

# The Mediations of the Identity of Seniors on IT. The Case of Grand Parenthood

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**Abstract.** This paper studies a particular way to categorize people as “grand parents” instead of considering them simply as “seniors”. It describes several communicational approaches and questions the consequences of such a choice on the relation of people with IT, and especially computer mediated communication. The empirical basis of this research is constituted by the observation of several associative, political and economic organizations devoted to the defense and institutionalization of grand parenthood as a social form in France.

**Keywords:** Computer mediated communication · Generation · Grand parenthood · Mediation · Senior · Social categorization · Stereotype

This paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the social uses of IT by aged people in a particular perspective: (1) to study the way people assume the familial role of grand parents, instead of assigning them to an aged-based category as “seniors”; (2) to address the problem, not by opposing stereotypes and practices, rather by analysing how they become interdependent, when actors, institutions, firms pursue the objective to invent a social form, which is called in French “*grand parentalité*” (we can approximately translate as *grand parenthood*)<sup>1</sup> to structure it and to legitimate it; (3) to consider IT in the wide sense of various info-communicational devices by which this mediation [7, 23] can be embodied, including computer mediated communication (from now on CMC) as other media practices.

Our inquiry is grounded in the tradition of analysis of media practices, but also in the works about the social mediation of knowledge and culture [12]. The concrete basis of our research is an inquiry into several organisations (associative, editorial, industrial ones) the main activity of which is to take part in the recognition of grand parenthood. We plan to determine the place they attribute to the appropriation of media and especially CMC by grand parents, on symbolic, imaginary and practical levels.

After having discussed the process of construction of the category itself, we propose to identify major issues of this interaction between representations and computer

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<sup>1</sup> The French « *grand parentalité* », which is of common use for the organizations we study, is much more abstract and symbolic than english equivalents as « grand parenting » or « grand parenthood ». In different texts as « Rhétorique de l’image » and *Mythologies* [4, 5], Roland Barthes uses words as « *italianité* » (for Italy) or « *sinité* » (for China) to stress the imaginary dimension of categories. It sounds like “parentality”.

mediated communication, then to comment on some examples of organisational projects in their own history and specificity.

## 1 Some Social Constructions of the Idea of Generation

Everybody can observe the words we use about aged people to be all but natural. They are social constructs linked to precise stakes and projects. They change with time (for instance the way kids call their grand parents: in France “*mamie*” looked very modern in the 60’s when “*mémé*” became obsolete, but it sounds now very dated); but also with social censure (we say rather “third age” than “elderly”, as we say “hearing-impaired” instead of “deaf”). Categorization plays a role in the construction of our means of thinking because it is dependent on different interests of knowledge [13]: it has many consequences on the questions we can or cannot ask. For instance, the French nomenclatures about life ages were elaborated, first by State offices for surveys, and then by marketing techniques in order to target groups of consumers. The category of “seniors” must be considered that way. It is a compromise between the pragmatic aim to identify a profitable target and the social necessity to offer a positive representation of an age which is currently associated with negative connotations. It is also a means to shift the boundaries between the groups. For instance, as says advertising expert Alyette Defrance, “The category of seniors works better as long as the 4<sup>th</sup> age exists. The discourse on the dynamism and eternal youth of Seniors stresses implicitly the distance with the 4<sup>th</sup> age by opposing ‘privileges’ to ‘handicaps’” [11, 158]<sup>2</sup>. We have no room here to develop this analysis, but we can recall three major milestones for our subject. First, it is a dynamic process and, in a society in which youth is a value, aged people can be qualified as young; second, any categorization serves certain interests, which can be political, economic, scientific ones; third, the dominant actor of this process, marketing, privileges the “core meaning” of life styles defined by the social value of certain practices and objects. Now we can note it is very important for the question we are studying, because, both in the representation of aged people and in the way CMC is considered, the strength of this process of categorization is considerable.

On the one hand, the discourse about generations is engaged in the success of the industry of computers and networks, which has gradually developed a real “generational storytelling” [1]. The idea of youth is at the heart of the promotion of technical revolutions, which take their strength from their capacity to be in line with a society that gives value to novelty and health and dynamism. This powerful rhetoric lines up a set of notions which are related by metonymic relations: young, new, futurist vs. old, obsolete, backward-looking. It is not rare, from the times “digital era” opened, that the succession of human generations should be defined in reference to that process of innovation in technologies, like calling adolescents “Internet generation” or “F[acebook] generation”. Moreover, the constant innovation, which makes this industry profitable, is frequently formulated in terms of successive *generations*, a word easily used both to qualify persons and machines. One of the major French associations about CMC in France is called

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<sup>2</sup> Strategic planning manager of the leading French advertising agency, *Publicis*.

“Internet New Generation Federation”<sup>3</sup>, playing with the ambiguity between technical innovation and life ages.

On the other hand, the dynamic evolution of the representations hinges widely on the fact of denying ageing and so to speak of rejuvenating the elderly. This, in relation with real evolutions in life expectancy, familial relations and consumption – the average age to become a grand parent in France is 54 for women and 56 for men [6] and most grand parents are professionally active –; but also with the affirmation of youth, health, novelty, future. A new definition of aged populations asserts itself, combatting and reinforcing at the same time the stereotyped representation of “old” grand parents as conservative, tired, old-fashioned people in advertising and entertainment [20]. The phrase “New grand parents” sums up this new way to depict the social group with features usually attributed to young generations. Logically, the reference to uses of IT plays a major role in that kind of relooking of previous generations.

## 2 Categorization and Relation to Technology

In front of this omnipresent discourse, some actors contribute in a very different way to building social categories: they first consider people, not by their age, but by their familial role as grand parents. As we shall see below, it is not sufficient to emancipate those projects from the imaginary of ages; but it leads to a different way to theorize the relation between generations and media. We shall try first to figure the main difference between categorizations in terms of seniors and grand parents, and see then the interactions between the two points of view.

We observe here the process of institutionalization of a social form. The consideration of the role of grand parents is not new – even if the category moved a lot a century along – but the claim for a specific identity, is. We can observe it through the creation of associations, the publishing of guidebooks, the creation of platforms devoted to such a community, the setting of training programs and even, in France, of a school, the “School of European Grand parents” (*École des grands parents européens*, from now on EGPE).

There are two main differences between those two ways to categorize people. First, if you define people by the means of age difference, you privilege “factors of differentiation”, to use marketing vocabulary, in order to singularize groups: so are digital natives, so are active adults, so are seniors, so is 4<sup>th</sup> age. On the contrary, the category of grand parents cannot be defined without referring to the relation it forms with other generations, not only with grand-children but with the intermediate generation [2].

Such a difference is important for the way we problematize the relation between people and technologies. In an approach grounded on age targets, the succession of human generations is usually defined in reference to that process of innovation in technologies. From that viewpoint, aged people are usually associated with the idea of “digital immigrants”, people who enter CMC as strangers, coming from an ancient world. In contrast, the young audience appears as the representative of the future in our

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<sup>3</sup> <http://fing.org/>. Visited on feb. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

world and, in an industrial strategy, the promise of success in the uncertainty of present<sup>4</sup>. Aged people are facing a test they can pass or fail, entering “information society”. On the contrary, grand parents can be apprehended through the nature, the sense and finality of their role as social actors.

Symmetrically, instead of being an objective in itself, CMC can help or handicap this social role. In an approach focused on the role of grand parents, what is decisive is the way familial and social relations develop, not the ability of individuals to cope with technical skills. To quote a famous phrase, the question is to consider attentively “*what people do with media*” instead of focusing on “*what media do to people*” [17, 3]. The aim of the enquiry is not to evaluate the acceptability of the media, but to explore the sense of meeting, information retrieving, dialoguing. In this perspective, CMC appears as a new means to actualize practices, commitments and relations that have developed for years through previous communication devices. For instance the EGPE has a rich expertise in the media creativity, as the creation of phone service for care, or the diversion of holidays notebooks or comics for popular education purposes, and the creation of *kits* in order to equip interveners in situations [21]. With a very important methodological consequence: people are not by principle classified according to their ability, but by the aims they share. So we can find, in the same field of practices, both people who are very fond of CMC and people who never use it.

### 3 Building an Intergenerational Perspective

Nevertheless, even if this approach in terms of familial roles modifies significantly the means to address the uses of media, it is impossible to strictly distinguish between those two ways to categorize people, as actors of intergenerational relations, and as individuals of the same age – as grand parents and as seniors. Such representations constantly interfere. So, as soon as *IT, the Net, Digital* come to be mentioned, this idea mainly refers to social stereotypes and is part of what Roger Silverstone calls “Media morality”: the implication of media innovations in our conception of identity and otherness [22].

Such a reality lies on four interdependent processes that have been pointed out for a long time by socio-semiotic studies on communicational practices: (a) the fact that the stereotypes are not only deceptive conceptions that could be simply corrected, but rather major ingredients of culture and identity; (b) the link between the perceptions of ages and the imaginaries of time; (c) the reality of the generational experience in which each of us in different historical contexts builds different relations to the media; (d) the fact that media practices do not operate as pure technical abilities, but refer to collective memories and to forms of life. For instance, the EGPE mentioned above (a) uses the imagery of grandmothers knitting pull-overs for kids which is the symbol *par excellence* of an epoch, in order to organize one of its successful activities; (b) argues the duty of transmission from past to future to convince people to intervene voluntarily in schools;

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<sup>4</sup> Debate at the Celsa « Le public jeune : promesse ou mirage ? », may 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011, (*Young audience: a promise or a mirage?*). Streaming online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKQzYZnQmY>. With a thematic note: <http://www.celsa.fr/pub/lesentretiens/LePublic-Jeune.pdf>. Visited on feb. 3th 2016.

(c) is facing the fact the association was created in a very different media environment than ours; (d) has much debate about what signifies using for instance social networks instead of books.

The weight of stereotypical representations of each generation is particularly impressive in advertising and branding. One of the leading brands in the food industry is named “Mamie Nova”, a common friendly name for grandmothers. Far from any intergenerational signification, it operates as a metonymy of age, which is not less present in the Internet. In this way we can find *Mamie regale* ([www.mamieregale.fr](http://www.mamieregale.fr), *Mummy is treating*), a platform that puts in touch amateur cooks with customers, or “le gang de grand-mères” (<http://gangdegrandmeres.fr/fr/>, *Racket of grand-mothers*), a factory of fashion commodities paying 10 % of their incomes to an association of leisure for seniors.

But what is more central for our inquiry is the way the two perspectives collide in particular communicational devices. We have an interesting example with the guidebooks devoted to this mediation. Editing a guide is a way to define a social form, not only by practices, rather by knowledge and know-how. The guidebook tells us we can identify ourselves as grand parents, but we have to learn how to be completely so. The titles of the books are interesting in that respect. One of them [18] is entitled “Les nouveaux grands-parents” (*The new Grand parents*) and another one [19] entitled “Grands-parents et malins” (*Grand parents and cunning*) includes a subtitle that evokes “les grands-parents nouvelle generation” (*the New generation Grand parents*). The stereotype of *seniors* is implied in the definition of the intergenerational project: grand parents are young and their generation is new. They are not 4<sup>th</sup> age people.

Even more interesting is the way the reference to new media works in the guidebook itself. The ability to use IT is not a central topic of these books, which are published by authors who belong to traditional media industries, i.e. editing in one case, TV in the other<sup>5</sup>. The use of contemporary communication tools does not occupy a wide space in those books; it intervenes in the middle of the books, and it is not regarded in itself but as a means to develop specific relations with grand-children. Nevertheless, the need to introduce grand parents to a world they are supposed to ignore is evident, because those chapters include a methodical popularization, not only of technical tools, but also of young people uses. In a chapter entitled “Remain connected”, we read: “You can not only speak to them by video conference or follow their holiday achievements by photo sharing, but also enter their life (without interfering except in dangerous situations) by seeing who are their friends and interests” [18, 110]. Which is rather astonishing if we remember it is devoted to “new grand parents”. Moreover, it acts in a paradoxical way: far from rejuvenating, it makes grand parents older. In one book, CMC (illustrated by a couple in front of a laptop) is introduced by the title “Quel coup de vieux!” (a familiar expression stressing a brutal aging); in the other, it is approached in relation to the last years of life (“Les petits-enfants grandissent et les grands-parents vieillissent”: *Grand-children are growing and grand parents are ageing*).

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<sup>5</sup> *Les nouveaux grands parents* is a derived product from a program broadcasted on the TV channel France 5, (“Les maternelles”).

Nevertheless, the content of those chapters does not stress the performance of mastering digital tools, rather the role they can play in the development of new and original relations between generations. The opposition between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” is at stake to the extent using network technology is presented as a strict condition to enter the world of kids. But different examples illustrate what Austin [3] calls “felicity” in communication, because they describe the family enjoying the presence and wisdom of grand parents. Considering seriously the role of grand parents softens the brutality of stereotypes in the use of digital media. When seniors are approached via the category of grand parenthood, they are no more digital immigrants, but rather *digital guests*.

#### 4 ‘Grandparent Generation’ as a Metaphor

We propose now to move to a more accurate observation of the way “*grand parentalité*” affects the manner media practices are involved in different projects.

For this purpose, we must briefly go back over some major conclusions of the research developed on the question of generations in social sciences. We can sum up three interdependent definitions of the concept of generation. Of course it refers to different stages of life; but it depends also on historical periods and, especially, of different stages of development and innovation of media techniques and culture; at last, people do not completely belong to a generation if they do not think themselves to belong to it, both because they use this designation and they are assigned to it by the social and vernacular discourse [1]. For instance, many grand parents belong to the generation called “*baby boomers*” and were represented as “*teen-agers*” in the beginning of the 60’s; but many “new grand parents” are people “who did not do 68” [8], being too young then, and even some of them were called “generation X” [10] in the early 90’s. All those people did not share the same dominant values nor the same experience of media innovation and in their life the arrival of colour TV, “pirate” radio stations and the Macintosh played different roles.

So, when approaching the media culture of several organizations which are acting for *grand parentalité*, we have to consider altogether the building of the category, the historical experience of actors, and the way media are invested for the goals of each organisation. But one process seems to be common to all the organizations we studied: the mutation of the category of grand parents to a social and political form. It is a kind of metaphor: grand parenting, which is a biological and familial process, becomes the icon of a kind of social commitment. In the programmatic discourses of many organizations we find the phrase “grand parent generation”. In rational terms, the population of grand parents do not constitute a generation: it does gather several generations, as we just saw. But to invent a “grand parent generation” conveys to that heterogeneous community a universal dimension and draws a simple biological condition to become a stance, a role in front of the world. Gradually, it allows to attach to the category people who have no relation to real grand-children, but are considered as *potential grand parents*, and even people who are invited to consider themselves as “grand parents de cœur” (grandparents at heart): people having affective relations with the generation of

children without any familial link. This metaphoric role of grand parenthood includes by principle any person of the third or fourth age in the same mission, because they embody the attention paid to intergenerational relations. It is a kind of mission: a specific duty of grand parents in the society. So, each time somebody commits to a cause explicitly as a grand parent, this act conveys a particular added value and brings a specific strength to the project.

## 5 Organizational Stories

The two actors who first defined their identity by the category of *grand parentalité* in France emerged from the frame of associative life in the 90's: the School of European Grand parents (EGPE) yet mentioned (1994), and the *Grands parrains* (*Grand godparents* 1998). Such organizations were joining the associative tradition by grounding on voluntary work and physical meetings, and at the same time by drawing their values and models from the bookish culture of their founders, who were then young grand mothers<sup>6</sup>. Digital communication was not an issue for them in a time innovation reached mainly "early adopters", who were very few here<sup>7</sup>. Those two initiatives had the effect to legitimate the idea grand parents to have a social role beyond the strict frame of the family. In that respect, the approach developed by *Grands parrains* is especially interesting. Its purpose is really to create the category of "grandparents at heart". It releases the grand parental link from biology by giving the media the role of matching "potential grand parents" with "adoptive grand children", what is impossible without resorting to communicational devices, even if very classical ones. Thanks to organizational and communicational means, people are supposed no more to put up with grand parenting, but to choose it.

The landscape or the actors of *grand parentalité* took a new turn in the 2000's with the creation of the firm *Super-grand parents*, which professed the same goal as *Grand-godparents*, i.e. to create "grandparents at heart", but in a doubly original way. First, it was initiated by the "middle generation", the one of parents<sup>8</sup>. Second, instead of grounding on a traditional associative format, it created an original type of mediation, so to make the program of "grand parentalité" enter an economically viable model. And it is the innovation in the media structure itself and in the exploitation of digital media specific properties that was fostering the circulation between associative and economic relations, which is indispensable to this business model. Beyond the punctual use of the image of grand parents with the sole end of advertising and merchandising, *grand parentalité* becomes the core of both business and intergenerational links which is characteristic of the "industry of passages" [15]. So this economic actor is a forerunner in the re-categorization of seniors on a grand parental angle, even if on the basis of an

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<sup>6</sup> Marie-Françoise Fuchs for the EGPE and Annick Glorieux for Grand-Godparents.

<sup>7</sup> The Internet, which is then 30 years old as a scientific device, becomes a common tool in France in the late 90's.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.super-grandparents.fr/fr/why\\_grandparents.awp](http://www.super-grandparents.fr/fr/why_grandparents.awp). Visited on feb. 5th 2016. Founder: Christelle Levasseur.

opportunist operation linked to its activity, rather than as a real marketing analysis of the perspective the shift from seniors to grand parents opens on strategic possibilities.

After those two steps of associative and economic conceptions of grand parents, a third stage is reached with the creation in Norway of “Bestefoldreaksionen”, translated as “Grand parent climate campaign”. An example of the way “grand parent generation” can use digital communication, as a basis and support for ideological and political action. Indeed, from their creation on, Grand parents for climate have been using digital tools as the real skeleton of the organization: through them they could recruit members and make their actions visible, and even make the cause to fertilize other European countries. It is a very different relation to media in regard of other organizations evoked above. For a deeper examination of the relation between the organizational structure and the media practices, we shall focus here on two examples: the EGPE and Grand parents for climate.

Even if it developed in a bookish and associative universe, EGPE has managed to conquer the world of mass media by positioning itself as the expert of “grand parentalité” and qualifying their members as spokespersons of grand parenthood. Such a strategy for recognition was not initially grounded on digital tools, rather on interpersonal relations and reputation. They choose now to put forward on the Internet a rhetoric of doing – showing the achievements of the organization in its workshops – instead of demonstrating knowledge and expertise. It is a particular positioning in the public sphere (which can be accepted and “excused” by the fact itself they are grand parents and it fits the representation of that category by the media); but it is also relevant with the fact associative life having structured itself widely on the consideration paid to experience compared with academic diplomas. The approach of Grand parents for the climate is totally different: as we just saw, CMC is structurally implied in the creation itself of the organization; so its active use expresses the will to lean on it in order to defend a cause which is presented as clearly surpassing grand parenthood.

## 6 Trivial Philosophies of Time

If we take a distance regarding the making of the mediation process as it was just described, we can understand media strategies contributing to a redefinition of important cultural categories. One of them is the way our society represents the relation between different scales of time, from immediate *hic et nunc* situations to anthropological perspectives, via historical changes. As said above, the usual way to articulate them is to associate youth with future and elderly with past. And we cannot deny this representation to be at stake in the mediation of *grand parentalité*, especially with the necessity to picture seniors as dynamic people facing the weight of the memories of the past.

In contrast, the affirmation of the abstract category of *grand parentalité* and the metaphoric role attributed to the “grand parent generation” permit a process of refashioning this complex of representations and practices. This, as a result of multiple recourses to media: popularizing the imagery of the category; embodying it in community platforms; mobilizing it in collective manifestations. The fact to institute the “grand parent generation” as the guarantor of the care of future generations offers



the opportunity to inverse those temporal perspectives. In such a narrative, older generations – represented both by their wisdom as aged people and their “natural” role as “grandparents at heart” – become the representatives of the future destiny of nature and humanity. Young people are not thrown back to past, as “digital immigrants” are in the mainstream stereotype, but rather to “*presentism*” which is stigmatized as the ideology of our time [14], i.e. the legitimate but short-sighted moral of *carpe diem* which was powerfully glorified by cultural industries in the years of formation of these actors (*Dead Poets Society* 1989). Such assimilations, via the media, between a generation and a representation of times, is a kind of trivial philosophy of History. On the one hand, it reinterprets the destiny of the generation of “baby boomers”, who were strongly committed in the cult of technical development and so took a responsibility in neglecting the environmental issues, in a rather euphoric way. On the other hand, it comes back strangely to the first roots of sustainable development in the 80’s – forgetting the evolution this political cause has experienced in the following decades to a conciliation between the economy, society and environment [16]. Indeed, in the so-called *Bruntland Report* which is the real “bible” of this movement, the reference to the responsibility of generations is the core idea of a new political cause: “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [8]. We could say the two main mythic narratives of our society, information society and sustainable development, collide here inside the process of categorizing generations media experience.

Finally, beyond the wide diversity of the actions that can be undertaken under the banner of grand parenthood, we can draw three general conclusions; first, it is impossible to understand the role played by IT innovations and uses without introducing them into the wider question of media and mediations; second, even if all the practices are displayed in front of us as contemporary ones – what they are really – they belong to temporal perspectives which are not separable from different epochs; third, the idea of generation is very a complex one, melting in an indissoluble way stereotypes and practices, and social creativity about the intergenerational process with rather fossilized and dividing figures of ages.

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