

France pulls plug on Internet forerunner Minitel

June 28 2012, by Emmanuelle Trecolle and Boniface Murutampunzi



A user demonstrates a Minitel prototype at Issy-les-Moulineaux near Paris in 1979. Three decades after it launched, the Minitel -- a made in France forerunner to the Internet that at its height was installed in nine million homes -- will shut down for good on Saturday.

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Once at the cutting edge of technology, the Minitel allowed users in France to check the news, search phone directories, buy train and plane tickets, make restaurant reservations and even take part in online sex chats long before similar services existed elsewhere.

But the advent of the Internet made the Minitel's dial-up connection and

black-and-white screen obsolete and -- despite the protests of some fierce hold-outs -- operator France Telecom-Orange has decided to pull the plug.

Developed by [France Telecom](#) in the 1970s and freely distributed, the Minitel reached its height in the early 1990s, with 26,000 services available and annual revenues of about a billion euros (about \$1.2 billion).

"The Minitel prepared the French for the way the Internet is used today, with electronic communication services, messaging and database consultation," said Helene Viot-Poirier of Orange.

But only about 400,000 terminals are still in use, many of its services -- including booking [Air France](#) and railway tickets -- have been discontinued and in 2010 the system brought in only 30 million euros in revenues.

With 85 percent of those revenues going to service providers, France Telecom has decided the cost of maintaining the network is no longer worth it.

Among those who will miss it are many in France's farming community, where the Minitel is still widely used, especially in remote areas where [high-speed Internet](#) connections are not yet available.

"Farmers often used (the Minitel) for quick operations: calling an inseminator or a knacker, or informing us of a birth in their livestock. They typed a number and immediately had access to these services," said Alain Bazire of the Chamber of Agriculture in the Ille-et-Vilaine region of Brittany.

In the region's community of Vitre, 52-year-old farm manager Solange

Gieux said the Minitel would be sorely missed among farmers.

"It's heartbreaking for me. My Minitel was sacred," Gieux said. "It was very simple to use and very inexpensive. It's too bad they are taking a tool like this away from us."

Gieux said she had no plans to buy a computer. "It's too complicated," she said. "The Minitel was the best."

While the Minitel was a major success at home, France never succeeded in exporting the technology and some say its widespread use was to blame for France lagging behind other industrialised countries in adopting [Internet](#) use.

But others say the Minitel gave France early expertise in e-commerce and point to successful entrepreneurs such as Xavier Niel of French technology firm Free who got their start as service providers on the system.

"The Minitel allowed France to create an ecosystem of content providers who will outlive the service," Viot-Poirier said.

French technology and new media expert Damien Douani said much of what made the Minitel successful -- such as its simple interface, easy payment system and profit-sharing between providers and its operator -- can be seen in the new wave of technology like Apple's iPad and App Store.

"The Minitel was a simple tool for consultation, not for creation, and that's what people are asking for, that we help them find their way in the jungle of information," Douani said.

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