

ANNOTATION

The One **Big** **Missing Feature** of the **Web** According to a **Top VC**

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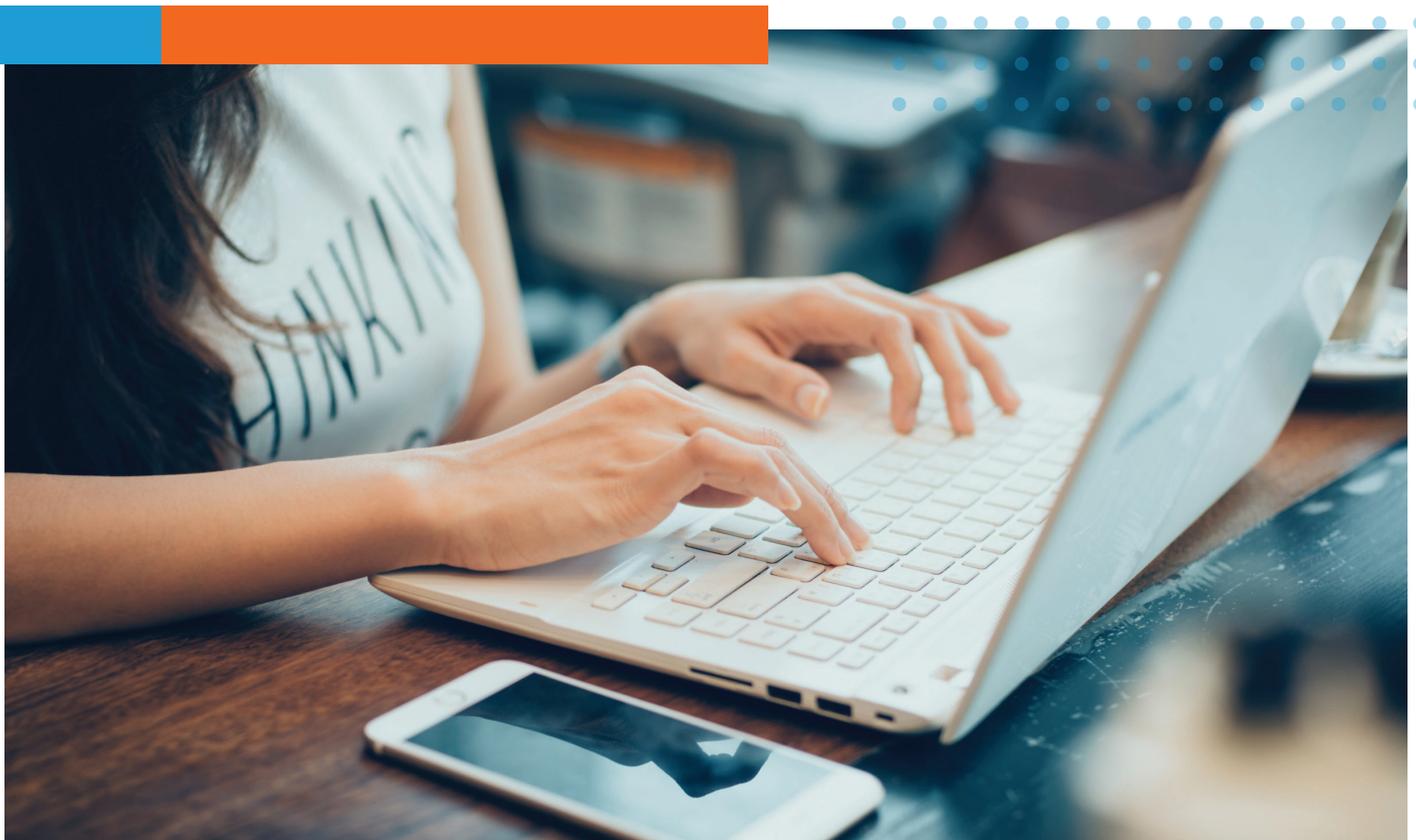


It goes without saying, but Marc Andreessen has charted an enviable path in Silicon Valley history. From building the first major web browser Mosaic to co-founding Netscape in 1993 to launching one of the most successful venture capital firms of all time, Andreessen has played an extremely critical role in shaping the Internet as we know it today.

Yet while Andreessen is known for these successes as both an entrepreneur and venture capitalist, he has also been a respected futurist. He sees the world as it is now and what it could be. His commentary is closely followed by entrepreneurs, investors, journalists, and other notable figures in business.

Therefore, it was quite fascinating that one of Andreessen's most notable comments on the web is largely forgotten. Simply put, one of the world's top venture capitalists believes that annotation is still one of the big missing features on the Internet.

Ultimately, Andreessen's commentary on annotation rings true today. While several digital tools have tried to bring annotation to the web, there is still a vast opportunity to fill in this gap and create even more value for Internet users around the world. One of the most exciting opportunities comes from The Overweb, which lets users access a game-changing trust layer over the web.

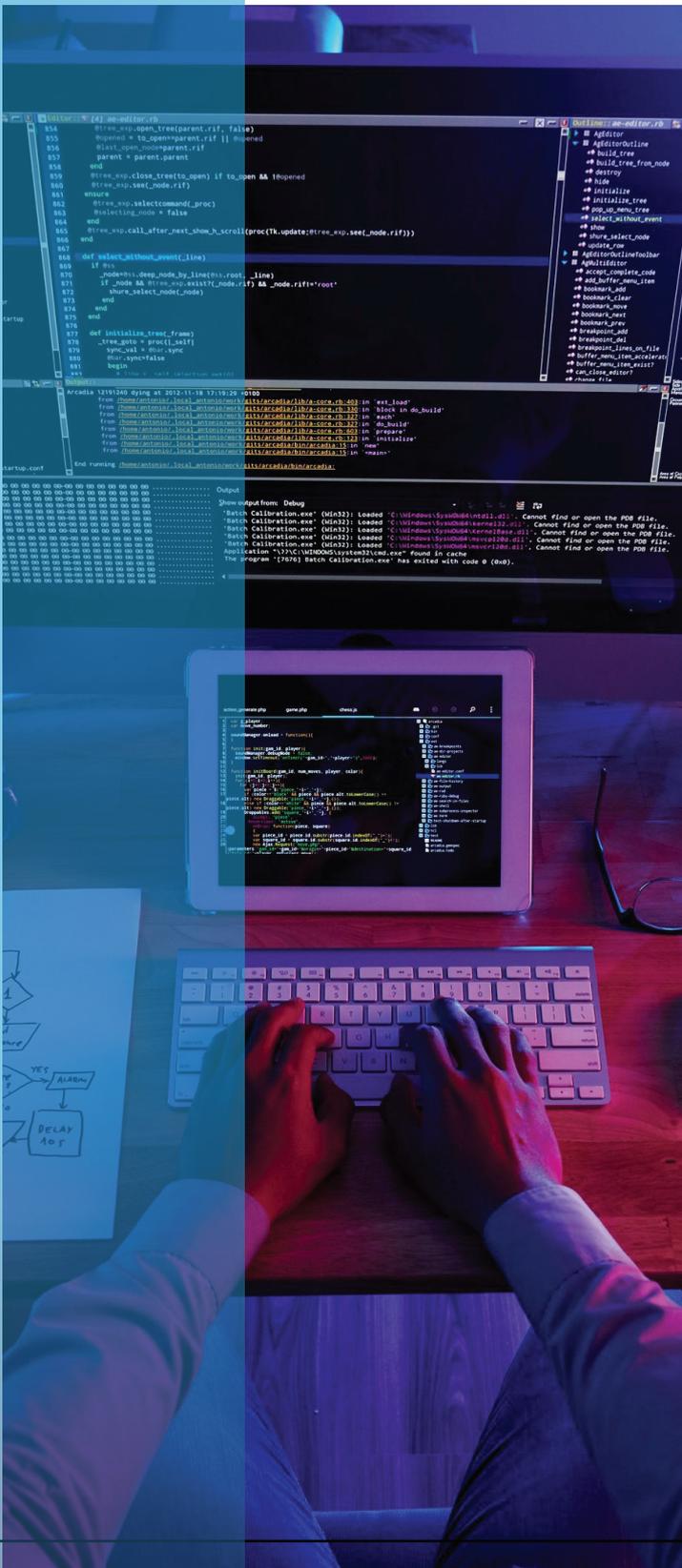


AN OVERLOOKED PREDICTION FROM A SILICON VALLEY LEGEND

Andreessen's comments about web annotation weren't made out of the blue. In fact, he has been thinking about the subject for quite some time.

He shared his thoughts on the topic after Andreessen Horowitz invested \$15 million into Rap Genius (now just called Genius). Yes, Andreessen and his partner Ben Horowitz were interested in the website's significant traction among rap aficionados and fast growth among Y Combinator startups. But that wasn't the most important thing. In fact, Andreessen said that he found rap "every bit as comprehensible as ancient Mesopotamian."

As Andreessen says in his blog detailing the investment, he and his firm were interested because Rap Genius and its stellar team were on a mission to annotate the web:



“ Finally, there's the other reason – maybe even the real reason – why I'm so fired up about this idea and this investment. Only a handful of people know that the big missing feature from the web browser – the feature that was supposed to be in from the start but didn't make it – is the ability to annotate any page on the Internet with commentary and additional information. ”

In fact, the original web browser was supposed to include an annotation feature. In fact, at Netscape, he and his co-founder Eric Bina created a feature called “group annotations” that would let users add their comments to any webpage—all through users' browsers. While the idea was popular among early Internet users, the Netscape team didn't have enough time to properly build the necessary server. There was no cloud at the time. Potential scaling issues made it difficult to keep going, so Andreessen and his colleagues decided to drop the feature. At the same time, Andreessen wondered what the web would have been like if annotation had not been removed.

This is what made Andreessen Horowitz's investment into Rap Genius so exciting. It was a chance to work with the Rap Genius team to continue this mission of annotating the web—but 20 years later. As Andreessen said in his blog post, Rap Genius “is on an ambitious mission, and one that we are proud to get behind.”

Andreessen's announcement should have generated significant conversation. After all, one of the greatest tech luminaries in the modern era used his firm's capital to invest in a company that was essentially carrying out his favorite digital feature from several decades ago.

On the contrary, Andreessen's commentary had a muted impact. Even considering his reputation in the tech community, large media outlets had a much more minimalistic response. Yes, they covered the fact that Andreessen and his firm were investing their capital into Rap Genius. However, these media outlets ignored the “big missing feature” remark and quickly moved on to other topics. They didn't spend time discussing annotation in general and the fact that Andreessen still sees a huge opportunity to bring it to modern web browsers.



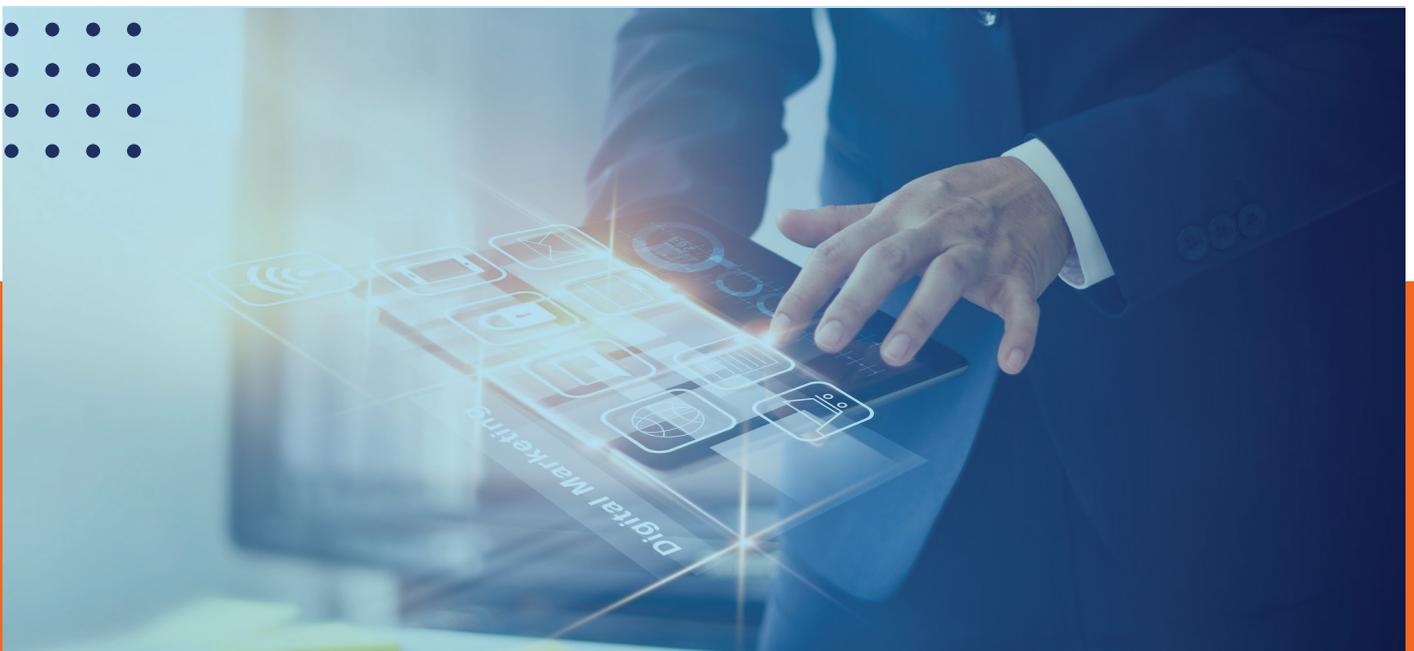
A BEHAVIOR THAT HAS EXISTED FOR CENTURIES

But let's take a step back. Andreessen isn't the first intellectual to recognize the value of annotation. We can go back centuries to find humans leveraging the power of annotation to educate others about our world.

Annotation can be traced back to the Talmud. We have to go back to 1000 AD to see text annotations in Talmudic commentaries and Arabic rhetoric treatises. The general idea involved a Rabbi adding his insights, commentary, or other facts in the margins or subline of texts. At the time, scribes copied manuscripts with marginal annotations and then distributed those annotations within their community.

If you really think about it, these types of marginal notes were an extremely early and primitive form of crowdsourcing. An individual reading a Medieval text could quickly contribute to that text's meaning and value. Even if the original author did not anticipate a particular comment or note, that individual's note helps many readers get more out of the original text.

The rise of the printing press made it less likely that one specific script would be passed around to many different people. Instead, authors would be more likely to add notes to personal texts. While the general public wouldn't be seeing these notes, individual owners of texts would record key insights or information that could bring the original context to life.





ANNOTATION IN THE MODERN WEB

Fast-forwarding to modern times, we have seen several companies and groups of people exploring the power of annotation on the web. We can even see shades of this idea in 1945 when Vannevar Bush's article in *The Atlantic* discussed a tool called Memex. Memex could store and compress tools like books, articles, and individual communications in a mechanical order.

The idea evolved from there, eventually reaching the doorsteps of some of today's Internet giants. For instance, Microsoft played a role in preventing the adoption of text annotation in the 1990s. At the time, Mosaic (which Andreessen co-created before Netscape) was a web browser that played a key role in popularizing the web and graphic media. It also offered an annotation feature.

Microsoft was a formidable competitor. It preloaded 90% of PCs with Internet Explorer, which made it extremely difficult for Mosaic (and later Netscape) to compete. More than 20 years later, the WC3 annotation standard was passed in 2017, but ironically only Microsoft's latest Edge browser has annotation, albeit in primitive form.



THE OVERWEB: A PROMISING FUTURE FOR ANNOTATION

The annotation story has certainly had its highs and lows. Consumer enthusiasm is certainly there for annotation on the web, yet there haven't been many tools to capitalize on that enthusiasm. Genius is certainly the first step in annotating the web, yet some other motivated founders are answering Andreessen's call and addressing this issue.

One of those projects is called The Overweb. The Overweb is a self-described trust layer over the web. Essentially, it lets Internet users get deep levels of context for any idea that they encounter on the web. At its core, the web is about sharing information among other talented and experienced individuals. The Overweb stays true to this mission and is working to create a more deeply-connected Internet.

As you can see here, The Overweb pattern has three key pillars. The first is a safe digital space. Here, the platform's users can be assured that the personas they encounter are in good standing. The second pillar—on-page presence—lets you go visible on webpages. Finally, on-page interactions is the third pillar. With over 100s of smart tags, users can annotate text and share their knowledge with the rest of the world.



In the end, the Internet was made to be annotated. Andreessen was at the forefront of the movement—even if that vision hasn't yet become a reality. As mentioned in his post on Rap Genius, he often wondered “how the Internet would have turned out differently if users had been able to annotate everything — to add new layers of knowledge, to all knowledge, on and on, ad infinitum.”

Now, we are living in an era where the Internet can (and arguably should) be annotated. Adhering to Andreessen's core vision - layering knowledge on knowledge - will help us as digital citizens become smarter, more educated, and more connected.

There are still plenty of opportunities to annotate the web. One of the greatest opportunities is at the Overweb. Whether you are a talented founder or are simply interested in this problem, the Overweb is an open-source community seeking to reinstate this hugely important missing feature of the web.

We invite you to join us in this effort and be part of changing history. Working together, we can fulfill Andreessen's vision and become smarter, more knowledgeable, and more connected with each other. To learn more about the Overweb and its mission, please visit

<https://theoverweb.com/start-here>

