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Open Source America's Operating System

"It's Not Just A Good Idea—It's The Law!"

May 31, 2011

Honorable Darrell Issa
U.S. House of Representatives
2347 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Issa:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on June 15 to discuss our Congressional Video Pilot. Your staff, including Seamus Kraft, Rob Borden, and Linda Good, have been a real pleasure to work with over the last 6 months. I also really appreciate all the help we've received from Todd Redlin and Pat Hirsch from the House Broadcast Studio.

There are four items I was hoping we could touch on in our meeting:

- The current status of the house.resource.org pilot with your committee.
- Unprocessed archives that are ready to release.
- A method we've developed using COTS hardware and open source software that we can use to start capturing all hearings to disk.
- The longer-term status of this project, in particular the goal of making all public hearings of the People's House available on the Internet.

Our pilot project has been a great success. The system was up and running on January 5, and now has over 1,200 video files. In addition to your archive provided by HBS and C-SPAN, we have 100 videos from the 112th Congress for your committee. Most of those current hearings have closed captions, a first for any Congressional committee.

Joining House Oversight, I'm pleased to report that Congressman Markey provided the full archive for the Select Committee on Energy Independence he chaired and we've also uploaded 100 hearings from the Rules Committee. C-SPAN, the Internet Archive, and YouTube are all loading these hearings into their systems for viewing. We've also upgraded house.resource.org to a dedicated 30-tbyte system in a central co-location facility, with a second copy of all the data on another server for backup.

We are now preparing a substantial upgrade of the system. The House Broadcasting Studio furnished us with 3,029 hearings for all committees which we have on disk and we are expecting another 1,000 or so from them. In addition, we have 457 hearings we purchased from C-SPAN that are ready to deploy. I believe we will be able to make our milestone of having 5,000 congressional hearings on-line by the end of the year.

One of the issues we've faced in enlisting additional committees in our trial is that recording hearings is an improvised, hit-or-miss proposition. Each committee does it differently, many of them use contractors to record only low-resolution files. You are lucky that Seamus Kraft is so technically adept, but most committees are not so lucky.

Using Commercial Off-the-Shelf (COTS) Hardware and open source software, we've built a system that is able to translate 12 channels of cable into 12 broadcast-quality Internet feeds on a gigabit Ethernet network. This network is a stand-alone island, meaning that it does not need to be connected to the House computer network. The system is about the size of a dorm-room refrigerator and all it needs is power and a feed from your cable system. The system was constructed with 12 channels, but can easily be doubled to record all 24 channels of the House Cable System.

My hope is to brief you on this "12-channel Tivo" and, if you approve, to return in July to meet with House Information Systems, committee staff, and others as appropriate to secure permission to install this in your committee offices early this fall as a pilot program.

Finally, I was hoping we could briefly discuss the long-term goals of this pilot project. As you know, the goal of our non-profit is to turn this task back over to the Congress, our milestone is to put ourselves out of business. There are two issues, both of which you might be able to accomplish using a House Resolution:

- It would bring joy to my heart to hear the U.S. House of Representatives declare that if a public hearing is held, video from that hearing should be released on the Internet because today, public means on-line. You shouldn't have to live inside the beltway to see what Congress is doing.
- One issue I've run into since 1993 when I first starting working with the Congress is the issue of making gifts to Congress. I'd very much like to turn over a set of disk drives with your full archive on it so this resource could be available to staff as an internal resource. Likewise, the system we've built for you for real-time recording is a "one-off" and it would make the most sense to simply donate it to the House.

Both of these goals could be accomplished with a House Resolution, though I'm certainly open to any other mechanisms that accomplish the same goals.

Sincerely yours,

Carl Malamud
Public.Resource.Org