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Technology
Kevin Maney

Gates sees cellphones as way to help Third World

So I'm sitting with Bill Gates at dinner and he says ...

Actually, I've often wanted to start a barroom conversation that way but feared sounding like Commander McBragg. "Dear chap, did I ever tell you about the time I used a tablet PC to stop a charging rhino just before it gored Bill Gates and ruined our conversation about global philanthropy?" (**More Tech:** [Kevin Maney's blog](#))

Anyway, I really was with Gates at a dinner recently, and I brought up the topic of Nicholas Negroponte's project — One Laptop Per Child. Negroponte, who founded the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, wants to make \$100 laptops for the poor in developing countries. Gates, with as much respect as he ever musters for something he thinks is dumb, said it was a really bad idea. He says it would be more effective to disseminate Internet-enabled cellphones to those regions.

I'd report Gates' exact words, except I wasn't taking notes because we were at a Morton's steakhouse eating pieces of beef the size of car tires.

But last week, the Microsoft chairman repeated his argument at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland — where the United Nations endorsed Negroponte's project.

On the face of it, Gates seems to be taking his position only because that darn \$100 laptop doesn't run on Microsoft's Windows operating system. Negroponte chose a free Linux-based operating system — and then gored Microsoft by saying he picked it not because it's free, but because it's better.

Worse for Microsoft, if tens of millions of Negroponte's Microsoft-free laptops spread through the Third World, that kind of product base would lure developers to create more software for the machines. Major manufacturers such as Sony or Dell might decide to make better, competing supercheap non-Windows laptops.

Soon, people in the USA, Europe or Japan could be buying versions of Negroponte's laptop — maybe ones that cost \$200 and have a few more features but still contain no Microsoft software.

Negroponte never intended to start a Microsoft competitor — he just wanted to help get computers and the Internet to the world's poor. But spin out the tale of the \$100 laptop in a certain way, and you wind up with Negroponte bringing Microsoft to its knees.

So why wouldn't Gates fight back?

Unless that is not what is happening.

Why cellphones?

Five years ago, Gates probably would have been thinking only of Microsoft in any debate about a \$100 laptop. But these days, perhaps he is proposing his ideas for more elevated reasons.

I asked Gates about the \$100 laptop because, up until then, the dinner conversation had been about his philanthropic work in the developing world — which landed him, along with his wife, Melinda, and U2 singer Bono — on the cover of *Time* as Persons of the Year. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has spent \$9.3 billion on health care

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initiatives and other causes in the past six years. Gates has traveled to places such as India and Africa repeatedly. He has proved passionate and knowledgeable about helping the remote, isolated poor.

Cellphones are cheap, use little power and are already made by dozens of companies. A single cell tower could connect a whole town. Cellphones have Web browsers and text messaging and e-mail — and are stable, tested technology. They're spreading quickly in a lot of the developing world.

So, to paraphrase Gates, why start from scratch? Why rely on a product that's never been mass-produced and could have more bugs than a rain forest? If the U.N. and governments of nations such as Egypt and Nigeria want to get technology into poor villagers' hands quickly, why not focus on cellphones?

It's a commendable point.

So here's a challenge to Gates: Do it.

Negroponete has momentum because he has executed on what seemed like an audacious plan. He got big-name backers early on, especially Google, AMD and — as of Tuesday — software company Red Hat. Also on board is Gates' cohort from the *Time* cover, Bono. Negroponete told me a year ago, "This is the first project in my life where I've never had to worry about money."

He started with an improbable concept and now has a prototype. Quanta Computer of Taiwan — a contract manufacturer that makes about one-third of all laptops sold — has signed on to make the \$100 laptops. And, most recently, Negroponete got the U.N.'s support.

Gates says that laptops aren't going to do much for the poor if they can't get on the Internet and that most of the poorest regions don't have Internet connections. But there might be answers to that, too — with Wi-Fi and microwave or satellite connections. Lockheed Martin is working on geostationary blimps that could act as a wireless Internet tower serving a large area.

Negroponete is off and running, while Gates so far is mostly conceptualizing. But I'm willing to give Gates the benefit of the doubt. I want to believe he really wants to solve these big problems — and that his next move will be to dive full-throttle into making his competing cellphone proposition real.

The outcome could only be good — to have two forces like Negroponete and Gates in an arms race to produce technology that could transform the lives of hundreds of millions of the world's poorest people.

Some experts worry that Gates is maneuvering to make sure Negroponete's project gets hung up in industry politics. That would be horrible and counter to Gates' philanthropic ambitions. Here's to hoping he fights this battle in a way worthy of a Person of the Year.

Kevin Maney has covered technology for USA TODAY since 1985. His column appears Wednesdays. [Click here](#) for an index of Technology columns. E-mail him at: kmaney@usatoday.com.

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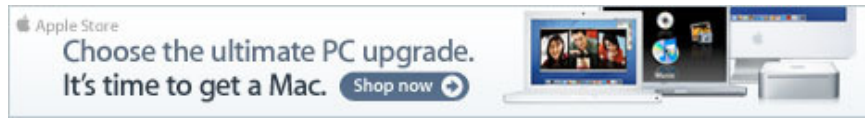
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