

THE MINITEL AND FRANCE'S LEGACY OF DEMOCRATIC INFORMATION ACCESS IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

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Abstract:

Although the Minitel is relic in the world of online information technology, there is more to this outdated machine than the history of its failure. The Minitel grew out of a French tradition of information transfer and was uniquely suited to serve its target population. Competition provided by the Internet has been stiff, but the Minitel staved it off through the turn of the millennium. Indeed, the French cannot be blamed for keeping hold of their Minitels as long as possible, as the Minitel came to be not only the homegrown purveyor of democratic access to information, but also a symbol of national pride. Now, as France moves with the rest of the world to embrace the Internet, it is not without a certain sense of *deja vu*.

The Minitel and France's Legacy of Democratic Information Access in the Age of the Internet

With the relatively recent rise of the Internet, Anglo-American writers have understandably turned their attention toward the new and exciting possibilities that this online system represents. At the same time, there has been less interest in France's Minitel, the world's first popular online system. Based on the fact that the Minitel is now widely considered to be a failure, both in France and abroad, one finds a host of condescending comments these days and, not surprisingly, not much that is positive. However, there is more to the story of the

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Minitel than the smug announcement of its demise. The Minitel was in its heyday a valuable tool, one that has left its mark on France's information sector and on French society at large, and one that has created expectations in the minds of the French concerning the value of an online information system.

Indeed, from our vantage point in the first part of the twenty-first century, now is the perfect time to explore the implications of the Minitel on France's information and communication culture.

French Society and Information Technology: A Brief Overview

France, as a country, has long been proud of its penchant for transferring information and for its capacity to embrace this new technology to these ends. A document issued by the French Embassy proclaims that, as far back as 1470, King Louis XI of France invented the first system of mail dispatch using horses. King Henri IV later democratized this system by making it available to the people of the country [1].

By the mid nineteenth century, Parisian businesses had adapted all too well to the efficient new means of transmitting information afforded by the telegraph. According to the French post office, La Poste, once the telegraph system was no longer sufficient to satisfy the information transfer demand, the French took the situation in hand and installed a system of pneumatic tubes that used bursts of air to propel actual letters under the streets of Paris. This pneumatic tube system of information transfer became operational in the 1860's and was hugely successful [2]. Although the pneumatic technology was borrowed from the British, the French were quick to implement it and to make a success of its use [3].

These tubes transferred information both quickly and efficiently, and were of overwhelming importance to the information transfer industry. One aspect of the tubes that

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Anglophones might have difficulty appreciating is the importance of the handwritten letter that it delivers. A sort of valuable human contact is implicit when one takes the time to handwrite a letter. Despite their taste for technology, the French as a people are extremely concerned with the personal aspects of communication. I distinctly remember a grandfatherly French friend of mine telling me about the good old days. This gentleman had been employed as a professor of English at a French university and was often involved in choosing candidates for university-sponsored programs. He enjoyed reading the hand-written applications of the candidates and became, in his own words, a bit of a handwriting analysis expert in the process. In the case that two candidates were equally qualified, he would arrive at a decision by selecting the candidate with the more promising penmanship.

Even in the present day, vestiges of this appreciation for handwritten items are to be found in the public sector. Although discussions of culture and generalizations about a people are always complex, some concepts are taken for granted. For example, it is widely understood that French businesses prefer communications with clients and with each other by means of handwritten letters to typewritten ones. As well, if the typical Frenchman needs information, he prefers to ask someone face-to-face [4, p. 113]. In fact, in her chapter devoted to the telephone, Carroll gives examples of this attitude regarding the home or office telephone and discusses common French reactions to the American perception of the usefulness of the device. One particularly interesting statement involves information-seeking at a place of business: “Several French people have admitted to not having confidence in information obtained by telephone because they had learned from experience that ‘a response over the phone commits no one’” [4, p. 90] Carroll suggests that going directly to the information source is the most typical French solution. By analogy, I would like to suggest that, in the case of business communication, a hand-written letter has long been the preferred

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means of contact because it engages and commits the author in a similar fashion. A typed letter is impersonal and the quality of its contents dubious at best, as no one was required to invest him or herself in its creation.

The Parisian pneumatic tube network, a means of transferring these precious handwritten letters, managed to survive long past the invention of the telephone or even of the computer. Information transfer via tube was obsolete by the time the information society began, but the tubes themselves were not completely retired from service until 1984 [2].

Another system devised to aid in the transfer of information surfaced in France during the last year of the pneumatic tubes' existence: this system also allowed for a certain degree of uniqueness to the correspondence as it was a system of French design and was marketed under the name "Minitel".

The Minitel: An Early Online Success Story

In the tradition of the pneumatic tubes, France's second highly successful and high-tech form of information transfer came into being to serve an information need, and this one during the computer age. The teletex system that allowed for online communication came to be marketed under the name Minitel in the early 1980's [5]. The Minitel began as a small, rectangular box with a screen on the end that served as a miniature text-interface monitor. The user interacted with the Minitel through a small albeit awkward keyboard situated under the screen. For those who acquired the technology, the magic of the Minitel allowed them to use online services and even to make secure online purchases [5].

Like the telephone, the Minitel quickly proved to be user-friendly enough to outweigh the lack of a personal touch discussed in the previous section. The elaborate gadget gained in popularity in part due to the fact that the French government indirectly had a monopoly on

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both the telephone service and the Minitel service. At the time, the government had possession of the phone utility France Telecom, and France Telecom was the sole distributor of both telephone and Minitel services. Payment for both was streamlined and charges incurred from the purchase of online services were itemized on the regular telephone bill [5]. The Telecom oversaw the details of operation, and ease of use was a top priority, although painfully slow by today's standards, the interface was easy to navigate. Some of the services that were offered were financial, some were entertainment-based. The Minitel appealed to both businesses and to individuals; anyone who had a telephone line could benefit. By the mid-1990's, although it did not hesitate to enumerate its shortcomings, The Economist proclaimed that the Minitel was a "part of everyday life in France" [6]

Over the course of the following decade, France Telecom did its best to continue the promotion of the Minitel. France Telecom's concern for the well-being of the Minitel was not exactly philanthropic, as it kept a full fifty percent of the money collected for the Minitel's online services [7]. Well into the mid 1990's, and the age of the Internet, the Minitel remained an aspect of everyday life in France. Jones tells us that by 1997, six million consumers and three million businesses bought more than a billion dollars worth of goods and services on the Minitel, or more than ten times the income from Internet commerce in Germany and in the UK in 1998 [7].

The Internet as an Unfriendly Information Source in France

At a glance, it seems incongruous that the Minitel could win out so handily over the Internet in the latter half of the 1990's when the Internet was doing so well in America and was catching on in Europe. The French, as we saw as far back as the 1800's with the adoption of the pneumatic tubes, are traditionally a people who embrace new technologies. These new

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technologies, however, must provide a worthwhile service and be culturally compatible in order to be readily accepted. The communication advantages that were present for the French with the pneumatic tubes and with the Minitel were lacking with the Internet. After all, the Internet sprang forth from American roots, and this entire system of online communications grew out of an economic climate unique to America.

Many of the underlying differences resided in the cost of a phone call and the competition that regulated prices. Of benefit to the Internet's American growth was the fact that the United State's national telephone company monopoly had already been dissolved prior to the widespread use of online communications. The American Telephone and Telegraph Company had been taken to court by the Department of Justice in 1974. By 1982, AT&T was divested of its local services; the Regional Bell Operating Companies were created in 1984 as replacements [8]. Dial-up connections to the Internet were not a concern to consumers for a full ten years after the upheaval; competition had been fostered by the time the American public tried to get its PCs online from home.

Conversely, France Telecom was a possession of the government and the purveyor of the telephone service monopoly throughout the first fifteen years or so of the Minitel's existence [9]. The phone rates that France Telecom offered, considered high for the average customer's informal phone conversations, were in no uncertain terms prohibitive for most customers wishing to establish dial-up connections for a computer.

By the end of the 1990's, the French were beginning to realize that the future of information dissemination, especially on a global scale, hinged on the adoption of the Internet. Lionel Jospin, then French Prime Minister, was reported by Businessweek to have admitted in 1997 that the Minitel was slowing the growth of technology in France [10]. In an effort to make up for lost Internet time, the French government agreed to the partial

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privatization of France Telecom, but only after intense political scrutiny. The process was begun by in 1996 when France Telecom became a corporation in the French sense (a “société anonyme”), but it was only opened up to having its shares traded on the stock exchange in October 1997 [9].

After the privatization, one of the on-ramps to the information superhighway became more accessible, almost as accessible as it had been to Americans up until that time.

Accordingly, during the calendar year immediately following the privatization, from 1998 to 1999, France Telecom alone estimated fifty percent more subscribers to its Internet service Wanadoo [11].

Not coincidentally, it was during this era of the telecommunications market changes that France saw a rise in the sale of computers, a commodity that is relatively expensive when compared to the prices that Americans pay for comparable equipment. While the French were getting online in 1998, they were also buying large numbers of PCs for the first time. The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade confirmed that “Computer sales (in France) increased by twenty-two percent in 1998, the second fastest growth rate in Europe behind England at twenty-four percent. This was the first time that more than a million PCs were sold in France. In the first quarter of 1999, sales of PCs increased by thirty percent over the same quarter in 1998” [12].

Even after the privatization of France Telecom and individuals’ attempts at outfitting their homes and businesses with the appropriate means for accessing the Internet, France as a whole was still reluctant to give up the Minitel in order to embrace fully the age of the Internet. Gerard Poirot feels that France’s hesitancy was due to the fact that the Minitel became such a dismal failure so quickly and after so much investment and that people were unwilling to invest too much of themselves in system that would be obsolete in a matter of

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years [13]. In a 1995 article, he describes the extent to which the financial impact of a large Minitel push is still being felt. Despite the profits that France Telecom generated from Minitel use, “FT now admits that Minitel's break-even mark is well beyond the 2000 AD horizon and refuses point blank to speculate on just when the service might move into profit” [13].

Financial difficulties notwithstanding, the Minitel remains a contender in the world of information access. At least, it does for the moment. The presence of the “nouvelle génération” i-Minitel at <http://www.i-minitel.com/> is proof.

The Fundamentally Democratic Worth of the Minitel

Through the late 1990's into the new millennium, the continued adherence to an outmoded system of information went beyond a fear of new technologies and a dislike of outside influences. In fact, it lay in the intrinsic worth that the Minitel came to have in the eyes of the French people: it engendered a sense of national pride because of its cleverness and ease of use. It came to symbolize homegrown ingenuity. The French were not actively rejecting the Internet as a means of information transfer, a foreign information entity shaped for an American audience by its American creators, instead, they hesitated to snub a technology that a large number of their own people find useful and simple to access, one that was shaped to reflect their unique culture.

It is worthwhile to note that the Minitel made its appearance as the information society that had been set in motion after the Second World War was looming large on the English-dominated information horizon, and it was a bright spot on that horizon. On my first trip to France in the early 1990's, I was proudly shown one family's Minitel terminal. Quite a bit of

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nationalistic pride was evident in the young mother's voice as she showed me the contraption and reminded me knowingly that we did not have such a thing in America.

Bender argues in his article "Transborder Data Flow" that culture is impacted by the globalization of information sources [14]. He is certainly not alone in suggesting that cultural imperialism is impacting certain countries. The average Frenchman tends to want to fight this encroaching perceived danger and to protect his way of life. In combating the approaching cultural menace, the French came to value even more their new system. While the rest of the world plugged away with telephones and faxes in the late 1980's, the French had excelled beyond these contraptions in creating cutting-edge technology, made by the French, for the French.

In a country where a group of intellectuals has been nominated to an 'Académie' to oversee the national language since 1635, the appeal of French-language information should not be underestimated. Although educated people in France are more and more likely to speak English, it is still of fundamental importance that information sources be accessible on a wide scale; virtually everyone born in France can access information written in the French language, thus information in French is democratic. The French literacy rate is one of the highest in the world at ninety-nine percent [15], and the technology-savvy businessperson along with the most unsophisticated country-dweller could access information by means of the Minitel if he simply had access to a phone line and a Minitel terminal.

The argument for the value of democratic access to French information is an integral part of the rationale behind the famous and frequently mocked Toubon law of 1994 [16]. Seemingly arrogant from an outsider's perspective, the Toubon law (although rarely respected and not enforced) attempts, among other things, to keep French information in the French language and to exclude information in English. The value of the Minitel, a resource that

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democratizes information in a country where socialism dominates politics, shows itself in that it is indeed a tool that is engineered for that very specific society. The Minitel in many ways seems to be the very embodiment of the French motto of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”.

Campaigns to get the French using the Minitel were aimed at democratizing information access, something that the Internet was never meant to do in France. Moreover, the Internet proved to be elitist. Prohibitive requirements included not only a phone line, but also an ISP, the necessary hardware including a fast computer and a modem, and the knowledge to coordinate the operation.

Though the French rely more and more on the Internet, they have not entirely turned their backs on the Minitel. In an article written two years into the new millennium, Michael Pastore explains: “Minitel users still outnumber all other forms of online access, Forrester's Technographics report found. Some fifteen million French consumers (thirty-three percent of the nation) still use Minitel. But French consumers are accessing the Web via PCs in large numbers, and although the Minitel system will not disappear from French homes, its role will be reduced” [18]. As time goes on, even though the French are making more purchases via Internet than through Minitel [19], they are hanging on to their terminals. In fact, the percentage of Minitel terminal owners has not changed since 1995 when one third of the French had terminals [6].

Conclusion

Regardless of the successes or failures that will come with the widespread adoption of Internet in France, the Minitel has clearly run its course. The Internet will come to have more resources tailored to the French; more are certainly added on a daily basis and the French as a people are getting increasingly comfortable with Internet technology. Also in the realm of

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technology, according to a paper by Gunnar Trumbull of the Harvard Business School, the heretofore unheard of number of tech start-ups in France are actually helping the unemployment situation and changing the way the French approach innovation [19].

Where does this progress leave the Minitel? As excitement is generated by the new Internet culture and as new technologies come under state protection, I believe that the Minitel will quietly fade into oblivion, a noble old creature whose time has clearly passed, but whose worth and one-time prominence will not soon be forgotten. Like the great romantic poets or the conquests of Napoléon, the Minitel is a vivid reminder of a certain point in French history when the French were superior to their neighbors in a given domain, a time that has come and gone. As French interests are distracted by other ventures such as making up for lost time in terms of technology, the French will eventually move on from their great contribution to the latter half of the twentieth century.

Or, perhaps as with the pneumatic tubes, the Minitel will not be completely retired until a clearly superior, homegrown innovation is created to replace it.

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