

HERVE DE CHARETTE
Minister of Foreign Affairs of France

The rapid development of a whole area of Asia benefits French foreign trade. For the first time in ten years, France recorded a surplus of more than 9 billion francs (1.8 billion dollars) there. Exports, which had increased by 20% in 1994, further rose by 28% in 1995, and even by 46% for those intended for Hong Kong. The sale of Airbus contributes largely to this result as Asia in general has become the

main outlet for this European aircraft. During the recent Europe Asia summit in Bangkok, President Jacques Chirac announced his goal of having the French share of the Asian market rise from 2 to 6% within 10 years. The only shadow in this area comes from the worsening of the deficit with China. Imports from this country increased by 12% while exports only rose by 10%.

With the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, French trade has proved dynamic. Russia's role as France's privileged partner was reduced to the advantage of other countries in Central Europe, especially Poland and the Czech Republic to which exports increased by about 30%.

What results will 1996 bring to French foreign trade?

It has been noted that this year French foreign trade has continued on its brilliant path by achieving a surplus of 18.4 billion francs (3.6 billion dollars) in the first two months of the year.

However, unlike what happened in 1995, imports fell off considerably in January and February. According to observers, this reduction is the result of a slackening in household and industrial purchases, particularly in the area of consumer durables. At the ministry delegated to Finance and Foreign Trade, specialists consider that it could be just a "temporary fall", similar to the one which took place in autumn 1995 without affecting the excellent overall results.

French Foreign Trade

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beat the record of 25 billion francs (5 billion dollars) recorded in 1994. France's most dynamic trade was with Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

With the rest of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), France registered a deficit of 30 billion francs (6 billion dollars). According to experts, the fluctuations with this zone correspond to two different realities:

— Although French imports from the United States fell slightly (2%), exports, on the other hand, dropped by 8%. This result is mainly due to a 30% fall in aeronautics deliveries and to the dollar effect.

— With Japan, the appreciation of the yen increased imports in value (+1%), but exports, particularly expendable consumer items rose by 10%. This brought the French deficit with this country down from 22 to 20 billion francs (4.4 to 4 billion dollars).

France on Planet Internet

The world computer network Internet has lately been a great hit with the French and the transition from videotext (Minitel) to the new on-line services is under way. The state is well aware of the importance of the economic, industrial and social stakes and it is thus taking action. The defence of plurilingualism and the beginning of reflection on the idea of international regulations are on the agenda.

by Florence Raynal

THE French are fond of paradoxes. They create more sites on the Internet than they consult. Laurent Sorbier, and official representative at the ministry delegated to the French Post-Office, Telecommunications and Space, explains. Moreover, it proves just to what extent they are looking abroad. Indeed, although France ranks ninth in the world for the number of sites created, her inhabitants are still rather reluctant to travel over the World Wide Web. Nevertheless, the network of networks is expanding to an astonishing degree, and the number of users, who amount to about 300,000 today and a third of whom are private individuals, is rising steeply. Indeed, the Internet, which for a long time, was confined to the world of researchers,

ready familiar with telecomputing. France has thus become an absolute pioneer in electronic business which produces a turnover that is considerably higher than that of the whole of the Internet in the world! Laurent Sorbier points out. Obviously, the Minitel is extremely poor graphically compared to the Internet, but when the French finally change over, this know-how will benefit them for the on-line services. Illustrating this spirit of transition, France Telecom recently created an ambitious service, Wanadoo, offering access to all of the Minitel services via the Internet. The state is concerned not to enter on a huge plan to deploy infrastructures without better knowing the nature and solvability of the demand and it

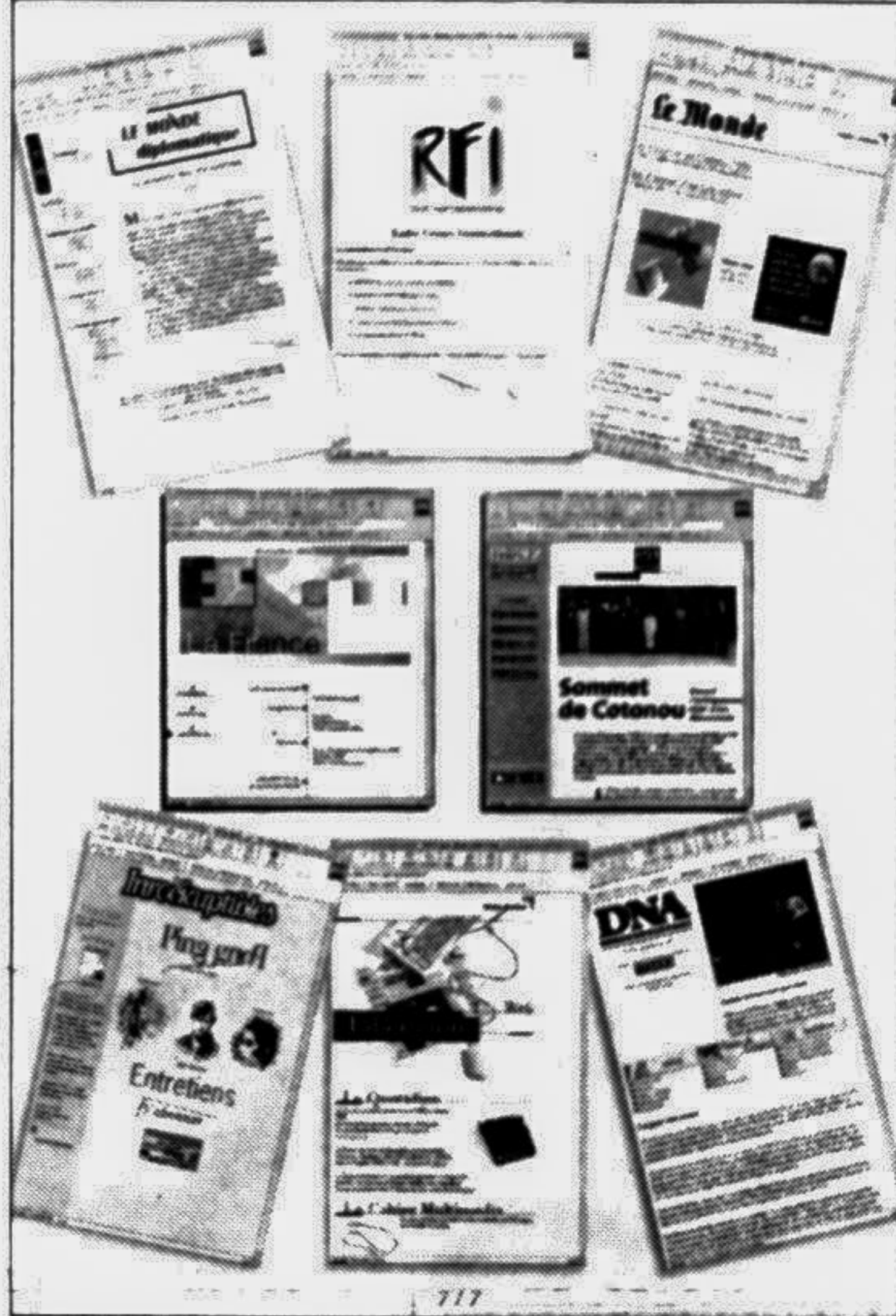
cultural diversity on the highways of information. The countries taking part thus noted their desire to concretely encourage a French-Language space in this area, in the Cotonou Declaration. Since this gathering, France has continued in this direction and intends to support the wide-scale, coherent creation of quality contents in French on the networks and their propagation, a position that she has undertaken to defend in international circles. The data-services of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs³ and Culture⁴ already ensure a

strong French-language presence on the Internet which is greatly appreciated by the international community. The active bilateral technical cooperation begun with Canada and above all, with Quebec on cultural and linguistic diversity on the networks will be continued, and should act as a driving force. As far as French-speaking countries in the South are concerned, numerous cooperation projects are being examined with the improvement of telecommunications networks, interconnection between African countries, distance teaching, the opening of access points to the networks and training. A lot of

reflection on this topic is under way and several big conferences will broach the subject, after the extended G-7 meeting which was held in May 1996 in Midrand (South Africa) on the theme "The information society in relation to development" and that of the ministers in French-speaking countries in 1997.

Finally, the adaptation of regulations in the framework of the development of the Internet is on the agenda. Indeed, the worldwide scale of the network implies reflection on an international level. Delicate problems include defending authors' rights, the rules of competition and security. In this respect, cryptography will be the subject of forthcoming discussions in parliament. Will universal rules for good conduct be successfully drawn up? The world information society seems to demand this.

1 To consult the list of all of the French sites: <http://www.urec.fr>
2 Data-service: <http://www.telecom.gouv.fr>
3 Data-service: <http://www.france.diplomatic.fr>
4 Data-service: <http://www.culture.fr>



Information on the Internet is booming in France. A few of the numerous private or public sites. (photo: DR)

academics, executives and computer specialists, is beginning to attract the general public and especially young people. The press devotes an increasing amount of space to it. The big dailies create multimedia supplements and about fifteen specialised weeklies have come out, half of which are devoted to the Internet. Works of vulgarisation appear in bookshop windows and "cybercafes" are always full of people. Various organisations are trying to democratise access to this information system and the number of companies offering access or managing the services on the Internet are on the rise. Recently, the first on-line multimedia network in French came into being. It is called Infonie and, in addition to giving access to the Internet, it offers a connection to specific services such as mail order purchasing and dispatches from the Agence France Presse news agency. Finally, the Internet Society, an international association on which the political, technical and financial destiny of the Internet depends, recently created its first French branch.

From the Minitel to the Internet

The French state has taken a certain number of measures to facilitate access to cyberspace. These include the possibility offered to everyone by the national telephone operator France Telecom, to connect up to the Internet for the price of a local phone call. Another area of action is the distribution of communicating micro-computers and multimedia terminals to private individuals. As a result of the excellence and success of the domestic videotext system, households have been slower to invest in more sophisticated equipment (only 10%) and link up to on-line services. The Minitel, whose existence is not yet threatened, is nevertheless, a fantastic asset for the French who are thus al-

has thus launched an appeal to firms and local authorities to test the various technologies on a real scale. Out of the 635 projects presented, 244 experiments will benefit from technical and financial support: in all 270 million francs (54 million dollars) for 1996. In order to encourage ministries to create a Web site by the end of 1997, the Ministry of Telecommunications² has set up a workshop. "Our role is to advise them so that the information between institutions is transmitted clearly and so that they can benefit from the experience of the seven ministries which are already equipped," Jean Touchard, who is in charge of it, explains. Another project which is fundamental for the development of the information technologies is to link up 700 schools in 1996-97 so as to familiarise children with the new tool. Moreover, the state intends to develop educational contents and to train teachers.

French On-line

"Everybody talks about the Internet now and it is written about all over the place. There is a vital stake for the French language and for the French-speaking community in this. It is a technological, economic, financial, cultural, social and political stake," the Senegalese President Abdou Diouf remarked at the Summit of the French-speaking community held in Cotonou (in Benin). President Jacques Chirac confirmed this. For him this revolution in information conceals a danger, that of "having the gap between rich countries and poor countries grow wider still and in an irreversible way" as well as the danger of "cultural uniformisation." While refusing to "compete with English" which is the language used by 90% of the information passing through the Internet, the French President called upon "the French-speaking community to take charge of a vast campaign for linguistic pluralism and

The Ombudsman

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pendent, not receiving any instructions from any authority. The ombudsman intervenes free of charge. He is empowered to help private individuals and legal entities, associations and trade unions, local authorities, etc to assert their rights in cases of mismanagement or an unfair decision by an administrative department. But he is unable to interfere in disputes among private individuals themselves. Similarly, he does not intervene in a difference opposing an employee and his administration.

The ombudsman is neither a referee nor a judge. He cannot impose a decision on the administration, nor intervene in a legal procedure nor call a

legal decision into question. A private individual or an association wishing to refer a case to an ombudsman has to do so through a deputy or a senator of their choice. The latter will check that the matter in hand is indeed one that can be dealt with by the mediator to whom he will then hand over the petition. Beforehand, the plaintiff has to have attempted to obtain an explanation or a revision of the decision which is the object of the dispute, from the department contested.

In order to settle the dispute amicably, the ombudsman makes use of his powers of persuasion and addresses recommendations to the offend-

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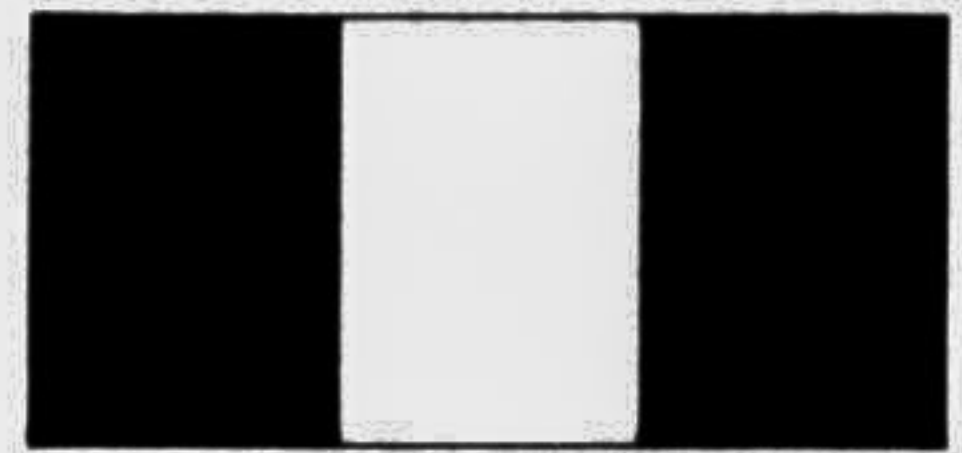
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