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Will Computers Save the World? On the Temptations of Technology

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In this age of technological marvels, we humans increasingly place our trust in the instruments and promises of technology and technological expertise. Now a movement has been started to bring technology to the underprivileged of the world in the form of $100 laptop computers.

As reported in _The New Atlantis_, the movement is led by <u>Nicholas Negroponte</u>, the visionary former director of the <u>MIT Media Lab</u>. The journal also offers insightful commentary:

One cannot help but marvel at such technical ingenuity. But like all technical solutions to complicated human problems, we should be skeptical. Computers, after all, are not standalone tools; they depend on a vast technological infrastructure and human expertise that makes them functional and useful. Will computers alone do much good in communities that lack such basic supports? Do poor students in developing countries have much use for spreadsheets? Can the barely literate get much value from word processing programs?

Obviously, computers are a great benefit to free, educated, and leisured peoples. Modern life is almost unimaginable without these marvelous machines, always getting better. But computers are probably of little use to poor, isolated, and desperate peoples. Philanthropic souls in a search of a cause can probably do better.

Further:

Of course, the blinkered enthusiasm of Negroponte and many others for "salvation by laptop" is the latest symptom of a delusion that afflicts millions: thinking that technology, and computing technology in particular, is the thing most needed to change the world for the better. Some skeptics have questioned the feasibility of the $100 price or criticized some of the technical details. But only a few lonely voices have raised more fundamental questions about how the machines will be used–such as this letter to M.I.T.'s Technology Review: "I'm Mexican, and I've seen which sites Mexican kids surf in cybercafés–and it's not ones like Project Gutenberg."

Yet rather than asking hard questions about unyielding poverty in an affluent world, it is far easier to praise "The Laptop That Will Save the World" (as the New York Times has called it) and to lionize Negroponte as a visionary (as ABC News has done). It is much more fun to speak of "integrated and seamless" educational experiences and "access to all the libraries of the world." And it is nice to believe that one's own favorite pastimes–like technological innovation–are what the most needy people most need.

Salvation by technology is a seductive ideology that can infect persons on both the political right and the political left. As many moral prophets have warned, the promises of technology are never as uncomplicated as they seem — not as sure as they may appear.