

# Introduction

**Pierre Bonis,**  
*director of AFNIC*

Every day, more than 4.5 billion human beings are “connected” — needless to say to what! As everyone knows, this can only be to the Internet.

On this network of computer networks which, for more than thirty years now, has grown along with the globalization of exchanges on all continents, users exchange sounds, videos, texts. All, or nearly all, communication techniques that have marked human progress since the invention of the printing press are found on this technological system. On the Internet, we publish, telephone, watch or even make films, keep informed.... We do not yet move, but there is talk about e-presence, e-medicine and even holographic communications. No form of communication, exchange or action fully bypasses the Internet — if it tends to do so, plans are being made to eventually put it “on the Internet”.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning, the Internet was the call of the open sea beckoning the general public with a virtual fading of distance and differences, a call to explore this *terra incognita*. From the memory of anyone who lived through this pristine period, one of the best examples is the first invoices received for a subscription to an Internet service-provider in the late 1990s. We were browsing American sites, participating on British forums, accessing contents hosted by Japanese universities; but France Télécom still always billed a local communication — a world within reach of our fingertips via a local connection!

This feeling that borders were abolished and barriers lifted augmented as time passed owing to e-commerce and Amazon for e-shopping. We sometimes overlook these forerunners who played a part in this general relativity of distance, this shrinking of geography, as uses of the Internet marched onwards. Amazon made its first delivery in 1995 at a time when French households were just starting to purchase personal computers. Since then, using the Internet has been synonymous with immediate access to persons and ideas anywhere around the world, to goods and services on line but with home delivery at your front door or sometimes in your computer (downloaded software).

Consumer and cultural goods and services proliferated on the “web”, which, till then, had been deemed fit for academia or nonprofits but not for retail businesses. This trend in uses not only turned the Internet into the shortest “shortcut” but also had concrete repercussions in the real world. Some businesses soon bore the brunt. Music was being accessed differently. For decades, recordings were placed on a physical medium, but now they were “dematerialized” and could be copied without any loss of quality. The whole music industry was upended. Its business model had to be redesigned.

As libraries and travel agencies, not to mention private clinics, hotels, and the movie industry, are now experiencing, their business models — often based on the good will stemming from neighborhood stores, from a fixed place of business or in a particular ecosystem — are teetering. Attractiveness is no longer primarily linked to distance, large or small, nor to local good will. What now counts are the opinions posted by cybernauts, whether from the end of the world or around the street corner. And price wars are raging. With the thrust of the Internet, mass tourism has grown, partly due to online travel agencies and reservation services. The world is shrinking. Disney produced a hit about this in 1994 for the release of its film *The Lion King*: “It’s a small world after all.”

Has this abolition of distance, along with the vanishing visibility of borders (the Schengen Agreement in Europe during the 1990s, NAFTA in 1994, the continual lowering of customs and of visa requirements throughout the first decade of the new millennium), been detrimental to cultural and linguistic diversity? Has it come at the price of “web-locked” areas, which have become the “have-nots” of digital globalization? Has the Internet wafted in something more than a breeze from the open sea?

---

<sup>1</sup>This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France).

The very conception of the Internet was based on a principle worth recalling: decentralization. Intelligence, it used to be said, was located at the two ends of the network. However faster bit rates and the concurrent development of technology have finally made the promised birth of a user-producer come true. Even though major business players on the Internet are American or, nowadays, Chinese, we notice — if we step back from being so impressed with the market capitalization of the Big Five (GAFAM) — the unprecedented development of local productions on the Internet. A first example comes from the production and distribution of contents. Freed (to a degree) from the requirements of the production and validation system used in the publishing industry, anyone can now hope to produce something to upload to the Web and make a name. This holds, in particular, for software and, too, for texts.

The values grounded on sharing and participation, which are alive on the Internet, account for Wikipedia's success at a time when no general encyclopedia is any longer being distributed as a set of books. Freeware provides another illustration of this sharing, of what we might call a bottom-up approach. An often overlooked aspect is the revival of local languages. For two decades now, the Internet has opened toward more and more language diversity. Two strong examples from the turn of this century are operating systems in Swahili and the use of non-Latin alphabets by the domain name system.

The “local” is not necessarily being crushed by the rapid development of exchanges on an Internet (initially) dominated by the United States and Europe, and mostly used by the upper socioeconomic categories. In the middle of the first decade of the century, the use of mobile telephones accelerated the penetration of the Internet throughout Africa. To the detriment of the local? Not necessarily so. True, the majority of new users tend toward the (ultimately highly centralized) social media; but at the same time, the development of e-banking in Africa has made up for the lack of banking facilities and laid the grounds for local practices on the Internet, such as “e-tontines”.

Local democracy and citizen initiatives find new tools for “proximity” through e-voting, online petitions and e-fund-raising. While enabling us to show an interest in the world's problems, the Internet also makes it easier for us to feel involved in our local area.<sup>2</sup>

From the dematerialization of administrative paperwork to the development of telecommuting (which the COVID-19 pandemic has shown to be essential for the national economy), from the search for jobs to transactions for goods and services without intermediaries, from the access to culture at home to the extension of production to users themselves... the Internet is constantly changing the point of equilibrium. It is a powerful factor that is upending vested positions. After having said this, let us avoid the pitfall of using these remarks to proffer a pessimistic vision of progress... or a blissful view of technology that mysteriously correlates the rise of the Internet with the advancement of humanity.

This issue of *Enjeux numériques* inquires into this shift between the “global” and “local”. How does the Internet contribute to each? Hyperlinked shortcuts or a hyperconcentration through commercial conglomerates? Individual isolation caused by online activities or new opportunities for interpersonal exchanges? The vanishing of the local to the benefit of a new digital continent or the use by local areas of this novel power of creation and visibility?

Anything goes. Demands for “proximity” and “differentiation” coexist with demands for universality and, sometimes, uniformity. The Internet was not designed to serve one or the other, to measure up to one of these two expectations. It works; and this is what we ultimately want from it. Its resilience and the plasticity of the uses which it allows are qualities tapped by movements that the Internet did not initiate but that it systematically amplifies.

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, <https://www.bondyblog.fr/> and <https://terredeliens.org/>.