

Intel, OLPC affordable laptop bout only hurts users

Ken Banks, IDG News

Anyone with the remotest interest in ICT for development won't have failed to notice the battle raging at the "bottom of the pyramid", where competing initiatives have been vying for the hearts, minds and dollars of schoolchildren and education ministries the developing world over. This particular battle is being largely fought out by two organisations – Intel and OLPC (One Laptop Per Child) – once partners but now fighting in opposite corners after months of wrangling lead to an acrimonious split earlier this year.

Both companies believe that portable computing is the answer to addressing the digital divide, and both companies are willing to go as far as building low-cost laptops by the million to prove it. OLPC first publicly announced its intentions in January 2005 when Nicholas Negroponte showed a simple non-functioning mock-up of his 'XO' device (also known as the \$100 laptop) at The World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Intel presented a working version of its own 'Eduwise' laptop (also known as the Classmate) at the World Congress on Information Technology in Texas a year and a half later. A few months earlier Kofi Annan famously broke the charging handle of the first iteration of OLPC during a press conference at the World Symposium on the Information Society in Tunis. It wasn't until the end of 2006 that the first OLPC's, albeit in beta and with a re-designed Kofi-proof charging handle, began rolling off the production lines.

High-profile initiatives such as these two were unlikely to live in harmony for long, and sparks finally began to fly in May 2007 when Nicholas Negroponte accused Intel of telling tales, and frustrating and undermining the work of OLPC. Both sides traded words for two months until, in an amazing turn-around they announced that they were to join forces in July. Intel became the latest arrival on the OLPC board, sitting alongside eleven other OLPC partners, a move which signaled that both sides were willing to put their differences behind them and work together. Significantly, however, Intel continued work on its own laptop until OLPC – according to Intel – decided several months later that there was too much of a conflict of interest and demanded they drop the Classmate. For a project which had the personal backing of the Intel Chairman, this was never going to happen. It didn't.

There's no reason why the two initiatives couldn't have lived together, but as is often the case a mixture of economics, politics, competition, opinions, ego and jealousy lead us to where we are today. For some, OLPC doesn't stand a realistic chance against one of the industry's biggest hitters, while for others their earlier decision not to offer a commercial version of the XO hurt them badly, as did their failure to hit their publicised \$100 price tag. To add insult to injury, one of the hottest topics among the XO community right now is whether or not a Windows XP-driven XO would be a good idea or not. For a computing device built proudly on open standards, this is a pretty fundamental question.

What happened between Intel and OLPC is more commonplace than you'd expect. The difference here is that, thanks to an incessant demand for round-by-round updates, and a very active blogging community, things have been largely played out in public. Ironically, if both initiatives were head-to-head in a commercial environment we'd see it as healthy competition.

Darwinian Law would apply, with the better product winning through and the inferior one forced to adapt or die. But this was never really a level-playing field, let alone two commercial outfits vying for market share and acceptable levels of profitability. Unlike Intel, OLPC is a non-profit entity with a single, simple social mission. According to their website:

OLPC is not, at heart, a technology program, nor is the XO a product in any conventional sense of the word. OLPC is a non-profit organization providing a means to an end – an end that sees children in even the most remote regions of the globe being given the opportunity to tap into their own potential, to be exposed to a whole world of ideas, and to contribute to a more productive and saner world community

<http://laptop.org/vision/mission/>

Intel, on the other hand, are clearly a for-profit entity, and a highly successful one at that. However, their “World Ahead Program” – where the Classmate resides – falls under their Education Initiative, which is funded by the Intel Foundation and Intel Corporation. According to their website:

The Intel World Ahead Program aims to enhance lives by accelerating access to uncompromised technology for everyone, everywhere. Focused on developing communities, it integrates and extends our efforts to use technology to help people improve their lives, societies, and economies

<http://www.intel.com/intel/worldahead/index.htm>

Not a million miles apart, are they? Although the two initiatives do have things in common, it's the differences that have sadly emerged dominant. In one corner is OLPC, the new kid on the block, the non-profit organization building a solution on open standards, talking in the hundreds of thousands (minimum orders stand at 250,000 units) and in the other corner we have Intel, the pioneering for-profit company building a solution based on proprietary technologies, talking about orders in the thousands (although they admit the need to sell literally millions of these things if it's to work).

Of course, a child in Nigeria or Uruguay doesn't particularly care where their laptop comes from, what principles were applied in its design or development, or who's right or wrong in the 'battle of the paradigms'. All they want is an education, ideally aided by the occasional brush with computer technology in some shape or form.

Sometimes we just need to remind ourselves of the bigger picture. And it doesn't get much bigger than this, whichever corner you're standing in.

Ken Banks, founder of [kiwanja.net](http://www.kiwanja.net), devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and currently divides his time between Cambridge (UK) and Stanford University in California on a MacArthur Foundation-funded Fellowship. Ken was awarded a Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net