

The New Commonplace

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Davos Day 2: OboPay Is One of the Fairest

The attendees of the World Economic Forum chose the startups they like most.



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The snow was falling heavily upon the Swiss resort town of Davos as I trudged down the Promenade, hurrying to attend a session at a grand hotel outside the main Congress Center, titled "Redesigning with Technology Pioneers."

Hosted by Tom Standage, the business affairs editor of *The Economist*, the session was ostensibly meant to address the following: "How can Technology Pioneers help to redesign society, values, and institutions?"

In fact, as Standage readily admitted, "This is a beauty show--except it's not." Standage was joined on stage by Mike Arrington of TechCrunch, Bernard Liautaud, a general partner at Balderton Capital, a venture capital firm, and David Spreng, also a venture capitalist, at Crescendo Ventures. The Forum participants who came to the session were asked to listen to the pitches of the [2010 Technology Pioneers](#) (the 26 startups the Forum believes are the most innovative in the world), and chose the five they liked most. Then, the VCs and Arrington would ask these winning Pioneers searching, useful questions.

In the event, it was hard for the attendees to choose, because the companies were so various. Then, too, the criterion was a difficult one for the investors in the audience to fully grok: they were asked which companies would have the greatest, sustainable, positive impact on society. (Finally, not all the Pioneers were present to pitch their ventures: past winners were roped in to stand in their stead.)

But in the end the companies that particularly struck the attendees were [Aura Biosciences](#), a startup which delivers cancer therapeutics using nano-sized proteinshells; [BioFuelBox](#), which converts waste fats into biodiesel; [Dilithium Networks](#), which helps communications carriers deliver multimedia content over any network to any device; [Nivio](#), which cheaply rents licensed software as a service for PCs, netbooks, or set-top devices; and [Obopay](#), a mobile payment service for people who are, in the jargon of the financial industry, "unbanked" or "underbanked"--usually, poor people in poor countries such as India and Kenya.

Obopay, founded by Carol Realini, particularly struck my imagination, and was enthusiastically explained by Tom Standage when Arrington and others were bemused by the company's service and business. But the opportunity was clear enough, without Standage's endorsement. Obopay offered people who had never had a credit or cheque card the means to send money to relatives, or pay for utilities or food using their phones. Realini had an example: mobile payments have transformed Kenya. Three years ago there was no mobile payment system in Kenya, and only 3 percent of the population had any banking service: today, [through a service set up by Safaricom](#), nearly one quarter of Kenyans bank using their cell phones, and each Kenyan who uses mobile banking uses it more than 21 times a month.

"Half of the world's adults [or 2.5 billion people] have no access to banking," Realini said. Obopay, and companies like it such as [MChek](#), could empower those people, making them more economically productive, and overturn banking. That's the kind of thing I look to technology to achieve.

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