

Pseudonyms in Online Discussion Forums: A Psychosocial Approach

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Ever since going mainstream in the 2000s, user comments on online news platforms have been held in relatively low esteem. Frequently, this has been echoed in academic research by a tendency to focus exclusively on user interactions and, thereby, losing sight of the role of the platform itself. Based on a symptomatic reading of user pseudonyms in discussion threads on two European populist news platforms, this article works out the manifold ways in which users and their interactions are closely related to the platforms on which these interactions take place, reframing online commenting – as well as critiques thereof (academic or otherwise) – through a reconceptualization of the user-platform relationship. From this perspective, then, users alone cannot be held responsible for a climate that is irreconcilable with ideals of deliberation. Instead, the relationship between users and platforms emerges as a simultaneously defeating and self-defeating dynamic.

Depuis qu'ils se sont banalisés dans les années 2000, les échanges de commentaires sur les plateformes d'actualités en ligne ont été tenus en piètre estime. Chez les universitaires, cette attitude a souvent correspondu à une

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tendance à se focaliser sur les interactions entre les utilisateurs, au détriment du rôle de la plateforme elle-même. Cet article s'appuie sur une lecture symptomatique des échanges entre utilisateurs de pseudonymes, saisis dans des fils de discussion sur deux plateformes européennes d'actualités, de tendance populiste. Il procède à l'étude des modes très variés selon lesquels les utilisateurs et leurs interactions se rattachent étroitement à ces plateformes. Il opère un recadrage des commentaires en ligne – ainsi que des critiques, universitaires ou autres, qui leur sont adressées – en reconceptualisant le couple utilisateur-plateforme. Dans cette perspective on comprend que les utilisateurs ne peuvent pas porter à eux seuls la responsabilité d'un climat devenu irréconciliable avec les idéaux de la délibération. Ce qui apparaît plutôt, c'est que la relation entre les utilisateurs et la plateforme obéit à une dynamique à la fois destructrice et auto-destructrice.

The question of whether full, last, first, or no name is expected in social settings may appear to be a trivial issue that only a sociologist could love. But it is in fact the kind of little detail in which big social meanings may reside.¹

“Dr Evil,” “Billy Elliot,” “Itsruddish,” “Working Man,” “loonyleftie” (dailymail.co.uk). Clearly, these pseudonyms say something about how users themselves conceive of their functions in online discussion forums and commentary threads. Bernie Hogan traces the use of pseudonyms to the mid-19th century, where authors and artists sought to mask features that they “believed would lead to unnecessary dismissal or outright rejection.”² In other instances, artists wanted “to distinguish their artistic work from other aspects of their life.” “[I]t is the artistic use that may be most closely aligned with the contemporary uses of pseudonyms in social media,” Hogan sums up his findings.³

Although I strongly support Hogan’s emphasis on the artistic, creative aspects of pseudonyms, I have chosen a different focus for my analysis of names in online discussion forums. Inquiring into what kinds of names a specific online platform attracts—in other words, what pseudonyms prove to

¹ Gary T. Marx, “What’s in a Name? Some Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity,” in *The Information Society* 15, no. 2 (2006): 100-1.

² Bernie Hogan, “Pseudonyms and the Rise of the Real-Name Web”, in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. by John Hartley, Jean Burgess and Axel Bruns (London: Blackwell, 2013), 294.

³ *Ibid.*

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be typical and characteristic of a given platform—my study inevitably gravitates towards the *symptomatic*. This is not to dismiss the creativity that goes into pseudonyms and the actions attached to them; rather, this is to shed light on *user-platform relations* and the ways in which these relations *inform, channel* and *limit* such creativity. Focusing thusly on intersubjective and inter-agentic relations, my approach is in line with the tradition of (mainly British) psychosocial studies⁴ and psychoanalytically oriented cultural analysis.⁵

Approaching online anonymous commenting from a relational perspective becomes relevant in the face of the overall low esteem in which the practice is held.⁶ Increasingly more news and information pages online either radically limit their on-site commentary function,⁷ which since the mid-2000s

⁴ See Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, (London: Sage, 2000 [2013]); see also Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser, “Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies”, in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 13 (2008): 346–365.

⁵ Alfred Lorenzer, “Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse,” in Alfred Lorenzer *et al.* (eds.), *Kultur-Analysen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), 11-97.

⁶ For instance Stromer-Galley and Wichowski refer to a *Boston Globe* article by Nicholas Thompson as exemplary for this common attitude towards online debate: “[Thompson] argued that online political conversation is ‘sophomoric,’ ranting, full of insults, and ‘an insult to democracy.’” (Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Alexis Wichowski, “Political Discussion Online,” in *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. by Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 168–187; quoting Nicholas Thompson, “Freedom to flame. Online political chat is an insult to democracy. Can it be fixed?” *The Boston Globe* (October 13, 2002).

⁷ The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Germany, for example, has radically limited debate to very few articles; *Spiegel Online* has closed down its commentary functions for certain political issues, so has *Bild.de*. See also: Klint Finley, “A brief history of the end of the comments,” *Wired* (October 8, 2015) <http://www.wired.com/2015/10/brief-history-of-the-demise-of-the-comments-timeline/> (accessed February 23, 2016).

has been a standard feature, or demand for users to access this function via a social network account so as to assure real-name identification.⁸ Once users must identify themselves with their real name, it is believed, they will adapt their commentary style to higher moral standards, such as those of deliberation—that is, critical rationality as well as “reasoned, reciprocal, inclusive, equalitarian, sincere, and coercion-free argumentation.”⁹ The implication is thus that the possibility for users to remain anonymous in online forums is one of the root causes for the irrational and irresponsible behavior that has been vexing platform owners.¹⁰

A body of academic work has begun to shed light on the above assumption¹¹ and, indeed, as I will discuss below, there can be little doubt that anonymity/pseudonymity introduces specific modifications to the ways people interact with their surroundings. Yet, the problem with the assumption as it is formulated and researched in much of the academic literature is that it puts the spotlight almost exclusively on the users and, in so doing, risks losing

⁸ This has become the standard in Norway, see for instance *Aftenposten.no*, *vg.no*, *dagsavisen.no*.

⁹ Lincoln Dahlberg, “Exclusions of the Public Sphere Conception,” in *Javnost - The Public* 20, no. 1 (2013): 22.

¹⁰ See for instance Erik Tornes, “Farvell, anonymitet”, in *Aftenposten* (November 25, 2013) http://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kommentarer/Farvel_-anonymitet-7363457.html (accessed February 23, 2016).

¹¹ See Daegon Cho and K. Hazel Kwon, “The impacts of identity verification and disclosure of social cues on flaming in online user comments,” in *Computers in Human Behaviour* 51 (2015): 363–372; Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak, “Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye contact on toxic online disinhibition,” in *Computers in Human Behaviour* 28, no. 2 (2012): 434–443.

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sight of the platform's role in user interactions. The specific appeal of the platform's output, which supplies users with incentives to comment and prepares the ground for user interactions, is mostly treated as a stable factor and, by way of this stability, as a neutral one.¹² Against this tendency, I want to read pseudonyms on two mainstream tabloid news platforms, *bild.de* in Germany and *Mail Online* in the UK, for what they say about how users construct their roles and functions *in relation to* platforms.

The pseudonyms I have analysed cast the platform's part in the relation as in stark contrast to the modest notions of facilitation and enhancement that are foregrounded by the term "platform." As Tarleton Gillespie has pointed out, "platform" has come to function as a trope for "the online services of content intermediaries [...] by which others will come to understand and judge them."¹³ Thus, the term, with its denotations of *firm ground* and *elevated position*, and with its connotations of *facilitating action* and *making this action perceivable*, is opportune for these intermediaries, since it suggests that their influence is limited to the above functions, in this way concealing less altruistic, corporate interests.

¹² This becomes perceivable, for example, in an otherwise informative paper by the Norwegian media scholar Dag Elgesem: "The political correctness-argument and the regulation of online debates", presented at the *After the Crisis Workshop*, January 9, 2014, University of Oslo, Norway.

¹³ Tarleton Gillespie, "The politics of 'platforms'", in *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 348.

When *Bild*, one of the platforms under analysis in this article, advertises for itself with the claim “Make up your own mind” (*Bild Dir Deine eigene Meinung*),¹⁴ it becomes perceivable how far platform logic has pervaded other media types, too. Therefore, when I extend the term “platform” to the discussion forums and commentary threads of online news providers, it is in a sense that takes Tarleton’s critique on board and makes it a central theme. Platform in the context of this paper, then, means an institution that has a *formative influence* beyond its strategic image as facilitator and sponsor of (semi)public debate. The nature of this influence and its traces in user interaction is at the heart of this article.

Pseudonyms as a special case of naming

In her interpersonal account of anonymity, Julie Ponesse defines anonymity as “the result of a specific exercise of control, in which true pieces of information about a person are concealed from others with an effect of dissociability.”¹⁵ According to Ponesse, anonymity is never a complete concealment of identity, never complete “namelessness,” but always an act of concealment that must be seen in relation to (a) what it makes possible to be disclosed and (b) the context in which the balance between concealment and disclosure is put to

¹⁴ Advertising campaign “BILD Dir Deine Meinung”, *Jung von Matt*, 2009.

¹⁵ Julie Ponesse, “Navigating the Unknown: towards a positive conception of anonymity,” in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2013): 343.

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work. Dissociation is the defining moment in these relations. That which is disclosed is disclosed because it can be dissociated from those aspects of identity that remain concealed.

When Bernie Hogan defines pseudonyms as a “*practice* [...] often meant to facilitate nonidentifiable content,”¹⁶ this suggests that pseudonyms can be seen to function as placeholders for that which is dissociated and can thus offer links between what is concealed and what is disclosed—links between association and dissociation. On the basis of the material at hand (pseudonyms and comments in online forums), while it is neither possible nor desirable to say something about the *subjective* meaning of the pseudonyms for individual users, what is relevant here is that the act of dissociation on part of the user seems to render ownership issues ambiguous. To whom does that which has been dissociated in an anonymous interaction belong? To whom does it refer? While it is the user who brings it forth, the moment of dissociation seems to also *dedicate* it to someone or/and something else, and an apparent addressee of this dedication is the platform that gives the user interaction its context.¹⁷ I am interested here in this aspect of attribution. In order to tease out how pseudonyms characterise the relationship between the users and (their

¹⁶ Hogan, *Pseudonyms and the Rise of the Real-Name Web*, 293.

¹⁷ In view of the distributed architecture of the internet, speaking about context is always dangerous; however, I am here concerned with the most direct frame of reference for specific interactions.

activities on) a given platform, my reading will depart from those *forms of user names* that prove typical of the discussion threads under analysis.

Methodology

As mentioned above, my focus on user-platform relations is based on psychosocial studies with a psychoanalytic orientation, and here specifically on the *depth-hermeneutic approach to cultural analysis*, developed by the German sociologist and psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer.¹⁸ Depth hermeneutics seeks to critically examine cultural practice by detecting the contradictions and conflicts in individual enactments and articulations of sociocultural positions and by submitting these to an interpretation that combines knowledge from cultural studies, sociology and psychoanalysis. Its method of “scenic understanding”¹⁹ builds on the dialectic between the individual and the social. It holds that social relations can be abduced from individual actions and, in turn, that the blueprints of individual experience are dormant in social relations. Scenic understanding takes the former route; in this way, the researcher’s subjective experience is granted central importance. The researcher is to approach her/his material in a mode of evenly hovering

¹⁸ Lorenzer, “Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse.”

¹⁹ Alfred Lorenzer, *Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970 [1973]).

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attention,²⁰ attentive to her/his own affective responses. Where does one's flow of reception come to a halt? Where are the moments of puzzlement in which one's culturally attuned expectations fail? Scenic understanding zooms in on these moments in order to open up their potential for meaning through a process of free association. It is in this way that I have approached the user names in the discussion threads of the two platforms, starting my inquiry from those aspects of the pseudonyms that appear most striking, fascinating and/or puzzling. In the application of this method, my findings are meant as exploratory, experimental and exemplary; my aim is to develop models from case studies.

Material

This article is part of a bigger project in which I assess forms of interaction in user-user and user-platform relations online.²¹ For the present article, I have looked into online discussions of financial and economic issues on two European news platforms: *bild.de* in Germany and *dailymail.co.uk* in Britain. The focus on financial issues is exemplary and motivated by the tension

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (1911–1913), 109–120.

²¹ See "Steffen Krüger," Department of Media and Communication, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, <http://www.hf.uio.no/imk/english/people/aca/steffk/index.html> (accessed February 17, 2016).

between the concrete and the abstract in financial matters. It refers discussions to an often vague notion of lack that has proven (a) productive in allowing characteristic aspects of form in online discussion to come to the fore and (b) a satisfactory basis for comparing these forms with each other. Yet, other thematic *foci* would have been possible as well and will be considered in future research.

My choice of news platforms has been guided by the centrality of these two outlets in their respective countries. Both share a strong populist orientation, aiming to articulate—and channel—the concerns of the “common people.” Following Krämer’s work on “media populism,” populist news platforms can be described as having a decisively emotional, moralist, “sometimes aggressive” and commonsensical appeal.²² Arguably, due to this appeal, which suggests strong affective relations between platform and users, the selected platforms are an obvious fit for inquiries into such relations. Future research must therefore seek to extend its scope of inquiry by including broadsheet news providers, such as *The Guardian* and *Spiegel Online*.

Turning to the concrete material now, extracting user names from five discussion threads on *bild.de* resulted in 359 different pseudonyms.²³ In the

²² Benjamin Krämer, “Media Populism: A conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects,” in *Communication Theory* 24 (2014): 46.

²³ Florian Kain and Béla Anda, Kanzleramtsminister Peter Altmaier ‘Deutschland geht’s so gut wie lange nicht mehr,’ *bild.de* (August 8, 2014)

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case of *dailymail.co.uk* this number had already been superseded after searching through four discussion threads, which resulted in 401 different pseudonyms.²⁴

<http://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/inland/peter-altmaier/interview-mit-kanzleramtsminister-peter-altmaier-ich-will-endlich-wieder-twittern-37187920.bild.html> (accessed August 11, 2014); no author specified “René Benko (37) Aufsteiger aus Tirol gelingt mit Karstadt größter Coup,” *bild.de* (August 17, 2014) <http://www.bild.de/geld/wirtschaft/rene-benko/neuer-karstadt-hoffnungstraeger-37262376.bild.html> (accessed August 17, 2014); no author specified, “Dispo-Hammer – Jeder Fünfte lebt über seine Verhältnisse,” *bild.de* (January 10, 2014) <http://www.bild.de/geld/wirtschaft/girokonto/jeder-fuenfte-deutsche-lebt-ueber-seine-verhaeltnisse-34184002.bild.html> (accessed August 7, 2014); no author specified, “Energiestreit – Drehen uns die Russen den Gashahn zu,” *bild.de* (September 26, 2014) <http://www.bild.de/geld/wirtschaft/erdgas/drehen-uns-die-russen-den-gashahn-ab-37906890.bild.html> (accessed September 30, 2014); no author specified, “Was Sie jetzt wissen müssen—Schicksals-Woche für den Euro,” *bild.de* (January 19, 2015) <http://www.bild.de/bild-plus/geld/wirtschaft/euro/schicksals-woche-39390792.bild.html> (accessed January 19, 2015).

²⁴ Victoria Bischoff, “Will you have to take a personality test to get a loan? The ten questions that you could be asked,” *Mail Online* (September 2, 2015) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/cardsloans/article-3218679/Borrowers-applying-credit-cards-personal-loans-mortgages-soon-face-personality-test-accepted.html> (accessed November 10, 2015); Holly Black, “Should investors sell up, sit tight or even buy ‘cheap’ shares? And is your pension in peril? A market mayhem survival guide,” *Mail Online* (August 25, 2015) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/guides/article-3210700/Spooked-Great-Fall-China-DON-T-PANIC-read-Money-Mail-s-exclusive-survival-guide.html> (accessed August 25, 2015); Lee Boyce, “Solar panel returns set to be slashed by 90% from January,” *Mail Online* (August 27, 2015) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/bills/article-3212979/Solar-panel-returns-set-slashed-90-January.html> (accessed September 2, 2015); Lee Boyce, “Virgin Trains axe railcard perk for those travelling at peak-time—and it means some will see their journey price TREBLE,” *Mail Online* (August 26, 2015) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/bills/article-3211566/Virgin-Trains-axe-railcard-perk-travelling-peak-time-means-journey-price-TREBLE.html> (accessed September 2, 2015).

Interpretation

In the following I will present my central observations and interpretations for each platform, before relating these to my observations of the forms of user interaction on these platforms. I will round off my reading with a comparative part in which I refer my findings back to the contextual frame outlined in the introduction.

Bild.de

Even though *bild.de* advertises itself as a page that explicitly encourages users to choose their own pseudonyms, I was puzzled to find a significant amount of names that did not appear as pseudonyms at all but as plausible combinations of first and last names: “Marcus Brinkmann,” “Marleen Scholz,” “Michael Fischer,” “Ralph Schroeter” etc. Over one third—133 out of 359 names—can be classified as potential real names (although, as I will show, their plausibility varies considerably). This practice of offering real names instead of, or *as* aliases, is nearly absent from *Mail Online* (18 out of 401) as well as other platforms, such as *The Guardian*, *Spiegel*, or *vgd.no* in Norway.

Using one’s real name suggests a demonstration of strength, determination, and a denial of playfulness: *We don’t need to hide behind pseudonyms to say what we want to say*, this gesture demonstrates, *we stand by our opinions and make our opinions count*. In the case of the real-name-like

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pseudonyms on *bild.de*, this impression of strength and pride is specifically tied to the connotations of “middle-of-the-road,” ethnic German-ness. Already present in the above-cited examples, these national connotations become even more obvious in names such as “Hans Meier,” “Siegfried Müller” or “Walter Bauer,” examples that have a slightly exaggerated, almost stereotypical quality of male German-ness about them.

This tendency of German mainstreaming in the choice of display names appears to bear an intimate connection with the tabloid paper’s desire to be an integral part of the German national community and to speak from its midst.²⁵ Indeed, reading through this group of names, what they seem to say is *here are the users who befit the news medium at the heart of the nation*. And while the sets of names quoted above point towards a tendency of increasing stereotypy, other choices point even more clearly into this direction, with “Klaus Muster” suggesting a play on “Max Mustermann,” the German *John Doe* and “Otto Normalverbraucher” (literally: “Otto normal consumer”) making the commentator literally turn him/herself into an “average Joe.”

This tendency to exaggerate German identity is continued in the adoption of names borrowed from well-known German soccer players: “Gerhard Müller,” “Bernd Schuster,” “alex meyer,” “Arne Friedrich.” Next to

²⁵ See the above mentioned advertising campaign “BILD Dir Deine Meinung” (*Jung von Matt*, 2009). See also: Gerhard Henschel, *Gossenreport – Betriebsgeheimnisse der Bild-Zeitung* (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2006).

the footballers are other prominent figures: scientists (“Konrad Lorenzer”), (West) German entertainers (“Herbert Kuhn,” “Hans Hartz”), but also internationally known actors (“Matt Dillon”), film and cartoon characters (“Ivan Drago,” “Walter White,” “Dagobert D[uck]” [*i.e.* Scrooge McDuck]), folk-mythological figures (“Robin Hood”), pop musicians (“Mark Bolan”) etc. (the latter are no longer part of the plausible real-name category).

Whereas these above hints and references already add something buoyant to user-platform relations, other variations suggest a definitive regression into absurdity (“molle cyl” [“mole-cule”], “Kai Pirinha” [“caipirinha” + “Kai”], “Kartoffel Mann” [“potato man”]). This group of absurd, nonsensical names is the biggest one in the threads looked into, with about 140 pseudonyms that I associated with this clownish, ludicrous quality. Finding plausible, ethnic German names alongside more stereotypical renderings, as well as openly, or even “meta-stereotypical” ones, mixed in with a flurry of known figures in a soup of silliness points to a risk whose endpoint would be the entire *dramatis personae* sliding off into absurdity.

Bild.de: Pseudonyms in light of forum interaction

Turning to the question of forms of interaction within discussion threads, the attempt to join *bild.de* in talking from the core of the nation is clearly escalating. What dominates here is users attempting firmly and, at times,

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aggressively to take over the editorial line, to steer the platform and its journalistic output in their direction. Interestingly, while on part of the pseudonyms, this desire is enfeebled, subverted and to a degree even led *ad absurdum* by the build-up of a regressively playful element, there is little in the discussions themselves that could corroborate this. Interaction in the forum is predominantly characterised by protest, denial, rejection and disallowance, poignantly summarised in the pseudonym “So nicht” (“Not like that”). Rarely did I find a situation in which a slightly more playful mode of interaction relaxed the irritable, resentful atmosphere in the discussions.

The gesture of “putting one’s foot down,” characteristic of discussions on *bild.de*, is mainly directed at the objects, themes and issues that the platform’s articles supply users with. Yet the platform as medium is deeply involved in the battle over truths and opinions, even though its position in the various conflicts is ever shifting. In some instances, commentators join the platform’s editorial line in its ambition to define German culture while, at other times, commentators are strongly opposed to this line; in yet other cases, finally, users argue with each other over issues emerging from the articles.

In view of the overall constellation of pseudonyms and interaction forms, the absurd names seem to take on a peculiar dissociative function. In the often harsh attempts at taking over and determining the ideological direction of *bild.de*, it is the absurd names that create a distance to a sense of consequence

in the users' interactions. Thus, rather than articulating that which users seek to distance themselves from, the absurd names *create that distance*, detoxifying their interactions by signaling harmlessness: *Don't worry, it is just the "Otto Normalverbraucher" speaking!*

Dailymail.co.uk

Even though the comments on the British *dailymail.co.uk* page share a lot of characteristics with comments found on *bild.de*, the impression that I received from perusing users' pseudonyms there is a vastly different one. The tension between sober and carnivalesque takes on national identity, which defines the comments on *bild.de*, is not a particular presence in the threads here. Instead, first-name abbreviations ("BigC," "BoB," "Dave," "davedav," "DD," "jerjer," "Jimmy R," "Jonnty," "KarlB," "Keith25," "Mikey1," "trebor58," "Trixie64," "Wayne L."), together with place references ("Annie25-manchester," "bexhillbill," "brentford58," "Lancastrian," "MancMan," "Thornburyboy") are the practices forming the forum's character. Only very seldom are these combined with (pop) cultural references, like in "tim007" or in "George W."

An observation in Gary T. Marx's "Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity" triggered the association that opened up my understanding of this group of names on *Mail Online*. Delicately, Marx writes that "[t]he use of

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first names only [...] was said to traditionally be the case for both providers and clients in houses of ill repute.”²⁶ Now, I am aware that this must appear insulting; however, my main bridge for this association is that in both Marx’s historical example and the case of *Mail Online* “clients and providers” defend against the intimacy of a situation by applying a strategy, the use of first names, which highlights and *creates intimacy*. This naming practice thus constitutes a mutual pact in which participants agree to treat an intimate situation as one in which they are “amongst themselves.”

The house itself, *Mail Online*, is known for practices for which it has already gained a reputation: “Pictures of women in bikinis compete for space with stories about welfare cheats. Readers love it.” In this deadpan way *The Economist* describes the editorial line of *Mail Online*.²⁷ Relevant here is the way in which the platform is said to align two different ways of showing *nakedness* or, in other words, of facilitating voyeurism. On the one side, page-three girls serve readers’ scopophilic enjoyment—an enjoyment that is extended especially to the so-called “sidebar of shame,”²⁸ which keeps up a steady supply

²⁶ Marx, “*Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity*,” 100.

²⁷ No author specified, “Out of dead trees. The Daily Mail and general trust,” *The Economist* (April 6, 2013) <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21575824-successbut-unfortunately-not-model-others-out-dead-trees> (accessed November 10, 2015).

²⁸ Andrew Brown, “The Shocking thing about the Mail Online’s sidebar of Shame,” *The Guardian* (March 24, 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/24/mail-online-sidebar-of-shame> (accessed November 10, 2015).

of celebrities in various degrees of undress. On the other side, people who have cheated and betrayed the community are stripped off their social inconspicuousness. In both cases, the platform serves its readers/users objects for affective, imaginary enactments. *Oh, what I would do to her/him!* It is in this way that users become implicated in the platform's intimate interactions.

When, in her classic essay, *The Ego Ideal*, the psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel writes that “guilt is aroused when a limit [...] is touched or transgressed, [whereas] shame arises when a goal [...] is not reached,”²⁹ this analysis points towards an understanding of the shift between looking and being looked at that I see as virulent in the relations between *Mail Online* and its users. With the platform providing a stream of objects of defeat and transgression, doubts about the decency and morality of the users in relation to their participation on the platform are inescapable. In other words: users are prone to feel that they themselves underperform or overstep a line by accepting the offers of the platform. As “Mis Cheif” writes apropos the quality of the platform's news articles: “But we continue to read them [...] I'm just as guilty.”

Associations orbiting around the notion of “ill repute,” defeat, transgression and resentment are activated and conjured up by a wide range of

²⁹ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *The Ego Ideal: A Psychoanalytic Essay on the Malady of the Ideal*, trans. Paul Barrows (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 176.

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pseudonyms in use in the platform's threads: names pointing to notions of borderline legitimacy ("Admissibility," "Audacious," "borka," "Just one little cog," "Jaded," "Time for revolution," "New World Border," "loonyleftie") ill-humour, anger and aggression ("angry granny," "AngryTribesman," "growlley," "Grumpy," "Its Grim up North," "Cut the BS," "youbetterbelieveit," "landboss," "StonedNotStupid," "Watchit," "i really hate idiots," "Awaanbielyerheid" [Scottish: "Away and boil your head"], "attila_the_hun," "al1066," "BROADSWORD"), disengagedness ("Idontcare," "idontknow," "sleepyville," "stone6," "takingiteasy," "unsurprised," "Whatsallthefussabout," "Itsrubbish," "comfortably numb,"), sexual innuendo and corporeality ("BELCHER," "Bellydancer57," "Dr Love," "hari BABU60," "HazelEyedGirl," "Hotshot," "iamsohot," "Kitboy," "mailman," "Mashly Addison," "Secretboy," "Disgusted," "Daley Male," "danimaldaisy," "Kim Rong Un," "Old fart") as well as cynicism and fatalism ("Laughing me heed off," "Hugh Avonalaff," "Raven Mad," "Tired and weary").

Oscillating between association and dissociation, self and platform, these names entail a moment of abjection in which something that was expelled from the self is perceived with an ambivalent feeling of disgust and fascination. The impression that I receive from the reading of users' pseudonyms is that

they reproduce, return and reflect a shameful and guilty dynamic of looking and showing which emerges between the users and the *Mail Online* platform.

Dailymail.co.uk: Pseudonyms in light of forum interaction

As on *bild.de*, user discussions are characterised by protest, rejection and denial; these are either triggered in accordance with, in response to and/or as a reaction against the argumentative line of the respective article. The notions of “ill repute” are thus either attributed to the objects that the platform offers for discharge or to the platform itself, as for example in reactions to the frequent articles in which *Mail Online* suggests fear and panic as adequate user responses. Predictably, an article entitled “market mayhem survival guide” provoked obvious displays of irony, such as “WE’RE DOOOOOMED! ;)” (Johnny Euphoric), or “My advice to investors is to PANIC!!!” (Tired and Weary). Furthermore, users turned to playing a blame-game that makes clear just how aware they are of the knee-jerk, automatic reactions commonly suggested by the platform and expected of them: “Is it still ok to blame Gordon Brown?” (Johnny Euphoric); “I blame Socialism and Fiat currency” (DHare); “Bloody Wilson!!” (Freedom Democracy); “Ropert Walpole!!!” (New World Border); “i blame ramsey mac donald.....” (winstonsmith); “I

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just hate China, tatty Chinese products and disgusting Chinese food” (Bellydancer57).

Comparing these findings with naming and discussion practices on *bild.de* what one finds is an inverse situation. While on *bild.de* a significant number of pseudonyms seems to counter the harsh, resentful tone of the discussion by adding a disclaiming, silly element to it, on *dailymail.co.uk* it is the discussions with their ironic diversions and caricaturing exaggerations that counter the more sombre, (self-)deprecating tone of the pseudonyms.

Conclusion

Returning to the question of what roles and functions are referred to in users’ pseudonyms, one can say that, in the case of *Mail Online*, users use their choices of cynical, self-deprecating, grudgingly angry, corporeal and sexualised names to show that they are aware of how they are looked upon, not least since they themselves look upon the platform in this way. Simply put, many of the names pick up on an aspect of the “ill repute” associated with the platform; users thus signal a part-acceptance of the roles attributed to them by the platform, even if only with a measure of irony. Resentment and knee-jerk condemnations are presented as routinized forms of interaction, arising inevitably from the interplay between users and platform. User names on *bild.de*, in turn, challenge and ridicule their platform’s claim of speaking from

the core of the nation. Their universally applied first-name-last-name structure conjures up the ethnic German *average Joe* who tells the platform that *he* (because in most cases he is male) *does not sanctify the way that it purports to speak on his behalf*.

In response to Hogan's notions of artistry and creativity, then, one can say that pseudonyms in both forums bear a creative potential only in so far as they point to conflicts in user-platform relations and also, in so far as they make these conflicts reflectable. However, especially the strong undercurrent of irony on *dailymail.co.uk* suggests that the awareness of the contextual affordances articulated in the names exhausts itself in this articulation. As Jodi Dean remarks by drawing on Slavoj Žižek: "ideology refers to the beliefs involved when we go ahead and do something *nevertheless*. Ideology affects what we do, not what we know."³⁰ It is in this respect that, in the case of populist news platforms, the creative potential might simply not translate into practical change.

In view of deliberative standards, the attitudes that are expressed in user names on both platforms entail relevant information about the possibilities and impossibilities of their realisation in current user-platform relations. In the context of *dailymail.co.uk*, users' articulations of guilt and shame always

³⁰ Jodi Dean, "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere," in *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 101.

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refer to the services of both “clients and providers,” which is to say they signal that it is both they themselves *and* the platform that are complicit in a practice that is commonly seen to lack in quality and responsibility. In the case of *bild.de*, one can see how the populism of the platform renders deliberation problematic. With the platform operating under the premise of giving voice to “common people,” users find themselves in a relation in which to scream and shout becomes a necessity for those who want their *own* voices to be heard. Thus, it might be the very wish of the platform to represent society’s core that stands in the way of more reasoned user discussions. The harsh reactions and the references to an overly intimate, potentially implicating situation point toward user-platform relations that are so close that they are experienced as outrageous, revolting, and suffocating.

Ultimately, then, at least in the case of mainstream populist platforms, when the magazine *Wired*, in an issue published in late 2015, predicts the “end of comments,”³¹ this should not be understood as users being rightfully punished for their irresponsible behaviour and for thus marring a promising opportunity for grassroots democracy; rather, if the end of comments is nigh indeed, this might just as well release people from a “wicked spell.”

³¹ Klint Finley, “A brief history of the end of the comments.”

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