

March 17th

## First Radio Distress Call

March 17, 1899

The first radio distress signal was transmitted from the East Goodwin Lightship when the merchant vessel Elbe ran aground. The message was received at the South Foreland Lighthouse in Kent, which summoned the Ramsgate lifeboat.

All this was before the 'SOS' signal; the call sign for ships in distress was 'CQD', which had been devised by the Marconi Company [Aug 14]. It was popularly misinterpreted to mean 'Come Quick - Danger' or 'Come Quickly Down', but its official designation came from the land telegraph signal CQ - "sécu" from the French word sécurité - followed by D for Distress.

The 'SOS' signal (three dots, three dashes, three dots) was established at the Berlin Radio Conference on Oct. 3, 1906, and formally introduced on July 1, 1908.

The first time a 'SOS' was used in an emergency was on June 10, 1909, when the Cunard liner SS Slavonia was wrecked off the Azores. Two steamers went to the rescue.

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## Robot Waiter

March 17, 1985

Kenichi Echiuya, one of the managers of the popular "Grazie's Italian Restaurant" in Tokyo, visited the World's Fair in Tsukuba (Expo '85), which opened on this day.

One pavilion highlighted the impact of technological evolution on ordinary life by including a large number of robots.

Echiuya was inspired and shortly afterwards the restaurant gained a new employee - a 4-foot tall robot waiter called Ken-chan, built by the Japanese company Dainichi Kiko.

Ken-chan used radar to maneuver, but could also be directed from a control unit connected to it by a 12-foot cable.



Restaurant manager Mitsugu Watarai operating the Ken-chan robot. (c) Associated Press.

Ken-chan couldn't take orders, or set food down on tables, but it could utter 15 different phrases, including "My name is Ken" and "How about dessert?"

Dainichi Kiko, founded by Toshio Kohno in 1971, was Japan's largest robot maker in the 1980's, specializing in industrial robot arms, but its robot waiters were a profitable novelty sideline. For example, its COSMO1 robot from 1983 sported a plastic monkey alien head with two antenna, which won an award for excellence.

A news report from 1987 put the future of robo-waitering in doubt when it revealed that Ken-chan was now gathering dust in a corner of the restaurant.

For more robot waiter activity, see [June 10].

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## IBM SAA Announced

March 17, 1987

Systems Application Architecture (SAA) was a set of standards for unifying IBM's hardware and OSes, in particular its System/370 mainframes [April 7], the AS/400 minicomputers, and PCs running OS/2 [Dec 4]. The noble goal was to allow an application written on one hardware/OS combination to be easily ported to another.

SAA had four components: Common Communications Support (CCS), Common User Access (CUA), Common Programming Interface (CPI) and Common Applications. The obvious question is why the fourth one didn't get a three-letter acronym?

SAA was quickly labeled as complex, obscure, and difficult to learn. Under the new IBM CEO, Lou Gerstner, Jr. [March 1], "SAA" was 'deemphasized', although many elements continued to be used.

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## Apple Sues Microsoft

March 17, 1988

Prev: [Nov 22] Next: [Aug 24]

Apple filed an 11-page suit against Microsoft [March 13] and Hewlett-Packard [Jan 1], accusing Microsoft of using visual features from the Mac's GUI in Windows 2.0 [Dec 9], and condemning Hewlett-Packard for copyright violations in its NewWave desktop.

Five years later, on [Aug 24] 1993, the judge decided against Apple, stating that Apple could not patent its GUI. However, the lawsuit probably triggered the one between Xerox and Apple, filed on [Dec 14] 1989. For the related story of Apple's visit to Xerox PARC, see [Dec 00].

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## AOL Acquires Netscape March 17, 1999

On Nov. 24, 1998, AOL [Oct 2] announced that it would acquire Netscape Communications [March 25] for around \$4.2 billion in stock; the deal was closed on this day.

Many considered it a clever buy since it let AOL better compete against Microsoft in the browser and Internet provider markets. On the other hand, many people ridiculed the merger, most notably the longtime Netscape developer Jamie Zawinski [Nov 3]. He argued that the two company's cultures were too different. He also remarked that, "My friends keep saying 'jwz@aol.com' and then laughing uncontrollably."

Perhaps Zawinski was right. Within a year most of the Netscape engineering stars had left, and were being called "Net-escapees." AOL turned out to have so little interest in Netscape that it continued to distribute Internet Explorer (IE [Aug 16]) as its primary browser. Eventually, Netscape lost almost all of its once mighty market share to IE.

On July 15, 2003, the Mozilla organization became the Mozilla Foundation [Jan 23], signaling that AOL was scaling back its involvement in browser development. Netscape was discontinued in Dec. 2007, and support ended on Feb. 1, 2008.

But the Netscape 'spirit' lived on in the Mozilla Foundation, and from the ashes rose the phoenix, aka Firefox [Nov 9].

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## Cambridge Analytica Exposed March 17, 2018

Several newspapers broke a story that consulting firm Cambridge Analytica (CA) had been harvesting data from up to 87 million unsuspecting Facebook users via an app

(prophetically) called "This Is Your Digital Life."

CA innocently responded by saying that the app users had given their permission when signing up. But Facebook sternly declared that "misleading people or misusing information" was in violation of its policies, and eventually banned CA from advertising on the platform.

CA's data analysis methods were based on the work of Michal Kosinski at the Psychometrics Centre of Cambridge University. His profiling system used general online data, Facebook-likes, and smartphone information.

Despite its righteous stand against CA, Facebook's reputation was severely battered by the scandal, and suffered more as several other similar privacy debacles were exposed [July 24]. Facebook responded by retooling its APIs several times.

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