



## **The Tech Policy Summit**

By Tim Bjarin

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Last week I attended the second annual Tech Policy Summit, which is held in the heart of Hollywood just steps away from the Kodak Theatre and Grauman's Chinese Theatre. The Summit has become quite an important event. It's where Silicon Valley and Washington policy wonks get together to discuss the role of government in tech-related issues and try to find common ground when it comes to subjects like copyrights, visas for foreign workers, the digital divide, Internet expansion and adoptions, and others.

Interestingly, the tech world was hardly on Washington's radar for decades, and the tech companies liked it that way. Back in the mid-1980s, I had the dubious distinction of being asked by some folks at the U.S. Department of Defense for an introduction to the "right" people at Intel. They wanted to discuss whether or not 80386-processor-based PCs should be sold to what they considered hostile countries. It was quite clear that in those days, Washington did not have a direct line to the tech world. In fact, they viewed the tech industry as a bunch of nerds, and except for the question of transferring advanced technology to places like Russia and China, they pretty much left us alone.

Then came the Internet. And PCs began crossing over into areas of telecom, wireless networks, and the like. All of a sudden, tech companies were not only on Washington's radar but, in some cases, were forced to become players in trying to shape government policy where tech issues were concerned.

In the mid-1990s, Silicon Valley developed its own lobbying group called TechNet ([www.technet.org](http://www.technet.org)). TechNet is a bipartisan, political network of CEOs and senior executives created to promote the growth of technology and, in turn, the economy. Organization members and our nation's policy makers join hands to help sustain and advance America's global leadership in innovation. TechNet has become a key force within the industry for dealing with national and state legislators on tech matters. The group has been involved in various issues, including H-1B visas, a call for stronger focus on science and technology in education, and the use of technology to drive innovation and job creation.

The aforementioned Tech Policy Summit included some important and fascinating government policy makers, such as FCC Commissioner Robert M. McDowell; Congressman Howard Berman, who is chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on

Courts, the Internet, and Intellectual Property; California Public Utilities Commissioner Rachelle Wong; Under Secretary of Commerce for Intellectual Property Jon Dudas, who is also director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office; and U.S. Ambassador Richard Russell, associate director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy. There were also key industry leaders, such as Verizon CTO Dick Lynch, Qualcomm CEO Paul E. Jacobs, and BitTorrent president and cofounder Ashwin Navin.

Overall, the summit offered informative sessions on a wide range of topics, including "Accelerating Innovation," "Growing the Market for Technology," "The Future of Wide-Area Public Broadband," and "Protecting Kids in the Digital Age," to name a few. There were two sessions, however, that I found particularly interesting.—Next: The Making of a Tech President >

The first, called "The Making of a Tech President," featured a somewhat contentious panel. Alec Ross, executive vice president of external affairs at One Economy Corp., started the session by telling the audience that "a tremendous amount of ground in global tech competition has been lost over the last eight years."

In describing his company's efforts to bridge the digital divide, Ross said he asked Washington officials to consider the idea of implementing broadband in public housing. He was told that high-speed Internet is considered entertainment and not essential. "It's really a simple fix. All the President has to do is to sign an order," Ross said. "But there was literally no room for this simple idea at the White House." While Ross is backing Obama, he said the remaining candidates understand and "get it" more than the current President.

Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum and of techPresident, said he thinks that the U.S. tech sector has gone down under President Bush: "We need a complete reboot of our entire system of governance or we're going to be like farmers and ranchers who looked at the steam engine and said it would be good for hauling horses to the fields."

The Bush bashing continued until Tony Perkins, founder and editor in chief of AlwaysOn, asked, "Didn't broadband penetration go up over the last eight years?" Perkins hinted that his fellow panelists were being too cynical, noting that Bush supports opening U.S. immigration policy to include more H-1B visas, a pet cause of Silicon Valley.

Some of the panelists suggested that McCain and Bush should be chastised for pursuing an open immigration policy. But, according to Perkins, "Job creation is the key, and the best president for tech will get out of the way of a free, unencumbered, and unregulated market." Perkins added that "whoever is president needs to understand how jobs are created; they have to be committed to a flat, even playing field."

With the elections still months away, understanding the candidates' positions on tech-related issues is important. You can be sure that Silicon Valley execs are going to be prodding the candidates they back hard on this issue.

The other session that really caught my attention was entitled "Using Social Media as a Policy Tool." One of the speakers that really stood out was Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation ([www.sunlightfoundation.com](http://www.sunlightfoundation.com)). According to the foundation's Web site, its mission is to "offer transparency grants for organizations that are using new 'Web 2.0' technology to further the organization's mission of making information about Congress and the federal government more accessible to the American people. Our goal is to support groups and individuals who are going beyond the traditional, single-subject public disclosure database, and who are interested in creating cutting-edge tools to enable the media, bloggers, and citizens to sift, share, and combine government information in ways that are useful for them." These are the folks behind Congresspedia ([www.congresspedia.com](http://www.congresspedia.com)), a wiki/encyclopedia on Congress that people can edit.

One of the things Ms. Miller wants members of Congress to publish on their Web sites is more information about what they do. However, current franking laws—the rules that members of Congress abide by to qualify for free postage mailings to their constituents—also govern what they can put on their Web sites. Miller called this congressional policy "crazy" and stated that it needed to be changed for members of Congress to be more open about their activities.

In fact, a great deal of this session—and even parts of the others—focused on using things like social media to track the legislative activities of government leaders and officials as a means for holding them accountable to their constituents. Another session suggested that social media could be used more aggressively for tracking lobbyists, pork-barrel earmarks, and, in fact, all the activities of our congressional leaders. Clearly, the issue of broader accountability was a theme echoed across the two-day event.