This week in tech, 20 years ago

As a person who covers day-to-day technology news, I often wonder how my writing might come off to someone in the future — and whether anyone will even be reading it. I can't answer those questions, but I can do the next best thing: look back at what other people were writing 20 years ago.

Here are five stories — big and small — that science and tech enthusiasts might have checked out during the week before March 24th, 1998.

"Murder by Internet"

Vermont teen Chris Marquis, according to news reports, was a high school dropout living with his mother. He was also an obnoxious, abusive CB radio troll who sold radio equipment online and scammed his customers. When his furious victims began swapping reports, they fantasized in chats about showing up at his doorstep and getting revenge. Unlike the vast majority of online threats, one person who hated Marquis turned out to be deadly serious about hurting him.

In March 1998, someone mailed Marquis a package containing a pipe bomb. It went off when he opened it, killing him and seriously wounding his mother. The alleged culprit was a trucker named Chris Dean, who had sent Marquis $800 of equipment for what turned out to be a cheap broken radio. (Dean pleaded not guilty but was sentenced to life in prison without parole.) Several months after Marquis' death, Scott Kirsner wrote a detailed longform story about the case, tracing the forces that brought Marquis and Dean together.

The men who sold Mars

Long before Elon Musk started making dad jokes about colonizing space to build “Mars bars,” three men from Yemen proclaimed themselves Martian real estate tycoons. The men cited mythology to claim that they were the planet’s historical owners, and after NASA landed the Sojourner rover, they sued the agency for “invading Mars” in 1997.

Unsurprisingly, NASA wasn’t all that worried. The agency told reporters dryly that “Mars is a planet out in the solar system that is the property of all humanity, not two or three guys in Yemen.” But the guys in question remained undeterred, even after they lost the case. In March 1998, they started “selling” Martian land for $2 a square meter, resurrecting their bizarre scheme. Did anybody actually take the bait? Two decades later, we can only hope not.

Goodbye, AOL Hub

March 24th was a sad day for media site AOL Hub, which folded 20 years ago today. Founded in 1996, the Hub was designed for college-age men and described as “edgy and not full of crap.” (It published material with titles like “Arousal Guide” and “Luscious Lists,” although perhaps blessedly, I haven’t found what these actually were.) It was even supposed to launch a record label called “Hub Music,” allowing it to – in the words of *Wired* – “send singles over the Net.”

But by 1998, AOL was tiring of making original material, and it started shifting to partnerships. According to *CNET*, it had also discovered that many college kids weren’t even using AOL; they could reach the internet through their schools. AOL merged with Time Warner just a couple of years later, and the battle to actually make money through online media continues to this day.

“Joy-riding on the information superhighway”

If you’re nostalgic for the era when computer criminals were teens with cool names like “Jester” and “The Analyzer,” instead of neo-Nazis or faceless state-sponsored social media agencies, then it’s worth noting that this week saw the first US federal computer crime charges brought against a minor. The unnamed hacker (who used the aforementioned Jester handle) was accused of crashing a Bell Atlantic computer network and knocking out an airport’s phone service in Massachusetts, along with service to 600 nearby homes.

The teen reportedly took a plea deal for probation and community service. But according to *The New York Times*, the case was a warning shot against kids who were “joy-riding on the information superhighway.”

Around the same time, Israeli police arrested Ehud Tenenbaum, an 18-year-old accused of hacking networks that belonged to the Pentagon, NASA, and the US Air Force, among other targets. Tenenbaum became an instant folk hero in Israel, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described him as “dangerous,” but also “damn good.” A decade later, he made the news with another arrest — this time, for a lucrative bank fraud operation.

Does anybody remember OROM disks?

I have zero recollection of ever hearing about Optical Read-Only Memory (or OROM) storage disks, but people were very excited about them for at least one week 20 years ago. According to *CNET*, startup Ioptics bragged that it could put “up to 128MB of information on a data card around the size of a business card,” at a cost of $2 to $3 a card, compared to $50 or more for a 4MB flash memory card. Ioptics was founded

by CD-ROM technology pioneer James Russell, and it had backing from Microsoft, among other investors. Unfortunately, business card-sized disks were too big for the emerging mobile computing market, and the company dissolved almost exactly a year after the tech debuted.

I’m not sure whether OROM tech made it into some other storage system. But its news coverage reminds me of all the other articles I’ve seen (and written) about hot new products that quietly crash and burn but end up memorialized in optimistic stories about their limitless potential. It’s one of the most distinctive elements of tech-focused journalism — and one of the things that makes it interesting to read decades later.

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