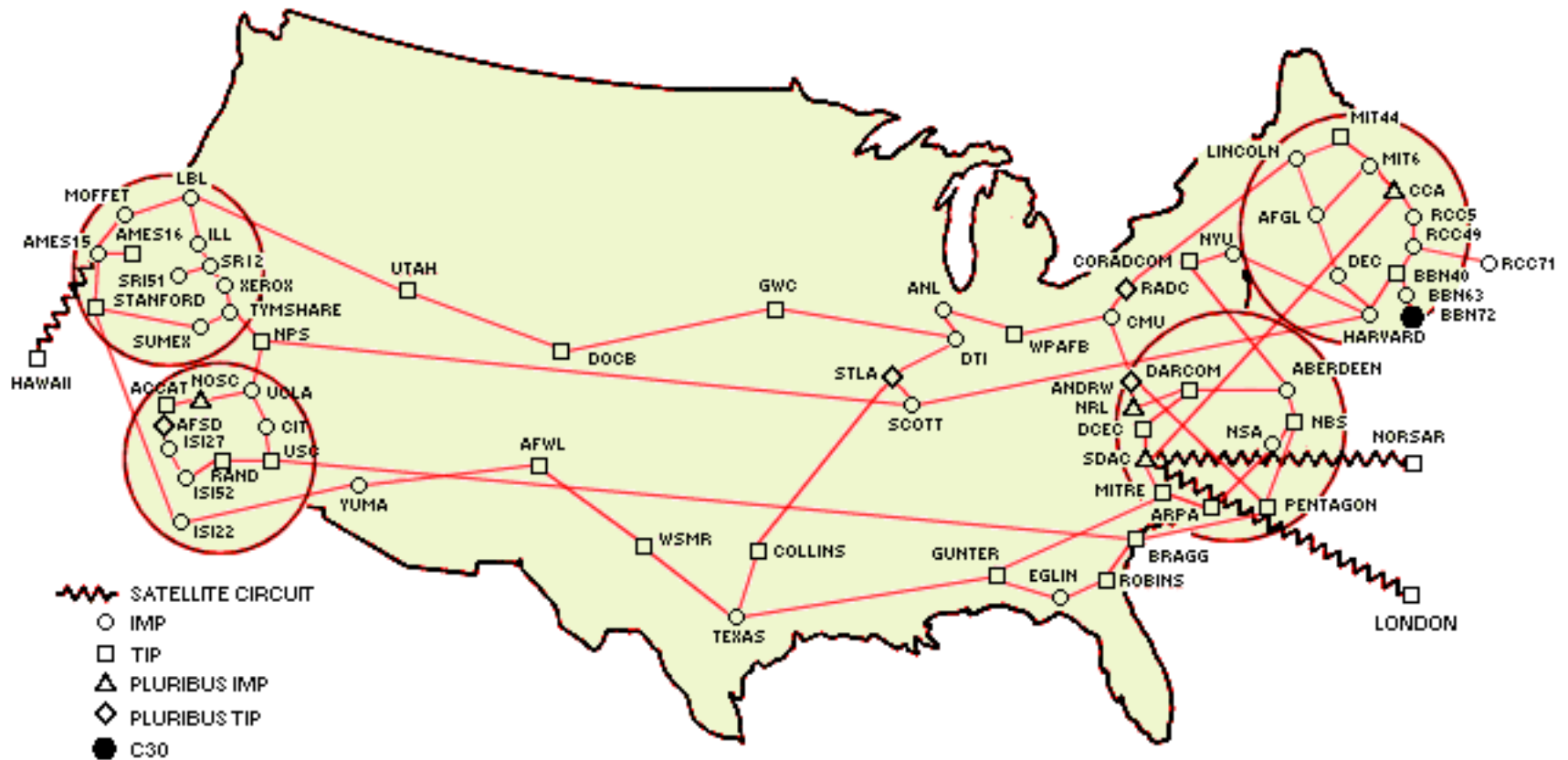


The (Unintentional) Birth and Evolution of a Successful International “Brand”

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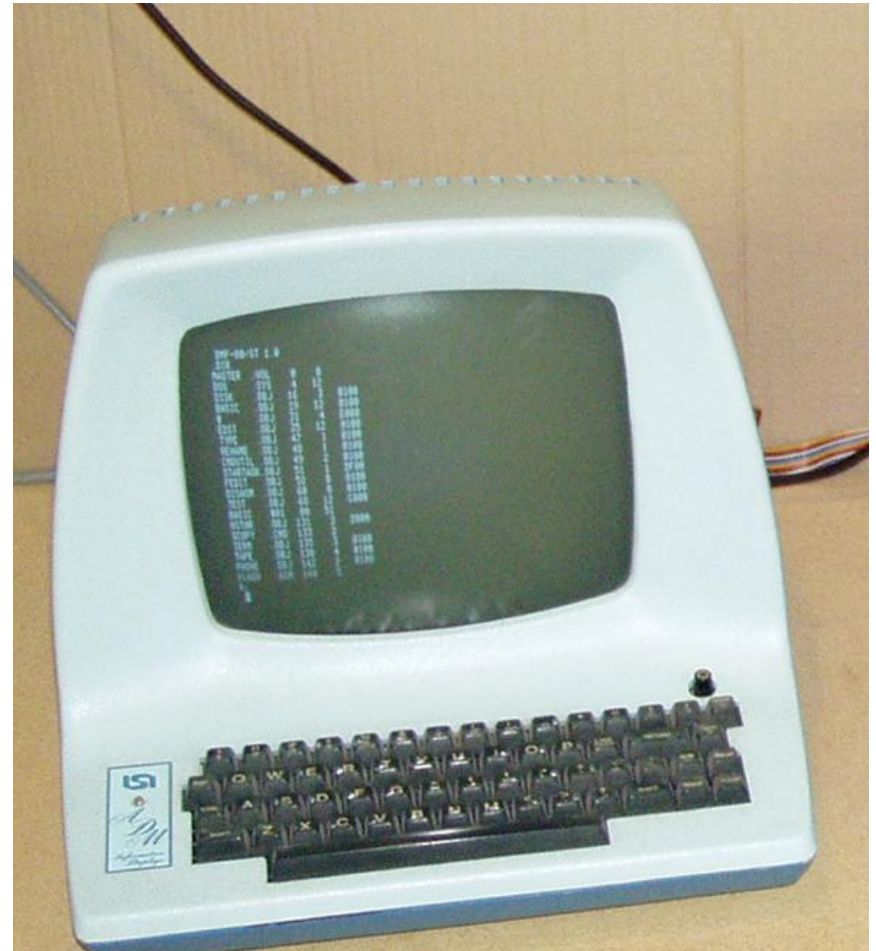
The Internet (ARPA net) in 1982



Computing Environment at CMU, 1982

One of the three top universities for Computer Science in the world!

- Two big time-sharing machines, 100 users each.
- Most faculty and students used these ugly text-only terminals.
- Many faculty had terminals at home, connected by 300 to 1200 bit per second phone lines.
 - Compare to today's home internet: typically 3 to 10 *million* bits per second.
- Text-only Email, local and remote.
- We had social media! (Text-only bulletin boards on various topics.)



Flame Wars

- Sarcastic post, seen by many.
- One reader thinks it's serious.
- Angry complaint.
- Sarcastic reply.
- Repeat cycle for days...
- Boring and annoying for all!



Tech-Nerd Humor...

- What if the elevator cable snapped, sending it into free-fall?
 - Would a pigeon in the elevator keep flying?
 - Would a candle go out?
 - What would a puddle of mercury do? Turn into a sphere and rise?
 - You're in a falling elevator! Is that all you have to worry about???
- Because of a recent physics experiment, the leftmost elevator has been contaminated with mercury. Also some fire damage.
- Not funny! The elevators are fine and there is no mercury spill.
- Maybe we should adopt a convention of putting a star (*) in the subject field of any notice which is to be taken as a joke.
- Surely everyone will agree that "&" is the funniest character on the keyboard. It looks like a jolly fat man in convulsions of laughter.

My Contribution...

19-Sep-82 11:44 Scott E Fahlman :-)

From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at Cmu-20c>

I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:-(

- I thought this would amuse the few people following this discussion, and then it would quickly be forgotten.
- I didn't save a copy. 20 years later, we finally found the original message on back-up tapes in a warehouse.

It Started to Spread...

- Within a week, many people at CMU were using this.
- In less than a month, it had reached labs and universities in California, and variations were appearing:
 - (:-) for messages dealing with bicycle helmets
 - @= for messages dealing with nuclear war
 - <:-) for dumb questions
 - oo for somebody's head-lights are on messages
 - o>-<|= for messages of interest to women
 - ~= a candle, to annotate flaming message
- But that was as far as ARPAnet went. It could go no further.
- I thought people would get bored, and it would all disappear in a month or two.

... And Kept on Spreading

- New universities joined the network, a few at a time.
- The military ARPAnet became the civilian Internet.
- Connections to research/academic nets in UK, Japan, Europe...
- Wherever the Internet went, Email was sent immediately. Inevitably, some messages had :-)) in them.
- At first it was all computer people, academics, and military. In the 1990's the internet suddenly burst into the homes of regular people – and so did the :-)).



Did I Really Invent the Emoticon?

- It depends on your definition.
- Someone else invented the term “emoticon”.
- There were earlier things, such as =) for “tongue in cheek”.
- I never claim to have invented “the emoticon”, only the :-) and :-(as used online, and maybe the idea of making a face sideways.
- We could actually watch this spread out from my original post.
- My candidate for the first emoticon in English:

!

(Pre-dates Gutenberg)

Why did the :-) “go viral” and last 30+ years?

I’m not a marketing wizard, but some ideas:

- **It filled a (small) need:** A *very easy* way to say “I’m only joking”, “I’m happy”, “I’m serious”, or “I’m unhappy”.
- **It’s free.** If people had to pay or ask permission to use it, nobody would use it.
- There’s an “**in group**” effect:
Look, I know the secrets of the Internet!
- A **smile** is immediately recognized by every human culture, across every language. Even shallow emotion can be powerful.

Smiles Are Powerful



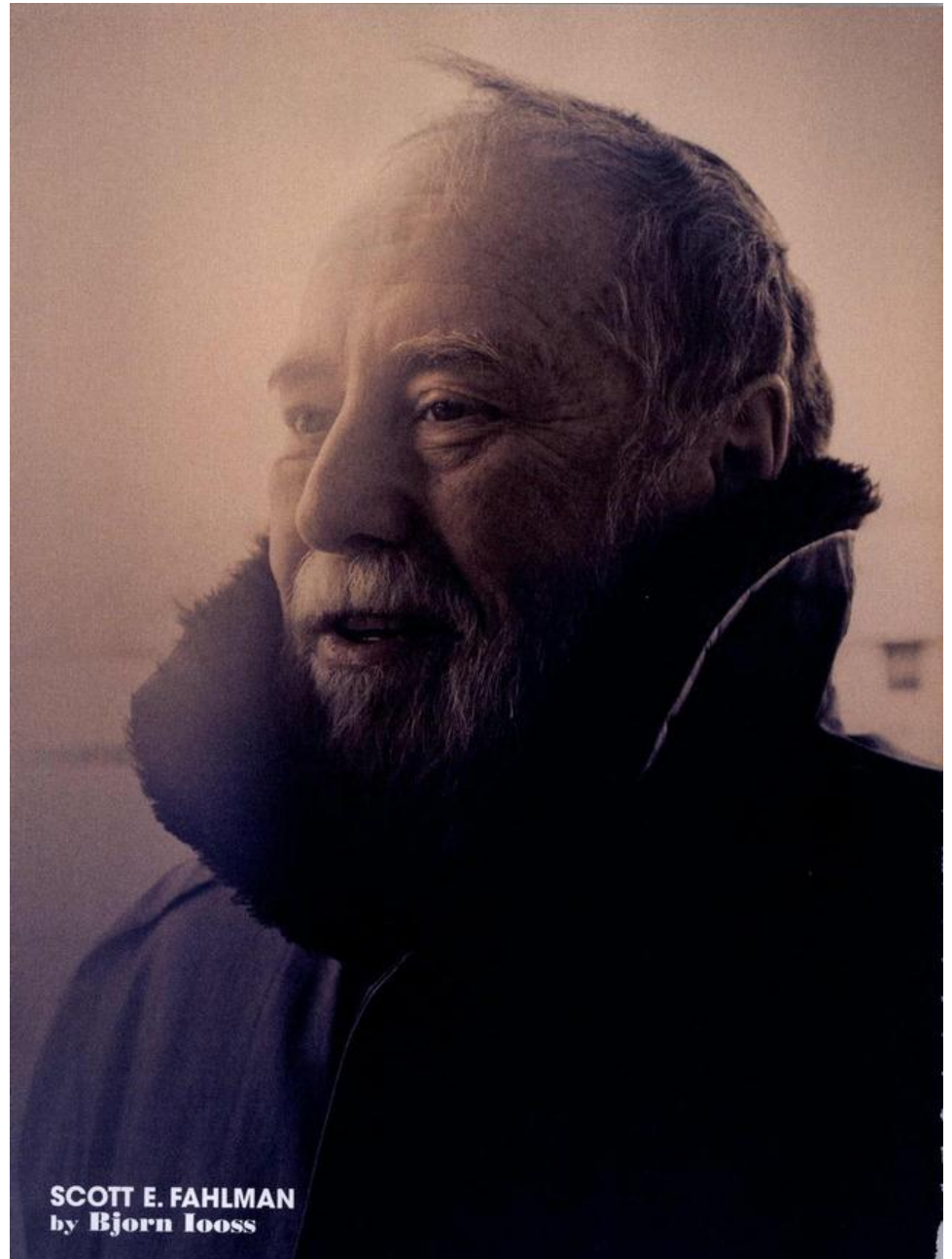
Not Only Humans



How Has :-)) Changed My Life?

- Professionally, not much. This was 10 minutes of silliness in a 40-year career of cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence Research.
- But sometimes I get invited to nice places like Davos and meet new people.
- It's fun to be famous for *something*.
- Lots of radio and press interviews.
- The Carnegie Mellon PR people love this story.
- The most interesting thing so far was to get a full-page picture in L'Uomo Vogue. So I'm now an authority on fashion. :-))

Check These People Out | Scott E. Fahlman
Editorial from L'uomo Vogue Magazine,
January 2011



Lessons

Nothing very profound here...

- Symbols (“brands”) are more likely to spread and survive if they are intuitive and immediately recognizable.
 - If they tap into some universal human emotion, that's even better.
 - A bit of whimsy and identification with an "in group" also helps.
- You never know what little comment or idea is going to take off.
 - So save a copy!
- Once your creation is out there, you can't control how it changes and how it is used.
 - Sometimes I know how Dr. Frankenstein felt...

The End

For more info, Google “Fahlman smiley lore”.