

David J. Farber, Computer & Information Science

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David Farber

David J. Farber, an emeritus professor in the department of computer and information science in the School of Engineering & Applied Science, died on February 7. He was 91.

Born in New Jersey in 1934, Mr. Farber earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering in 1956 and a master's degree in mathematics in 1961, both from the Stevens Institute of Technology. He began his career at Bell Laboratories, contributing to the design of the first electronic switching system (ESS-1) and to the development of the SNOBOL programming languages, before holding positions at the Rand Corporation and Scientific Data Systems.

After his time in the industry, Mr. Farber went on to hold faculty positions at the University of California, Irvine, the University of Delaware, and Carnegie Mellon University. During this period, he led work that produced the world's first operational distributed computer system, later helping to conceive and organize major national research networks, including CSNET and NSFNET, and contributing to the National Research and Education Network. His paper "The Convergence of Computing and Telecommunications Systems," which he co-wrote with engineer Paul Baran in 1977, was a seminal work that suggested that computers could take over communication functions, later to take the form of email, text messaging, and more. Mr. Farber also played a central role in establishing the NSF- and DARPA-funded Gigabit Network Testbed Initiative, chairing its coordinating committee and advancing the development of high-speed networking technologies that would underpin the modern internet.

Mr. Farber joined the Penn Engineering faculty in 1987 as a professor of computer and information science. In 1993, he was named the Alfred Fidler Moore Professor of Telecommunication Systems, which he held until he retired and took emeritus status in 2003. He also held a secondary appointment in the department of electrical and systems engineering, as well as appointments in the Wharton School and the Annenberg School for Communication. At Penn, Mr. Farber was known not only for his technical leadership but also for his deep engagement with public policy.

A pioneering computer scientist and visionary educator, Mr. Farber is widely regarded as one of the architects of modern computer networking. Over a career that spanned more than six decades, he helped lay the technical and policy foundations of the internet, earning recognition as a member of the Pioneers Circle of the Internet Hall of Fame in 2013. From 2000 to 2001, while on leave from Penn, he served as chief technologist of the Federal Communications Commission, where he advised on telecommunications and internet policy at a critical moment in the evolution of digital infrastructure. Throughout his career, he was a thoughtful and influential voice on the societal implications of emerging technologies, bridging the worlds of engineering, government and industry.

Mr. Farber was a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the Association for Computing Machinery, and American Association for the Advancement of Science, and received numerous honors for his lifetime contributions to computer communications, including the ACM Special Interest Group on Data Communication Award and the John Scott Award. In 2018, Mr. Farber became a distinguished professor at Keio University in Japan and co-director of the Keio Cyber Civilization Research Center, continuing to teach, mentor and advance international dialogue on the future of cyberspace until shortly before his death.

"Through his scholarship, public service, and unwavering commitment to students and colleagues, [Mr.] Farber helped shape not only the architecture of the internet, but also the civic and intellectual framework that guides its continued evolution," said the computer & information science at Penn Engineering in a tribute. "His impact will endure in the networks that connect the world and in the countless lives he influenced through his teaching and leadership."

Mr. Farber is survived by his son, Emanuel, and two grandchildren.