

Computing

Cheap Tricks

A \$ 100 laptop for the poor could affect the computer industry .

An interview between a journalist and a business analyst , adapted from The Economist October 1st 2005

We 've recently heard of an idea which sounds as audacious as altruistic : provide a personal laptop computer to every schoolchild , particularly in the poorest parts of the world . Is such a thing possible ?

The first step to making that happen is reducing the price down to \$ 100 . And that is the goal of a group of American techno-gurus led by Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the famous MIT Media Lab . The group is called One Laptop Per child (OLPC) . When Mr Negroponte unveiled the idea at the World Economic Forum in January it seemed wildly ambitious . But, surprisingly , it is starting to become a reality . Mr Negroponte plans to display the first prototype in November at a United Nations summit . Five countries – China, Brazil, Egypt , Thailand and South Africa – have said they will buy over 1 million units each . Production is due to start in late 2006.

How is the group (OLPC) able to create a laptop so inexpensively ?

It is mainly a matter of cleverly combining existing technologies in new ways . The laptop will have a basic processor made by AMD, a flash memory instead of a hard disk, will be powered by batteries or a hand-crank , and will run open-source software . The \$100 laptop also puts all the components behind the screen, not under the keyboard , so there is no need for an expensive hinge . So far, OLPC has got the price down to \$ 130 .

But good news for the world's poor may not be such great news for the world's computer manufacturers . What will be the impact of this project on the computer industry ?

The new machine is not simply of interest in the developing world . On September 22nd, the governor of Massachusetts said the state should purchase one for every secondary-school student , when they become available . Sales to schools are just one way in which the \$100 laptop could change the computer industry more widely . By depressing prices and encouraging the trend for " good-enough computing ", where customers upgrade less often ,it could eventually put pressure on the world's biggest PC –makers .

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