

The Forgotten British Pioneer Who Invented Internet TV Before Netflix Existed

Most people think streaming was invented in Silicon Valley. The real story began in Cambridge in 1994.

Most histories of the internet leave out one name. John Bentley.

In 1994, while most people in Britain were still getting used to the idea of email, a British entrepreneur named John Bentley was building the world's first Internet TV system. Not a concept. Not a prototype on paper. An actual working device that connected a standard home television to the internet through a dial-up phone line.

He called the company Viewcall.

The set-top box Bentley developed used an ARM RISC 7500 processor built at Cambridge Science Park. It stored data remotely, making it a forerunner of what we now call cloud computing. At a time when accessing the internet meant sitting at a personal computer, Bentley's device let anyone watch internet content on the television already sitting in their living room.

In July 1995, Viewcall gave its first public demonstration at London's Café Royal to approximately 100 UK investment firms. The Financial Times described the device as the Volkswagen Beetle of PCs.

By December 1995 the story had crossed the Atlantic. Bob Metcalfe, the inventor of Ethernet and later winner of the Turing Prize, reviewed Viewcall at the Comdex trade show in Las Vegas and published a two-page endorsement in InfoWorld on 18 December 1995. He coined the term Intervision to describe what he had seen. The Wall Street Journal reported that Viewcall had taken the lead in interactive internet TV. USA Today covered the story the same month.

Viewcall Europe Plc was listed on the London Stock Exchange with backing from 3i, the UK government technology agency. Viewcall America was formed in Atlanta with a \$10 million facility.

Then came the battles. Acorn, which had manufactured the set-top box, appeared to launch a rival product. Oracle's Larry Ellison entered the market. WebTV emerged as a competitor and was eventually acquired by Microsoft for \$425 million. Daewoo, appointed as Viewcall's sole European agent, went bust in 1997.

The industry that Viewcall had pioneered became Netflix. It became Amazon Prime. It became AWS Cloud. It became the way the entire world watches television today.

John Bentley is now 86 and lives in the Algarve in Portugal. He has told the full story in his memoir Mr Internet TV: The Ego and The Id, published in 2025. He wrote it because he wants the historical record to be accurate and because the human story behind technological change deserves not to be forgotten.

The book is available on Amazon and Goodreads worldwide. For more information visit www.johnbentley.biz.