

"IT'S A STRUCTURE PROJECT, NOT AN EDUCATION PROJECT":

The \$100 Laptop and the Creation of Social Structure

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One hundred thousand years ago hunter-gatherers lived in groups of 25 people. Five hundred years ago nation-states came into being. Supra-national entities (the European the United Nations, Mercosur) emerged in the 20th century.

The story of humankind is to a large degree the story of ever-increasing social structure and how humans work together and live together in those social structures. By expanding the number of entities that a human can interact with, technology -- particularly communications technology -- has played a central role in creating social structure.

In January, 2005 Nicholas Negroponte announced a new technology, widely known as the \$100 laptop, which has the potential to radically accelerate the creation of social structure. The laptop sports impressive technical features -- a newfangled display, instant-on capability, and 1km WiFi -- but introducing new technology is not the goal of One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), the organization that is creating and distributing the laptop. The goal, according to the OLPC website, is to "revolutionize how we educate the world's children." Negroponte says, "It's an education project, not a laptop project."

While revolutionizing education is a large and admirable goal, I believe that the OLPC, as the laptop is referred to, will do much more. I believe that the OLPC's greatest promise lies in its ability to support new social structure.

The OLPC's one-kilometer WiFi gives people the ability to talk about the weather, about crops, about guns, and about government with people they have never seen. The OLPC lets people vote and create a newspaper and send email and chat. The OLPC lets people find each other, help each other, support each other, and work with each other. The OLPC is a relationship enabler.

To the extent that the OLPC increases understanding and knowledge it furthers education, but it is a learning tool for everyone, not just children. In promoting itself as just an educational platform for kids, OLPC risks being judged on a very narrow slice of its potential. It risks

failing for stupid reasons and it stupidly fails to reason about the full scope of its application.

Happily, no matter how its creators sell it, the OLPC will become what it is: not just a platform not for education but a platform that supports the creation of *new relationships among human beings* -- relationships that promote learning but also engender political, economic, and social frameworks.

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