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The Hundred Dollar Man

Technology Review's editor in chief, Jason Pontin, talks with Nicholas Negroponte about the Hundred Dollar Computer.

By Technology Review

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Last month, at *Technology Review*'s Emerging Technologies Conference at MIT, Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of MIT's Media Lab, showed off the designs for a remarkable new computer. Negroponte believes that by eliminating profits, expensive displays, and commercial software, he can build a laptop for less than $100. He hopes that education ministries in poor countries will buy hundreds of millions of the machines and give them to children for free. It's a laudable vision -- but is it really possible? Jason Pontin talked to Negroponte over email.

Jason Pontin: I am a little skeptical about the Hundred Dollar Laptop (HDL), although I applaud the desire to improve opportunities for children in the poor world. Is technology really the main "bottleneck" (as you have said) for education in the poor world?

Nicholas Negroponte: "Bottleneck" may not be the right word. Technology is the only means to educate children in the developing world.

JP: How will poor governments possibly afford one laptop per child? Who will fund them?

NN: There are many models, all being explored, from relief efforts like the UN, to banking like the World Bank and regional banks like the IADB, to cross subsidies like universal access funds, to one-on-one funding where a kid in the United States funds a kid in Nigeria. The full gamut is needed.

JP: When you first began talking about the HDL at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, you emphasized the figure of $100. Now you talk about letting the price "float." Are you abandoning the goal of creating a machine for $100? Has it proved too difficult?

NN: We've not abandoned at all. What we are doing is letting it float down. When we launch, I cannot predict the exact price. It will be at cost . Let's imagine the cost is $134 (which is where we are right now). If I can be assured that the components in quantities of 100 million units will bring it to or below $100 in late 2007, then I am happy to let the first units out at $134. Likewise, we may have a third party develop the same machine for the commercial market and, guess what, spin out $34 of license fee, as an example. Don't take the $34 too seriously.

JP: Why a laptop? Why not a secondhand cheap desktop? Why not a mobile device like a cell phone?

NN: Come on! It cannot be a cell phone because of the reading experience. And secondhand never works: not enough of them, and just loading the software and shipping costs almost $100.

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