

Technology

Judith Milhon

Making the internet a feminist issue

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The cyber-feminist Judith Milhon, who has died of cancer aged 64, pioneered the public's right to the internet. Also known as St Jude, she was part of what she described as a "lefto-revolutionist programming commune" in Berkeley, California, that built the first public online computer system, the legendary Community Memory project, in 1973.

The network of computers we now call the internet then belonged to just two groups: the US military and a handful of universities and research institutes. Indeed, it was only in that year that the network extended across the Atlantic to include University College London and the royal radar establishment in Norway.

The Berkeley group adapted a TeleType machine that they housed in a cardboard box for soundproofing. The machine, which had no electronic screen or mouse, was placed in Leopold's record shop in Berkeley, and connected to other terminals across the San Francisco Bay area over the local telephone network.

It functioned as an electronic bulletin board and quickly became popular with local musicians, who used it to sell instruments and promote concerts. Other early activities of the project included typewriter art and electronic poetry.

Although the machine remained in the record shop for only a few months, the Community Memory project gave rise to the system of bulletin board services (BBS) that remain an active part of today's internet (there are now more than 100,000 BBS active in the US alone). In turn, BBS inspired the system of newsgroups that led to the invention of the worldwide web by Tim Berners Lee in 1989.

Born in Washington DC, Milhon was brought up in Indiana. She became part of the beat/hipster scene in Cleveland, Ohio, in the early 1960s and was active in the civil rights movement, helping to organise the famous 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and being jailed for civil disobedience in Jackson, Mississippi.

Milhon started programming in 1967 after reading a book called Teach Yourself Fortran, and worked as a programmer for the vending machine firm Horn & Hardart in New York. But she soon joined the hippy exodus to California, settling in Berkeley, where she began to encourage other women to join the emerging cyber culture.

At a time when the internet was dominated by men, she was an ardent advocate of the joys of hacking, cybersex and a woman's right to technology; her battle cry was "Girls need modems!"

Milhon was equally renowned for her well-timed cynicism and often humorous writing, both of which helped establish her as a feminist spokesperson, raising awareness among the growing ranks of women entering the technology sector. In the early 1990s, she became senior editor of the widely opinionated and anarchic Mondo 2000, the San Francisco cyber-culture magazine and precursor to such publications as Wired, Red Herring and Business 2.0.

As St Jude, Milhon became one of the first female hackers. In a 1999 interview with Michelle Delio of Wired, she described hacking as a "martial art - a way of defending against politically correct politicians, overly intrusive laws, bigots and narrow-minded people of all persuasions." Hacking, she argued, represented, "the clever circumvention of imposed limits, whether imposed by your government, your own skills or the laws of physics".

Her books, which explored ideas of identity in networked societies, include *The Joy Of Hacker Sex*, *The Cyberpunk Handbook* and *How To Mutate And Take Over The World*, the latter co-written with Mondo 2000's founder, RU Sirius.

In the late 1990s, Milhon settled across the bay in Oakland, where she continued to work as a web designer and consultant on internet start-ups. She remained a staunch advocate of hacking, telling ABC News earlier this year that women still faced much prejudice in cyber communities. "Simply be present, honest, reasonably competent, female, and everyone's aghast," she said.

She is survived by her companion of 40 years, Efrem Lipkin, her first husband, Robert Behling, and their daughter Tresca.

- Judith Milhon, cyber pioneer, born 1939; died July 19 2003

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