



HAL
open science

[Book Review] Minitel welcome to the Internet,
platform studies

Sophie Gebeil

► To cite this version:

Sophie Gebeil. [Book Review] Minitel welcome to the Internet, platform studies. 2018, 10.1080/24701475.2018.1496310 . hal-01960852

HAL Id: hal-01960852

<https://hal.science/hal-01960852>

Submitted on 27 May 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Minitel welcome to the Internet, platform studies

On 1 April 2018, Wikipedia France put a vintage version of their website, inspired by the Minitel display, online, thereby illustrating that Minitel is part of French digital history's folklore. Nevertheless, this book reminds the French reader that Minitel also generated negative stereotypes in the English-speaking world: it was a centralised object fully controlled by a totalitarian state. *Minitel, Welcome to the Internet*, is the first scholarly book in the English language dedicated to the history of Minitel. Julien Mailland and Kevin Driscoll, both American researchers in Media studies, chose to study its history through the prism of platform studies by publishing the book, and having it become part of the eponymous MIT collection, thus helping to enlighten the reader on the social, cultural, and political aspects of its history. Considering Minitel as a singular telematics network for computation, communication and commerce, the book opposes the prejudices and seeks to understand the reasons for its success: 'How Minitel allocated power and authority among millions of users' (p. 6). However, in its introduction, the authors inform the reader that 'the Minitel period reflects many of the same tensions that animate the "platformization" of the Internet today' (p. 7). Thus, the main thread of the book is that by deconstructing the prejudices, and thus defending Minitel, innovation and civic participation on the future of the internet will be ensured. The reader is thus forewarned of this stimulating approach that will assume its share of presentism, now termed as 'platform', which did not exist during the Telematics Period.

Mailland and Driscoll have used a variety of references and sources to write this book. For instance, they drew on Minitel's official documentation, oral enquiry and the informal sources compiled by the Minitel enthusiasts, such as Frederic Cambus at Minitel.org and Goto10.fr. The introduction (Chapter 1) acquaints us with their methodology; the sources employed and introduce the book's structure. Each chapter can be read independently. Chapters 2–4 decipher the technical and political aspects of Minitel's architecture, creation and management and discuss the role of the French political and cultural tradition in the State's choices. Subsequently, they show that the platform, centralised by the State, is a hybrid and a relatively open system. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the Minitel users, highlighting the development of a network industry (hardware and software), and in particular third-party services, such as Pink Minitel, as well as what was going on the fringe.

This book review will combine an outline as well as a brief discussion on the book's contribution to existing literature, in particular comparing it to the French book 'Minitel, France's digital childhood' (Schafer & Thierry, 2012).

Chapter 2 describes Minitel's key technical components that enabled the platform's success. Minitel was created in 1978 but was finally shut down in 2012, marking a generation during the 1980s and 1990s. The core characteristics of the platform remained constant throughout the system's life, demonstrated by a Minitel service written in 1985 that still continued to function in 2012. Here, Mailland and Driscoll chose to 'take apart' the Minitel, by examining each component in turn, and combining the users' point of view with the technical aspects. Minitel was made up of three components: the terminals, servers and network infrastructure, which interconnected them and 'together, these elements sustained a generative platform for the creation of novel online services and the emergence of thriving virtual communities' (p. 24). In 1982, the first terminals were installed free of charge and in one year there were more than 120,000, reaching 5 million in 1989.

Chapter 3 examines how Minitel's creation, design, and architecture reflected France's political tradition of centralisation, a historical heritage strengthened by the French Republic (1958-to this day). At the end of the 1970s, Minitel was a part of France's bigger plan. The aim was to upgrade the telephone network and become more competitive with the US computer industry (IBM, Armonk, NY). In 1978, following the recommendations set out in Nora and Minc's famous report, *The Computerisation of Society* (1976), a French decree approved an experimental videotext project dedicated to the 'Direction Générale des Communications' (DGT), which was at the origin of Minitel. Three ways of development illustrated the platform's centralisation. First, access to the Teletel network based on Transpac was controlled by the State through the Point d'accès vidéotex (PAVI) gateway, which was monopolised by the PTT operator. Second, the DGT centralised the mass production equipment that enabled the private industry to develop. Third, the Kiosk (Le Kiosque), founded in 1984, with free access for 3 min, enabled a 'pay-as-you-play' billing system to be developed: Teletel added the cost onto the monthly phone bill. This was accompanied by a censorship system in which the new services that were provided had to receive *a priori* authorisation from the administration in order to create the service ('regulatory level'). Subsequently, all traffic passed through one of the centrally controlled gateway servers (PAVI – 'technical level'). Nevertheless, both authors argue that centralisation was a key factor in Minitel's success.

Chapter 4 looks at the ways in which the State supported openness on the Teletel platform, which sustained a dynamic private sector around Minitel, considered a novel hybrid in architecture. Minitel was regarded as a success of the 'venture capitalism à la française', contributing to the openness and sharing of knowledge. The DGT managed the infrastructure while giving the service providers the opportunity to develop the content industry on the network's fringes. Thus, Mailland and Driscoll use the term 'hybrid network design' to describe Minitel's architecture in contrast to the vision of a 'walled garden'. This point is reinforced by the comparison between Teletel and Videotex in Britain and Germany, respectively, which were fully centralised architectures, created and managed by IBM, without State intervention. Both authors also analyse the failed 101 Online experiment that was launched by France Telecom and the US West company in 1991 on the American Minitel Network. One of the reasons why it failed, unlike Minitel, was precisely because it was a very closed and centralised system contrary to the French model. This example is very enlightening and unfamiliar. It shows the necessity to distinguish between centralisation and public control. For the two researchers, the public-private partnership created for Minitel was very similar to the commercial exploitation of the packet-switched Internet in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 5 examines the expansion of Minitel companies, mainly service providers, and focuses on the Pink Minitel (Minitel Rose); to be more explicit, adult sex-related services. Based on the messages taken from the chat rooms that were run in Strasbourg in 1981 using the experimental system Gretel, Minitel Rose grew rapidly and accounted for 50% of all traffic revenue. On one hand, the DGT morally condemned these practices, yet on the other, was delighted to receive the financial benefits from them. The 'moral censorship' was grossly unfair and only applied to prostitutes and homosexual online communities. 'Minitelists' were employed to pass for actual users so as to lure the real users into chatting with them for as long as possible so as to increase the profit for these service companies. (p. 107). Nevertheless, there were also many digital innovations and the authors chose 'to select a few innovations that prefigured what the post-1995 Internet would offer': before the Internet, there were already online trading companies, messaging services, 'Minitel Artificial Intelligence', an online tickets system, home automation services (domotique), online banking and online payment tools like LECAM.

The 6th chapter focuses on the fringe uses of the network. Both writers offer a social constructivist approach based on the idea that the Minitel story is a 'social construction', resulting from a reciprocal relationship between technology and society. Mailland and Driscoll present how the users played a main role in the Minitel story, despite state control. Minitel was created explicitly to support the creation of new services by third parties, thus making the entrepreneurs major players in the history of Minitel. The Kiosk model allowed for experimentation and innovation but at the same time, there were also problems connecting to Teletel, a closed system that was managed by a multiplicity of services belonging to the French administration. For third party service companies to use Minitel, it was necessary for them to have their content approved by the Censor receive a short code issued by the DGT, for example '3615 hello', wait to be connected to the Transpac Network, and then negotiate the tariffs. During the 1980s, Minitel users also took advantage of being able to connect to the network, and did so for their own personal benefit. Some examples are: the computer engineer Xavier Niel, downloaded the database from the Kiosk and created the private service 3617 ANNU, a reverse phonebook; leisure communities developed on the fringes of the Télétel network; hobbyists created micro-servers by using Minitel and a PC to connect to the telephone network and thus created bulletin board systems for video games. Although the DGT was informed about the 'sysops' activities, they chose to ignore it.

Five years after the book 'Minitel, France's digital childhood' was published (Schafer & Thierry, 2012), Mailland and Driscoll decided to review Minitel's history through the concepts and issues raised by current research on the platforms. This approach has facilitated the understanding of this specific ecosystem. They show how Minitel can be considered a novel hybrid architecture that catalysed the development of a domestic computing industry. This success was the result of typical 'Venture Capitalism à la française' mixing state investments and public-private partnerships, theoretically in the common interest. The use of this hybrid system by the French populace manifested itself in creative innovations and specific cultural works.

In opting for the 'platform studies', they chose to underline the innovative services that are today on the web, thereby favouring a homogenous history of the Minitel. In Schafer and Thierry's book, Pascal Griset considered the Minitel a matrix, an 'intermediate invention' placed in the socio-technical context of the 1970s and 1980s in Europe. The transition and the period of co-existence with the Web are thus more detailed. In contrast, however, none of the authors extended this work to proffer a history that connected to the present and future of the Web, in which Minitel was the first stepping stone towards the Internet, thereby attracting attention from across the Atlantic. Subsequently,

there is much backward and forward movement between the 70s/80s and the present. Although the transitional period during the 1990s/2000s is evoked, it is of lesser importance. Yet, as they recall very well, the state's intervention as a venture capitalist, the Minitel experiment nevertheless seemed to reinforce the belief that centralisation was a precondition for the success of the Internet in France during the 1990s.

In both cases, the approaches review the pre-existing historiography. Schafer and Thierry (2012, 2017) argue that the history of telematics made it possible to understand contemporary practices, such as the rise of the Apple platform. Mailland and Driscoll also place great emphasis on this aspect in their conclusion, also underlining the question of freedom. With regard to the Minitel platform, the State organised the censorship supported by many groups in society, including the press. However, if a citizen or a firm was excluded from the network, they could address the problem in court. This however, was not the case for the Wikileaks application, which was excluded from Apple's private platform in 2010 with no possible legal redress. This comparison enabled the authors to affirm that 'the Télétel platform exhibited various characteristics of openness that exceeded walled gardens such as CompuServe or Apple' (p. 91).

In addition, Minitel's place on a global scale is described in both books. Schafer and Thierry accurately describe the telematics events that took place in England, Germany, Canada and Japan, while Mailland and Driscoll focus mainly on Europe. Nevertheless, the information on the exportation of Minitel to the United States now constitutes an important new contribution.

By referring to previous work while bringing together the concepts of platform studies, the book *Minitel, Welcome to the Internet*, renews the history of French telematics. Pleasant reading and clear, even for a non-specialist French reader, it will undoubtedly become a reference, providing both a stimulating introduction to the history of Minitel, as well as a reflection on contemporary issues.

Sophie Gebeil UMR 7303 TELEMMe, Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, TELEMME, Aix-en-Provence, France ~~Aix-Marseille-Universite, Aix-en-Provence, France~~ [AQ3] sophie.gebeil@univ-amu.fr

References

Minitel Research Lab USA website, <http://minitel.us/>. [AQ1]

Schafer, V., & Thierry, B. G. (2017). From the Minitel to the internet: The path to digital literacy and network culture in France (1980s–1990s). In G. Goggin & M. McLelland (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories* (pp. 77–89). New York and London: Routledge. [AQ2]

Schafer, V., & Thierry, B. G. (2012). *Thierry's Le Minitel. L'enfance numérique de la France (Minitel, the French digital childhood)* (p. 230). Paris: Nuvis, Cigref.