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Monday, November 13, 2006

Part I: Philanthropy's New Prototype

The cofounder of MIT's Media Lab, Nicholas Negroponte, wants to make \$100 laptops available to poor children throughout the world. The next few months will be critical in determining whether the One Laptop per Child project succeeds.

By James Surowiecki

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In the decades after the Civil War, libraries were scarce in much of the United States. Many towns had no library at all, and those libraries that did exist were typically small and private, run by clubs or lodges that had scraped together collections of books to lend to their members or, on occasion, to outsiders who paid a fee for borrowing privileges. For the most part, towns did not have library buildings; book collections were housed instead in cheap offices or in unused space in public buildings. Even in bigger cities, it was often difficult to borrow books. Until the very end of the 19th century, Pittsburgh, for instance, had just one private lending library, and it struggled to stay afloat. And few people, if any, took seriously the idea that every town in the country should have a public library where citizens would have free and equal access to books.

Andrew Carnegie changed all that. Carnegie was an embodiment of the American Dream; born poor in Scotland, he had emigrated to the United States and built a fortune in the steel industry, turning himself into one of the country's wealthiest and most powerful businessmen. As Carnegie told it, when he was a young boy, he'd had to work instead of going to school. But a wealthy local man named Colonel Anderson had put together a small library of about 400 books, and every Saturday, Carnegie was allowed to read and borrow some of them. The experience, Carnegie wrote later,















convinced him that there was no more productive way to help children develop than to build public libraries. And so, beginning in the 1880s, he set out to do just that, in towns all across the country.

Strictly speaking, Carnegie began his campaign outside the United States; his first library, built in 1881, was in his hometown of Dunfermline, Scotland. The first library he built in the United States, eight years later, opened in Braddock, PA, where Carnegie Steel had one of its biggest mills. A year later came the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny, PA. The Allegheny library was important because it was the first funded according to the model that Carnegie would follow thereafter: instead of simply paying for and endowing the library, he offered the town a large initial grant on the condition that it agree to pay for the library's operations thereafter. (In what came to be known as the "Carnegie formula," towns generally committed to an annual budget--for maintenance, new books, and so on--that equaled 10 percent of Carnegie's original gift.) These were, in other words, to be genuinely public libraries, dependent not on the largesse of a single person but on communities' willingness to subsidize their own access to knowledge.

That willingness was not always easy to inspire; in some towns it was actually illegal at first to use tax money to pay for libraries. But as more towns accepted Carnegie's deal, and as it became evident that the libraries were generally very popular once they were built, more towns decided that they, too, needed free libraries. By the time he died in 1919, some 30 years after the Allegheny library opened, Carnegie had given away \$350 million of his fortune; he spent more than \$60 million of it to build more than 2,800 libraries, including almost 2,000 in the United States and almost 700 in Great Britain. His donations had so effectively revolutionized public opinion that by the middle of the 20th century, it was the rare American town that dared go without a public library.

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