

Did the US release anything like Viatel or Prestel mailbox

Yes, the United States released several systems very similar to Prestel and Viatel during the 1980s videotex boom, though they were operated by private media and telecom corporations rather than a state-run postal authority.

Unlike the UK (Prestel) or Australia (Viatel), where centralized post and telecom offices backed a single national standard, the US market was fragmented into competing regional experiments and commercial networks.

The closest US equivalents to the Prestel-style TV-and-mailbox experience fell into two major categories:

1. The Direct Videotex Clones (TV & Terminal Based)

Major US media giants spent hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to replicate the exact European model—using dedicated terminals or modified TVs connected to phone lines:

- **Viewtron (Knight-Ridder):** Launched in 1983, this was the most high-profile US clone of Prestel. Users bought a custom **AT&T Sceptre terminal** that plugged into their home TV and phone line. It featured news, banking, shopping, and an electronic messaging mailbox.
- **Gateway (Times Mirror):** Launched around the same time in Southern California, this service targeted homes with a similar terminal-to-TV concept, offering local information and messaging.
- **Keyfax:** A Chicago-based joint venture that targeted home users with interactive text and mailbox features.

Why they failed: These dedicated videotex systems fizzled out by the mid-1980s. The specialized terminals and subscription fees were prohibitively expensive, and the graphics were sluggish.

2. The Text-Based Online Services (PC Based)

While terminal-to-TV systems failed, the US successfully adopted "videotex" in a broader sense through early commercial text-based online services. Because personal computers (like the Apple II, Commodore 64, and TRS-80) took off faster in the US than in Europe, Americans bypassed the "TV terminal" and went straight to dial-up services:

- **CompuServe & The Source:** Introduced in the late 1970s and booming in the 1980s, these services acted exactly like Prestel but were accessed via PCs. They featured highly popular email systems, message boards, and real-time chat forums. In fact, **Radio Shack** sold a dedicated [TRS-80 Videotex terminal](#) and software bundled specifically with CompuServe hours to mimic the European model.
- **Quantum Link (Later America Online / AOL):** Starting as a dedicated network for the Commodore 64, this eventually evolved into AOL. Its cornerstone feature was the electronic mailbox and instant messaging.

Comparison: Prestel vs. The US Equivalents

Feature	Prestel / Viatel (UK/Australia)	US Videotex (Viewtron/Gateway)	US Online Services (CompuServe/AOL)
Backing	State-run Post/Telecom authorities	Private Newspaper/Media conglomerates	Private tech and database corporations
Hardware	Modified TV set or dumb terminal	AT&T Sceptre terminal hooked to a TV	Standard Personal Computers (PCs) with a modem
Mailbox Style	Numerical page-routing or page-based text messaging	Menu-driven messaging via terminal keyboard	Text-based Electronic Mail (Email) and forums

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