

If you had walked into a computer lab at UCLA in 1973 and asked a researcher to show you "the internet," you would have gotten a puzzled look. The global, commercial, always-on internet you use today simply did not exist yet, and even the word "internet" was not in everyday use.

Yet the core ideas were already alive in California labs and phone company switching rooms. The story of what the internet was called in 1973 is really the story of how research networks, telephone companies, and a lot of trial and error slowly converged into what we now take for granted.

For telecom fans, especially in California, that story feels surprisingly local. It runs through UCLA, Stanford, the Bay Area, the old Pacific Telephone offices, and the regulatory battles that later reshaped AT&T and the "Baby Bells."

Let us start with the central question, then zoom out into the surrounding telephone and networking history that shaped it.

So, what *was* the internet called in 1973?

In 1973, the closest thing to the modern internet was called **ARPANET**.

Technically, there was not yet "the internet" as we use the term today. There was a small, experimental, government-funded packet-switching network known as the ARPA Network, or simply ARPANET, created under the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA, later DARPA).

A few important details help clarify the naming:

- Researchers in 1973 talked about "the ARPANET," "the network," or "the ARPA Network," not "the internet."
- The word "internetworking" did exist in technical circles. In 1974, Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn published a pivotal paper, "A Protocol for Packet Network Intercommunication," which used the term "internetting" for connecting multiple networks.
- The word "internet" as a common noun for a global, interconnected network of networks spread later, mostly during the 1980s as TCP/IP became standard and separate networks started to interconnect at scale.

So if you want a historically precise answer: in 1973, the precursor to the internet was called **ARPANET**, and the broader idea of linking networks together was described as **internetworking**, not yet "the internet" with a capital I.

What ARPANET looked like from California

California was one of the main hubs of ARPANET in the early 1970s. The network launched in 1969 with four nodes, and two of them were California institutions: UCLA and Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Menlo Park.

By 1973, ARPANET still had well under 100 nodes. You did not "log on" from home. You walked into a university or research center, usually into a room with a refrigerator-sized terminal or a teletype machine, and connected over dedicated lines funded by ARPA.

Those lines still ran over the infrastructure of the traditional telephone network. The core ARPANET routers, called IMPs (Interface Message Processors), sat in labs, but the physical circuits were leased from the big regulated telephone carriers, primarily AT&T's Long Lines and the regional Bell operating companies. In California, Pacific Telephone and Telegraph, later Pacific Bell, was the familiar face of that system.

For the people who ran the public telephone network, ARPANET at that time was a niche government experiment, riding on top of their copper but not something the average paying customer ever saw.

What the phone system looked like in 1973

While ARPANET researchers were passing packets between UCLA and SRI, almost everyone else in California was living in the age of the **plain old telephone service**.

There are a few key points about that era:

1. Monopoly structure

The "old phone company" in much of the United States in 1973 was simply called **the Bell System**, or informally "Ma Bell." In California, that meant local service from **Pacific Telephone** (a Bell operating company) and long-distance service from **AT&T Long Lines**. Where Bell did not operate, **GTE** (General Telephone & Electronics) handled many territories. When people ask "What was the old phone company called?" In California, "PacTel" or "Pacific Bell" is usually what long-time residents remember on their bills.

2. Regulation and predictability

Rates were regulated and fairly stable. You rented your phone set from the phone company, you did not own it. There was no discussion of "What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?" Because there was no bundled internet and no meaningful competition.

3. Analog switching and operator culture

By the early 1970s, most switching had moved from manual operators to electromechanical and early electronic switches, but it was still very physical. Technicians in central offices in Los Angeles, San Diego, or San Jose would walk aisles of frames and relays that you could hear clicking under load.

4. No consumer data services

Businesses might lease private lines or use early systems like Teletype, but residential customers had voice only. The question "Can I just have a landline without internet?" Would have sounded backwards; there was no other kind of landline to compare it to.

So while ARPANET researchers were experimenting with packet switching, the vast majority of Californians still knew the network only as the regulated public switched telephone network, delivered by a small cluster of well known telephone companies.

From ARPANET to the commercial internet

To understand how "ARPANET" turned into "the internet," it helps to line up a few milestones. Within labs, the story is technical: host protocols, NCP to TCP/IP, gateways, routing. For consumers, the story is about who actually sold you service and what they called it.

Here is a stripped-down historical arc, with the technical and commercial worlds side by side:

1. Late 1960s to mid-1970s: research networking

ARPANET grows slowly among universities and defense contractors. The term "internetting" appears in papers, but no residential customer ever orders "internet service."

2. Late 1970s: parallel networks

Other packet networks emerge: Telenet, Tymnet, and early X.25 services. The telephone companies experiment with data services over their long-distance networks. Still, for the public, the key question is "What are the major telecommunications companies?" Not "Who is my ISP?" The big names are AT&T, GTE, MCI, and soon Sprint.

3. 1983: the big technical shift

ARPANET switches to the TCP/IP protocol suite. From that point, the foundations of the modern internet are in place. The word "Internet" with a capital I starts appearing in technical documents as a proper noun.

4. Late 1980s to early 1990s: dial-up services and early ISPs

Before AOL became a household name, there were services like CompuServe, The Source, Prodigy, and a long tail of smaller online services and bulletin board systems (BBSs). When people ask "What came before AOL?" Or "What were the old internet dial-up providers?" They are usually thinking of this era. In California, tech enthusiasts dialed into local BBSs over PacBell lines or used long-distance to reach national services.

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5. 1991 onward: the web era

Tim Berners-Lee launches the first website at CERN in 1991, at the address <http://info.cern.ch>. That site, and the protocols behind it, paved the way for the web to ride on top of the existing internet. Through the 1990s, when people signed up with AOL, EarthLink, Netcom, or local California ISPs, they finally adopted the word "internet" as the ordinary name for the whole experience.

By the mid-1990s, the question had flipped: nobody said "ARPANET" anymore. Everyone, from San Francisco startups to retirees in Palm Springs, spoke of "getting on the internet," often by hearing *Phone Systems Company California* the screech of a dial-up modem on a phone line built by AT&T, GTE, or the Baby Bells.

The phone companies in the 1980s and beyond

When modern customers ask "What were the telephone companies in the 1980s?" Or "What was the name of the telephone company in the 80s?" They are often trying to place old bills, logos, or memories. The 1980s were the pivot decade.

Before 1984, the Bell System was vertically integrated. Local service in California came from Pacific Telephone (later Pacific Bell), and long-distance from AT&T. Competitors like MCI and Sprint chipped away at the long-distance monopoly, but local service was still essentially a monopoly.

In 1984, the AT&T divestiture split the system into AT&T (long-distance and equipment) and seven regional Bell operating companies, the "Baby Bells." Pacific Bell became part of Pacific Telesis. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, those companies merged and rebranded until we arrived at the familiar modern names: AT&T (rebuilt through mergers), Verizon, and others.

So when people ask "What are the past telephone companies?" Or "What phone companies no longer exist?" The list gets long:

Pacific Telephone, Pacific Bell, Bell Atlantic, NYNEX, US West, Ameritech, SBC, GTE, MCI, and many more have disappeared as standalone brands. Their networks did not vanish; they were absorbed into the modern giants that now show up whenever someone searches "What are all the major phone companies?" Or "What are the major telecommunications companies?"

In the U.S. Today, the top tier of national or near-national telecom carriers is typically considered to include:

- AT&T
- Verizon
- T-Mobile US

Cable providers such as Comcast (Xfinity) and Charter (Spectrum) also operate significant voice and data networks, though they are usually thought of first as broadband and TV carriers.

Dial-up, feature codes, and what was before broadband

For many Californians, the first practical taste of the internet came over a landline, frequently the same line that carried every family call.

That era answered several of the keyword questions directly:

- **What were the internet providers in the 90s?**

Beyond national names like AOL, CompuServe, Prodigy, and MSN, there were regional providers like EarthLink (founded in California), Netcom, and a long list of small ISPs, often with a few modem banks in a local central office.

- **What were the old dial-up internet companies?**

Add names like Mindspring, PSINet, AT&T WorldNet, and countless local providers that survived a few years before consolidation. If you look at California newspaper classifieds from the mid-1990s, you will see full pages of dial-up ISP ads with local access numbers in each area code.

During that same period, landline feature codes became part of everyday use. On a typical California landline, codes like *69, *82, and *77 added primitive control over privacy and call management:

- *69 - Call Return, which dialed back the last incoming number if it was available.
- *82 - Temporarily unblocked Caller ID on outgoing calls when you normally blocked it.
- *77 - Turned on Anonymous Call Rejection, blocking calls where the caller had deliberately hidden their number.

These feature codes still exist on many traditional and VoIP landline offerings, though some are being retired or replaced as carriers modernize their platforms.

Landlines today: who still offers them, and for how long?

For California telecom fans, one of the most common questions now is not "What was the internet called in 1973?" But "Will I lose my landline in 2027?" Or "Which companies still offer a landline?"

The answer is nuanced.

Traditional copper **POTS** (Plain Old Telephone Service) is shrinking. Carriers such as AT&T and Verizon have petitioned regulators to withdraw or reduce legacy copper services in many areas, in favor of fiber or wireless. In California, AT&T has pursued approvals to withdraw basic landline service in several wire centers, though regulatory decisions are still evolving.

When people ask "What companies still offer landline service?" Or "What companies now support original landlines?" They are often referring specifically to copper POTS. In much of California:

- AT&T still maintains some POTS lines, but is clearly steering new customers toward digital voice over fiber or fixed wireless.
- Frontier, which took over much of Verizon's former landline footprint in California, provides a mix of POTS and VoIP, depending on the area.
- Cable companies like Comcast/Xfinity and Spectrum offer "landline" phone, but it is typically VoIP delivered over cable, not a copper POTS line directly out of a central office.

If your priority is "What is the cheapest landline phone service without internet?" You are usually looking at either:

1. A bare-bones POTS or digital voice line from a regional carrier, sometimes in the 25 to 45 dollar per month range before taxes and fees, or
2. A stripped-down VoIP service from smaller providers or over-the-top VoIP companies, which can drop under 15 dollars per month, but requires broadband and a bit of configuration.

Rates vary by region and by regulatory status, which is why any honest answer to "Who is the cheapest landline provider?" Has to be qualified. Senior discounts, lifeline programs, and local tariffs all matter.

Landline service for seniors: simplicity versus reliability

Questions like "Which is the best landline phone provider for seniors?" And "What is the simplest landline phone for seniors?" Come up constantly, especially in California communities with large retiree populations.

From an engineering and customer-support standpoint, the trade-offs are clear:

- Traditional copper POTS lines have their own power from the central office and can work during power outages, often for several hours or more. This makes them attractive for vulnerable users who might not own cell phones.

- VoIP lines over fiber, cable, or fixed wireless offer better integration with modern features but typically go down when your home loses power, unless you maintain a battery backup or generator for the network equipment.
- Wireless home phone products (from carriers like Verizon or AT&T) wrap a cellular radio in a box that looks like a landline interface. They are simple but rely on cell coverage and local power.

For physical handsets, the "easiest phone for an elderly person" is usually a large-button, corded or simple cordless handset with good volume and minimal menus. Brands change over time, but the design principles remain stable: high contrast labels, clear ringer volume, and no need to navigate smartphone-style menus.

When seniors ask "Can I just have a landline without internet?" The answer remains yes in many parts of California, but the form it takes may be:

- Real copper POTS where still available.
- A stand-alone digital voice line over fiber or cable, ordered without broadband data service. This is increasingly how carriers structure their offerings.

If you depend on a landline, especially for medical devices or emergency calling, it is worth asking your provider plainly about backup power, how long the line should stay up in an outage, and what [Phone Systems Company California](#) happens as they retire older infrastructure.

Mobile networks, smartphones, and operating systems

The historical question about 1973 often arrives in the same breath as modern comparisons: "What are the top 3 phone service providers?" "What are the top 3 best phone brands?" "Which is the most popular smartphone operating system?"

On the carrier side in the U.S., by subscriber counts and network footprint, you typically see:

- Verizon Wireless
- AT&T Mobility
- T-Mobile US

Smaller brands often ride on these networks as MVNOs (mobile virtual network operators), so when someone asks "What is the alternative to Verizon?" They might actually be looking at a T-Mobile-based or AT&T-based MVNO, even if the brand is something like Mint Mobile, Consumer Cellular, or Visible.

On devices and operating systems, the picture is simpler. The global smartphone market is effectively a **two-platform** world today:

- **Android** is the most popular smartphone operating system by global market share, especially in developing markets and among a wide range of manufacturers.
- **iOS**, Apple's platform, dominates the premium segment in markets like the U.S. And has a disproportionate share of affluent users.

When people ask about "the 5 mobile operating systems" or "the top 10 most popular operating systems," they are often thinking back to a more diverse era that included Symbian, BlackBerry OS, Windows Phone, and others. Today, outside of niche or regional uses (Huawei's HarmonyOS in China, KaiOS on basic phones), almost all mainstream smartphones run Android or iOS.

Questions like "Which phone is least likely to be hacked?" Do not have a one-line answer. From a security practitioner's perspective:

- Recent flagship iPhones, kept updated, offer consistently strong default security for non-expert users.
- Recent flagship Android devices from reputable vendors, kept updated and not sideloading random apps, are also robust.
- Simpler feature phones may have a smaller attack surface, but sometimes receive fewer security updates.

In practice, user behavior matters more than brand prestige. That said, when people ask "What phone do most billionaires use?" Or "What phone does Elon Musk use?" The public evidence points mostly toward high-end iPhones and top-tier Android flagships among wealthy users, but individuals can and do switch platforms. There is no authoritative public disclosure for specific individuals such as Elon Musk or Donald Trump that would stand up as a verifiable reference beyond occasional photos and reports, so any strong claim deserves skepticism.

Business phone systems: from key systems to cloud PBX

Telecom professionals today field a lot of questions such as "What is a business phone system?" Or "What is the best business phone system?" From companies trying to modernize.

Historically, a business phone system meant a **PBX** (Private Branch Exchange) or a smaller key system in the wiring closet, physically connected to a handful or dozens of external lines from the phone company. In California offices in the 1980s and 1990s, those were often AT&T, Nortel, or Panasonic systems bolted to a plywood backboard, with a rat's nest of cross-connects feeding desk phones.

Now, a business phone system usually means one of three things:

1. An on-premises IP PBX using SIP trunks over broadband.
2. A fully hosted "cloud PBX" from providers like RingCentral, 8x8, or others, where the phones in your office are just IP endpoints.
3. A mobile-first setup where "desk phones" are mostly smartphone apps tied to virtual numbers.

When people ask "Who has the best phone system?" They may really be asking about call quality, reliability, integrations, or cost. The "best" choice depends heavily on whether your business is in a single California office with on-site IT staff, or a distributed network of home-based workers who live on softphones.

From a reliability standpoint, old TDM-based PBX systems tied to physical PRI lines were rock solid, but inflexible and costly to maintain. Modern cloud systems reduce on-site hardware but introduce a bigger dependency on your internet connection and the provider's platform. Each option answers a different version of "What is the best business phone system?" Depending on your risk tolerance and technical comfort.

The dark side of the internet

Any honest history also has to acknowledge "the dark side of the internet."

ARPANET's designers in the 1970s were thinking about resilience under failure and efficient resource usage, not identity theft or ransomware. Security models assumed cooperative, known users on university campuses. As the internet became public and commercial in the 1990s and 2000s, it inherited those open assumptions but added billions of anonymous users, money, and crime.

The dark side today includes:

- Large-scale data breaches of telecom and internet providers.
- Robocalls and spam, often riding the same PSTN infrastructure that carried your grandparents' calls.
- Malware, phishing, harassment, and more hostile behavior that thrives on global connectivity.

When you connect a California small business or an elderly relative to broadband, you are no longer just plugging them into a benign information utility. You are connecting them to a network that includes both legitimate services and sophisticated adversaries. That reality colors how professionals choose routers, configure business phone systems, select landline or mobile providers, and even recommend which smartphone OS to use.

Why the 1973 question still matters

Asking "What was the internet called in 1973?" Is not a trivia game. It forces you to remember that the internet was not inevitable, and that it did not arrive as a polished product from any single "number one phone company."

It grew out of:

- Government-funded research networks like ARPANET.
- The physical infrastructure and regulatory environment of monopoly and then competitive telephone companies.
- The messy evolution from copper POTS to digital voice, from dial-up to broadband, from proprietary online services to an open web.

For California telecom fans, that story is written into local geography and corporate DNA. UCLA, SRI, Stanford, and a scattered list of old Pacific Bell buildings are part of the same narrative as the fiber routes and cellular towers that now answer modern questions like "What are the big 5 phone companies?" Or "Who is the #1 phone company?" Or "What is the top 1 phone in the world?"

The names have changed. Pacific Telephone turned into Pacific Bell, then SBC, then AT&T. ARPANET became simply the internet. Dial-up providers either died or disappeared into broadband brands.

Yet if you strip away the rebranding, you are still looking at a network of networks, built on top of whatever carriers and protocols the era could supply. In 1973, that meant ARPANET running on leased lines from "the phone company." Today it means global IP networks riding on fiber, radio, and undersea cable from giants with familiar logos on California storefronts.

The labels move. The continuity is underneath.