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Open Source America's Operating System
"It's Not Just A Good Idea—It's The Law!"

January 20, 2011

Honorable Eric Cantor, Majority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
303 Canon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Leader Cantor:

One of the very first acts and perhaps the most enduring legacy of Newt Gingrich when he became speaker was to launch the Thomas system, giving the public access to the status of bills before the Congress using the Internet. Coincidentally, I spent the first part of 1995 hooking up audio from the floors of the House and Senate to the Internet in some of the first production demonstrations of webcasting.

Today, as the new House of Representatives has taken some dramatic steps to make video from congressional hearings more readily available to those of us who live outside the beltway, I believe there is a tremendous opportunity to give the venerable Thomas system its first face lift in 16 years.

There is a long-term effort to modernize Thomas, including substantial contributions from the Law Library of Congress and outside consultants such as the Legal Information Institute at the Cornell Law School. However, in parallel with the long-term efforts, there are some short-term steps Congress could take that would have some dramatic results:

- A bulk access facility should be provided for Thomas so non-profit and for-profit outside users of this data can get the whole database at once and then retrieve periodic updates to the database. Even if the U.S. Congress were the best designers in the world, we know that one size never fits all and it is essential that we encourage others to repurpose this data and adapt to new, unforseen uses.

- In addition to bulk access to the core Thomas data of bills and their status, bulk access should be provided to important corollary data, including the U.S. Code, the Annotated Constitution, the Congressional Record, and the Statutes at Large.

- With the Federal Register, we found that bulk data led to all sorts of innovation "in the cloud" by all sorts of people. To encourage others to innovate, the Congress could host a developer day, inviting open source developers from organizations such as GovTrack.US, Google, GovPulse.US, and the Sunlight Foundation. A 1-day Congressional Developer Day would be an opportunity for leadership to hear from some of the best programmers in the world and impress them with the opportunities to help make information coming out of our Congress more useful for all.

- The process of a long-term revision to Thomas should bring in more stakeholders. Groups such as the Sunlight Foundation might be invited to send a participant to the regular meetings on the subject. In addition, I believe it would be important for leadership to also have some eyes and ears at the table to make sure the long-term plans meet the needs of the House of Representatives.

Access to bulk data, both for the core Thomas system and for corollary databases, would have a huge and immediate effect. Hosting a developer day and making sure stakeholders are part of the long-term development will help keep the next-generation system in tune with the needs of the Congress and of the public.

I would be more than happy to provide any advice or assistance as you study topics such as Thomas and the future of video from congressional hearings. Please do not hesitate to let me know how I can be of service.

Sincerely yours,

Carl Malamud
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