs, online newspapers, games, etc.). Some have created a representation of the virtual world as an object at risk, which involves setting up protection from his personal space, while other users of the media have a more open approach. These different operations result in different behaviour of those existing in normal society.
To appeal to the territory of the Internet and social practices it induces, echoes the one hand, physical space occupied by the user of the Internet, needing relationship between the keyboard and screen and returns that Hall was defined as a type of intimate distance and, on the other hand, a symbolic space that registered the other in a friendly and familiar network. The establishment of pseudonyms referring to the privacy of Internet users, enrolment reports to the other on the personal territory of the user of the Internet, these modes do not they open on a redefinition of social norms being in civil society, but updated differently in virtual space?

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