USC report examines candidates' technology policies

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As the 2008 presidential election enters its final month, researchers at the Annenberg Research Network on International Communication (ARNIC) have found some sharp differences – and surprising similarities – in the two major candidates' positions on technology policy.

In areas such as media ownership and consolidation, open access to Internet content and intellectual property rights, ARNIC's report provides guidance for voters concerned about the future development of communication technology and the media.

Titled *Campaign 2008: USC Annenberg Technology and Media Policy Watch*, the report examines each candidate's party platform and public record to gain an understanding of their positions on the issues.

The project was directed by Ph.D. student Russell Newman and communication professor Jonathan Taplin, and is available online at http://arnic.info/policywatch.php.

"Voters should have access to the best contextualized knowledge available as they make their decision about who will govern their country for the next four years," Dean Ernest J. Wilson III said. "The Annenberg School for Communication is committed to fostering knowledge in the public interest, especially as it intersects with our specialty domains of media, journalism and communications. We view this as a start to help the public navigate the sometimes murky waters of net neutrality, media

concentration and other topics."

In general, the researchers found that Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and the Democratic Party believe that government can play a strong role in guiding the development of America's communication environment, while Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and his Republican colleagues rely more on the ability of the competitive marketplace to meet the public's desires.

-- In the area of **media ownership and consolidation**, Obama believes that prescriptive regulation encouraging diversity of ownership and enhanced enforcement of anti-trust laws will lead to increased competition in the media environment. In contrast, researchers found that McCain's public record and statements reveal some contradictions on the issue. While he has warned that "consolidation without competition can hurt consumers," he has encouraged looser restrictions on ownership. McCain also believes that competition from emerging media models – the Internet and cable and satellite TV – serves as a corrective against monopolistic tendencies of the "traditional" media, while Obama raises concerns about the decline in local service seen when local monopolies in traditional media are allowed to proliferate.

-- On the hot-button issue of **network neutrality**, which addresses network providers' ability to charge different rates to their users based on the amount of network traffic the users' generate, both candidates again stand in contrast. According to the report, "McCain opposes mandated network neutrality," and it quotes his position that the free market is the "best deterrent against unfair practices." The report authors also quote McCain as saying that legislation designed to remove rate structures based on network usage could "actually harm the openness of the Internet." Obama, on the other hand, sees declining network neutrality as a side effect of the limited competition available among broadband service providers – if consumers are unable to choose among

competing providers, they may be unable to find the network openness they desire. Obama believes network neutrality must be ensured through legislation designed to eliminate tiered rate structures and encourage open access. While the report's authors found both candidates' positions vague on details, they saw a sharp contrast between Obama's call for open access and McCain's belief that the market is "competitive enough."

-- Some area of agreement was found on the topic of **copyright, patents and access to knowledge**, although the report criticized both campaigns for a lack of leadership in addressing controversial issues of intellectual property. Both candidates strongly believe that copyright protections must be a key part of international business agreements, and both campaigns decry the influx of pirated creative material from countries with looser intellectual property laws than our own. Both McCain and Obama believe the U.S. patent system needs increased transparency in order to reduce the cost of bringing innovative products to market. Costly lawsuits and patent disputes are seen by both candidates as impediments to American innovation, the report found.

ARNIC researchers found surprising silence from both political parties on what the report called an "era-defining" set of issues, including application of the fair use doctrine and the role of the public domain in the creation of digital culture. With Web sites like Wikipedia and YouTube revealing a vibrant community of content creators building on each other's work, the report criticized both candidates for failing to recognize the importance of these emerging issues in the information economy. "Neither McCain nor Obama seem willing at this stage to provide the visionary leadership that is needed to bring U.S. copyright and patent policy up to speed with existing technologies," the report concluded. Both campaigns have been approached for additional input, and researchers hope these concerns will be addressed.

Faculty advisor Taplin saw the report as an extension of USC Annenberg's leadership in communication law and policy analysis through ARNIC and other research organizations. "ARNIC was founded to allow students and professors to collaborate on important issues of communications policy," Taplin said. "This work comes from our belief that technology policy could be the key to America's economic recovery."

Newman said communication and technology policy is central to the United States' democracy.

"The next president, with his power of appointment to the Federal Communications Commission and other agencies which bear on our media, will wield tremendous influence over its trajectory at a time of incredibly rapid and formative change," Newman said. "Will control of vital information resources be permitted to consolidate further into fewer and larger hands? How will we expand access to broadband communication technologies? Will control over what we access and create aboard broadband networks remain decentralized, or will dominant providers be permitted to favor certain content or to accumulate information on our activities for sale to the highest bidder?

"The candidates this year have strikingly different answers to these questions. This project is an effort to provide information on these important differences."

Source: University of Southern California