



**Book Review : En construction, la Fabrique française  
d'Internet et du Web dans les années 1990, Ina, coll.  
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Book review: Valérie Schafer, *En construction, la Fabrique française d'Internet et du Web dans les années 1990*, Ina, coll. Etudes & Controverses, 2018, p 139.

In this synthetic book published in the National Audiovisual Institute's (INA) series "Etudes & Controverses", Valérie Schafer takes up a challenge that is not only ambitious but also necessary. She focuses on understanding the stakes, players, and temporalities of Internet and Web deployment in France in the 1990s. Schafer is a contemporary European history professor at the University of Luxembourg's C2DH, and specialises in the history of telecommunications and information technology<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, with the overlapping of SIC, STS (Sciences and Technology Sciences), media history, technology and innovation, her work has also focused on the history of the Minitel<sup>2</sup>, digital heritage and Web archiving<sup>3</sup>. This book is based on the original manuscript of her "*Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches*" presented in 2016 for which she received the Inathèque Research prize. It consists of five dense chapters that are pleasant to read due to a clear and rhythmic writing style. While it is not only intended for Web history specialists and professionals, readers must be aware that they will benefit fully from the book if they already have basic knowledge of the Internet terminology.

Based on recent history, the short format provides clarity on the main issues that helped influence and propel the Web's growth in France in the 1990s, shedding light on contemporary debates related to the evolution of the Web in our democratic society. Its original and complex subject matter is brought to the fore by the author's introductory questioning: "How can the Web be encapsulated in a comprehensive manner, taking into account what is happening both on and behind the screen? "; How can the history "of an Internet diffused through all sectors of society, in particular through the Web " be captured? How can France's lagging behind be explained in terms of the public's turning point in the 1990s with regard to the American model? These stimulating and ambitious questions strongly contribute to underline how relevant a national history of the Web is<sup>4</sup>.

The author draws on a wide range of sources in order to answer these questions, starting with the classic materials of contemporary history: institutional documentation (reports, notes found in boxes in the National Archives), numerous oral surveys carried out by decision-makers, producers and anonymous *early adopters*, printed media, amateurs' collections, and the INA's television archives. Moreover, the history of the Web in the 1990s is also based on born-digital sources, in particular using two types of documentation that are relatively new to the historian. Schafer guides us in the conversations of the first forums' discussion groups that have been kept on the Web and are still accessible online. As a specialist in digital heritage, she also draws on the Web's archives of the Internet Archive, the BnF (Bibliothèque nationale de France) and the INA (Institut national de l'audiovisuel), enabling access, in part, to websites that have disappeared or old versions of websites

<sup>1</sup>Taken from her pioneering thesis work: Valérie Schafer, *Des réseaux et des hommes: les réseaux à communications de paquets*, doctoral thesis, Paris-Sorbonne University, France, 2007, 710 p.dir. P. Griset.

<sup>2</sup>Schafer, V., & Thierry, B. G. (2012). *Le Minitel. L'enfance numérique de la France*. Nuvis.

<sup>3</sup>Schafer, V. (2018). *Temps et temporalités du Web*. Presses de Nanterre.

<sup>4</sup>Musiani, F., Paloque-Bergès, C., Schafer, V., & G. Thierry, B. (2019). *Qu'est-ce qu'une archive du web ?* Marseille : Open Edition Press.

<sup>5</sup>For studies linked to the « national Web » see Brügger, N., & Laursen, D. (2018). Historical studies of national Web domains. In N. Brügger, & I. Milligan, *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*. London: Sage ; Ben-David, A., Amram, A., & Bekkerman, R. (2018). The colors of the national Web: visual data analysis of the historical Yugoslav Web domain. *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, 19(1), 95-106 ; Rogers, R., Weltevrede, E., Niederer, S., & Borra, E. (2012). National Web Studies: Mapping Iran Online. Retrieved from [https://mappingiranonline.digitalmethods.net/Mapping\\_Iran\\_Online.pdf](https://mappingiranonline.digitalmethods.net/Mapping_Iran_Online.pdf)

that are still online. The reproduction of screenshots reflects the visual memory of the first websites. For instance, the reader will discover the symbolic "Armada de la liberté" website created in 1994 by Stéphane Bortzmeyer or the Gandhi website's home page, which has been promoting the sale of domain names since 1999. The different facets of the transformations that were ongoing during the 1990s are addressed in five chapters in which Schafer examines critically but without seeking exhaustiveness, the history of the Internet and the Web's structure in France from multi-faceted aspects. In her own words, she deals with "the structural groundwork (infrastructures, companies) and arts and crafts (personal pages, the *handmade* Web)".

The first chapter looks at the arrival of the Web in Minitel France. The author portrays the filiations, hesitations and multiple trajectories that took shape, contrasting with the monolithic vision of the expected tidal wave from the United States. Rather, the Minitel constituted a "breeding ground for stable entrepreneurs" such as Valentin Lacambre, who founded 3616 Altern and then hosted Altern B in 1992, who promoted and supported the transition to the Web. At a time when "conflict occurs due to the convergence of several media models which is currently underway between telecommunications, information technology and audiovisual" (p. 17), it distinguishes three socio-technical paths that were referred to in Franck Rebillard's work<sup>5</sup>: national telematic services, the Internet of Origins (open), and the pooling of hybrid initiatives led by industrial players in communication. Finally, it was the basic commercial package that was accepted and implemented through a basic Internet access that was sometimes accompanied by targeted services such as Infonie. For established stakeholders, the transition was not easy, as was highlighted by France Telecom, which struggled to design a new economic model distinct from the Minitel until the launch of Wanadoo in 1996. Users also had to deal with these transformations, and although the French developed a certain "culture for the keyboard, screen and online interactions" (p.24), they also developed habits and used in particular French online service, which were not very attractive. In addition, Schafer also discusses the political and media discourse generated by the rise of the Web in this first chapter, in which the comparison with the Minitel is omnipresent until 1997.

The reader is then taken behind the scenes to discover a whole world of players, from ISPs to hosting companies, against a backdrop of enthusiasm for the "Net-Economy" preceding the 2001 bubble (chapter 2), before turning to the Internet users and the issues related to the democratisation of Web access (chapter 3). Behind the screen, a teeming professional universe was being developed, composed of what the author calls connectors, "whether they are essentially technical intermediaries or those that connect Internet users, requests, services and content, they play an essential role in the development of the Web" (p. 34). Among them, operators directly connected to the Internet in the USA offered customers and service providers a connection: RENATER (academic), Transpac (historical telecommunications operator), Oléane (private ISP focused on the pro offer), and EUnet (linked to UNIX users). Oléane was the first commercial ISP before being acquired by France Telecom in 1998. The testimonies collected by the author (Jean-Michel Planche, Annie Renard) have made it possible to give substance to the diversity of the professional trajectories and the entrepreneurs' success stories that were widely publicised, in spite of the difficulties associated with the complexity of traffic. These narratives contradict the first "ordinary Internet users'" experience, to whom the third chapter of the book is dedicated. Indeed, the forums' archives and the testimonies bear witness to the difficulties of material and access encountered by the French, who then carried out a "second digital conversion" after that of the Minitel during the previous decade (p. 54).

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<sup>5</sup>Rebillard, F. (2012). The setting up of the commercial offer to the general public in France (1995-1996): between the provision of Internet access and "proprietary" online services. *Le Temps des médias*, 18(1), 65-75.

Internet access was thus expensive, complex and required technical expertise. In the second half of the decade, choice for the users diversified, and the author counted about thirty ISPs in 1995 compared to two hundred in 1998. Subsequently, the increase in access was not only available to homes, but also to public places such as post offices, libraries, town halls, social centres and associations, where users could go to learn about web navigation. The pioneering cybercafés, the Café Orbital in Paris and La Douche in Nice, which opened in 1995, were followed by the opening of a second wave of establishments, and in 2002, the [easycave.fr](http://easycave.fr) website listed 750 cybercafés in France. And so, the user experience was linked to places, to a specific material culture and was characterised by a high visibility of the technological aspects such as the "black box". The author thus subtly redefines the emphasis of the "power of the user" who, when accessing the Internet, had to go through a laborious acculturation that relied on a network of specialists who enabled the latter to occur.

Chapter 4 examines the "first Web explorers", and focuses on democratising web access. The figures for online visits and the statistics related to naming, obtainable thanks to the NIC France archives that keep a record of the number of connected machines and domain names registered under.fr, enable readers to identify and visualise the 1996 "take off" in the form of graphic representations - "the Internet's first year in France" - according to Isoc France<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, users, such as Stéphane Bortzmeyer, were mainly from the IT world. These *early adopters* were initially joined by those whom the author describes as "very enlightened amateurs" such as Ellen and Dominique, two "pro-ams" at the beginning of one of the first French personal websites inaugurated on 31 December 1994: Quarante-deux.org. Since 1996, opening up the Internet and the Web to the public has resulted in the arrival of a wider public. In the same way that Pierre Mounier analysed for the United States, Valérie Schafer highlights the "cultural clash between the pioneering community, which had forged its rules, especially through Netiquette, and the turbulent and lost newcomers (Newbies)"<sup>7</sup>.

The last chapter focuses on the state's role, the permanence of the territorial dimension, especially on a national scale, as well as the sustainability of the debates raised during the first controversies in France. Indeed, the 1990s were marked by the first screenings and lawsuits against intermediaries (in particular the Web host AlternB), while state intervention was perceived as repressive, bringing "the independence of cyberspace" to an end. With regard to institutions, the author questions the specificity of the French approach compared to the American model. Despite the reticence expressed by the Minitel and historical telecommunications community (Gérard Théry's report in 1994), the proliferation of reports led to Hourtin's speech (1997) during which Lionel Jospin, working with a team of consultants such as Jean-Noël Tronc who were familiar with the ongoing transformations, affirmed the need to change course and move to the Internet and the Web. The idea of a "French delay" was thus used as a means of promoting a certain volunteerism. Valérie Schafer draws attention to due to the enormous adjustments that were made in order to catch up at the end of the decade (1997-2000). At the same time, broadening the market base gave rise to debates such as the Gubler Affair in 1996, during which the book on François Mitterrand, banned from publication but scanned in a cybercafé, was distributed on the Internet. Therefore, the question that arises is to know whether ISPs and web hosts are responsible for illegal online content. From consulting archived ministerial notes, among others, the author reveals the temptation for the executive to strengthen the legislative framework to the detriment of freedom of expression. At the

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<sup>6</sup> In 1997, the number of French sites was estimated at 21,367, compared to 825,385 in the United States (p. 77).

<sup>7</sup> Mounier, P. (2012). *Les maîtres du réseau: les enjeux politiques d'Internet*. La découverte. p. 55

same time, co-regulation was largely encouraged, with the creation of the Internet Rights Forum in 2000. Throughout this last chapter, the author affirms the willingness to create a "French version", based on technology imported from the United States and adapted to the national audience; an "Internet for all" rooted in the Republic and its values. The American model, having influenced generations of entrepreneurs and governments, was also an object of resistance, as the debates on defending online French-speaking world bear witness to. Indeed, the national option was sometimes at the forefront as the French Internet was at that time was developing through the different forms of co-construction and consultations that brought together the various players at the moment when John Perry Barlow declared cyberspace to be independent in 1996.

In the closing pages of the book, Schafer describes the 1990s as the 'in-between' decade; a decade that was in continual negotiation, a "euphoric age that has already lost some illusions on the way" (p. 123). To write this continually evolving history, the author reminds us that we must take into account the double critical distance necessary to avoid the traps of "information deluge", and that the twists and turns of the "Digital Dark Age" before 1996 need to be untangled, while facing the current nostalgia of the "Web1.0" and its characteristic vernacular forms at a time when the contemporary Web seems standardised and under the control of GAFAM. Consequently, for the historian and reader alike, "understanding this history implies ridding ourselves of our vision of hyperconnectivity, unlimited packages, smooth navigation, and powerful search engines that create a digital environment which is very different from that experienced by the first Internet users" (p. 31).