29. Information Technology Policy and Culture in France

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The Change to an Information Technology Policy

Since the United States announced the “Information Super-Highway” in 1993, information technology (IT) policy has become a priority for the peoples and nations of the world. By the end of 2002, the number of Internet users throughout the world had increased to over 665 million. Information and telecommunication systems are no longer the province of experts such as scientists and engineers but are now freely used by the general public. In this new environment, access to telecommunications infrastructure is indispensable for all people, especially in areas such as cultural and education policy, consumer protection, revision of the tax system, common law, and security measures.

In France, a variety of plans for “informatization” have now been put in place, because by the late 1990s there was an increasing awareness that France was far behind its northern European neighbors and the USA. However, once France had decided its policies, a government-oriented IT revolution was rapidly initiated and the IT industry grew significantly.

This chapter analyzes the key characteristics of the policy by retracing the steps taken to develop the information society in France.

Six Priority Areas to Create the Information Society—
In the 1990s

In 1994 when France Telecom submitted their report the “Information Highway Service,” the French government started to seriously address the problems of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector. Although the government chose to support 170 projects in the next year, in fact, it was not until Lionel Jospin became Prime Minister in 1997 that IT started being actively developed and encouraged by the French government.

In France a monochrome teletext system, Minitel, had already enjoyed widespread and popular use among companies and private households since the 1980s.

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French people used this telecommunication system to routinely search and access information. Ironically it was the very popularity of the Minitel system that kept the French away from the Internet and the opportunity to fulfill the national desire to promote “France and French culture,” and they then found themselves far behind other European countries in their presence on the Internet.

In January 1998, the government announced the Governmental Action Program for the Information Society (PAGSI) and focused on setting priorities in the following six areas: education, culture, the modernization of public services, enterprises and electronic trading, research and innovation, and the changes to the legal framework that were required.

Because informatization of the educational field was set as the first priority, the French government focused on and emphasized the importance of implementing an ICT policy in education. In the very same year as the announcement, Admifrance, the portal site for the French administrative body, was established and enabled companies and individuals to access information including a guide to citizen’s rights and administrative procedures, articles on French law, advertisements for public tendering, the full text of white papers, and so on.²

In February 1999, Prime Minister Jospin himself made an announcement in an editorial entitled “France in the Information Society.” The Prime Minister admitted that through the 1990s France had fallen behind in the information society and declared his determination to now strongly promote ICT policies as a nation and make up for this incomprehensible delay.

Elimination of the Digital Divide and Promotion of Research and Development—After 2000

In July 2000, Prime Minister Jospin chaired the Third Interministerial Committee for the Information Society (CISI). The committee firstly evaluated the progress of the PAGSI over the past 3 years. In the educational field, a top priority, it was confirmed that the access rate to the Internet in secondary schools was now among the highest in Europe. Informatization of the administration by distributing information equipment throughout the government and administrative institutions and wider public Internet access to government services was progressing well.

Also, for the purpose of closing the digital divide, 3 billion francs (450 million euros) was budgeted and 1 billion francs (150 million euros) was allocated for research and development expenses.

In order to eliminate the digital divide, the following ten targets were set by the government.

1. Establishing more than 7000 public spaces allowing access to the Internet over the next 3 years
2. Creating 4000 additional youth jobs as multimedia trainers

²Later, in order to respond more effectively to the needs of citizens and companies, the site was restructured and the new service named Service-Public started in September 2000.