

Kevin Driscoll, **The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022, 328 pp., \$28.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
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Stop doomscrolling, put down your phone, and say it with me: Things did not have to be this way. Things have not always been this way. Things need not stay this way. Other worlds are possible.

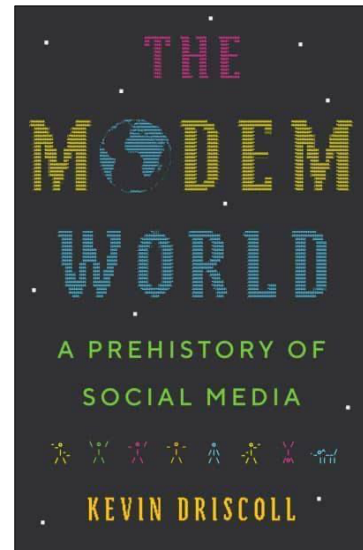
In today's social media climate, such a mantra offers comfort. A few surveillance capitalist, venture-funded platforms masquerade as the public sphere. Millions of people spend hours in distraction-driven environments riddled with hate speech, extremism, and misinformation. Many accept this as a legitimate configuration of digitally networked communication.

Sure, calls to regulate social media platforms are subjects of bipartisan agreement in the United States, but do not confuse this with meaningful policy changes or tractable alternatives. The European Union has shown more gumption with policies like the General Data Protection Regulation. Nevertheless, the deeper power dynamics remain. After all, what will people do instead? The Musk-driven exodus from Twitter to Mastodon or ideological options like Parler or Gab notwithstanding, the kids are on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Commercial social media has some staying power.

Communication scholars—at least those of us who study, teach, speak, or consult about online communities, computer-mediated communication, social media, and media industries—must never let the world forget that other kinds of networks and cultures of computing existed within recent memory. These were more than mere possibilities or prototypes. Bygone virtual communities offer a tapestry of alternatives that, but for the grace of Zuckerberg, we might have pursued. The recent past provides an existence proof of these latent possibilities.

In **The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media**, Kevin Driscoll, associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, takes up this task. The book, Driscoll's second, leads an archaeological expedition into electronic Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), one of the most significant, now-defunct early online lifeworlds. Driscoll's latest work *could* profoundly enrich and reorient both popular thinking and research into past eras of social computing. For example, I have taught Driscoll's arguments on BBS communities alongside pieces by Fred Turner and primary sources in courses about online communities. This book deserves a wider audience.

The "modem world" of BBS, which began in a Chicago blizzard in January 1978, was a widespread type of online community until the mid-1990s. Prior to Driscoll, the relationship between BBSs and the social



web today had remained mired in myths and half-truths. Driscoll writes against several prevailing narratives: that the Internet and social media were born in Silicon Valley; that the hobbyist computer (inter)networking cultures of the early Web emerged in the postwar corridors of Palo Alto or Route 128; that BBS communities were the exclusive domain of cis-gender straight White men; that venture-funded commercialization and centralization of the social media industry was inevitable; and that the BBS declined and fell because their interfaces were too text-based and social practices too fringe to compete with the more visual, mass-market-oriented Internet and World Wide Web.

Against such received wisdom, Driscoll serves up a deeper understanding of an earlier era when optimism in the heterogeneous futures that could be realized in code felt less naive. Digital utopianism has taken well-deserved hits, but its redeeming feature has always been the insistence that better worlds are out there if we can just envision and build them. *The Modem World* provides evidence that supports such optimism of the intellect. Megalomaniacal billionaires have never had a monopoly on the varieties of online experience. *The Modem World* reminds us that social and cultural history finds enduring and proper subjects in the popular—the underground, unrefined, unpolished, and poorly documented margins—rather than the sanitized cool of commercial pop culture and elites.

The book's chapters offer deeper dives into signal BBS communities, systems, comparisons, and their historical transformations. Driscoll traces the roots of the modem world back to ham and citizens band radio shacks, phone phreaking, and hobbyist microcomputer clubs. Computer-mediated social media originated in a Chicago apartment after the aforementioned blizzard gave IBM employees Randy Seuss and Ward Christensen time to build the first BBS, the Chicago Bulletin Board System (CBBS) for their friends in the Chicago Area Computer Hobbyists' Exchange. Diverse BBS communities then spread among similar hobbyist groups. Their experiences and orientations also spawned terminology, practices, norms, and values that persist online today.

From the Ur-example of CBBS, Driscoll shifts focus to Fido Net, a suite of software tools and protocols that interlinked BBS boards. Fido Net was built by Tom Jennings to port BBS software across different system architectures and overcome long-distance dialing costs. (Who even remembers those?) In effect, Jennings bootstrapped a radically decentralized, autonomous communications network at the margins of the Bell telephone system—an anarcho-punk grassroots Internet. Jennings' creation lacked the university credentials and defense funding of the ARPANet. However, those who called it home managed to engineer electronic mail, file transfer, discussion boards, and more.

Driscoll then explores varieties of media creation, sharing, and exchange that prevailed in BBSs. He mines archives of fringe literatures, including text files, shareware, early video and image sharing boards (yes, the pornography was plentiful), and games. These different media, as well as the digital networks through which they were disseminated, modified, and exchanged, opened new formal possibilities. They also provided opportunities to revisit creative norms, business models, and ethics. All of this occurred at the margins of mainstream culture and software industries. The rapid improvements and affordability of personal information processing and communications infrastructure allowed communities of practice to flourish and push the boundaries of technology use in directions few had imagined.

The Modem World further explores the social environment of BBS communities. Driscoll's account emphasizes some of the myriad ills we tend to attribute to present-day social media. However, tensions around violent extremism, hate speech, privacy, and autonomy in electronic communication predate our current moment. The leaders and participants on BBSs developed strategies to mitigate some of the problems that ensued, including the challenges of maintaining the space for critical, counter-hegemonic views as well as the generative freedoms that can loosen some of the strictures of everyday life.

Gender and sexuality provide an exemplary theme that Driscoll weaves throughout the book. No surprise, the modem world was occupied predominantly by White, cis-gender men from more technical and privileged backgrounds and was rife with misogyny and racism from the very beginning. Yet, BBS communities also cultivated spaces of experimentation, solidarity, and social support for a variety of marginalized experiences and identities. In particular, gender and sexuality play proliferated in BBS settings, which tantalized many with fantasies of anonymous, disembodied, and placeless communion. BBSs were also adopted by activists to share resources and resist the state-led denial of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States, overcoming the spatial divisions and social isolation that compounded viral transmission and collective tragedy.

What do we make of the fact that the John Birch society and precursors of today's alt right seem to have thrived alongside more inclusive ideological alters in these early days? Perhaps the best we can say is that social media afford ease of connection among people who might not otherwise find each other. The contradictions and divergences in terms of who takes advantage of such possibilities underscore the futility of any effort to draw a "straight" line between online community and a fixed set of cultural values or impacts. Driscoll side-steps such reductive implications.

Even prevailing accounts of the decline and fall of BBS communities do not withstand Driscoll's scrutiny. When the World Wide Web and the commercial Internet first appeared in the United States around 1995, legend has it that American consumers immediately recognized that AOL, CompuServe, Prodigy, and the rest provided more polished, safer, sophisticated, visually interactive, and appealing online spaces than BBSs. However, with the exception of the basic chronology, Driscoll dismantles every part of this story. The only crucial problems that the early Internet solved in ways BBSs had never fully overcome were challenges around long distance dialing and a more polished public image backed by powerful and wealthy people.

A number of opportunities and questions arise after reading *The Modem World*. Theorists might wish for elaboration of points of friction between the book and more general accounts of computer-mediated communication. Likewise, analytically minded scholars of online community organizations might seek a more systematic comparative understanding of the structure, relationships between, and impacts of different BBS servers and communities. Finally, forgotten features of BBS communities might motivate a design research agenda that deserves further development and empirical evaluation.

Such opportunities are proper subjects for future work, however, and in no way detract from what Kevin Driscoll has accomplished here. *The Modem World* is a wonderful, welcome contribution to the field that can benefit students, teachers, researchers, and nonspecialist readers alike. If you only pick it up as an alternative to yet another hour trawling social media feeds, you might enjoy a bigger, better sense of

what life online once was. You might return with a deeper appreciation for present-day geek/fringe culture that resonates with bygone eras. You might even renew or expand your imagination for the future of computer-mediated sociality and community building. The digital past has a thing or two to teach us about the present as well as whatever comes next.