Internet access on cellular phones, after emerging as a new technology in the mid-1990s, is now a thriving activity despite the global economic recession. IDC reported smartphone sales of 1.18 billion units in 2008 (IDC, 2009), compared to the unconnected personal digital assistants approaching merely 1 million units per quarter in the second half of 2003. However, the concept of using handheld devices for wide-area data applications began 25 years prior to the beginning of the end of PDAs.

The key year in the history of PDA devices is 1978. That year, a start-up called Lexicon sold its handheld electronic language translator (Levy, 1979) called the LK-3000. Its interchangeable modules included database and notepad applications, and the product was licensed by Siemens-Nixdorf. Meanwhile independent inventors Robert Hotto and Judah Klausner patented what may be the world’s first PDA (Klausner & Hotto, 1977). Toshiba acquired the rights and produced it as the Memo Note 30 model LC-836MN. It combined a handheld calculator with an alphanumeric keypad and had the ability to store up to 30 data entries.

Noteworthy in these devices were their applications to the intelligence community. Lexicon founder Michael Levy revealed in 2003 Koblentz (2003) that an encryption module was created for the U.S. National Security Agency, while Toshiba’s product was featured for its own cipher value in the April 1980 issue of Cryptologia. In both cases, the intention was that military and intelligence staff would use proprietary hardware to send data over public landline telephone networks—a technique not dissimilar from modern commercial VPNs.

More ambitious devices developed in the realm of science fiction, such as Douglas Adams’ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy on BBC radio beginning in March, and Gordon Dickson’s story Thank you, Beep published that summer in the Hewlett-Packard Calculator Journal. It would take time for reality to equal the hype. Miniature landline acoustic modems only available to the defense and intelligence community in 1978 were publicly launched by the
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