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When institutions meet the Web: advocating for a 'critical Internet user' figure in the 1990s

Camille Paloque-Berges. Short paper for the RESAW 2015 Conference, Aarhus, June 2015. This is part of a work in progress on Internet user associations in 1990's France.

Introduction

What is an "Internet user" in the late 1990s? How is this important in the 1990s transition between the confidential and the mainstream Internet?¹ The Web as a "missing link" between information systems technologies and market is a common answer to explain the success of the Internet in the end of the twentieth century (Ceruzzi, 2012). However, we lack insight on how the Internet entered the public sphere, from a genealogical and historical point of view. With Philip Agre (1998), we argue that studying Internet as "public discourse" means understanding how institutions appropriate technologies, their language, their modus operandi, their apparatus – and evolve doing so. Our hypothesis is that in the context of an Internet crisis in the mid to late-1990's, institutional appropriation of the topic on the Web 1.0 helped define a general Internet user; and thus, allowed the emergence of a "Internet critical user" as an alternative to the "commercial user" being fashioned in the new digital economy. One of the first institutional appropriations of network technologies can be analyzed through the creation of non-profit organizations dedicated to the defense and promotion of the Internet, and more specifically dedicated to the "Internet user". We studied how they appropriate Internet and Web technologies to showcase their mission.

Our corpus comprises websites of two of these groups in France: AFUU, the French Unix User Organization that pioneered open system networks in France since 1982 and became in 2002 the AFNET (Net Users French Organization), falling within the tradition of professional computer users; and AUI (Internet Users Organization), created in 1996 in reaction to the first governmental attempts in France to regulate Web usage, merging in 2002 with the French chapter of ISOC (ISOC-France), and fitting into the model of the citizen defense group. Adopting Niels Bruggen's methodology for Web history analysis (2009), we postulate that website as artifacts reflect the organizations' conception of what the ideal Internet user should be as well as the practical means defining this user as well in the broader social context².

1. A changing "Internet-sphere" for a changing engagement with the Internet

It is important, in order to both introduce these organizations and recall the late 1990s context, to describe how the fast evolution of digital networks shaped the organizations' missions as well as their means of communication. We thus investigate the evolution of the "Internet amateur" (one who likes and is engaged, professionally or not, in its societal development, whether the emphasis is put on technical, cultural, economic or political aspects). These engaged users have vested interest in the Internet: they are early adopters, "natives of the Internet Islands", opposite to the "ordinary user" (Bakardjieva, 2005) but often speaking or acting in their name. Several studies tackled the different roles defining commitment towards the Internet in 1990's France:

¹ This research is funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) within the « Web90 » project (piloted at ISCC/CNRS by Valérie Schafer).

² Our case study can probably have some degree of generality for western countries that profited from the first wave of Internet global deployment (the US, Western Europe).

- didactic: “resourceful operators” (Carmagnat, 1996) mediating Internet knowledge and use in the workplace, or “information processors” (Boullier et Charlier, 1997),
- economic: stakeholders from open to proprietary Internet providers (Rebillard, 2012),
- social and political: militants for the defense of a “non profit Internet” (Granjon, 2012; Auray, 2002; Peugeot, 2001).

While our two organizations do take on some aspects of these three typical roles, their respective general mission belongs roughly in the last two categories. We will analyze how their websites take a reflexive position in the genealogy and the current environment of Internet technologies.

A reflective evolution of the Internet-sphere

Our source for access was the Wayback Machine at the Internet archive³, with the well-known problems caused by the disappearance of some images, and software modules now obsolete. Both of the websites’ content is now offline; while the domain afuu.fr redirects to afnet.fr since 2002, aui.fr is on sale since the merge with ISOC-France the same year. We are not sure of their birthdate, but studied the archived versions from the first capture (1997) to 2002 (when they both were redefined in their identity).

The AFUU organization emerged in the early 1980s out of a professional academic community of researchers and engineers using and promoting the open system Unix on compatible mini-computers. They became familiar and involved with heterogeneous networks for communication and data transmission in the late 1970s by developing and implementing the Unix User Control Protocol (UUCP) between distant machines in order to access email and newsgroups, and building bridges to the Arpanet (NTCP) and then to the Internet (TCP-IP) (Keltly, 2012). Thus, AFUU belongs to a tradition of professional organizations from a hybrid academic-industrial sector working on compatible and open systems, a tradition going back to the early 20th century (Russell, 2014). In France, Unixians were pioneers in connecting to the international UUCP network as soon as 1982, the same year the AFUU was born as the French equivalent of other European Unix User Groups (EUUG) (Paloque-Berges, ...). One of AFUU’s missions was to support the technical and (informal) administrative management of Fnet, the French branch of the European backbone for UUCP networks, EUNET. Fnet was decisive in connecting French networks to TCP-IP in 1988, was *de facto* the first French Internet Service Provider and became a rightful non-profit organization in 1992. Among the Internet services Fnet offered, access to Usenet groups was prominent, with a newsgroup dedicated to Fnet and many others to Unix groups. With mailing lists, Usenet played a crucial role for the gathering of early-adopter Internet users, for information, communication or organization purposes before the Web, and continued to do so until the early 2000s.

Usenet is also a crucial element in the genealogy of AUI, and was actually its birthplace as recalled on the website history’s section. Among AUI most active members, we find French Usenet personalities such as Christophe Wolfhugel, the initiator of the French branch of Usenet, Laurent

³ For visualization purposes, we confronted these web archives to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF)’s collection: their 1996-2008 stock is a duplicate of the Internet Archive capture of .fr websites, and thus there with no major differences apart from the disappearance of a few background images.

Chemla, or Stéphane Bortzmeyer, close relations to the Unixians⁴. Their website, like AFUU's, still relies on newsgroups and mailing lists for interactive communication and coordination, like debating and voting.

Both organizations take part in the genealogy of Unixian communities and actually do show sympathy towards their inheritors, free software and open source communities, by taking a stand against software licensing along the EuroLinux Alliance. But there is no mention of Fnet or other Unix-related communities on AUI's website, probably because their website is sponsored by the independent ISP provider Oléane (domain name registration, webspace and mail hosting), which began in 1990 as UUCP network service provider⁵ (thus a "rival" to Fnet). In AFUU's case, the absence of Fnet is a little more intriguing – even more when knowing that Fnet's 1999 website adopts the acronym "AFNET" (Association Française des utilisateurs du Net), the same endorsed by AFUU in 2002⁶.

A websphere revealing stakeholders at play

Textual and link references to stakeholders and partners within the websites show a web of operators involved in the defense and promotion of Internet use. They help us pinpoint the specificity in the organizations' missions.

There is a clear dichotomy in how AFUU and AUI display the socio-professional identities of their stakeholders. While AUI's members can be described as low-profile users, meaning they don't display obviously any information about their "dayjob", AFUU's case is quite the opposite, displaying with emphasis their industrial and political affiliations: the president is assistant director for information systems at Dassault Aviation⁷, and several board of directors members are senators, members of parliament, affiliates at UNESCO or work in major telecommunications or computer-technologies companies (La Poste, Bouygues Télécom...). On the history page, a staggering "non exhaustive" list shows 265 organizations (from the industrial and academic sector) that are members of AFUU.

AFUU's websphere, besides linking to their partners and homologue counterparts at the European level (the EurOpen coalition for instance), shows a series of links to online commercial magazines for network or computer users such as 01informatique.fr, or promotional events that AFUU helped organize, such as "Intr@net 99" (a convention as well as an online informational portal) "net2000 & 2001" and "Fête de l'Internet", tightly linked to the industrial sector with support from public authorities (with then-French President Jack Chirac opening the net2001 convention).

⁴ This proximity mostly stems from Bortzmeyer's work, in the first half of the 1990s, at Conservatoire national des arts et métiers' IT department (Cnam), where the pioneer experiment with UUCP networks happened a decade before (Paloque-Berges, ...).

⁵ France Télécom bought Oléane in 1998.

⁶ We are currently conducting a research on the history of Fnet that we hope will provide answer to the disappearance of Fnet from the interests of Internet engaged user communities of the late 1990s, after having played such an important role in connecting France to Usenet and Internet in the 1980s (Paloque-Berges, ...); we already know from reading newsgroups that Fnet, as the only ISP until 1990 was subject to much criticism from the France computer science and engineer community for its high prices and complicated administration, as well as personal conflicts.

⁷ A major player in military, business and civilian aircraft manufacturer part of the powerful industrial French Dassault group specialized in transport, computer, and media technologies.

Contrastively, AUI's website mostly links to other non-profit groups, whether they are militant partners (like the Global Internet Liberty Campaign (GILC) along with ISOC, the Human Rights Watch or the Electronic Privacy Information Center), or have a similar interest in the defense of the « Internet user », in France, in other countries or at a transnational level.

This contextual history is important to recall in order to analyzing the stakeholders' background experience and involvement with the Internet. Without having gone into a complete prosopography analysis, we think most members of these organizations are active witnesses of the technical and social transformations that the computer and communication network industries were subjected to in the 1990s. The ambiguous relationship to Unix culture, first, signals a shift of power relationships in the economy of software collaboration for developing and using networks. The sudden and wide success of the Web, secondly, is both a victory and a trauma for these early-adopters, symbolized in the legendary 1993 "Eternal September" which marked the end of an era for Internet use "at the risk" of new political, economic and social values emerging with the massive adoption of the Web (Schafer, Paloque-Berges and Georges, 2015).

2. From the website as artifact to public discourse and action

Following Niels Bruger methodology for analyzing websites as artifacts, we focused on three levels: semantic, to reveal topics showcasing the main causes and missions; formal, to understand visual and textual categories framing their discourse; performative, to pinpoint means offered to the Internet user. We will demonstrate how the organizations inscribe⁸ their respective ideal figures of Internet users within their website, and by doing so institutionalize them within the public sphere.

The advisor vs. the advocate

The lexicon fields of AFUU's website is encompassed by a semantic inclination for economics. Consultant trade language is dominant along with various "resources" (brochures, benchmark indicators, barometers and data, services and expertise) for users mostly set to be "decision-makers" in businesses and the public sector. This clear commercial targeting of users agrees with the shift in Unixians identity mentioned earlier, and is underlined in AFUU's use of the term "open systems" on its first page: a logo captioned by the sentence "open systems is a registered trademark". Indeed, openness is a symbol of Unixians' relationship to technology as a socio-technical complex: born and circulated as an open operating system from 1969 on, it fostered user cooperation, sharing and appropriation thanks to its early (almost) free distribution in the academic sphere (Kelty, 2012); however, Unix was privatized in the mid-1980s⁹, which may explain the AFUU's website explicitly commercial rhetoric.

AUI website's semantic inclination leans towards the language of ethics and law. In accordance with the reasons why it came to be (to bring a civilian voice and a judiciary entity to the emerging political debate about Internet use's regulation in 1995's France), the first page displays throughout the years the current cases being discussed in the media (pedophilia in 1996, webhosts' legal responsibility towards content in 1999, privacy issues in 2001). A social commentary accompanies the technical and informational services offered, for instance with the explicit mention of an open source licensing for their search engine (GNU), or with a charter for choosing the best ISP including legal and ethical advices against "risk of abuse". Focus is less in delivering services than in

⁸ We use the term « inscription » as theorized by Philip Agre (2004).

⁹ The reverse of fortune gave way to the emergence of the free software movement and later, to the open source economy, as evoked earlier.

transmitting knowledge and mediating best practices for Internet use, as showed by the project “Internet open school” or the different workgroups’ missions (user rights, networks in society, services and public relations, users as “client” and “servers”...).

The lexicon of cooperation is topical in both websites; but interpreted in its semantic context, reveals a dichotomy. Cooperation helps standing for common causes regarding deregulation purposes in the eye of the law (cryptography, software licensing); but translated in economic terms, the call for cooperation promotes a liberal digital market at AFUU, and defends digital workers’ rights at AUI. One can read this opposition in the insistent argument AFUU makes against the “French backwardness”¹⁰ by emphasizing that the organization is “PRO-technologies”¹¹ and by advising “concrete action” vigorously (for instance via the “@CTION” program, the “Assembly for New and Open Communications and Technologies”). Although not explicit, it is a possible scratch against the type of advocacy undertaken by organizations like AUI, for instance their promotion of the “Onenet Campaign (“One Planet. One Network”), a universal declaration of Internet user rights and deeds (“we are the guardians of the Internet, not its owners”). If AFUU’s promise to animate a workgroup about the relationship between Internet and rights falls short, staying “under construction” throughout the years, one could consider that AUI’s global charter for Internet user is an idealistic standpoint.

A visual and performative grammar framing a program for action

The visual identities of the websites are contrastive¹². AUI’s appearance is austere, its first version similar to the first page on the Web created by Tim Berners-Lee’s team at CERN¹³: white background, linear laid out black text with blue hyperlinks. AFUU’s relies on the folkloric design developed by first generation web users, with colorful animated gifs (most of them being partners’ logos) and a flashy background. This has a consequence on how information is organized on the page, and thus how it is hierarchized, as well as on what actions users are allowed to perform.

AFUU’s website shows a profusion of links for capturing users’ attention through animation and colors. Categorization relies on familiar keywords for a professional user in search of information services (administrations, education, commercial uses, tourism, culture, media). AFUU takes on the role of equipping the whole of France with Internet technologies, a reminder of the governmental promotional politics for telecom and computer technologies of the previous decades. Indeed, the reader is encouraged to read a series of governmental reports and participate in the multiple events managed or backed up by AFUU (conventions, conferences, exhibitions, competitions...) that call for real-life encounters in the fashion of industrial shows. Besides commercial information services (from advising to performing a user needs-oriented search on the Web¹⁴), a free vigil is provided through an open access mailing list. Overall, calls and advices for action are generally tailored to the professional user needs, whether they are a business owner or a public service decision-maker (private individuals being alluded to but never addressed in length).

¹⁰ A recurring critique, along with technophobia, since President « Plan Calcul » in 1966, within the technology sector towards the French industrial policy considered as too protective, and thus seen as missing the innovation dynamics of the American techno-industrial complex.

¹¹ Capitals original.

¹² Although, as previously said, iconographic elements are or may be missing from their archived versions.

¹³ See the restored version of the WWW’s first webpage: <http://first-website.web.cern.ch/>.

¹⁴ A service still offered at the eve of the massive adoption of Web search engines.

AUI makes up for its minimal design by playing with text size in order to direct attention on the current topics being tackled (mostly of judiciary nature). A 1998 redesign re-organizes the content in three columns layout, with the current affairs still at the forefront. The redesign is integrated as such in the “new projects” category, along a reflexive and performative commentary from AUI: it emphasizes the new user-friendly appearance as well as its didactic qualities, and offers html templates for appropriation in case users would like to add content to the website. A stock of documents originally crafted by AUI (regarding computers and networks use and governance) is available to all users, with an explicit call to circulate: “Because the stakes are so high, don’t hesitate to copy and share. / *Internet is not only for professionals*¹⁵”. Another feature of performative transmission is the guide “Internet for beginners” by Laurent Chemla, a commonplace of computer networks since their early years, mixing the technical and the cultural, the didactic and the folkloric, open, sharable and modifiable by Internet experienced users (Paloque-Berges, 2013).

Finally, analyzing how the websites handle their “members only” sections¹⁶ reveal the contrast between the two organizations, but also their ambivalence regarding the governance of their own organization. As we saw earlier, both websites emphasize the need for open cooperation, whether for efficiency (AFUU) or ethics (AUI); both offer a members-only area with restricted resources.

The paradox within Unix culture and history (the shift from a open and free cooperation model to a privatized model retaining the symbolic value of openness) is inscribed in webdesign: AFUU encourages cooperation (“businesses counseling each other”, crowdsourcing the animation of workgroups), but encloses the major part of their resources in the members area, for instance the “Tribunix magazine” and most technical information. One trivial, but symbolic feature of this ambivalence towards Unix early hacker culture resides in the error message displayed when one wants to access the membership area without password: “Trying to hack, eh? Just joking...”.

On AUI’s part, it is probable that the member area only gives access to a series of general and topical mailing lists (school, cryptography, web...), if we believe the dialog box’s instructions when clicking on the access link. Along with cherishing information items of pre-Web Internet culture (like the guide for Internet beginners mentioned previously), and issuing a call for preserving rather than altering the nature of the Internet¹⁷, AUI assumes its Usenet inheritance for self-regulated online life organization (relying on the netiquette custom law, for instance). This prompts us to wonder about how their sociotechnical governance program is to be mediated and traduced (in the latourian sense; Latour, 2004) to the general public in a new context of massive Internet use. Indeed, the offered tools for organizing group governance and action remain the privilege of users familiar with mailing lists and newsgroups¹⁸, with little room for face-to-face interaction in physical places. As such, it

¹⁵ Emphasis original.

¹⁶ Websites’ sections enclosed behind a password protected, such as member’s areas, are by default not archived, so we have to guess from the information accessible on the websites and the dialogue boxes what they hold.

¹⁷ AUI uses the word « dénaturer », meaning « altering a natural state », whether metaphorically or literally.

¹⁸ Another of our case studies on the same topic, but focusing on computers professionals’ discussions on Usenet about the growing public success of the Web between 1992 and 1997, shows that the use of newsgroups and mailing lists is far from being consensual. Indeed, they hold a general tendency towards close-knit and niche communities with a strong reliance on shared references, values and modes for action difficult to translate for public debates about political action (study entitled « L’horizon du grand public pour les experts des technologies d’Internet au tournant du Web », presented at the International symposium « Formes et

feeds the ambivalence maintained by new the Internet-committed militant groups between relying on custom law (native to online life sociability before the Web) and leaning towards modes of action that fall under constitutional law, as analyzed by Nicolas Auray (2002). It is no coincidence that in 1996 John Perry Barlow releases its Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace¹⁹, an ode to Internet custom law, which success might be have been more of a swansong than a model for the social and institutional future of the Internet.

Conclusion

We are drawn to conclude, thanks to our analysis put in perspective with our social, political and economic context knowledge of the French Web in the 1990, that these inscriptions reveal an Internet in crisis. The appropriation of this crisis by institutions does produce elements of social questioning of the legal, political and economic stakes for the societal use of the Internet. It is important to recall, as it has been stressed by Agre (1998), and has been since the first critical turn in Internet studies in the early 2000's, that these moments of critical appropriation do not imply a revolution is taking place but help to shift the interest from "Internet societies" to "Internet in society" (Wellman, 2009; Wellman and Hogan, 2004). Web inscriptions of this crisis show the maturation of two Internet user figures that will map the deployment of the Internet in the public sphere in the following decade:

- a service user surrounded by injunctions to cooperate with the new digital economy for the sake of innovation and participation, in order to make up for "France's backwardness";
- a critical user facing the difficulties to update traditional political activism while balancing online and offline action, new values and tools and old institutions, in order to make up for a growing digital gap between ordinary citizens and experienced netizens.

These figures took shape and reality as the Internet was grounded, partly by these organizations' discourse and action, as a complex socio-technical technology in the public sphere, opening a dialogue within existing institutions. But looking back from the 2010's, facing today's growing control by governments and the market on user-oriented technologies, we know the revolution did not happen. It is important to understand this, as this critical user is today a growing opposition force in the many controversies about Internet governance and digital data use today, but remains a complex figure.

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¹⁹ <https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>

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