Mit der Post in die Zukunft: Der Bildschirmtext in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von 1977 bis 2001
[Postal service into the future: Bildschirmtext in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1977–2001]

By Hagen Schönrich. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. 348.

There are many origins for the not yet thoroughly defined construct that is commonly called "The Internet." Currently under discussion are the interactive data networks that national postal services in many countries operated during the 1980s.

Hagen Schönrich's work on how Bundespost (the German Postal Service) developed the Bildschirmtext (BTX) system is not meant to be a history of the underlying technology, which others have detailed, such as Heinz Bahr, *Bildschirmtext ist für alle da* (1988) or Volker Schneider, *Technikentwicklung zwischen Politik und Markt* (1989), also positioning BTX in the sociocultural context. Schönrich tells the story of this data network, from identifying the need for a new communications system in 1976, its public presentation and market entry, when it was neither technically nor legally the right time for such a system, to the shutdown in 2001. The narrative is embedded in a legal, political, and technological context, based on a well-chosen variety of contemporary journals and newspapers, as well as official governmental records, complemented with BTX content, such as preserved pages. The introduction provides a clear and thorough analysis of these sources and their limitations, like the thirty-year embargo on governmental files forcing the focus on the 1980s, and an extensive literature review. Schönrich's protagonists are Bundespost and private BTX users. He identifies four stages during BTX operations and uses these as a guideline through this mainly chronological story: planning and development, test phase and legal consolidation, market entry and operations, and finally the network's expansion ending with its shutdown. As the Videotex(t), Teletex(t), and Bildschirmtext terminology is confusing, thankfully the planning chapter clarifies and differentiates the systems behind these quite similar terms, their international background, and the Bundespost's ambivalent role as a state organ as well as an economic company. The BTX system, roughly based on the British Prestel, relied heavily on existing infrastructures like the telephone, its underlying network, and television. As the BTX System did not fit in any of the media categories enshrined in German law, it became the prototype of a novel class, the "new media," requiring prior definition. The legal and political debates around the classification of BTX were not yet over when the test phase began. Schönrich guides the reader through these entanglements in an engaging way, despite the dry and complex topic. Many BTX services are like blueprints for later internet applications; however, the system could never fulfill its developers'

expectations. Only following the arrival of the personal computer and some technical adjustments did the number of users rise significantly, but by then, the time had already come for the actual internet.

Schönrich's work takes its place in the history of digitization alongside other international studies with different perspectives or that focus on the technical side. Despite the comment "one must not overlook the actual research on the history of the internet" on p. 31, the book avoids placing BTX in this research area and declares it a topic for further study. A thorough investigation would, however, have far exceeded the limits of this work, which nonetheless lays the foundation for that kind of research. This book plays an important role in closing the research gap in the late twentieth century history of the Bundespost, covering its development and role in the evolution of telecommunications and media toward a digital society. Entertaining and easy to follow, the book is a pleasant read for anyone interested in the history of communications media or networks. It offers an extensive view on the reasons why BTX merits a place between two main German narratives: one as a curiosity born from faith in technology as a solution for the 1980s crises, ending as a failure, and the other as a precursor of the internet.

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