

Technology for Obama National Support Group

Minutes of the February 13, 2007 Inaugural Meeting, 10-11AM
Held at the FastRoot Wi-Fi Technologies LLC Office Suite
15th Floor, 200 South Wacker Street, Chicago, Illinois

I. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME¹

Edmund Danté Hamilton opened the inaugural meeting by thanking participants for braving the rough weather to contribute their ideas on how to structure a National Technology Platform for Senator Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign. He stated that he was pleased to see so much interest in the initiative, as evidenced by the twenty or so participants who had come by word-of-mouth and the event posting on the Mybarackobama.com website, and the more than 100 more who had expressed interest in future involvement through the website. He explained that the group was organized by Mr. Bruce Montgomery and himself in response to the challenge Senator Obama raised in his Springfield, Illinois campaign launch speech on Saturday, February 11, 2007 to "be the generation that reshapes our economy to compete in the digital age," and comments about technology, education, broadband access and research and development made in the same speech.

Hamilton next introduced key organizers for the group and their interest in technology—the host, FastRoot Wi-Fi Technologies LLC, a long-time supporter of statewide technology initiatives and sharer of its office space with the community-based Illinois Technology Association; Mr. Montgomery, a leading technology consultant for the state government of Illinois; and himself, a web developer and broadband publisher specializing in the non-profit and small business sectors. Mr. Montgomery is a member of Mayor Daley's Chicago Technology Initiative and has known Senator Obama for a number of years. He has served as the technology advisor for several State Congressmen, including Congressmen Rush and Davis. For the past seven years, he has run a weekly "Technology Access TV" television program on CA-TV.

II. MISSION AND GOALS

Mr. Montgomery led the next segment of the meeting by clarifying his goals for the initiative and asking participants to briefly introduce themselves and their interests in joining. He stated that Senator Obama's comments on Saturday raise many issues at the community level and present an opportunity to organize and suggest solutions that will help steer the future national debate in a positive direction. His aim in organizing the National Support Group specifically is to (1) get everyone together to place their ideas on the table concerning technology solutions in answer to Senator Obama's national call to action on Saturday, and (2) involve others from the technology community who can further develop the issues and deepen the discussion. From Mr. Montgomery's perspective, Chicago is the natural place to headquarter this effort, as Senator Obama is preeminently from the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois.

The role he envisions for the National Support Group is to help place technology on the front burner of Senator Obama's 2008 Presidential Platform by articulating the issues that face the nation and providing critical thought leadership, position papers, research, and a publicly-available ObamaForTechnology.com website that will help counsel his campaign in the right direction. The group would articulate and embrace solutions not only for the software and information technology industries, but for the whole spectrum of technology, including biotech, nanotech, education, infrastructure, broadband access, intellectual property, research and development, smart homes construction, and mobile wi-fi technology. By including members from a broad range of disciplines and expertise areas, it would represent,

¹ Note: The views of the Obama for Technology National Support Group as expressed in these meeting minutes, by member statements, or on the www.ObamaForTechnology.com public website, or any document or content accessible from said website, reflect neither the views of Senator Barack Obama personally, nor of his Campaign Committee for the 2008 Presidential Election.

at a community level, the concerns and interests facing our nation collectively—in the classroom, in small businesses, before large multinationals, for independent developers of new technology solutions, etc., etc.

III. MEMBER OUTLINE OF TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

At the conclusion of Mr. Montgomery's remarks, members presented the issues that brought them to the group, focusing on the tie-in between Senator Obama's technology comments on Saturday, and their own interests and concerns as citizens and specialists in the IT industry. The issues are summarized by topic below.

A. Net Neutrality & Other Monopolistic Issues

At least three members cited growing concerns about challenges to the neutrality of the Internet if large Internet Service Providers (ISPs) such as AT&T move to crowd out competitors by denying or delaying access to their broadband routes. Under this scenario, a consumer who subscribes to AT&T as their ISP and purchases their Internet video services might be prevented from accessing similar services offered by competitors if AT&T chooses not to honor the customary protocol of allowing that company's traffic on its broadband routes. Search engines such as Google.com would also be affected, as queries for the competitor's service would be unsuccessful or unable to link to actual pages from the AT&T customer's perspective. This has sparked an industry-wide debate on the equality of the Internet, in terms of speed and access to services and information, and the pros and cons of allowing large media companies to move away from the indiscriminant sharing of available broadband space.²

Another member expressed concerns about regional monopolistic practices whereby large media companies prevent consumers in one area from performing the same tasks and accessing the same services as consumers in another. He gave the example of movie downloads in South Korea: citizens there can download an entire new movie in five or so minutes, whereas this is impossible in America—not due to technology limitations, but to monopolistic licensing issues that are getting in the way of real progress and/or consumer wants.

B. Education

Members viewed the education-technology connection from several angles, as highlighted below.

- 1.) **Practical Hands-on Training for Tomorrow's Technologists.** The question of reshaping our economy for the digital age is as much a training issue as it is a matter of providing much-needed IT resources to schools across America. Children must be provided with hands-on practical experiences that place the technology—and the future of the technology—in their hands, thereby demonstrating that there is much to be done beyond the passive consumption of online media entertainment and instant messaging. In addition, the critical skills and knowledge areas that back the digital age—math, science, computer programming, research and development, etc., etc.—will need to be strengthened in public school curriculum to prepare today's youth to compete in tomorrow's hi-tech future.
- 2.) **Better Utilization of Open-Source Internet Solutions for Teachers.** One teacher from the South Side observed that the Internet is not being utilized to its fullest potential for school teachers across America. She suggested that a National Repository of Best Practices for Teachers be created; in this repository, for example,

² For more information about this topic, see the following *Wired* online news article dated 31 May 2006 (<http://www.wired.com/news/technology/internet/0,71012-0.html>) and Wikipedia article (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_neutrality).

a video of the nation's best Social Studies teacher could be posted for downloading on a particular lesson plan—both for the educator to learn and expand his or her teaching skills, and for the students to learn from one of the nation's best educators on that subject. This would be available nationwide and might help to standardize curriculum across regions. Likewise, lesson plans and assignments could be posted in multiple languages—English and Spanish, for example—for those students attending schools in rural areas that do not have a resident ESL program, thus ensuring that the learning content is still accessible to them.

It was also suggested, by another member, that the government take a strong role in developing nationwide open-source solutions for teachers as a cost-saving initiative. The example was given of a \$20 grade recording package used by many schoolteachers; if instead of \$20 per license, the school received an open-source solution from the government for free, that money could be dedicated to important school initiatives rather than the software companies.

- 3.) **Better Capitalization of Wireless Mobile Technologies.** Today's youth are avid consumers of wireless mobile technologies such as cell phones, instant text messaging and iPods. Their use outpaces that of adults and yet the hi-tech tools are often overlooked as potential depositories or conduits of educational content. One member of the group suggested exploring this as part of the National Technology Platform.³
- 4.) **Better Oversight of Computers & Computer Services Contracts to Public Schools to Prevent “Dumping,” “Bid Rigging,” and Other Such Unsavory Practices.** Two members referenced the 2004-2005 E-Rate Scam whereby a nationally-recognized computer manufacturer and others conspired to rig the bidding process for the provision of computers to disadvantaged public schools in San Francisco, resulting in the award of the contracts to pre-selected companies (unfair competition) and the sale of the computers at inflated prices.⁴ It was suggested that perhaps the group look at ways to help schools avoid similar mistakes as part of a National Technology Platform.
- 5.) **Better Funding for Computer Programming Services Departments at Universities and Schools.** A representative from the IT Department at a local public university observed that the school did not get an adequate amount of funding from the national government. This impaired the school's ability to obtain updated computers and software programs, provide training to students, teachers and technicians, and afford broadband services. He stated that the school's broadband services bills from a local telephone provider were so expensive that they could not be paid out of the IT Department's budget and therefore, came out of the school's infrastructure budget, thus hindering plans to build a much-needed new facility. He further noted that because of the training issues, students mostly used the school's computers for entertainment, not educational, purposes, and felt that better funding would help address this by empowering the school to train its students to use their computer time more productively.

C. Research & Development Funds

Members who represented small businesses, independent consulting companies, and area universities cited government funding for increased research and development into hi-tech solutions as a critical component of a National Technology Platform. This

³ One possible direction for this is the delivery of foreign language training through cell phones, as has been done in South Korea for several years now.

⁴ For more on the E-Rate Scam, see the following articles: San Francisco's City Attorney's Office Report (http://www.sfgov.org/site/cityattorney_page.asp?id=33631); Todd Oppenheimer's report for *The Nation*, dated 29 January, 2004 (<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040216/oppenheimer>).

piggybacks on another concern raised by the group, which was the sense that other countries are outpacing the U.S. in technological advancements—e.g., the need to catch up.

D. Broadband Access Issues

At present, big businesses are driving broadband access policy discussions and shifts; however, this is not necessarily in the best interest of individuals and small businesses. There is a need to get outside perspectives on the following issues specifically: (1) FCC spectrum policy; (2) unlicensed wi-fi access; and (3) privacy issues in the digital age.

E. Slash.dot Issues & the Freedom of Information Act

Members suggested that a uniform open-source policy be established for the posting of Freedom of Information Act documents, noting that some government organizations appeared to be subverting the spirit of the law by making the information difficult to access on the Internet. Such a policy would insist that open-source and Word-based documents only be posted. The recent decision by the State of Massachusetts to move to a comprehensive Open-Doc Policy to ensure the easy, unencumbered public access of public information was commended as a potential model for a National Technology Platform policy position.⁵

F. Privacy Issues

Two members listed protection of individual privacy rights as a critical area for focus within the group.

G. Intellectual Property Issues

Most, if not all, of the independent consultants and small business owners within the group raised intellectual property concerns as a major area of focus for an Obama '08 National Technology Platform. They felt that big media companies were deliberately conflating patent, copyright and trademark issues in order to hinder competition from small businesses that might actually offer better, or similar, services. There is a critical need for patent reform in particular since the current system has allowed gross injustices to happen such as Amazon.com's patenting of its "one-click-to-buy" button, a web design solution that is clearly generic and widely available but over which Amazon.com now fights other companies for the exclusive rights to employ. Such practices are rampant across the IT industry and cause many small businesses and consultants to falter as they attempt to roll-out legitimate new solutions, only to have them pushed back off the market by larger companies' claims of patent infringement. For this reason, the members suggested that the National Technology Platform include some provision to help small businesses fight and overcome unfair charges and practices.

H. Further Development of Open Source Solutions as a Workaround to Monopolistic Practices by Large Media Companies. It was suggested by several members that the government take an active role in sponsoring research and development for the creation and promotion of publicly-available, free open-source solutions that will eliminate the need for many expensive software programs such as Microsoft Windows. For example, an average Windows license costs \$100 USD; schools, businesses and private individuals would save \$100 for every free open-source program with the same capabilities that is installed in its place.

I. De-escalation of Protectionist Rhetoric in the IT Industry and within the Democratic Party More Broadly. A member of the group who ran an IT business in India and had many friends and associates who had benefited from the current Bush administration's sponsoring of work visas and technology exchanges with Indian companies, but was

⁵ For more information about the Massachusetts Open-Doc Policy, see the following articles: 12 February 2007 zdnet.com blogspot (<http://blogs.zdnet.com/BTL/?p=1812>).

attracted to Senator Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign, asked if Senator Obama would continue to support similar cooperative initiatives with foreign governments if elected to be President of the United States. While this question could not be addressed by the group, it sparked a general discussion as to how Senator Obama could position himself on this issue and differentiate himself from other Democratic candidates. It was observed by one member of the audience that the Democratic Party seemed to be leaning heavily on the side of protectionism when the reality was that there was much public good, though loss of some jobs, to be gained from the regular exchange of technology solutions and specialists with other countries. Senator Obama's National Technology Platform may be a good area to show he's not taking the route of over-protectionism, thereby distinguishing himself from other candidates.

IV. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Montgomery wrapped up the discussion by thanking participants for sharing their concerns and insights and promising to convey the discussion to Senator Obama's staff. He reiterated that the purpose of the group was to establish a community of interested persons who would act as thought leaders on the subject of technology for Senator Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign, pulling on their own reservoir of experience and articulating the issues through research and position papers that would be both publicly available through the ObamaForTechnology website and shared with the Senator's campaign committee to help steer the national debate on technology. He stated that he felt that the group had made good progress in its first discussion, and invited members to reach out to others within the IT and educational communities who could help broaden and deepen future endeavors. Mr. Hamilton added that members were encouraged to post relevant articles, research pieces and discussion blogs on the group website at MyBarackObama.com—until such time as the ObamaForTechnology website was fully set up.

The meeting was adjourned shortly after 11a.m., with the next one set at the same time and location in two weeks.