

## *The \$100 Laptop*

A Flawed Plan to “Save the World”

Nicholas Negroponte, head of the Media Laboratory at M.I.T., recently attracted great public attention by outlining the specifications of a laptop computer that would cost about \$100. The laptops would be durable and flexible, moderately fast by today’s standards, with a hand-crank as a back-up power source. Although there is some interest in using the laptops here in the United States—Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney has said he wants to purchase one for every middle- and high-school student in his state—Negroponte chiefly intends to manufacture and distribute these new computers to poor people in underdeveloped countries. The machines, he believes, would help liberate the most impoverished human beings by bringing them into the modern world.

One cannot help but marvel at such technical ingenuity. But like all technical solutions to complicated human

problems, we should be skeptical. Computers, after all, are not stand-alone tools; they depend on a vast technological infrastructure and human expertise that makes them functional and useful. Will computers alone do much good in communities that lack such basic supports? Do poor students in developing countries have much use for spreadsheets? Can the barely literate get much value from word processing programs?

Obviously, computers are a great benefit to free, educated, and leisured peoples. Modern life is almost unimaginable without these marvelous machines, always getting better. But computers are probably of little use to poor, isolated, and desperate peoples. Philanthropic souls in a search of a cause can probably do better.

Then there is the problematic relationship between computers and tyranny. Many poor countries have corrupt, despotic, and lawless gov-

ernments. Perhaps the free exchange of ideas, made possible by Web-connected computers, will create a new generation of high-tech dissidents. In countries with autocratic governments and highly educated populations, this may be the case. And indeed, the idea of the blogger revolutionary or guerrilla journalist speaking truth to power is already firmly embedded in our consciousness. But in tyrannical nations with poorly educated citizens, computers might also become instruments of propaganda and oppression. The machines may come to serve tyranny rather than undermine it.

Of course, the blinkered enthusiasm of Negro Ponte and many others for “salvation by laptop” is the latest symptom of a delusion that afflicts millions: thinking that technology, and computing technology in particular, is the thing most needed to change the world for the better. Some skeptics

have questioned the feasibility of the \$100 price or criticized some of the technical details. But only a few lonely voices have raised more fundamental questions about how the machines will be used—such as this letter to M.I.T.’s *Technology Review*: “I’m Mexican, and I’ve seen which sites Mexican kids surf in cybercafés—and it’s not ones like Project Gutenberg.”

Yet rather than asking hard questions about unyielding poverty in an affluent world, it is far easier to praise “The Laptop That Will Save the World” (as the *New York Times* has called it) and to lionize Negro Ponte as a visionary (as ABC News has done). It is much more fun to speak of “integrated and seamless” educational experiences and “access to all the libraries of the world.” And it is nice to believe that one’s own favorite pastimes—like technological innovation—are what the most needy people most need.