

# The Concept of Time and Space on the Internet Analyzed through the Pseudonymous

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**Abstract:** *If the digital society is rooted in civil society, it does not duplicate. Indeed, a great number of social practices are put into place both in the real world as well as in the virtual world and are organized around the same objects: time and space; however, they differ in their realization. The Internet is at the crossroads of two phenomena that oppose one another with respect to both their concepts and the social practices involved; these are anonymity and privacy life. Quite clearly a number of phenomena have emerged from these different Internet approaches. So, what are the consequences of these new concepts of time and space on Internet?*

**Keywords:** Time, Space, Virtual society, Pseudonymous.

## 1. Introduction

The Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC) are at the origin of the implementation of some altogether new paradigms: time and space have been modified. The permanent connectivity of people through electronic objects will have a deep impact on the organizational structure of the various civil societies in the world. Thus, the Internet allows users to communicate by overcoming geographical boundaries. Moreover, it may involve fascinating but also dangerous things. Certainly, we name ourselves to get known, then to be recognized by another: we get the information which he or she wants to give us via monitor screens, but this is not enough: unknown with respect to both his or her life and culture, he or she may live in the same city, 300 meters away, or even further away. To overcome these disadvantages, the Net surfer who wants to participate in chat rooms, to express his opinions on forums, etc., chooses to take another identity or a pseudonym. Thus, in civil society, nomination is subject to the law whereas on Internet the users identify themselves by creating their pseudonymous. In these new paradigms of time and space, the user can inform his or her close alter ego at any time of what takes place in the world by use of pseudonyms in a relationship without the hierarchy. These various elements will be examined in this study.

## 2. World can't wait or the notion of time on Internet

To understand the meaning of the expression: "World cannot wait", it is presented a lexical-semantic analysis. In a book about synonymy and analogy, Péchoin (2009) specifies that the lexical item "world" refers to the material universe, to nature, universe at the crowd, the multitude as well as to the

environment. As we can see, this meaning correlates with its direct, metaphorical or symbolic perception. From a lexical point of view, the term "world" belongs to the semantic field of space; this hypernym subsumes this class of objects and stands for "area, distance" (Rey, 2006). As for the verb "to wait", it is associated with the concept of time, with the term "time" meaning "part time" as well as "continuous period".

In addition, new technologies of information and communication (ICTs), such as the Internet, have radically altered the user's links to space and time. Whereas, in the old days distances were measured in steps or in days, they are now reduced to the second (telephony, Internet ...) and are expressed in terms of time in place of space. The representation of objects in the world has thus totally changed. The gap between these new conceptions of the world is widening as, at the appropriate time, the replacement of the geocentric model by that of the heliocentric model by Galileo.

In the former paradigm, there existed, a world with huge distances to overcome, at least on a human scale. This paradigm has been replaced by that of the "Global Village". This notion, introduced by Marshall McLuhan, refers to the reduction in distances applied to the world, considered a village. Proulx (2004) argues that: "The communication by Internet transforms the link space-time. The Internet user is released from any spatial and temporal model which could limit its access to the information. [...] There is a widespread practice in non-real time of those who consult at any time of the day or night sites scattered to various parts of the world". The myth of "Global Village" is "for the fundamentalists of Internet, the ideal of a transparent world [which] is embodied in a 'global village', without border, lawless, without constraint" (Breton, 2000).

"World can't wait" is the result of the structure of the digital paradigm. In contrast to civil society, the organizational

structure of the digital society (Internet) is closer to the undulatory dynamics than in that of solids in terms of network. Terms as “Net surfer” or “to surf the Internet wave” illustrate this phenomenon. Its space is organized around networks and any Internet user’s projects are registered in the immediacy and of flows of information. The structure of the groups involved is of an informal type: the members of chat rooms may constantly change, for example.

In the digital community, the development of a cooperative democracy is also a new societal fact and the liberation of the information “allows the Internet users to self-organize to produce collective and critical forms of a new kind” (Cardon, 2010). On the Internet, the territory of the political blogosphere differs totally from the political sphere existing in civil society. The president of the United States, Barack Obama knew how to use the Internet to communicate with the American citizens by using the following site: <http://www.barackobama.com/>.

Whether it is information sent by means of social networks, as Tweeter or Facebook, or by that of the mobile phones, to cite only a few, the reaction of the users is immediate, at least they respond in a very short time, which results to all the group of one another here, that the Internet users pass on or receive from the information, the evacuation of certain time to think and thus wait before acting. So, immediacy and novelty of information are the unique features of the application Twitter. To inform, to react to information received, to plan an action, then to realize it have become ways of functioning managed in the present or in the immediate future and either in the distant future.

### 3. Proxemic distances in virtual society

In civil society patronymic, or matronymic nouns, are used to position oneself along a genealogical line, whereas one’s first name is a means of identifying oneself within one’s family group. Furthermore, in order to join discussion forums, or chat-rooms, the internet user has to choose a pseudonym, whose origin may come from various sources – the person’s private life, cultural objects, individual traits etc. In general, the pseudonym is a particular type of nomination. It differs from other names discussed previously in relation to the following characteristics:

- 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 Legifrance, there are only regulations concerning the usage of pseudonyms in family names or in connection with the protection of authors’ rights to works published under a pseudonym or anonymously: Intellectual Property Code, sections L. 113-6 and L. 123-3.

On the Internet, creativity is plethoric and the objective put forth is to label the Net surfer. Pseudonyms on the Internet are not fixed anthroponyms as may be those in use in civil society. Indeed, these autonyms can highlight expectations or a person’s supposed qualities on a dating site (Batard, 2007) and they may be created from one’s personal history (Martin, 2006). And, more broadly, this is not the case in civil society but it is the case in virtual society through pseudonyms.

In addition, the familiarity which belongs to communicational exchanges between users, such as a familiar form of address in the French language, is of particular importance in chat rooms. Usually in the French language the

use of these pronouns marks the emotional distance. As emphasizes Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1996), these verbal markers are the following: “tu/tu for familiarity and vous/vous for distance”. The emergence of phenomena like the levelling of hierarchy, has been realized in virtual society with the disappearance of the use of “vous” in the French language, the normative and prescriptive roles that some users use within the creation of on-line glossaries and on-line dictionaries, the subtraction to the rule existing in civil society because any depositary of this or that digital object can distribute it to all Internet users. This shows that some codes and rules of civil society are no longer valid on the Internet.

Finally, the Net surfer is registered, both with an organization, set up within a particular territory: each user machine behind her keeping a physical distance almost uniform, and is also in its intimate groups, often because the computer usage is a social practice that generally takes place at home. According to the anthropologist Hall, founder of the concept of proxemic distance, proxemic distance is based on the fact that territory is a place of communicative exchange, where “man observes uniform distances in his relations with others” (1966). 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.*, 1966). The study of spatial distances between individuals or groups in different cultures and situations shows that they have invariants (four types of distance established by Hall) and differences (e.g. the personal distance is not the same between Japanese people and American people). Thus, 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.

For the book: *Se nommer pour exister – L’exemple du pseudonyme sur Internet* that was published in 2012 by Editions L’Harmattan, a questionnaire was put online. This questionnaire covered most of the new social practices occurring on the Internet, including the notion of hierarchy as a social practice. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions. Its implementation, as well as the collection and compilation of data, was managed by IDRAC, a business school based in Montpellier (France). In particular, questions 19 and 20 focused on the notion of 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.)?” 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 hierarchy, which is an integral part of our civil society, 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 levelling of 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.

Hence, the question arises of how to apply the applicable laws in civil society in a space that is not a public space, but a private one. If such laws were actually applied, then it would affect the private space of the individual and this phenomenon, in turn, would be similar to the procedures used in any dictatorial system.

#### 4. Pseudonym as private sphere

In civil society, anthroponomy sets the social being within a group. In order to join discussion forums or chat-rooms, the internet user has to choose a pseudonym. However, using a pseudonym on the Web is not done for the sole purpose of naming an individual. Thus, 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 pseudonym chosen by the user can be laden with meaning – antagonism, emotion etc. The main feature of the pseudonym on the Internet is its richness in terms of creativity as we can see in table 1.

**Table 1:** Examples of pseudonyms collated in an online survey

Psychomath	alcoolikUnanyme	rhaehl	Syntax
Sky-Galaad	arm7	Fullpower 170ch	preferred lotus

Source: Online survey conducted among 300 Internet users from June 2002 to June 2003 (Martin, 2005)

The pseudonym is Net surfer’s virtual identity. 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). Ghasarian emphasizes: “[...] the patronym, the noun of relationship that an individual receives at birth, demonstrating its identity” (1996).

The identity construction associated to anthroponomy is also linked to membership. Indeed, “[...] if to name an object in the world is to give it a meaning, to identify an individual is to recognize him” (Martin, 2005). The Internet, also called digital society, has led to a redefinition of identity and social practices used in the communication sphere. A dictionary dedicated to the Internet and to computer science and telecommunications reports the following definition: “alias chosen by a user when communicating online with others” (Office of the French Language, 2001).

From an online survey conducted between 2002 and 2003,

#### 4.2 Sustainable development forum

The corpus analysis shows different classes of pseudonyms. In Table 3, it is presented 8 autonyms constructed directly or

Martin said: “The analysis of the creative process of pseudonym shows that there is an antinomy between anonymity on the Internet and the nature of onomastic choice. Indeed, numbers indicate that the thematic classes grouping the choice of interviewees is as follow: 139 subjects chose the thematic class called personal history of the subject, while all of the other two thematic classes entitled ‘societal objects’ and ‘indexical marks of the subject's personality, that have been requested by 145 respondents” (2006).

The Net surfer can also use his pseudonym to position himself facing a challenge of the society. If the Net surfers are building some of their pseudonyms as the holders of demands or opinions, there are others who bring emotional contents. About it, Plutchik (2003) identified eight families of basic emotions: grief, fear, anger, joy, trust, disgust, anticipation and surprise (in Blumenthal 2009). These emotions are more important in private space (real or symbolic) that they can be in a space more distant (real or symbolic).

#### 4.1 Nintendo forum

From a forum dedicated to Nintendo, different pseudonyms have been collated. In table 2, we can see three pseudonyms which show that the users are fans of the Nintendo games.

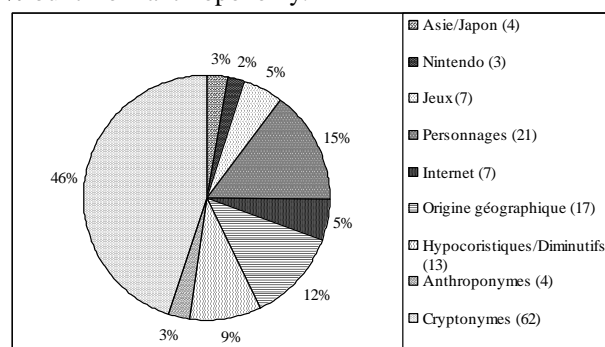
**Table 2:** Examples of pseudonyms collated on forum Nintendo

NintendoFan	fandenintendo	nInTeNdOv-I-p
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Source: Pseudonyms collated on August 2010 (Martin, 2012)

We can see the repartition of classes of pseudonyms collated on forum Nintendo:

- 4 % built from Asia/Japan;
- 2 % built from brandname Nintendo;
- 5 % built from games;
- 15 % built from personages;
- 5 % built from Internet;
- 12 % built from geographic origin;
- 9 % built from hypocoristic nouns and nicknames;
- 3 % built from anthroponomy.



**Figure 1:** Distribution of different pseudonyms collated on forum Nintendo

indirectly from the topic of the forum in reference with the nature.

**Table 3:** Examples of pseudonyms in relation with the nature

abeille (bee)	colibri	GGreen	greenzer
bioeco	tomatesdelatreille (tomatoes from the pergola)	mareebasse (low tide)	cielnature (sky – nature)

Source: Pseudonyms collated on <http://www.developpementdurable.com/>  
Accessed 4 September 2010 (Martin 2012, p. 160)

The category mentioned above illustrates that the distribution of its autonyms can be integrated into more different sub-categories such as whose pseudonyms are built around the term “bio” with 7 occurrences (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Examples of pseudonyms built with the root “bio”

bioeco (organic-ecology)	chacunsonbio (each its organic)	evydemmentbio (of course organic)	ma cantine bio (my organic restaurant)
bioetglamour (organic and glamour)	cosmetique bio (organic cosmetic)	laurence-aboneobio (Laurence subscribed to organic)	

Source: Pseudonyms collated on <http://www.developpementdurable.com/>  
 Accessed 4 September 2010 (Martin 2012, p. 160)

The prefix bio “is a borrowing from Greek-bio, representing the noun that means the bios not the fact of life, but how to live the lifestyle of humans (sometimes animal), which concretely means experience, resources, and the late period, the crowd, the world” (Rey, 2006). We can note that each of these autonyms synthesizes an ideological position: the world’s “bio”.

#### 4.3. The field of emotions

On other forums in relation with elements affecting the subject in his private sphere, we can find the construction of autonyms into the field of emotions in a more intimate setting. On a forum dedicated to health: Doctissimo (<http://forum.doctissimo.fr/>), it is mentioned diseases such as anorexia and bulimia. Some examples of these pseudonyms are presented in Table 5.

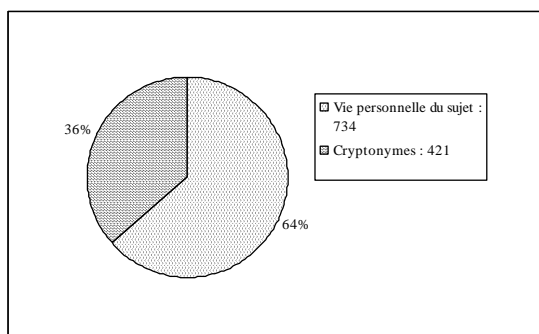
**Table 5:** Examples of pseudonyms around diseases such as anorexia and bulimia

aapel (call for help)	help-me-please99	lost44	the-heart-of-a-girl-broken
isuffer	mal 2 vivre (unhappiness)	mon-mal-de-vivre (unhappiness)	Acoeurperdu the term “perdu” (lost) refers to the emotional suffering of the Internet

Source: Pseudonyms collated on <http://forum.doctissimo.fr/>  
 Accessed 17 August 2010 (Martin 2012, p. 160)

These pseudonyms are built from terms belonging to the semantic field of illness and suffering. Thus the process of creative pseudonym highlights the suffering of the Net surfer and synthesizes with particularly indicatives autonyms.

In a study conducted by Martin (2012) with a survey put online, we also observe that pseudonymous built from private space appears to predominate in the large numbers of case as we can see in figure 2 (personal life: 64%, cryptonym: 36%) for a total of 1155 pseudonyms.



**Figure 2:** Distribution of the ensemble of pseudonyms

This multidimensional status of a pseudonym on the Internet has been examined using various examples taken from newspapers’ on-line editions as well as discussion forums (diseases, sustainable development, national identity, games, etc.).

## 5. Conclusion

Finally, analysis of pseudonyms in this study shows that they are conjugated in first person singular because both have the status of speaker and noun space. Furthermore, the status of multidimensional pseudonym 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. As we mentioned, time and space are different in the Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC). So, on the Internet, it seems that there is telescoping between actual physical distance common to all Net surfers, which falls within the distance listed by Hall as intimate (direct contact to ~ 0.45 m) (1966), where private space is often located to access this media and the symbolic distance between the Net surfer and his interlocutor. These social practices show a particular investment of the Net surfer in his or her pseudonym created 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?

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