



## Will 'Cloud Computing' Work In White House?

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ANDREA SEABROOK, host: SEABROOK: The economic crisis is a big focus of the new Obama administration, but other parts of the transition team are working on less headline-grabbing details like picking a new computer system for the White House. Some tech industry titans are already weighing in on this decision. Google and Microsoft are both pushing the White House to adopt a kind of network configuration called cloud computing. Cloud computing? Well, it's not as ethereal as it sounds, says NPR's resident tech guru, Andy Carvin. Think of it this way: before, if you wanted to type up say, your resume, you'd use the word processing program you have installed on your computer, but now?

ANDY CARVIN: Now, there are tools out there to make it possible for you to connect to web pages that do the word processing for you. So, for example, Google. Google has its Google docs tools, so if you wanted to create a spreadsheet or any type of text document you would simply go to a web page that has all the functionalities of a word processor, but because it's taking place on the Internet, you can access it from anywhere, and you can get other people accessing it as well.

SEABROOK: In other words, there's nothing different than I'm doing. I'm still typing my resume, but instead of my resume being saved on the computer under my desk, it's being saved somewhere out there in the clouds, some place I don't even know off.

CARVIN: Yeah, it's exactly that's it. It's the cloud.

SEABROOK: So we're already cloud computing?

CARVIN: Absolutely. That's the thing that's so hilarious about all this is cloud computing. The Internet is cloud computing.

SEABROOK: Now if the White House is going to use this kind of computing, the next question has to be - is it secure?

Mr. KEVIN JACKSON (Government Contractor and Computer Security Expert): One aspect of cloud computing is actually knowing where information is.

SEABROOK: This is government contractor and computer security expert, Kevin Jackson.

Mr. JACKSON: If you don't know where the information is, how can you prove that it's being protected?

SEABROOK: Right, so it seems to make sense to me, if you have a computer, and you have to protect what's in it, that you just secure that computer really, really well.  
(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. JACKSON: Right. Absolutely.

SEABROOK: With a cloud, what do you do?

Mr. JACKSON: Right. One of the aspects of it is actually proving that information has not been changed by a bad actor.

SEABROOK: It seems like levels of access would be another question.

Mr. JACKSON: Access control.

SEABROOK: Right.

Mr. JACKSON: Managing who can access it, when they can access it.

SEABROOK: And it's not just a question of who can get a hold of sensitive government information, but whether the government can get a hold of your sensitive information. Then again, Jackson says in some ways, cloud computing is more secure.

Mr. JACKSON: If you think about it, let's say all your information is on a sheet of paper. If you take that sheet of paper and encrypt it, and put it in one location, that's typically how things have been done in the past, but in the cloud, if you take that sheet of paper, encrypt it, then tear it up into four or five pieces, and then put those pieces in five different locations around the world, now even if someone got one of those pieces, they wouldn't have all your information.

SEABROOK: Are you saying that cloud computing could actually be safer?

Mr. JACKSON: Yes, in a lot of ways it can be safer, because there's no physical location for someone to attack. In fact, if you look at Amazon or Google, a piece of information actually exists in multiple locations around the world, so it would be difficult to even identify where that information is, let alone go after it.

SEABROOK: There are other distinct advantages to cloud computing. It makes collaboration on projects vastly easier, and that's something the government is notoriously bad at. Many people can work on one single document, instead of saving 12 different versions of it on 12 different laptops. Vint Cerf is the scientist known as the Father of the Internet, and he's now at Google. He says there's another advantage.

Mr. VINTON CERF (Vice President, Google): If this administration evolves in the way that it appears to be evolving, it's likely to be very substantial and increasing interest on the part of the public in engaging, and seeing what the administration is doing. So, the cloud is just really a good paradigm for achieving that objective.

SEABROOK: So if all the tech gurus - Vint Cerf, Microsoft's Steve Ballmer, the people at Google, think the White House should use cloud computing, is there really any choice? There is. Up to now, internal White House computer networks have been kept behind heavy firewalls. The new approach would mean a rethinking of all the systems and regulations now in place. And if the transition team isn't even sure if Obama can have a BlackBerry? Switching the entire White House to cloud computing could be more change than they want to take on.

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