

Obama promises Net neutrality and e-democracy

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US presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama have released their technology policies, differing on whether "Net neutrality" rules should be imposed on telecommunications companies and on the breadth of their aspirations for the American public.

Mr Obama said Net neutrality rules – which would prevent telcos giving priority to certain types of Internet traffic over others – were needed to ensure freedom of expression on the Internet and to prevent "a two-tier Internet in which websites with the best relationships with network providers can get the fastest access to consumers".

The debate over Net neutrality has international implications, pitting the economic interests of telcos against those of media companies and other website owners. Concerns over telcos' behaviour came to the fore this year, when Comcast, a large Internet service provider, was accused of "throttling" peer-to-peer traffic, such as video sharing services, on its network.

Mr McCain said he did not believe in "prescriptive regulation like 'Net neutrality'" but rather believed "an open marketplace with a variety of consumer choices is the best deterrent against unfair practices".

Mr Obama's policy, which was better received by Internet commentators in the US, was the more adventurous – flagging new experiments in e-democracy and promising to open-up government decision-making using "blogs, wikis and social networking tools".

The public would have an opportunity to read and comment online on all non-emergency legislation for five days before it was signed into law and Cabinet officials would have to hold "periodic online town hall meetings" to answer questions and discuss issues.

Both candidates fretted over the state of broadband in the US. "As a country, we have ensured that every American has access to a telephone service and electricity, regardless of economic status, and Obama will do likewise for broadband Internet access," Mr Obama said.

He promised to change the Universal Service Fund – the US equivalent of the Telecommunications Service Obligation – to support "affordable broadband, with a specific focus on reaching previously unserved communities".

Mr McCain also promised to "pursue high-speed Internet access for all Americans", but by sponsoring a "Community Broadband Bill" that would let local governments build infrastructure in competition to private providers. He said he would also support government-backed loans or low-interest bonds to help provide services in "under-served areas where the market is not working".

While Mr Obama opened his technology policy statement with an inspirational quote: "Let us be the generation that reshapes our economy to compete in the digital age", Mr McCain's policy document only moved off taxation on page two.

Both candidates backed a reform of the patent system and talked up the importance of science education, Mr McCain noting that the number of computer science graduates had halved during the past eight years.

One Kiwi company that could stand to gain from an Obama presidency is Auckland's Orion Health, which develops software to help healthcare providers manage clinical records. It has just committed \$9.6 million to a software development project aimed at achieving its goal of becoming, within the next few years, New Zealand's first software company with revenues of more than \$100 million.

Mr Obama promised to spend US\$50 billion over five years "to move the US healthcare system to broad adoption of standards-based electronic health information, including electronic health records" – music to Orion's ears.



Reuters

NET IDEAS: US presidential candidates Barack Obama, pictured, and John McCain have released their technology policies, differing on whether "Net neutrality" rules should be imposed on telecommunications companies and on the breadth of their aspirations for the American public.