

Beto O'Rourke outed as Cult of Dead Cow member, phreaker and writer of screeds

Enlarge / WATERLOO, IOWA — MARCH 16: Democratic presidential candidate and former Cult of the Dead Cow member Beto O'Rourke greets voters during a canvassing kickoff event with state senate candidate Eric Giddens March 16, 2019, in Waterloo, Iowa.

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Beto O'Rourke, the former Texas congressman and Senate candidate and recently declared Democratic candidate for president in 2020, has been outed as a former member of what has been described as America's oldest hacking group—the Cult of the Dead Cow (CDC). O'Rourke admitted to his membership in an interview for an upcoming book, as Reuters reported in an exclusive based on the book.

O'Rourke's role in the group, starting in the late 1980s, was more focused on writing screeds for the CDC's text-file essays than hacking. O'Rourke, like other teens of the time, did find ways to avoid paying for long-distance dial-up phone service time to connect to bulletin board systems (BBSs) of the day across the country with his family's Apple IIe computer and 300 baud modem, which he often used to search of pirated games.

He eventually launched his own bulletin board system (BBS)

called TacoLand, which Reuters' Joseph Menn reports was largely about punk music. "This was the counterculture: *Maximum Rock & Roll* [magazine], buying records by catalog you couldn't find at record stores," O'Rourke told Menn.

For those too young to remember, BBSs were the social media platform of the pre-commercial Internet era. They hosted files for download and discussion boards and were islands of anarchy in a time when there were few online services—and usage was billed by the minute. Connecting to CompuServe, for example, could rapidly become expensive for the online-obsessed—especially when the billing was layered atop phone charges to connect to distant dial-up access lines. O'Rourke called the BBS world he connected to "the Facebook of its day."

Founded by Kevin Wheeler (known as "Swamp Ratte" or "Grandmaster Ratte") and a group of other BBS "sysops," CDC was named for the defunct FarmPac slaughterhouse in El Paso, a building used as a hangout by some of the city's teens. CDC grew into a network of BBS operators spanning the US and Canada; members ran their own bulletin boards and cross-promoted each other. Much of the focus of the group was writing content published across BBSs in text files under the "CDC Communications" brand.

As "PsychedelicWarlord," O'Rourke spent most of his time posting essays that were meant to provoke, song lyrics from punk albums, and the occasional poem. At one point, he and another member interviewed a neo-Nazi. And in one post, he gave "The True Story of Cult of the Dead Cow," in which he claimed authorship of the name:

Well, it was about 11:30pm on a cold night in April of '85. I had just finished talking to Franken Gibe. I still kinda remember how it all went about...

FG: "Hey Psyche! I just had the greatest idea for a new

organization!”

PW: “Really? What are you planning on calling it?”

FG: “Oh... I was thinking of something along the lines of ‘CCC’”

PW: “Which stands for...”

FG: “‘Comatose Cow Club’... and I’m gonna write this book. But it’ll be more like a bible for this CCC group. I think I’m gonna call it Cow’s Book. Pretty catchy, eh?”

PW: “Yeah... hey, why don’t you call it ‘Cult of the Dead Cow’? I dunno... I just think CDC is more catchy. And then when you guys get famous, you can print dead cow t-shirts and place an ad in Maximum RocknRoll!!”

FG: “Ahhhh Psyche... You are such a dreamer! And anyhow, Cult of the Dead Cow. Ha! Who would want to join a group like that? Oh well... talk to ya later.”

PW: “Bye... but consider it, OK?”

O’Rourke was not involved in some of the more notable hacker exploits of CDC, such as the creation of the remote administration backdoor Back Orifice, released in 1998. But by then he had returned to El Paso and launched an Internet services and software company called Stanton Street Technology Group. O’Rourke’s wife Amy took over the business when he went into politics and sold the company in 2017. And O’Rourke’s mixture of libertarian and liberal politics could be seen as being influenced by his early BBS days.

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