

AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



Progressive Voter Guide to Media and Technology

Voter Guide to Media and Technology

This election, voters have a clear choice from the two major presidential candidates on whether the Internet should remain free and available to all, whether huge corporations should be allowed to own even greater concentrations of outlets, the extent to which you have a right to privacy online, and whether government will use technological developments readily available to make government more open.

Although media issues are not part of the daily election debate between John McCain and Barack Obama, the candidates have detailed backgrounds and positions on everything from media consolidation to privacy in the Internet age. As Amanda Terkel writes for Salon¹, as chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, McCain has had the chance to “choose whether to be pro-competition or pro-big business. In most instances, he chose the latter route, by opposing increased Internet access for schools and libraries, backing large mergers to benefit the telecom industry and supporting a virtual system of haves and have-nots.” There are some notable exceptions for McCain, however: McCain did vote against the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which required the FCC to regularly review its media ownership rules, and he has supported a series of broadband initiatives. But largely, McCain believes, like many conservatives, in the “magic of the marketplace,” not the government, to cure social ills. The Obama philosophy on media and tech issues is clearly that he believes in the need for serious government oversight, from the establishment of a chief technological officer in the White House to protecting control of the Internet from the advance of corporate greed.

1 http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/08/13/john_mccain_technology/print.html

1. NET NEUTRALITY: KEEPING THE INTERNET OPEN

Telecoms and tech corporations have stealthily positioned themselves to seize control of the Internet from the public primarily through deceptive multimillion-dollar lobbying and PR campaigns that attempt to reshape public understanding of how the Internet works, who owns it, and what role the private sector plays in keeping it open.

Solution: In order to ensure that broadband networks are open to all producers and consumers of Internet content on fair and equal terms, Washington needs a series of legal safeguards to protect from market encroachment on public space.

Obama's position: From Obama's campaign Web site: "Barack Obama strongly supports the principle of network neutrality to preserve the benefits of open competition on the Internet."

McCain's position: From McCain's technology platform: "John McCain does not believe in prescriptive regulation like 'net-neutrality,' but rather he believes that an open marketplace with a variety of consumer choices is the best deterrent against unfair practices." This position, Free Press argues, would allow for "blocking, speeding up or slowing down Web content based on its source, ownership or destination." "When you control the pipe, you should be able to get profit from your investment," McCain told *All Things Digital* writer Kara Swisher.

Learn more: CommonCause.org¹, ThinkProgress.org², SaveTheInternet.com³, Obama's Technology Plan⁴, McCain's Plan⁵

2. BROADBAND

America lags badly behind other nations in terms of broadband penetration, affordability, community access and number of Internet providers from which people have to choose. Although this issue has been addressed in a series of laws passed in Washington this decade, it still lacks proper regulation.

Solution: From the Center for Digital Democracy: "Many municipalities have found it efficient to build publicly owned broadband networks to serve their communities. In many cases, these networks started out as control systems for local power grids, but have repurposed their excess bandwidth to offer cable television and high-speed Internet service to the public. Such municipal networks can provide much-needed competition for the major telephone and cable companies that have become infamous for their poor customer service and failure to upgrade their technology."

1 <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=1421497>

2 <http://thinkprogress.org/2008/08/15/mccain-net-neutrality/>

3 <http://www.savetheinternet.com/=faq>

4 <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/technology/>

5 <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/CBCD3A48-4B0E-4864-8BE1-D04561C132EA.htm>

Obama's position: In a 2007 Silicon Valley meeting with tech industry leaders, Obama is summarized as saying that “subsidies for phone carriers should be given only to those offering both regular phone service and Internet broadband to rural areas. To date, carriers offering merely phone service have been able to claim subsidies from the so-called Universal Service Fund, giving them little incentive to roll out broadband.” Obama’s campaign offers a plan pushing for America to “lead the world in broadband penetration and Internet access. As a country, we have ensured that every American has access to telephone service and electricity, regardless of economic status, and Obama will do likewise for broadband Internet access.” His campaign argues it will “establish a multiyear plan with a date certain to change the Universal Service Fund program from one that supports voice communications to one that supports affordable broadband, with a specific focus on reaching previously unserved communities,” and says it wants to ensure that “every school, library and hospital (can) take full advantage of the broadband connectivity.”

McCain's position: Salon author Amanda Terkel writes, “When McCain took over his second tenure of the Senate Commerce Committee, the United States ranked fourth in broadband penetration. ... In 2007, two years after he had given up that position, the United States had dropped to 15th in the world.” Terkel also reports that “McCain was one of the most vocal opponents of Education Rate (E-Rate), a program designed to provide discounts to schools and libraries to connect to the Internet.” But in 2005, McCain successfully helped pass the Community Broadband Act, which Free Press praised for providing “local governments, schools, nonprofits and disadvantaged communities with faster, cheaper and more reliable broadband service. With millions still lacking the economic benefits of high-speed Internet, this legislation could not be more critical.” John McCain’s campaign touts his support for a “Community Broadband Act,” which claims it would help people “invest in their own future by building out infrastructure to provide high-speed Internet services.”

Learn more: DemocraticMedia.org⁶, Obama’s Technology Plan⁷, www.benton.org⁸

3. MEDIA CONSOLIDATION

Six major companies control most of the media in the United States. Since 1995, the number of companies owning commercial TV stations declined by 40 percent. Three media giants own all of the cable news networks; Comcast and AOL Time Warner serve 40 percent of cable households, according to Common Cause. The issue of concentrated ownership expands to radio and newspapers as well. Diversity of opinion and competition between news organizations are fundamental requirements of a well-informed public in a given area.

6 http://www.democraticmedia.org/issues/digital_destiny/best_practices

7 http://www.barackobama.com/2007/11/14/obama_shares_his_tech_plan_tod.php

8 <http://www.benton.org/node/7864>

Solution: First and foremost, the incoming president can lower regulatory and economic barriers for existing media outlets and create incentives for new media ventures -- for example, the postal rates that magazines are now forced to pay to subscribers could be lowered. In addition, decades of deregulation on media ownership rules are ripe for massive reform. Perverse tax incentives enjoyed by media conglomerates should be cut.

Obama's position: In 2008, Obama co-sponsored a successful bill that threw out the FCC's rule allowing a newspaper in any of the nation's top 20 media markets to own a TV or radio station in the same market. He gave an interview on the subject in 2007, saying, "The ill effects of consolidation today and continued consolidation are well documented -- less diversity of opinion, less local news coverage, replication of the same stories across multiple outlets, and others. We can do better." His campaign speaks to the general principle that diversity of media ownership is "critical to the public interest." From Obama's campaign Web site: "Unfortunately, over the past several years, the Federal Communications Commission has promoted the concept of consolidation over diversity. An Obama presidency will promote greater coverage of local issues and better responsiveness by broadcasters to the communities they serve."

McCain's position: McCain has a mixed record on this issue. McCain voted against the Telecommunications Act of 1996, but in 2003, he voted against a resolution condemning the Federal Communications Commission's massive relaxation of its media ownership rules. As Tim Wu writes, "McCain and his advisers put their faith in the private sector's ability to provide a full and healthy information environment, and regard most government intervention as counterproductive." McCain has not articulated a specific position on this vital issue during the election.

Learn more: CommonCause.org⁹, Obama vs. McCain on Media Policy¹⁰, Broadcastingcable.com¹¹

4. WIRELESS SPECTRUM

As a recent Brookings Institution report explains¹², "The public 'airwaves,' or the radio spectrum, are a tremendously valuable asset that remains partially untapped by entrepreneurs and users. Over the past 25 years, the explosion of the cellular industry and wireless technology more generally has placed a premium on access to spectrum. Nonetheless, our spectrum policy has failed to facilitate an optimal and efficient use of this important resource -- meaning that spectrum is often left unused at the same time that there is a great demand for access to it."

9 <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQlwG&b=2127045>

10 <http://www.slate.com/id/2199569/>

11 <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA6480419.html>

12 http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/07_wireless_weiser.aspx

Solution: From the Free Press: “U.S. Internet users face a broadband duopoly where nearly 99 percent of all residential connections are provided by the cable or phone companies. The next president needs to give incentives for competitors to challenge them or else America’s Internet future will look a lot like its past: slower Internet speeds for prices that are far higher than what people pay in Europe and Asia.”

Obama’s position: Using populist rhetoric, Barack Obama’s campaign says it will “confront the entrenched Washington interests that have kept our public airwaves from being maximized for the public’s interest.” His campaign position paper says, “Obama will demand a review of existing uses of our wireless spectrum. He will create incentives for smarter, more efficient and more imaginative use of government spectrum and new standards for commercial spectrum to bring affordable broadband to rural communities that previously lacked it. He will ensure that we have enough spectrum for police, ambulances and other public safety purposes.”

McCain’s position: John McCain is not immodest about claiming a huge role in the development of wireless spectrum: “Under my guiding hand, Congress developed a wireless spectrum policy that spurred the rapid rise of mobile phones and wi-fi technology that enables Americans to surf the Web while sitting at a coffee shop, airport lounge or public park.” His campaign promises to “encourage research and development in technologies that could bring affordable alternatives to Americans, especially in rural areas,” and McCain has said he would push for setting aside spectrum for law enforcement and public safety.

Learn more: McCain Campaign Web site¹³, Obama Campaign Web site¹⁴, Barack Obama’s Technology Policy Position Paper¹⁵, www.sciencedebate2008.com¹⁶

5. CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA

The National Institute on Media and the Family estimates that “by the time a child is eighteen years old, he or she will witness on television (with average viewing time) 200,000 acts of violence including 40,000 murders. Studies have suggested that children who are exposed to media violence are more likely to be more aggressive and violent than children who have not seen violent media in later life.

Solution: Provide more public funding for high-quality alternatives on public television.

Obama’s position: In a major 2005 Senate speech on children and the media, Barack Obama spoke to the concern that “with all the time our children are spending in front of the television, with all the choices they have to see whatever they want whenever they want, the content of their viewing is not enriching their minds, but numbing them; not broadening

13 <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/CBCD3A48-4B0E-4864-8BE1-D04561C132EA.htm>

14 http://www.barackobama.com/2007/11/14/obama_shares_his_tech_plan_tod.php

15 <http://blog.tmcnet.com/regulations/tech-politics-2008/barack-obamas-technology-policy-position-paper-part-3-of-5.asp>

16 <http://www.sciencedebate2008.com/www/index.php?id=44>

intellectual curiosity or appreciation for the arts, but trivializing the important and desensitizing us to the tragic.” To address this issue, Obama’s campaign promises to “give parents the tools and information they need to control what their children see on television and the Internet in ways fully consistent with the First Amendment. An Obama administration will encourage the creation of Public Media 2.0., the next generation of public media that will create the Sesame Street of the Digital Age and other video and interactive programming that educates and informs.”

McCain’s position: In 1999, John McCain issued “An Appeal to Hollywood” calling for a “new social compact” that reminds parents of their serious responsibilities in determining the entertainment media in which their children involve themselves. “Our homes are being flooded by a tide of media violence,” he said. As a senator, McCain also introduced the Media Violence Labeling Act aimed at implementing a universal rating system for television, movies, music, video games and the Internet. He also “co-authored the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) governing the online collection of information about children younger than 13 years of age and giving parents greater control. COPPA became law in 2000.”

Learn more: Obama’s Technology Plan¹⁷, ThinkProgress.org¹⁸, OntheIssues.org¹⁹, Senate.gov²⁰

6. FREE AIRTIME FOR POLITICAL CANDIDATES

A key area where money and politics collide in the media is the issue of public access to the airwaves for political candidates. The lack of free media access for political candidates forces them to spend much of their time fundraising to buy paid media spots, which in turn makes the candidates indebted to the interests of their political donors. More than 70 percent of Americans support the idea of free airtime for candidates. Democracies in less developed countries such as El Salvador, Turkey and Ghana have adopted free airtime.

Solution: Push Congress to create legislation that ensures free airtime for candidates at all levels of government, drawing upon a commission’s recommendations and review of best practices established in other countries.

Obama’s position: In response to a campaign questionnaire from February 2008, Obama wrote that he would sign and support legislation that would (1) provide qualifying congressional candidates and party committees with vouchers with which to pay for some broadcast advertising time; (2) impose a modest user fee on broadcasters’ gross advertising revenues to underwrite the voucher program; and (3) allow qualified candidates and parties to purchase non-preemptible advertising time at rates below stations’ lowest unit charges during the final weeks of primary and general election campaigns.

17 <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/technology/>

18 <http://thinkprogress.org/2008/02/27/mccain-children/>

19 http://www.ontheissues.org/Social/John_McCain_Families_+_Children.htm

20 http://obama.senate.gov/speech/051109-remarks_of_us_s/

McCain's position: In 2002, McCain said, "I believe that one of the most beneficial ways for broadcasters to meet their public interest obligation is through the provision of free airtime to candidates. Not only will this serve viewers, voters and candidates, it will serve to help restore the integrity of the democratic process. ... The free airtime proposal has the ambitious though vital goal of improving our democracy. ... The free airtime bill would help de-emphasize large contributions by reducing candidates' dependence on raising money to reach voters. Clearly, our democracy will be improved when a candidate's success is less dependent on money and more dependent on the value of his or her ideas."

Learn more: CommonCause.org²¹, SaveAccess.org²², Politicsol.com²³

7. MEDIA OWNERSHIP DIVERSITY

People of color comprise 33 percent of the U.S. population, but they only account for 3 percent of commercial broadcast television station owners and 8 percent of local radio owners. Women comprise 51 percent of the entire U.S. population, but they only own approximately 5 percent of all full-power broadcast stations. A white-male-dominated media won't deliver a fair representation of interests and subjects that relate directly to women and minorities.

Solution: A president should have many powers in the FCC to push for greater diversity in media ownership, including on transparency of current media stakeholders, along with local grants and incentives as part of a federal program, which would have to be passed by Congress.

Obama's position: From Obama's campaign Web site: "Barack Obama believes that providing opportunities for minority-owned businesses to own radio and television stations is fundamental to creating the diverse media environment that federal law requires and the country deserves and demands. As president, he will encourage diversity in the ownership of broadcast media, promote the development of new media outlets for expression of diverse viewpoints, and clarify the public interest obligations of broadcasters who occupy the nation's spectrum." Obama co-sponsored the Media Ownership Act of 2007 to "promote transparency in the adoption of new media ownership rules by the Federal Communications Commission, and to establish an independent panel to make recommendations on how to increase the representation of women and minorities in broadcast media ownership."

McCain's position: From a fact sheet from McCain's campaign: "When Commissioner Michael Powell was appointed to the FCC in 1998, he spoke with Senator McCain, then Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, about establishing a program that would encourage minority ownership for communications companies, but prevent the rampant abuse that

21 <http://www.commoncause.org/atf/cf/%7Bfb3c17e2-cdd1-4df6-92be-bd4429893665%7D/OBAMA-MCCAIN%20ON%20MEDIA.PDF>

22 <http://saveaccess.org/node/338>

23 http://www.alternet.org/admin/story/preview/media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/content/Questionnaire_Midwest_Democracy_Network_Obama_02192008.pdf%3C/a%3E,%20%3Ca%20href=

was found in a previous program that the Congress voted to terminate in 1995. McCain and Powell began working in 1999 with the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters, the Minority Media and Telecommunication Council, and other minority groups.” McCain was the primary author of the Telecommunications Ownership Diversification Act of 2003, which gave a tax incentive to help promote greater diversity of ownership in the media.

Learn more: Obama’s Technology Plan²⁴, The McCain Counter-Offensive²⁵, ReclaimTheMedia.org²⁶, CommonCause.org²⁷

8. TECHNOLOGY AT THE CENTER OF GOVERNMENT

The Bush administration’s highest-ranking technology officer is a cybersecurity czar whose duties don’t extend into the numerous economic and political questions associated with recent decades of technological change. As a result, literally hundreds of key technological issues that deserve to be addressed directly by the president are poorly governed and ignored.

Solution: Create a high-level presidential staff position and bureaucracy to coordinate these issues.

Obama’s position: Obama’s campaign promises to “appoint the nation’s first Chief Technology Officer (CTO) to ensure that our government and all its agencies have the right infrastructure, policies and services for the 21st century. The CTO will have a specific focus on transparency, by ensuring that each arm of the federal government makes its records open and accessible as the E-Government Act requires.” A report on Obama’s plan highlighted that Obama would “ensure government officials hold open meetings, broadcast live webcasts of those meetings, and use blogging software, wikis and open comments to communicate policies with Americans,” according to the plan.

McCain’s position: In response to a questionnaire for Science Debate 2008, McCain’s campaign promises to “Appoint a Science and Technology Advisor within the White House to ensure that the role of science and technology in policies is fully recognized and leveraged, that policies will be based upon sound science, and that the scientific integrity of federal research is restored.”

Learn more: Barack Obama to Name a “Chief Technology Officer,”²⁸ ScienceDebate2008²⁹

24 <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/technology/>

25 <http://corner.nationalreview.com/post/?q=NTc5M2RmYWJjNjY4ZmNlY2l3YmM2ZmJhNWfkYWFIzDI>

26 http://reclaimthemedial.org/legislation_and_regulation/the_national_crisis_in_minority%3D5484

27 <http://www.commoncause.org/atf/cf/%7Bfb3c17e2-cdd1-4df6-92be-bd4429893665%7D/OBAMA-MCCAIN%20ON%20MEDIA.PDF>

28 <http://venturebeat.com/2007/11/13/exclusive-barack-obama-to-name-a-chief-technology-officer/>

29 <http://www.sciencedebate2008.com/www/index.php?id=44>

9. DIGITAL TV TRANSITION

On Feb. 17, 2009, all full-power broadcast television stations in the United States will stop broadcasting on analog airwaves and begin broadcasting only in digital. Unfortunately, in the transition, many groups who rely on broadcast television will be cut out of the process without government help, including elderly and low-income families.

Solution: From the Free Press: “There’s great promise in the vast portions of the broadcast TV spectrum going unused because of outdated regulations. In some places, as much as 70 percent of the public airwaves lie fallow. But these ‘white spaces’ could be used to bring high-speed Internet service to millions by opening up the spectrum for ‘unlicensed’ use by a new generation of devices.”

Obama’s position: Obama voted against the McCain Amendment to move up the DTV changeover by one year. Obama was asked: “If you become president, you will take office only weeks before the biggest technological change in TV history. How will you prepare for that, and will you put someone on your team in charge of keeping tabs on the progress of that transition?” Obama responded, “The transition will continue to require public-private cooperation and targeted outreach to seniors and lower-income communities. We have made coupons available for converter boxes, and we need to ensure that the neediest individuals are receiving them. ... Of particular concern are low-income, elderly, disabled, non-English-speaking and minority populations. Many of these groups tend to rely more on over-the-air television and, as a result, are more likely to be impacted by the digital transition. I am committed to working with the Senate and House Commerce Committees and the appropriate agencies to ensure that this transition happens without significant disruption and inconvenience.”

McCain’s position: According to Common Cause’s candidate guide on media issues, “Senator McCain offered an amendment in 2005 to move up the Digital Transition date to April 2008. The amendment was defeated, but did help to move the transition date up to February 2009 from April 2009.” McCain and his campaign have not addressed how this will affect lower-income households.

Learn more: DemocraticMedia.org¹, CommonCause.org², TVPredictions.com³, BroadcastingCable.com⁴

10. PRIVACY IN THE INTERNET AGE

Almost every week there are stories of thousands of private consumer information profiles being

1 <http://democraticmedia.org/taxonomy/term/12>

2 <http://www.commoncause.org/atf/cf/%7Bfb3c17e2-cdd1-4df6-92be-bd4429893665%7D/OBAMA-MCCAIN%20ON%20MEDIA.PDF>

3 <http://www.tvpredictions.com/obama061708.htm>

4 <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA6570325.html>

stolen, made public, lost or made accessible to criminals. The Internet remains largely unregulated, and the policies governing it are underdeveloped.

Solution: There is no single reform a president can initiate to protect the privacy of citizens on the Internet or across the technological spectrum. What is needed is a comprehensive strategy to protect private information involving law, regulation and technology.

Obama's position: His campaign argues that "dramatic increases in computing power, decreases in storage costs and huge flows of information that characterize the digital age bring enormous benefits, but also create risk of abuse. Obama will also work to provide robust protection against misuses of particularly sensitive kinds of information, such as e-health records and location data that do not fit comfortably within sector-specific privacy laws." He also pledges to "increase the Federal Trade Commission's enforcement budget and will step up international cooperation to track down cyber-criminals so that U.S. law enforcement can better prevent and punish spam, spyware, telemarketing and phishing intrusions into the privacy of American homes and computers."

McCain's position: McCain's campaign issued a press release titled "Ensuring the Personal Security and Privacy of Americans in the Digital Age," laden with bland, generic assurances such as "Ensuring the personal security of Americans in digital age is vital to the continued growth and advancement of our economy and society." No clear plan has been offered. In 2000, McCain authored the Consumer Internet Privacy Enhancement Act "requiring Internet Web sites to post privacy policies regarding the collection and use of consumers' information." McCain's campaign claims that the "bill and subsequent hearings on online privacy spurred the top commercial Web sites to post consumer privacy policies."

Learn more: McCain Campaign Web site⁵, Obama campaign Web site⁶

5 <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/PressReleases/975d6a22-2c5f-43b4-a083-1616bc2c4bc3.htm>

6 <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/technology/>