



## **Missing: Politicians Who Take Clear Stand On Tech**

By Declan McCullagh

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Net neutrality became one of the hottest political flashpoints in the last year. But in what might seem to be an odd omission, both Republicans and Democrats studiously ignored it this week when touting their technology agendas for 2007.

Also absent from the list of congressional priorities were controversial topics like social network restrictions, Internet surveillance, data retention, spyware, and laws aimed at regulating Google and its competitors when doing business in China.

Net neutrality alone might seem to deserve a prominent mention. eBay Chief Executive Meg Whitman e-mailed the company's users for the first time to rally their support last year, Web luminary Tim Berners-Lee embraced the idea, and it prompted Google co-founder Sergey Brin to trek to Washington to lobby politicians. It even led to street protests around the country.

But neither Net neutrality nor any of those other key topics make an appearance on either the Democrats' or Republicans' so-called high-tech agendas. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, and Sen. Gordon Smith, an Oregon Republican, separately trumpeted the agendas within 24 hours of each other this week.

The Democratic pronouncement is called The Innovation Agenda (PDF), and it pledges to recreate the kind of "unprecedented technological advances" that put a man on the moon. The Republican counterpart is The Policy Agenda (PDF), and it promises that technology will strengthen America's economy and "improve quality of life."

Pelosi's press release on Tuesday, which announced that votes would be held on some related bills this week, predicted her plan will "create a sustained financial and intellectual investment in innovation." Smith's press release a day later said that the Republicans' ideas would expand the "economy by eliminating barriers to trade and innovation."

Both documents are relatively brief and overflow with references to the technology equivalent of Mom, baseball and apple pie: innocuous statements touting the benefits of broadband (who knew?) and improving science and math education (who wouldn't?). Also making the bipartisan cut are calls to reform the patent system, which is about as controversial in tech circles as stating that Google enjoyed a successful IPO.

“The tech agenda is driven by corporate interests and lobbying, and I’m speaking of Republicans and Democrats alike,” said Jim Harper, a former congressional aide who’s now a policy director at the free-market Cato Institute. “It’s not driven by the interests of individual Internet users.”

Harper said an overall laissez-faire approach would be more beneficial. “More often than not, congressional involvement in technology policy leads to harmful outcomes rather than good ones,” he said.

Because the dueling agendas are intended to demonstrate politicians’ tech-savviness, creative omissions are necessary. It probably doesn’t help that Sen. Ted Stevens, best known for his “series of tubes” metaphor, is a member of the Senate Republican High Tech Task Force. Or that Pelosi received an “F” on a 2006 technology voter guide.

That means it’s important to ignore bipartisan enthusiasm for bills like the Deleting Online Predators Act, which cleared the House in a remarkable 410-15 vote last summer. The bill, which would restrict access to a wide swath of sites from MySpace.com to Amazon.com, was bitterly opposed by technology companies and eventually died in the Senate. It’s also useful to forget the recent support for mandatory labeling for risqué Web sites, complete with criminal penalties for errant Webmasters, which a Senate committee approved last year. (The bill died for unrelated reasons.) Another proposal supported by companies like Sun Microsystems would have amended the Digital Millennium Copyright Act but it, too, encountered a bipartisan wall of opposition.

Technology lobbyists, who regularly downplay partisan differences, dismissed the vagueness of the policy proposals from the two major parties in interviews this week. “Overall, the level of detail that’s on the piece of paper they sent out is probably less important to us than the overall commitment to addressing these issues,” said Kara Calvert, director of government relations for the Information Technology Industry Council. “So what they write in their bullet points probably is less important.”

Calvert added: “They’ve all said we have a commitment to things like broadband and immigration and R&D.” Jim Hock, a spokesman for Technet, said: “These issues are overwhelmingly bipartisan, we’ve been working with members on both sides, and we’re excited with the progress thus far.”

To be sure, there are some differences in the two major parties’ respective documents. Where the Democrats talk about affordable high-speed Internet access, they propose more government spending, more regulation by the Federal Communications Commission, and having government officials create a “national broadband access map.” The Republicans, on the other hand, say the goal of speedy Net-links can be achieved by “minimizing regulation on innovative new Internet services.”

Similarly, the Democrats propose creating a new federal agency to spend more money (presumably through higher taxes, though the document doesn’t say) on “high-risk, highreward energy technologies.” The Republicans prefer to “encourage the private

sector to develop” them. In general, the Republicans are more specific. Technet and the Information Technology Association of America have asked for reforms to Sarbanes-Oxley, ongoing support of free trade, more H-1B visas, and limits to Internet taxation--all of which appear in the GOP document but not the Democratic one. (In fact, Senate Democrats voted down a plan this week to limit Sarbanes-Oxley’s impact on smaller companies.)

Still, if the Democrats can specify details like creating a national broadband access map, why can’t they pledge to support new Net neutrality laws? House Speaker Pelosi has said they’re necessary, and a House vote last summer fell largely along party lines.

That leads to a second explanation for the vagueness: Being vague means being able to change your mind. If Pelosi were serious about introducing Net neutrality legislation, the argument goes, she could have done so months ago. But that would antagonize telephone and broadband providers, which have some of the most influential lobbyists and some of the most generous political action committees. (Pelosi’s office did not respond to a request for comment on Thursday.)

“If they did embrace technology, they might be asked a question about it, and they’d be in trouble,” quipped Lew Rockwell, a political analyst and commentator who is the president of the libertarian Ludwig von Mises Institute.

Rockwell added: “I think that has something to do with the nature of government. Government is very low-tech. When it makes use of technology, it doesn’t know what it’s doing... They don’t really know anything about these issues.”

CNET News.com’s Anne Broache contributed to this report