

## Who will be America's first 'tech president'?

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With the 2008 Presidential elections heating up quickly, we are hearing 16 declared hopefuls state their positions on all the great issues facing our nation i.e. Iraq, terrorism, global warming, healthcare, public education, energy, immigration, abortion, etc.

You can easily find statements from each of the candidates regarding the majority of these issues easily on their websites. So you might think that in course of using the web as an effective way to get out their message and raise money, that a few of the candidates might also realize that how we develop and support the Internet and the use of information technology is an issue itself. But oddly enough, none of the candidates has posted any specific proposals or recommendations, regarding the Internet, information technology, or even telecommunications policy overall. In fact, looking at their websites, you'd be hard pressed to find the word "Internet" used at all.

That isn't to say that they've been completely silent about technology issues. On Wednesday, John Edwards made a strong statement, calling on the FCC to use the upcoming auction of public spectrum to insure more affordable and open access to the Internet. "In recent years, the Internet has grown to touch everything and transform much of what it touches," he said. "It's not the answer to everything, but it can powerfully accelerate the best of America. It improves our democracy by making quiet voices loud, improves our economy by making small markets big, and improves opportunity by making unlikely dreams possible."

Along with Edwards, Barack Obama, Bill Richardson and Mike Huckabee have all declared their support for "Net Neutrality," the principle that Internet service providers shall not discriminate among the content they carry.

And Gov. Mitt Romney does list technology as an issue on his website, but only with one paragraph mentioning investing "substantially in technologies related to power generation, nanotechnology, and materials science." But so far none of the candidates are really emphasizing the Internet itself as a major factor in America's future. It's as if they all think it's a settled topic.

"Why should the Internet be an issue?" you might ask. Well, with unparalleled powers to turn information into ideas and ideas into action, the Internet links us to each other, and to our neighbors here as well as around the world, enabling us to organize to solve problems, transform our economy, help foster security, better deliver public services, make the use of energy more efficient, educate our children, and build our democracy.

But as fantastic a tool the Internet has become and can be, it still has not reached every one of our citizens and our businesses. Only half of America has broadband access to the Internet, and overall we are falling behind other countries both in how many people have broadband and the quality of that service. According to a recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States fell to a ranking of 15th among 30 developed nations in per capita broadband connections. In 2001 we were fourth and just six months ago we were 12th.

The "digital divide" is actually worse than it was when the term was first coined. At a time when every Fortune 500 company is working to connect its employees, customers, and suppliers, to dynamic 24 hour networks, the average kid in an urban city school still only gets one to two hours with a computer in school. Worse is the fact that the duopoly that we have in this country between the cable and telephone companies has created an artificial scarcity when it comes to Internet access with many parts of the country either not wired to broadband or unable to afford it.

Take a look at South Korea, where Internet connections are 10 times faster than in the U.S. at

about one-fifth of the price. In fact, whole cities in Asia are building massive wireless networks allowing them to become more efficient and reduce the cost of delivering government services. Even Corpus Christi, Texas, is way ahead of the rest of the country. The city's leaders built a public access wireless network they are using for reading utility meters and enhanced police security operations, to name two examples.

Governors and mayors throughout the country are trying to figure out how to spur economic development so their citizens, students, small businesses, can compete in the global economy yet a crucial piece of infrastructure to help them get there hasn't been built. Imagine if our interstate highway system stopped at the Mississippi?

Just like President Eisenhower did with highways, we need a leader who will commit to getting the job done and lead us back to the top position in the distribution of broadband and technology.

It's time we ask our candidates for president what they will do to insure that everyone is fully connected to the Internet and how this public resource can be used to make our country more competitive, more democratic, healthier, better educated, more secure and financially sound. With the help of our friend David Weinberger, we recently published a list of suggested policy goals for the candidates to consider. (See: [www.techpresident.com](http://www.techpresident.com).) Maybe some of them will realize that technology is not just a slice of the pie, it is actually the pan, capable of being a tool for change, innovation, and hope. Hopefully our next president will in fact be the first TechPresident.

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