

Silicon Valley

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Season Four of HBO/Mike Judge's high-tech comedy series *Silicon Valley* highlighted an issue (albeit in a comedic way) that has important real-life implications for the startup community. The show's somewhat timid protagonist, Richard Hendricks, had the next great tech idea: a decentralized Internet that relies on smartphones in lieu of traditional mainframe servers. Richard quickly realized, however, that to his dismay someone else claimed to have already patented the idea years ago, before the enabling technology even existed! What was Richard to do?

The problem is far from fiction. There are more than 9 million issued utility patents in the United States alone and, with respect to Richard's idea, more than 500,000 of these patents discuss the "internet" in some way. And, most of those patents are written in legally technical language that is both difficult to interpret without the aid of a skilled patent lawyer and amorphous at the same time (making it hard to determine whether anyone did, indeed, patent the idea before).

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