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Boon or Has-Been? Net Users Split Over Minitel

International Herald Tribune International Herald Tribune
Monday, March 12, 2001

We asked users of several French Internet newsgroups that focus on telecommunications and the Internet what they thought of the Minitel in today's Internet world.

"Everything that you can do expensively on the Minitel you can do for free on the Internet," Remi Alvergnat wrote. "For me the Minitel is dead, obviously."

Christophe Kowsky and Jean-Pierre Gautier wrote separately that they used the Minitel to fill out their monthly unemployment-insurance reports.

"It's the cheapest solution," Mr. Gautier said, "cheaper than either doing it by telephone or buying a stamp."

Both Delphine Kresge-Cingal, who has just obtained a doctorate in literature at the Sorbonne, and Gilles Vollant pointed out that official results of school and university entrance exams are on the Minitel but not the Internet.

Francois Demeyer wrote that the Minitel "has the advantage of being truly a 'plug and play' system, and when one has grown used to getting annoyed at the time it takes for Windows to boot - and its unreliability - it becomes a relaxing experience once in a while."

"Companies hesitate giving free access to the Net to their employees," Christophe Dary wrote, "for fear of being attacked by a virus. On the other hand, I've never heard of any virus attacks ever on the 'good old Minitel.'"

"The Minitel is not (yet) dead," Luc Dumaine said, "particularly for professionals. But if we ever succeed in having an equivalent business model of the Minitel on the Internet, the Minitel won't last."

"It's completely out of date in my opinion," Michel Guedj wrote. "Mine has been parked away in the attic for ages."

"The Minitel is an antiquity now," Sylvie Sainzelle wrote, "very practical in the '90s, totally outdated now."

But Emmanuel Fenain, who works at a small Minitel service, wrote: "The Minitel is still alive. Its strength is its business model. It has everything: quick to connect to, it's fast, it's in French! I still use it occasionally, no more, no less than before."

Alexandre Heim, who has worked on the Minitel and the Internet for more than 10 years, said one of the great advantages of the Minitel was its simplicity. "My mother knows how to use a Minitel but not a PC, therefore not the Net," he wrote.

"For around the past two years, it has been fashionable to

denigrate the Minitel: It's old, slow, out of date, obsolete, expensive," he said. "It'll die a natural death, certainly, but a little more slowly than predicted."

Alain Godet wrote: "As long as there is no good business model for the Internet, the Minitel will have many happy years ahead of it. Which means that France will remain all that much longer one of the leaders in the area of e-commerce and in terms of a connected populace, whether the Americans like it or not."

- BRAD SPURGEON



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