

# The Internet Origin Story You Know Is Wrong

The history of the internet is repeatedly reduced to the story of the singular ARPANET. But BBSs were just as important—if not more.

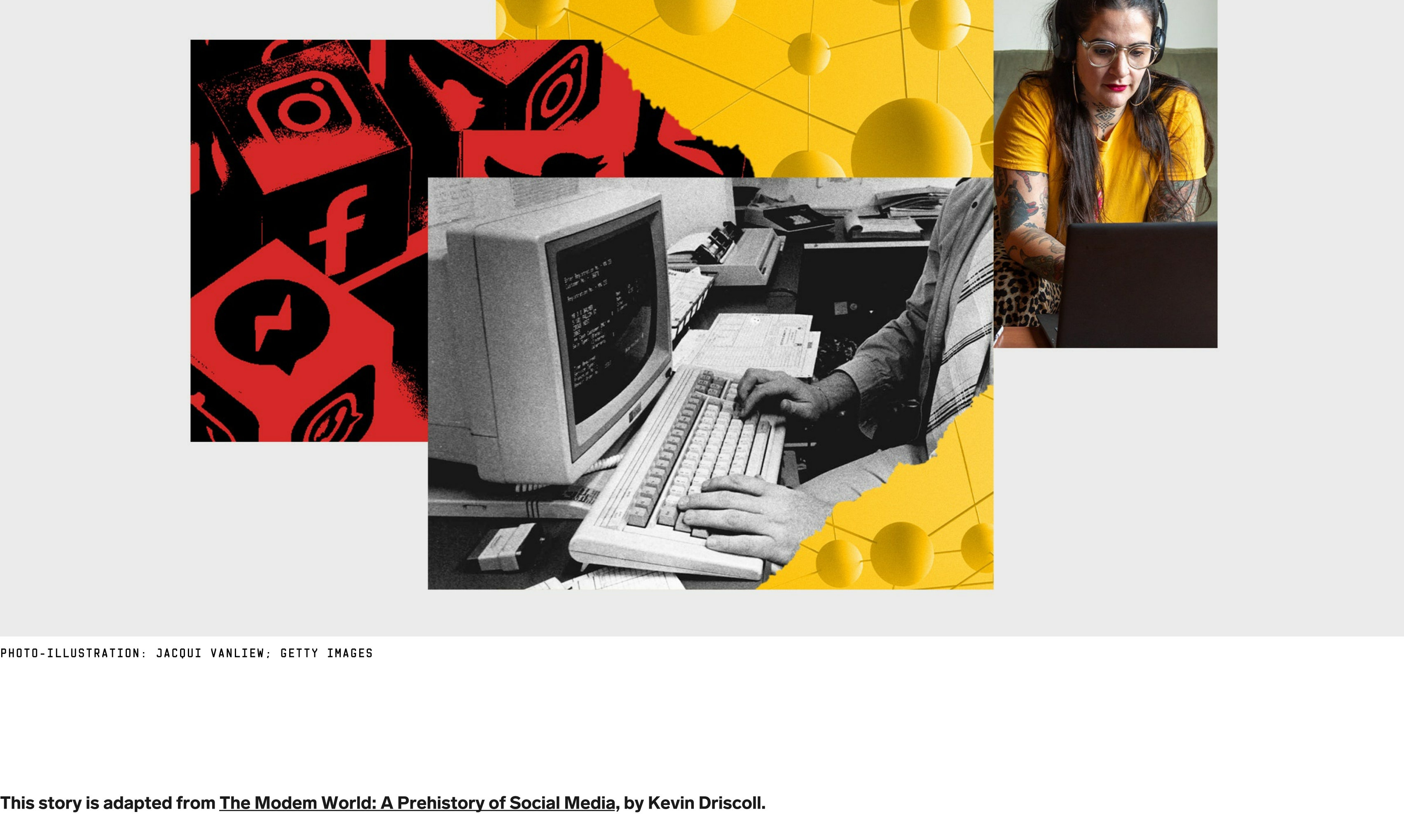


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This story is adapted from [The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media](#), by Kevin Driscoll.

FOR MORE THAN two decades, dial-up bulletin board systems, or BBSs, were a primary form of popular networked computing in North America. The creators and maintainers of BBSs, known as system operators or “sysops,” stood at the forefront of computer-mediated communication, carving out a space between nationwide commercial services and subsidized university systems. From the moral economy of shareware to the cooperative networks of HIV/AIDS activists, BBS communities adapted the simple idea of a “computerized bulletin board” to an array of socially valuable purposes. Their experiments with file sharing and community building during the 1980s provided a foundation for the blogs, forums, and social network sites that drove the popularization of the World Wide Web more than a decade later. But today the systems that made up this “modem world” are almost totally absent from the internet’s origin story.

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The tales that we tell about ARPANET and the Cold War, Silicon Valley, and the early web have become a founding mythology for the internet—narrative resources that we rely on to make sense of our computer-mediated world. Activists, critics, executives, and policy makers routinely call on this mythology to advance arguments on issues related to technology and society. In debates about censorship, national sovereignty, privacy, net neutrality, cybersecurity, copyright, and more, advocates refer to a few oft-repeated tales in search of fundamental truths about how the internet ought to be governed. The stories that people—especially people in power—believe about the internet of the past affect the lives of everyone who depends on the internet in the present.

Forgetting has high stakes. As wireless broadband approaches ubiquity in many parts of North America, the stories we tell about the origins of the internet are more important than ever. Faced with crises such as censorship and surveillance, policy makers and technologists call on a mythic past for guidance. In times of uncertainty, the most prominent historical figures—the “forefathers” and the “innovators”—are granted a special authority to make normative claims about the future of telecommunications. As long as the modem world is excluded from the internet’s origin story, the everyday amateur will have no representation in debates over policy and technology, no opportunity to advocate for a different future.

THE MODEM WORLD refuses to be a single, stable object of analysis. In life and in memory, it was multiple, different, conflicting networks at the same time. This complexity was written into the architecture of the networks themselves. Before 1996, the modem world was not yet the internet, not yet a single, universal information infrastructure bound together by a shared set of protocols. In the days of USENET and BBSs and Minitel, cyberspace was defined by the interconnection of thousands of small-scale local systems, each with its own idiosyncratic culture and technical design, a dynamic assemblage of overlapping communication systems held together by digital duct tape and a handshake. It looked and felt different depending on where you plugged in your modem.

The standard history of the internet jumps from ARPANET to the web, skipping right past the mess of the modem world. A history that consists of mostly ARPANET and the web isn’t incorrect or not valuable. There is much to learn from these networks about informal collaboration, international cooperation, public-private partnerships, and bottom-up technical innovation.

But we’ve been telling the same story about ARPANET and the web for 25 years, and it isn’t satisfying anymore. It doesn’t help us understand the social internet we have now: It doesn’t explain the emergence of commercial social media, it can’t solve the problems of platformization, and it won’t help us to imagine what comes after.

Today’s social media ecosystem functions more like the modem world of the late 1980s and early 1990s than like the open social web of the early 21st century. It is an archipelago of proprietary platforms, imperfectly connected at their borders. Any gateways that do exist are subject to change at a moment’s notice. Worse, users have little recourse, the platforms shirk accountability, and states are hesitant to intervene.

Before the widespread adoption of internet email, people complained about having to print up business cards with half a dozen different addresses: inscrutable sequences of letters, numbers, and symbols representing them on CompuServe, GEnie, AOL, Delphi, MCI Mail, and so on. Today, we find ourselves in the same situation. From nail salons to cereal boxes, the visual environment is littered with the logos of incompatible social media brands. Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Instagram are the new walled gardens, throwbacks to the late 1980s.

IN RECENT YEARS, it has become commonplace to blame social media for all our problems. There are good reasons for this. After decades of techno-optimism, a reckoning came due. But I am troubled by how often people—not platforms—are the object of this criticism. We’re told that social media is making us vapid, stupid, intolerant, and depressed, that we should be ashamed to take pleasure from social media, that we are “hardwired” to act against our own best interest. Our basic desire to connect is pathologized, as if we should take the blame for our own subjugation. I call shenanigans.

People aren’t the problem. The problem is the platforms. By looking at the history of the modem world, we can begin to extricate the technologies of sociality from what we’ve come to call “social media.” Underlying many of the problems we associate with social media are failures of creativity and care. Ironically, for an industry that prides itself on innovation, platform providers have failed to develop business models and operational structures that can sustain healthy human communities.

Silicon Valley did not invent “social media.” Everyday people made the internet social. Time and again, users adapted networked computers for communication between people. In the 1970s, the ARPANET enabled remote access to expensive computers, but users made email its killer app. In the 1980s, The Source and CompuServe offered troves of news and financial data, but users spent all their time talking to one another on forums and in chat rooms. And in the 1990s, the web was designed for publishing documents, but users created conversational guest books and message boards. The desire to connect with one another is fundamental. We should not apologize for the pleasures of being online together.

Commercial social media platforms are of a more recent origin. Major services like Facebook formed around 2005, more than a quarter-century after the first BBSs came online. Their business was the enclosure of the social web, the extraction of personal data, and the promise of personalized advertising. Through clever interface design and the strategic application of venture capital, platform providers succeeded in expanding access to the online world. Today, more people can get online and find one another than was ever possible in the days of AOL or FidoNet.

Yet commercial social media failed to produce equitable, sustainable business models. Despite massive user populations, remarkable engineering, and pervasive cultural influence, all major social media platforms depend on a revenue stream that has not changed for two decades: the exploitation of personal data for the purposes of advertising. This was true when Google launched Adwords in the year 2000. It was true when Google acquired YouTube in 2006. It was true when Facebook and Twitter went public in 2012. And it was still true in 2021. Despite the “moonshots” and “big bets,” these firms draw an overwhelming proportion of their revenue from the mundane business of placing ads on screens.

The modem world shows us that other business models are possible. BBS sysops loved to boast about “paying their own bills.” For some, the BBS was an expensive hobby, a money pit not unlike a vintage car. But many sysops sought to make their BBSs self-sustaining. Absent angel investors or government contracts, BBSs became sites of commercial experimentation. Many charged a fee for access—experimenting with tiered rates and per-minute or per-byte payment schemes. There were also BBSs organized like a social club. Members paid “dues” to keep the hard drive spinning. Others formed nonprofit corporations, soliciting tax-exempt donations from their users. Even on the hobby boards, sysops sometimes passed the virtual hat, asking everybody for a few bucks to buy a new modem or knock out a big telephone bill.

The other key, and closely related, failure of the social media industry is in its disregard for the needs of the communities that rely on it. In public debate, commercial social media providers like Facebook portray themselves as “tech” firms rather than “media” publishers, merely “neutral platforms.” This allows them to disclaim liability for the things that people do on their platform and entitles them to regulate user behavior through capricious “Terms of Service” agreements. Users who rely on these platforms for social support and economic opportunity click through the inscrutable terms without reading them. When harmed, they are left with no recourse, no avenues for redress, and no practical pathways to exit. Of course, the platforms want it both ways. At the same time that they deny responsibility for their users, they promote themselves as places for people to gather and share the intimate details of their lives. These are undemocratic, private spaces masquerading as a public square.

The modem world, again, offers different models. The stewardship of an online community takes work. The literature of the modem world is replete with textfiles, magazine articles, and how-to books about cultivating communities, moderating discussions, handling troublesome users, and avoiding burnout. The role of the bulletin board system operator required a unique mix of technical acumen and care for the community. Former BBS sysops recall late nights spent answering email, verifying new users, tweaking software settings, cleaning up messy files, and trying to quell flame wars.

This work is still being done on platforms like Facebook and Reddit. But unlike the sysops who enabled the flourishing of early online communities, the volunteer moderators on today’s platforms do not own the infrastructures they oversee. They do not share in the profits generated by their labor. They cannot alter the underlying software or implement new technical interventions or social reforms. Instead of growing in social status, the sysop seems to have been curtailed by the providers of platforms. If there is a future after Facebook, it will be led by a revival of the sysop, a reclamation of the social and economic value of community maintenance and moderation.

Platforms didn’t invent the social use of computer networks. Amateurs, activists, educators, students, and small business owners did. Silicon Valley turned their practices into a product, pumped it full of speculative capital, scaled it, and so far refuse to treat the lives we live through it with care. The stories we tell about the early internet must disentangle the grassroots origin of social media from its capture and commodification. I do not expect that new models for online sociality will look exactly like the BBSs did in the 1980s, but the history of the modem world centers on the interests of everyday people, a reorganization of narrative resources from which to envision alternative futures.

THE EXTRAORDINARY HISTORY of the modem world allows us to imagine an internet beyond the platforms. But turning to the past for help with the present is risky. Misogyny, homophobia, and white supremacy were problems on networks of the 1980s, just as they are today. To appreciate the moments of brilliance and possibility, we must also see the complex—often ugly—circumstances within which they unfolded. Historian Joy Lisi Rankin urges us to “overwrite” the narrow mythology of Silicon Valley exceptionalism with an account of the many different worlds of computing that have existed since the 1960s. And indeed, there is an abundance of history that remains unwritten.

From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, millions of people living and working in cities and towns throughout the continent collectively transformed the personal computer into a medium for social communication. They were the first to voluntarily spend hours in front of a computer, typing messages to strangers. Their experiments in community building and information sharing provided a foundation for the practices that now compel us to our computers and smartphones each day: love, learning, commerce, community, and faith.

In the words of one former sysop, the BBS was the original cyberspace. The stories from this era remind us that many different internets have already existed. An internet after social media is still possible; the internet of today can still become something better, more just, equitable, and inclusive—a future worth fighting for.

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