



Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité and the Age of Minitel

Viewing the Internet as a Public Utility

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Assignment 1

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Imagine a world with inequality amongst the citizens. In this world, the rich—doctors, lawyers, executives—form a bourgeois paradise, reserving the finest healthcare, entertainment, and information for themselves. The general citizenry, dubbing themselves the “99-percent,” still have access to the basic health and information, but can never receive the greater options their wealthy counterparts can afford. Now imagine, instead, that this world exists on the Internet, and that this social disparity occurred not in physical services, but in access to web content.

As governments continue to reject net neutrality laws, and service providers move closer towards total market control, this vision of the Internet seems to come closer to reality. If left unchecked, a future such as this could shatter internet pioneer Michael Hauben’s vision of the “netizen,” in which “you consider everyone as your compatriot” (Hauben). Rather than compatriots, netizens will interact with one another on the scale of haves and have-nots. However, this Hugoian vision of the future is rooted in a fundamentally flawed view of Internet access as a commodity rather than as a public utility. Using the defunct French videotext service known as Minitel as an example, a system can be developed that can accommodate for a changing social atmosphere. This new service can employ the fundamental idea of equal access to all citizens, which Minitel was founded upon, to lead the path for a neutral future.

Minitel refers to the French videotext system established in 1978. The service itself was known as Teletel, while the physical computing device was known as Minitel. The system allowed access to many text-based systems such as libraries, phonebooks, and adult chats. The system was operated through the phone lines, which, as political scientist Amy Fletcher explained in her paper “France enters the information age: A political history of minitel,” billed customers monthly for their time online (Fletcher 112). In the late 1970s, as Internet technology

began to take shape with ARPANet, France feared a “rising American hegemony in shaping the strategy for the upgraded network” (110). France, already recognizing the importance of communication to national strength, began to fear a US controlled Internet would hurt their own cultural identity. The French president commissioned a report, the Nora and Minc Report, to outline the importance of networking for the future. This report solidified the “idea of information as both the motor and the main output of modern economies,” and established “telematics” as a method of contact between social groups (110). From this report, France entered networking as the next public service of the PTT.

Minitel as a model for future Internet accessibility may seem controversial given its origins before the World Wide Web; however, it was born out of a culture whose constitutional motto is liberty, equality, and brotherhood. This view tracks the development of Minitel as a public utility. Coming from a history of inequality, the French believed that the market alone would not create a proper atmosphere for development. As Fletcher explains, the state “had to intervene, not to displace the market, but to shape it” (105). This view of the state shaping the market was less a socialist ideology, and more a recognition of the need for checks and balances in important networks.

The benefit of a state-controlled market, as Fletcher points out, was that tradition “necessitates that the essential infrastructure of the country must be equally available to all citizens” (106). Thus, Minitel was inherently born out of a culture of equality. This culture stands as one of the driving benefits of the system in that it ensured access to all its citizens, contrasted against modern services that create barriers for the less privileged.

The state-control over Minitel dates back to state control over communications in general. France held a long belief that communications were essential to national security, which

Fletcher cites as a consequence of the warring-nature of Europe (106). From the postal network to the telephone network, all communication came to fall under the state-run Post, Telegraph, and Telephone Administration (PTT). This administration, operating as a monopoly since 1889, regulated all funding, risk assessment, maintenance, and development of French communications. Again, we return to the beauty of Minitel as a public utility. In a 1984 French law the telecomm monopoly was required to “implement the official non-discrimination and neutrality rules” (109). These rules ensured access to all citizens, and at the time was an important step in bringing Internet-technology into the homes of the citizenry. Looking into the future, this rule of neutrality and non-discrimination establishes an Internet system

This model fell out of use in the mid-1990s, when a private telecommunications network was preferred. However, the example of networking as a public utility can be viewed as an example for modern Internet coverage based on the notion of availability to all citizens. This aspect of Minitel, born from the French political ethos, is the benefit of a public utility system. Minitel still allowed for private services to exist, which allows for it to be proposed as a modern replacement to Internet service providers (ISPs).

By having the government provide access to every citizen equally, there is little fear that companies such as Comcast will tamper with Internet speeds for the benefit of higher-paying customers. As Joe Flint and Meg James of the *Los Angeles Times* explain in their article “Comcast defends Time Warner Cable merger plan in FCC filing,” many activists fear that if left unregulated, the ISPs would “slow Internet speeds and quality to gain leverage in negotiations with other companies” (Flint et al.). This would force citizens with less means to only have access to certain information, certain websites, and lower bandwidth. Presumably, if a system

like this existed in the early days of networks, the Internet would not have been able to enter as many homes.

However, certain aspects of the system would have to be modified for the global nature of the modern Internet. Rather than a nationalistic venture, the public utility Internet is a method of allowing global access to the Internet. Many countries set limits on what content can be accessed by all their citizens in a system known as Smart Filtering. While this is the preference of the country, it proves that a system of international connections exist between ISPs and content creators. As a result, the public utility aspect of this should be regulated through an international body, before being sent to the individual countries. This authority can come together on price and technology for the future, and ensure the continued equal access in the global information age.

By modifying the Minitel technology for the modern Internet, the public utility aspect of the technology can benefit citizens of all class, race, gender, and creed. The government is founded within the interests of the people, and so, having information access at least provided by the government would keep this access open to all of the citizens, and achieve Hauben's dream of the netizen community. Changing the fundamental view of Internet use can avoid the apocalyptic failings of the "corporate Congress," and keep the Internet as a community of anonymous social equals.

Works Cited

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