



TECH STAR



Nicholas Negroponte: Changing the World through Technology

[By Akbar Ali]

Nicholas Negroponte is a man on a mission. Some might refer to his goal as “impossible idealism” or “tech humanitarianism,” but he isn’t one of them. This accomplished computer scientist and chairman emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab is on his way to fulfilling the promise of his One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) dream. He is quick to point out that this endeavor has little to do with technology; in fact, the project is marketed to potential donors as, *“It’s not a laptop project. It’s an education project.”* Ensuring that every child in the world has a laptop for his or her use is no small feat, but Negroponte firmly believes that with the right intentions of the world’s technology and of its political leaders, the goal is firmly within reach.

Born in 1943, Negroponte grew up on Manhattan’s Upper East Side as the son of a Greek shipping magnate. He studied at MIT for his undergraduate and also his master’s studies in architecture, focusing on what was then the nascent field of computer-aided design. After earning his master’s degree in 1966, he stayed on to join the university faculty, dividing his teaching responsibilities between his alma mater and visiting professorships at Yale, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan.

But teaching wasn’t the only thing which interested Negroponte. He was after innovation, and in 1967 he founded MIT’s Architecture Machine Group, an organization which functioned as a dual lab and policy institute on the subject of human-computer interface. 18 years later, he went on to establish the MIT Media Lab, building it from the ground up into what would become the nation’s premier computer science laboratory.

In the early- and mid-1990s, Negroponte began to establish himself as something of a media darling, becoming the first investor of Wired Magazine, where he contributed a monthly column for the first five years of the publication with excerpts of his best-selling book *Being Digital* (1995), which discussed the converging of digital media,

entertainment, and information. His primary theme throughout much of his writing is the simple mantra: “Move bits, not atoms.”

Having spent almost four decades dedicated to the pursuit of technological advancement and understanding would seem to most to be a worthy career achievement. For Negroponte, however, it has been merely a prelude.

In 2002, he had a life-changing and career-defining realization while visiting Reaksmey, a remote village in Cambodia located four hours from the nearest town. Negroponte and his family had established a school in the village three years earlier, bringing with them not only the love of learning, but the modern trappings of a satellite dish and an electrical generator. And then, in an unassuming gesture of what was about to happen, he gave every child in the village a standard laptop computer. For a village that doesn’t even have running water, these were major introductions. But more than that, it helped fuel a rise in the native children’s desire to learn in a way which not only alleviated the economic burdens of ignorance, but connected them with their peers around the world.

It was nothing short of miraculous. “The first English word of every child in that village was

‘Google’,” Negroponte says. “The village has no electricity, no telephone, no television. And the children take laptops home that are connected by broadband to the Internet.”

Perhaps the most startling effect of the introduction of laptops was the overnight rise in school attendance. Negroponte estimates that attendance among Cambodia’s first-graders rose by a full 50% because the children who were in school receiving the initial laptop donation told the other youngsters that school was “cool.”

Soon, children were taking their laptops home with them and showing their families how to use them. In a village with no electricity, these battery-run laptops often served as the greatest source of light in the home after dusk.

“Talk about a metaphor and a reality simultaneously,” he says. “It just illuminated that household.” And thus the revolutionary idea for One Laptop per Child was born.

Negroponte soon realized that though his ambition was running high, reality wasn’t able to match. A traditional laptop would be too expensive and cumbersome for the average child in the developing world. His solution? Invent a new durable, inexpensive laptop, which he did with the creation of the XO laptop.



TECH STAR

Now children in places as far apart and diverse as Nigeria, Pakistan, and Brazil can partake in the digital revolution, building their own futures through education and raising their nations out of traditional historical narratives buried under widespread illiteracy, violence, and poverty. The best part is that though many of the children receiving laptops can barely read and have never even attended school, virtually no instruction is needed to set them on their way to discovery.

“They get it *instantly*,” he observes. “It takes a 10-year-old child about three minutes.”

But while getting children to comprehend the computer is a relatively easy task, actually getting those computers into their hands and classrooms is a decidedly taller order, and thus, Negroponete has enlisted

the help of several international and federal organizations to ensure that a potential one billion school children around the world receive an XO Laptop. This keeps him on his toes, traveling 330 days out of the year to meet with government officials to convince them to invest in their most underutilized (and frequently ignored) resource.



Whatever assessment one chooses to make of Negroponete, as an altruistic humanitarian or a foolhardy idealist, one cannot doubt the

sincerity of his intentions. With no personal profit to be made from the program, the question of viability naturally arises. Negroponete’s response?

“If I was realistic, I wouldn’t have started this project. So it’s not realistic — but we’ll come close.”

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.