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Has IT Prophet and Activist Negroponte Put Away His Crystal Ball?

In staking so much on his One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project, it looks as if Nicholas Negroponte, author of "Being Digital", has made a significant life change - from predicting the digital future to actually creating it. That was one of the startling suggestions raised by his controversial keynote presentation and Q&A session before a gathering of the top international press and analysts at NetEvents Global Press Summit in Hong Kong - just a week after the first thousand of the project's laptops rolled off the assembly line in Shanghai.

What could be more worthy - and less controversial - than a project designed to provide millions of simple, low cost, wireless networked laptops to children in developing nations worldwide? Especially when they are purpose-designed for low maintenance and environmental impact, ruggedness and independence from electrical supply? The answers were surprising, for education is a hot political issue, and the long term possibilities of this project could be revolutionary and hard to predict.

"This is not a laptop project, it's an education project" claimed Negroponte, pointing out that many children in developing countries spend no more than 2.5 hours a day at school, while their laptop would be available 24/7. Reactions to Mr Negroponte's project have ranged from enthusiastic acceptance, through grudging and stalling, to outright suspicion - one telco accused him of being a "telecommunications terrorist". China and India, with the most to gain, had surprising difficulty with the project. India more from wanting to do it themselves, and China more because of the underlying Confucian culture of hierarchy and order than from actual government resistance.

He expanded on the challenge presented by millions of open source laptops entering a world dominated by proprietary software giants. Although the machine will run MicroSoft Office for those who really want it, the bundled software is more focused on creativity and communication than on laying down vocational skills for pre-teenagers. He also pointed out that, in the fast moving world of IT, latecomers are often at an advantage - so where might his laptop revolution leave first world countries with their massive legacy of PC investment?

Further questions put to Mr Negroponte from the floor included the "grey market" issue - the inherent risk in any aid project that the donated resources get diverted into corrupt or criminal channels. Mr Negroponte pointed out that there would be no market in these laptops because there would be no commercial sales and the laptops would be software locked until actually in the child's hands. Among other areas of resistance to his scheme he mentioned the financial markets and their fear of price cuts - when he persuaded Motorola to produce their low-cost handset, it pushed the share price down. With plans to ship these laptops by the million, traditional pricing strategies are overturned. Nicholas Negroponte concluded his inspiring keynote session with a few words on the digital futures currently under development at the MIT Media Lab he co-founded in 1985.