The Invention of the Internet

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Chinese youths play online games overnight at an internet cafe in Wuhan, China, June 11, 2005. Photo by Cancan Chu/Getty Images.

Unlike the lightbulb or the telephone, the Internet had no single inventor. Instead, it developed over time. The Internet got its start in the United States more than 50 years ago as a government weapon in the Cold War with Russia. For years, scientists used it to share information with one another. Today, we use the Internet for almost everything. For many people, it has become impossible to imagine life without it.

The Sputnik scare

During the 1950s, the United States was locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, a group of republics led by Russia. The Cold War was not a real war. Instead, it was a race to become the strongest country in the world. At the same time, many feared the Cold War could become a real war at any moment.

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world's first satellite, known as Sputnik. The Soviet satellite orbited the Earth and sent back radio messages. For many Americans, it was a sign the Soviet Union was pulling ahead. Many worried that the Soviet Union's new strength might make it decide to attack the United States.

The birth of the ARPAnet

U.S. scientists and military experts were especially worried about one thing. What would happen if the Soviets attacked the nation's telephone system? Just one missile could destroy the whole network of lines and wires that made long-distance communication possible. With the phone system down, government and military leaders in different parts of the country would be unable to talk to one another.

In 1962, a scientist named J.C.R. Licklider came up with an idea. He suggested that the government build a network of computers that could talk to one another. Such a network would allow government leaders to communicate even if the Soviets destroyed the telephone system.

Licklider's idea was accepted. The government began to try to put together a computer network, which soon became known as the ARPAnet.

"LOGIN"

In 1969, ARPAnet delivered its first message. It was only a simple communication from one computer to another. Both computers were in California and each was the size of a small house. The message was just a single word, "LOGIN," but it crashed the network anyway. The second computer only received the note's first two letters.

The network grows

By the end of 1969, there were still only four computers connected to the ARPAnet. However, during the 1970s small new networks sprang up around the world, and the worldwide network grew steadily. There was a problem, though. As computer networks multiplied, it became more difficult to link them into a single worldwide "Internet."

By the end of the 1970s, a computer scientist named Vinton Cerf had solved this problem. Cerf developed a way for all of the computers on all of the world's mini-networks to communicate with one another. He called his invention "Transmission Control Protocol," or TCP. One writer describes it as "the 'handshake' that introduces distant and different computers to each other."

The World Wide Web

Cerf's invention made the Internet into a true worldwide network. During the 1980s, scientists used the Internet to send files and information from one computer to another.

However, in 1991 the Internet changed again. An English computer programmer named Tim Berners-Lee introduced the World Wide Web. Berners-Lee made the Internet much more than a way to send files from one place to another. Instead, it became a "web" of information that anyone could see. Berners-Lee created the Internet that we know today.

Since then, the Internet has changed in many ways. In 1992, scientists developed an advanced new browser to search the Internet, later known as Netscape. It made it much easier for people to search the Web. The same year, Congress decided that the Web could be used to sell things. As a result, companies of all kinds hurried to set up websites. More recently, social-networking sites like Facebook have become a popular way for people to stay connected.