

Perspective: Will the \$100 PC fly?

By [Charles Cooper](#)

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Each January, the folks who rule the world congregate on the snowy slopes of Davos, Switzerland, to attend the World Economic Forum and bloviate about the condition of humanity.

So it was this year that one of the hot topics was the debate about how best to close the techno divide between the world's digital haves and have-nots.

As usual, there was no clear, best answer, but that's because there are sharp differences about how to proceed. One body of thought is represented by [Nicholas Negroponte](#), who runs MIT's Media Lab. He wants to build a [\\$100 laptop computer](#). Microsoft disagrees and is throwing its considerable weight behind a concept it calls the cellular PC.

So far, all this can be summed up as a vaporware battle royale. But at least give these folks credit for thinking about tomorrow. You've got to wish them luck. Success would mean tens of millions of people finally enjoying some of the fruits offered by the tech revolution.

We're still far away. Like so much else in techdom, the debate is being driven by the parochial considerations. Barring any breakthrough, any resolution will follow a prolonged knock-down, drag-out. I'll elaborate in a moment, but let's first consider the virtues of the two approaches.

The cellular PC has a couple of big pluses. Mobile phones are cheap, and they are ubiquitous--a fact I'm reminded of each time I fly down to South America (which I do a lot). After clearing customs, I'm invariably jerked out of my half-slumber by the cacophony of cell phone chatter all about the airport. Everyone--and I mean everyone--down there seems to have a cell phone hanging from their belt. And they use them. Boy, do they ever use them. It's simply more convenient to go mobile, and the price is not exorbitant.

There are more than enough obstacles ahead. But every revolutionary idea runs into challenges.

Microsoft has been showing prototypes of its cellular PC since the fall. Senior executives, who acknowledge that the idea is not yet fully baked, envision the unit as an inexpensive alternative to traditional PCs and laptops--especially for the nations of the industrializing world. So far, so good.

But Microsoft's concept also requires using a television for an external display. That would require users to buy adapters and specially configured keyboards. Not a deal breaker, but Microsoft still has not said how much that might cost. Each extra dollar, peso or real weighs into the equation. To be sure, I've seen quite a few TV satellite dishes sprouting from the rooftops of remote favelas in Brazil. But poor people have a hard enough time feeding themselves. If it comes down to buying bread or buying a television, there's no contest.

And then there is the question of how to power the units. Bill Gates has done remarkable work with his [charitable contributions to fight disease](#). As a business tycoon, however, he is feared and, in some cases, loathed.

While there are lots of mobile phones running the Symbian operating system, Gates wants to make a Microsoft operating system the standard. Agree to that, however, and you've laid the groundwork for yet another monopoly. With Microsoft's antitrust history [still a fresh](#)

memory, the cellular PC proposal will be a tough sell.

Negroponete is supposedly close to winning a \$700 million commitment from Thailand, Egypt, Nigeria, India, China, Brazil and Argentina to buy 7 million of the units. The \$100 price tag sounds sweet. But Negroponete has only a mockup to show around. He says [Taiwan's Quanta Computer is going to manufacture the machines](#), which would use processors from Advanced Micro Devices. Don't expect to see working laptops for another year at the earliest.

Another big unanswered question: the cost of the Internet connection. Tack on a big monthly charge, and the \$100 laptop easily doubles or triples in cost. Negroponete has waved away objections, envisioning a system that automatically connects 1,000 units sharing a few terrestrial Internet connections. Sounds great in theory, but I'll believe it when I see it.

So why shouldn't the two sides figure out a way to work together? After all, they have put serious thinking behind their respective projects.

I'm still trying to get an explanation from a senior executive at Microsoft (Earth to Craig Mundie, have you landed yet?). Maybe Negroponete's preference for open-source software convinced Microsoft to go its own way. According to a recent report in The New York Times, Gates was described as "privately bitter" about Negroponete's decision to use Red Hat rather than a Microsoft operating system like Windows CE.

There are more than enough obstacles ahead. But every revolutionary idea runs into challenges. The trick is to find ways to turn the concept into reality. The world's poor could use a break. What a shame if they were left disappointed again because of the demands of business politics and personal ego.

Biography

Charles Cooper is CNET News.com's executive editor of commentary.

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