

# A ROUND-THE-WORLD INNOVATION TRIP

In the space of a year, Francis Pisani visited around thirty countries to explore the dynamics of innovation around the world. He shared his impressions and findings during a conference as part of the “L’Heure H” cycle. He came back sure of one thing, which is that people are innovating all over the world.

San Francisco, Recife, Cairo, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Mumbai, Shanghai... Despite entering into his seventies, Francis Pisani did not neglect any part of the globe during his “round-the-world innovation trip”. After having spent fifteen years in the region of San Francisco, the journalist sensed that Silicon Valley was losing its magic, that the entrepreneurs no longer had the same ambition to change the world. So he decided to see what was happening elsewhere.

His first conclusion is that innovation is universal. It depends neither on the degree of development nor on the state of the technologies but instead it simply appears when a problem crops up that needs to be solved. As he puts it, “*Necessity is the mother of innovation*”. In all the cities that he visited, he observed the ingenuity of the

local entrepreneurs. In Accra, the capital of Ghana, he met Herman Chinery-Hesse, nicknamed the “Bill Gates of Africa”, the founder of Shopafrica53, a website that allows local SMEs to sell their products worldwide. All the transactions are made by SMS, an alternative to credit cards given that very few people in Africa have bank accounts. “*This portal is a real development aid tool*” explains Francis Pisani. In the same vein, in Kenya, a 25-year old woman called Linda Kwamboka has co-founded the M-Farm application used by Kenyan farmers to find out the prices of their products on neighbouring markets, but also to mutualize certain functions such as the transport or purchase of fertilizer. During his trip, Francis Pisani observed that the social dimension was also a powerful catalyst for innovation, notably in China, where he met the blogger Isaac Mao who has created a platform to help social activists to spread the word about their actions.

But what determines whether innovation is likely to blossom in a region or not? Pisani believes that two elements play a key role: co-working spaces and people. He recommends the creation of spaces set aside for innovation, open to all, to foster discussion and creativity. Rather than big clusters like the one in Skolkovo, near Moscow (spread over 380 hectares), he prefers more modest structures, incubators and co-working spaces that allow “collective ingenuity” to develop. In Kenya, the founders of the crowdsourcing software “Ushahidi”

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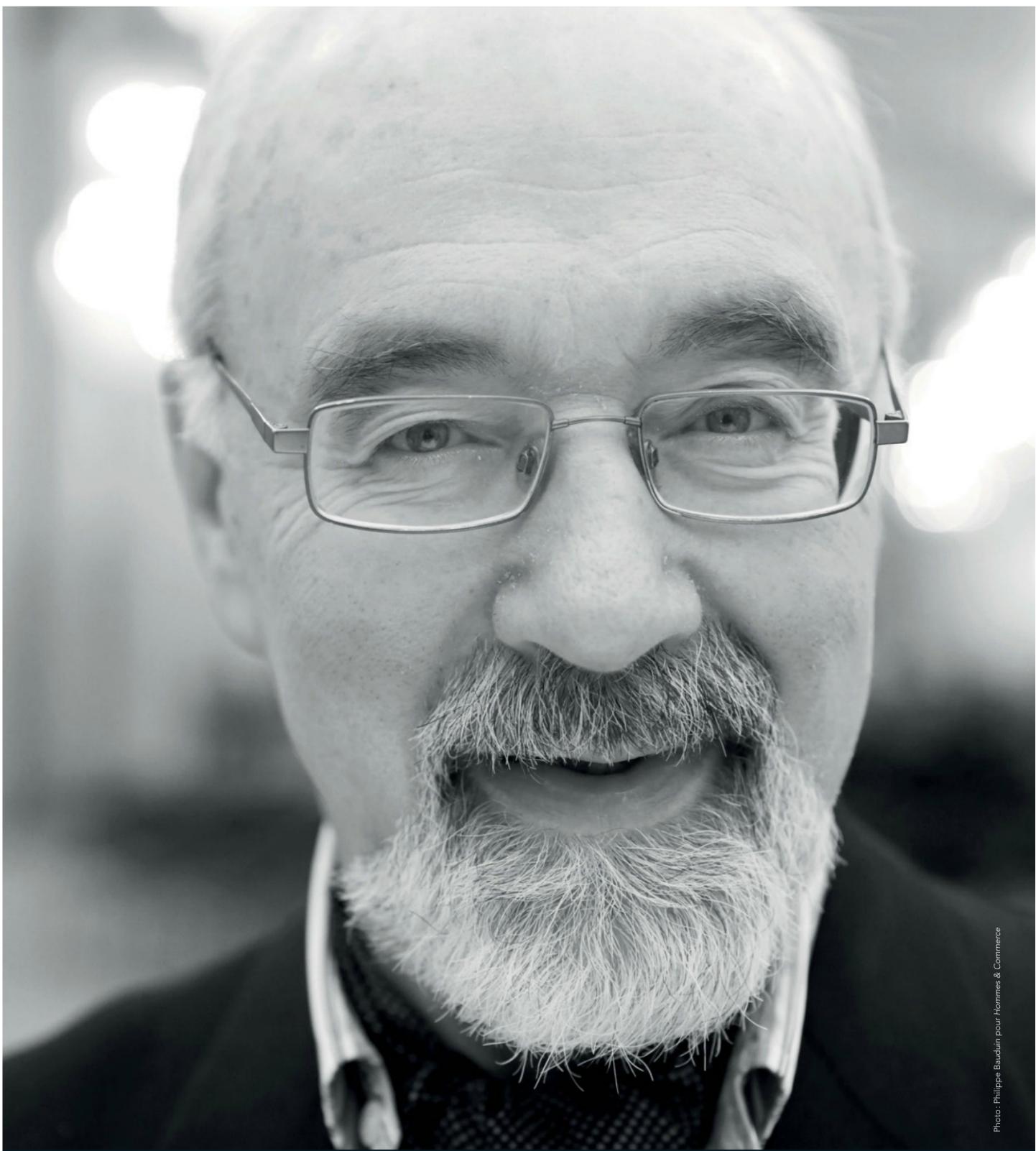


Photo: Philippe Baudin pour Hommes & Commerce

Francis Pisani is an independent journalist specialising in information and communication technologies. After spending fifteen years in the region of San Francisco, in 2011-2012 he embarked upon a round-the-world trip to seek out all forms of innovation, visiting no less than 45 cities in 32 countries.

Francis Pisani currently teaches at the Political Studies Institute of Paris and has taught at the universities of Stanford and Berkeley. He has published two books: *Comment le web change le monde: l'alchimie des multitudes* (2008) and *Des internautes aux webacteurs* (2011) jointly written with Dominique Piotet.

## TOMORROW'S HIGH-POTENTIAL NICHE MARKETS

In what domains will innovation flourish in the years ahead? Francis Pisani noted three major niches during his round-the-world trip. First of all, there is **3D printing**, which looks set to see a real boom. The American Jonathan Buford has already announced the imminent launch of a 3D printer costing 300 dollars called the Makibox. On a much bigger scale, the ESA (European Space Agency) plans to build a station on the moon using this technique. Another domain is that of **social networks**, where new players are emerging in Asia with the sites WeChat (China), Kakao Talk (Korea) and Line (Japan), which count almost 400 million users in total. Lastly, **online education** is considered by many experts as THE next revolution. For example, the TutorVista.com website, based in Bangalore, links up Indian teachers with American students, 24/7, for a modest fee of 100 dollars a month, a bargain given the astronomical cost of higher education in the US. If proof were needed to back up this theory it can be found in the fact that Pearson, the world's number one company in the education sector, has purchased the Indian company.

have created the iHub, “*an open space for geeks, hackers and investors which has become a showcase example in Africa*”, enthuses Francis Pisani. In Silicon Valley, accelerators such as Y Combinator and Tech Stars provide enterprising youngsters with a collaborative environment buzzing with engineers, designers, financial whizzes and marketers. These innovation zones do all they can to attract talents from all over the world, following in the footsteps of the success of Silicon Valley. Some emblematic examples: Jerry Yang, the co-founder of Yahoo, was born in Taiwan and “*at the age of ten he didn't speak a word of English*”; Serguei Brin, one of the two creators of Google, was born in Russia under Brezhnev; as for the Brazilian Michel Krieger, who arrived in California in 2004, he sold his start-up Instagram to Facebook for a billion dollars last year. The tightening of US immigration policy since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 has discouraged some entrepreneurs and dealt a hefty blow to the attractiveness of Silicon Valley. Between 2005 and 2012, the proportion of start-ups created by immigrants has fallen from 52% to 44%. “*Barack Obama wants to relax the immigration regulations, and a lot of technological companies are actively calling for such measures. It is important to re-open Silicon Valley and to boost one of its strengths... the diversity of the men and women working there*” insists Francis Pisani. In the meantime, certain countries are trying to take advantage of the situation, just as Chile has done. The Start-Up Chile scheme, created in 2010 by the government with 10 million dollars of funding, chooses the most promising start-ups and gives them

40,000 dollars and a one-year visa to come and work in Santiago. As a result, over 300 new companies set up in “Chilecon Valley” each year. “*The key point is to manage to attract what I call creative diasporas (students and expatriates). An ecosystem is fertile if it combines open co-working spaces and different people*” concludes Francis Pisani.

Even if the journalist mainly focused on start-ups and SMEs during his round-the-world trip, he nevertheless learnt some lessons for big groups that are looking to innovate. “*The companies that content themselves with simply following the trends in their sphere of activity and their markets will find themselves left on the side lines, because innovations often take place in the blurry zone between different segments*” he warns. “*I recommend 720° monitoring: 360° activity monitoring and 360° geographical monitoring*”. It is also important ‘to innovate within innovation’, in other words to question the way the company does things in order to boost staff creativity. With initiatives such as corporate ventures, multinational companies are starting to work alongside start-ups to learn from their creativity. “*There is always more intelligence outside of the organization than within it*” adds Francis Pisani. For example, there is the interesting case of the London hospital which brought in the Ferrari pit-stop team to hear its recommendations, and the result was a 42% reduction in errors in the operating theatre. Last but not least, a corporate culture that encourages innovation must also accept failure... and even, why not, reward it. That is what the Grey communication agency in the United States does with its Heroic Failure Awards. “*Hats off to the first French company that launches such an award!*” concludes Francis Pisani. Place your bets! ●

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