

# Forging a digital society

Written by: Axelle Lemaire, Secretary of State for the Digital Economy, France

Last update: 2 December 2019

**Axelle Lemaire, Secretary of State for the Digital Economy, France**



© Rights reserved

Digital innovation is an opportunity—for governments, for business, for the public, and for the way in which they relate to each other.

Digital technology is providing new tools that are revolutionising institutional relationships and the way society operates, empowering individuals, and their ability to both participate in and contribute to decision-making and production. Examples abound, ranging from the use of social media in spawning democratic movements, the pooling of resources with regard to housing and transport, to public involvement in decision-making on municipal spending or proposed legislation.

We are currently experiencing the accelerated transformation of a centralised economy based on scarce resources into an economy of abundance, one that is decentralised, connected, and data-driven. France now faces the challenge of preparing that future in order to keep up with this innovation and the development of these new models by providing full territorial coverage for mobile telephones and high-speed internet connections, data infrastructure for use by public and private data providers, increasingly open access to knowledge and support for those who are digitally disadvantaged. This is what lies at the heart of the bill that I am proposing in France, a law that defines a digital Republic, a law designed to bring every part of the governmental operating system into the digital age. This is an ambition that must also be developed and built upon at European level.

In the interests of democracy and transparency, it is of paramount importance that governments allow access to their data. Produced and stored by the state, this information represents a vital resource that can stimulate economic and social innovation in a digital society.

In the interests of democracy and transparency, it is of paramount importance that governments allow access to their data 

France is determined to lead by example, and has allowed access to the national register of companies and their sites in all sectors of the economy. Nine million entities are listed, making this database the most complete record of French businesses in the country. The current paywall will be taken down as of the first quarter of 2017. Making data available in this way fuels the development of innovative new activities: in the Netherlands, for example, free access to meteorological data led to the creation of a dynamic ecosystem of professional re-users, whose activities have generated a return of €35 million for the Dutch government.

Access to public data also helps to improve public policies: France released the source code for its income tax calculation software, and within 48 hours a team of young developers had suggested a way to optimise the algorithm and cut the time taken to calculate a simulation by a thousand.

Developing our fledgling digital businesses will take different forms of financing from those used to developing more traditional activities. The support given to French start-ups, for example, has seen a dedicated investment programme rolled out through a state-owned bank, and this has played a central role in defining how the start-up ecosystem is financed. The results are impressive, with a 100% increase in value from the €897 million raised in 2014 to €1.8 billion in 2015.

But innovation cannot happen on command, either in the digital industry or anywhere else. The role of the State is essentially to make sure conditions are right. One priority is to promote ecosystems of young digital businesses, at every stage of their development, at the national and international level. This is the idea behind the creation of French Tech, an initiative with a straightforward label designed to bring our innovator community in France together.

Not all companies are start-ups, however, nor are they all at home in the digital world, and some need support. French businesses are certainly well equipped with digital technology: 99% had high-speed internet access at the end of 2013, but just 64% of SMEs had a website, and a paltry 25% were selling their products online. In the digital age, businesses that are not online cannot compete on the market. Here again, the state has a role to play on the ground, through local representatives, raising awareness and guiding these companies as they master digital technologies.

An industrial revolution is taking place. But it can only happen if everybody in society plays their part. There needs to be full internet coverage throughout the

land, for both PC and mobile, if we are all to enjoy the growing potential of the digital world. Not only because needs are increasing in terms of network capacity and frequencies, but also and mostly because too many people are excluded from the digital world.

This shift will also materialise through training in these technologies. Demand is rising for new skills, and entrepreneurs will tell you that it is hard to find the right people. To create these jobs in the new sectors being created by digital business, training needs to be redesigned.

The digital world moves fast. It cannot be reversed or halted. It can help face major challenges such as social and economic fragmentation, or reduce unemployment, for example. But how can it achieve this if access is limited to the privileged few? Connection to internet will naturally become a right. The state must assist those who are least likely to have online access, and those who are least likely to use these technologies, and it must help them to do so.

This is how we can continue to build our society.

©OECD Yearbook 2016

[www.economie.gouv.fr](http://www.economie.gouv.fr)