

A Brief History of the Internet & Related Networks

Introduction

Vint Cerf

In 1973, the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) initiated a research program to investigate techniques and technologies for interlinking packet networks of various kinds. The objective was to develop communication protocols which would allow networked computers to communicate transparently across multiple, linked packet networks. This was called the Internetting project and the system of networks which emerged from the research was known as the “Internet.” The system of protocols which was developed over the course of this research effort became known as the TCP/IP Protocol Suite, after the two initial protocols developed: Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and Internet Protocol (IP).

In 1986, the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) initiated the development of the NSFNET which, today, provides a major backbone communication service for the Internet. With its 45 megabit per second facilities, the NSFNET carries on the order of 12 billion packets per month between the networks it links. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the U.S. Department of Energy contributed additional backbone facilities in the form of the NSINET and ESNET respectively. In Europe, major international backbones such as NORDUNET and others provide connectivity to over one hundred thousand computers on a large number of networks. Commercial network providers in the U.S. and Europe are beginning to offer Internet backbone and access support on a competitive basis to any interested parties.

“Regional” support for the Internet is provided by various consortium networks and “local” support is provided through each of the research and educational institutions. Within the United States, much of this support has come from the federal and state governments, but a considerable contribution has been made by industry. In Europe and elsewhere, support arises from cooperative international efforts and through national research organizations. During the course of its evolution, particularly after 1989, the Internet system began to integrate support for other protocol suites into its basic networking fabric. The present emphasis in the system is on multiprotocol interworking, and in particular, with the integration of the Open Systems Interconnection (OSI) protocols into the architecture.

Both public domain and commercial implementations of the roughly 100 protocols of TCP/IP protocol suite became available in the 1980's. During the early 1990's, OSI protocol implementations also became available and, by the end of 1991, the Internet has grown to include some 5,000 networks in over three dozen countries, serving over 700,000 host computers used by over 4,000,000 people.

A great deal of support for the Internet community has come from the U.S. Federal Government, since the Internet was originally part of a federally-funded research program and, subsequently, has become a major part of the U.S. research infrastructure.