CRITICAL MOMENT

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNICATIONS TURNING POINT

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This computer may not look like much, but there was a time in the early 1990s when turning it off would have shut down the World Wide Web.

A tattered, scribbled label warned: "This machine is a server. DO NOT POWER IT DOWN!!" The note was stuck on the computer of British software scientist Tim Berners-Lee at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva. It worked. Nobody switched off the device that was the original web server, and on a summer's day in 1991 Berners-Lee launched his invention, the World Wide Web.
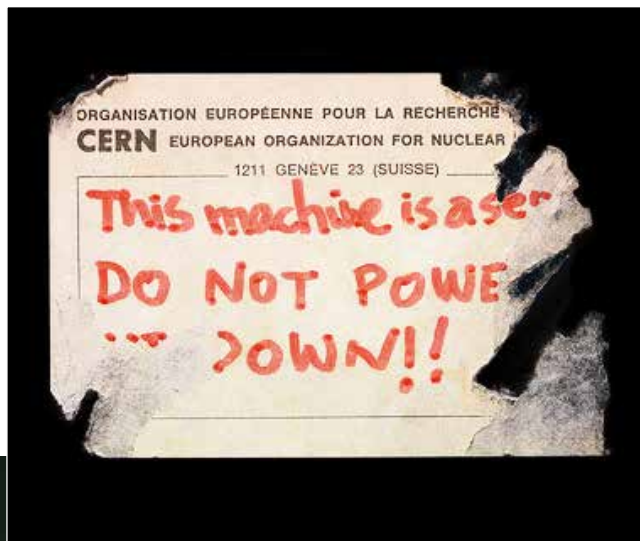
The first web page described the project's mission: "To give universal access to a large universe of documents." CERN contact details for team members were included for anyone who might be interested, though at least one entry said, "no email yet."

Berners-Lee had joined CERN in 1984 as a software engineer but was frustrated by how tortuous it was to navigate and share the research being done on incompatible computers by the lab's 5,000 scientists.

In March 1989 he wrote a paper that proposed using a hypertext system to link and share documents. His boss thought the idea "vague but exciting" and signed off on the purchase of a NeXT cube computer. Berners-Lee used it to create the HTML language and, ultimately, a global medium of information exchange.

No one had tasked Berners-Lee with finding a way of improving how his colleagues shared their work. He just thought it would be helpful. It was. "It's hard to overstate the impact of the global system he created. It's almost Gutenbergian," was *Time* magazine's assessment.

Today, the machine on which the original vision of freely shared information was conceived is on loan from CERN to London's Science Museum. Along with a very important sticker.