

You kids are so cute, thinking you invented email

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Commenter JT seemed quite astounded that Steve Ballmer sent email. There was no explanation as to the source of the astonishment, but commenter Boris thinks it was surprise that email even existed back then.

Email has been around for a really long time. RFC 822, which spells out the format of email messages on the ARPA Internet (as it was then known), was submitted on August 13, 1982. And it was itself a revision of RFC 733 from November 1977.

Like most companies that used email back in the early days, Microsoft ran a closed email system that was not connected to the outside world. To read your email, you went to your Wyse 50 serial console terminal and connected to a machine running Xenix. From there, you logged in and ran the classic Unix command-line mail program. (These terminals would later be repurposed as debugging terminals.)

Having to switch to another keyboard to check your email was rather cumbersome, so two developers wrote a mail client that ran on your PC, connected to your Xenix server, signed in as you, downloaded your incoming email and uploaded your outgoing email. It also deleted the mail from the server after downloading, so you didn't get angry messages from the email administrator about going over quota. The incoming mail could be organized into mailboxes, so you could have a "Meetings" mailbox and a "Design" mailbox, for example. (No nested mailboxes. We're not that fancy.)

The program was called WZMAIL (pronounced "whiz-mail"), named after its authors Mumble Wmumble and Mark Zbikowski. (Sorry, other guy!) J Allard described wzmail as "a time machine that was hardwired to 1982 BBS messaging systems."

Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. Like most corporate email systems at the time, it was unconnected to the rest of the world. At some point, somebody established an external email gateway that used the UUCP protocol and routed through the University of Washington's mail server named `uw-beaver`. If you wanted to send email to Bill Gates, you would address it as `uw-beaver!microsoft!billg`, or `uunet!uw-beaver!microsoft!billg` if your local system didn't know where `uw-beaver` was. (Unet was a major service provider at the time,

so everybody knew how to reach `uunet` , at least. The `uw-beaver` server was known to `uunet` , so once your message reached `uunet` , it would make it the rest of the way to its destination.)

Bonus chatter: The term *Information Superhighway* as originally coined did not refer to the World Wide Web, although that's what it eventually turned into.

At the start of the project that eventually became Microsoft Exchange, they chose X.400 as their model, seeing as X.400 positioned itself as the industry standard for email interchange. (You can see for yourself how well that worked out.) The product included a gateway that connected an Exchange-based network to an SMTP-based network. I remember filing a bug against the Exchange team pointing out that their gateway was generating headers that did not fully comply with RFC 822. The bug was resolved back to me with the remark, “We are not yet committed to supporting RFC 822 in our Internet gateway.”

Well, you can see who won that battle of the standards.

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