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Wednesday, November 15, 2006

## Part III: Philanthropy's New Prototype

The One Laptop per Child project wants to spread computer literacy throughout the world. But will it work, and is it the right strategy for closing the digital divide?

By James Surowiecki

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## The Critics

From the start, there have been objections to the \$100 laptop. Many people simply assumed that the project was hopeless, that there was no way to build a functioning laptop at that price and no way to enlist partners with adequate resources. "Let's see, build Xbox 3 for Microsoft or build PCs for charity. Hmm, tough choice there," wrote Doug Mohny of the technology website the Inquirer; Tony Roberts, the CEO of the U.K. charity Computer Aid International, said the entire project was based on a "misunderstanding of the history of technology." Others insisted, and continue to insist, that even if a real machine is produced at the end of all this, it will be little more than a toy. In December 2005, Craig Barrett, the former CEO of Intel, dismissed the product as a "\$100 gadget."

More substantively, and more recently, critics have charged that as a means of bridging the digital divide, the \$100 laptop is simply the wrong technology. The success of the laptop, the argument goes, depends on building an entirely new infrastructure in the developing world, rather than relying on the infrastructure that's already there. In OLPC's early stages, there appeared to be a good chance that Microsoft would supply the laptop's operating system. But around the time that deal fell through--Negroponte decided to keep the software open source--Bill Gates and Craig Mundie, Microsoft's chief research and strategy officer, were proffering an alternative to Negroponte's plan, in the form of an amped-up cellular phone for the developing world. Cell phones--and cell towers--are ubiquitous in the Third World, and they're already somewhat affordable, whereas Internet connectivity is much harder to come by. Most of what can be done on an Internet-connected laptop can also be done on a cell phone, albeit more slowly and less comfortably. Gates and Mundie argue, essentially, that we would be better off using this existing infrastructure to put Net-enabled cellular phones in the hands of kids and parents than trying to build something from scratch. In July, Mundie unveiled a rough prototype of Microsoft's phone, called FonePlus, and suggested that it would eventually allow users to read e-mail, run applications like PocketOffice, and surf the Web. It's also possible that the phone could be hooked up to a TV and a keyboard.

The simplest and strongest argument against the \$100 laptop, though, is that even if it can be built, and even if it will work approximately as well as Negroponte promises it will, it's still a waste of money. In an ideal world with unlimited government budgets, the argument goes, putting a laptop in the hands of every child would be a marvelous and valuable feat. But in the far-from-ideal worlds of developing countries, which generally have limited budgets and pervasive social problems, millions or billions of dollars' worth of computers are a luxury that governments can ill afford. Brazil, for instance, which seems likely to buy a million laptops from OLPC as soon as they become available, has around 45 million school-age children: equipping all of them would cost something like \$6.3 billion. Given the desperate poverty of many Brazilians, are laptops the best use for that kind of money?

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