

# Switch it off!

The lights are low, the tension high. The speaker takes the stand and fidgets with a laser pointer. The preamble is a shade too long, the sense of expectation growing with every slide, as the moment approaches and the crucial data are revealed ...

Does that sound like a conference you've attended recently? Perhaps not. Probably the low-level lighting in the auditorium is actually the glow of myriad laptop screens. The sense of expectation is purely the tremulous anticipation of getting a network connection. The odd glance might be thrown in the direction of the speaker and his data, as a web page downloads particularly slowly. The presentation is concluded. Any questions? No, the audience are immersed in their inboxes.



At last, it's the coffee break. Sections of the audience are rooted, mid e-mail. Others who failed to connect in the auditorium rush away to find better wireless reception, or somewhere to recharge failing batteries. The speaker stands alone, nursing his coffee in silence.

An exaggeration, perhaps, but this is not so far from the conference experience of today. The precious opportunity to interact with colleagues and competitors is no longer prized, when everyone is only ever an e-mail away. The temptation to 'keep up with the day job' — although understandable — does seem to have taken over. Conference delegates are often more concerned with what's happening back at the lab than in the meeting hall.

This is not to deny the tremendous benefit to research communities, and the world at large, of the 'go anywhere' communication made possible by the laptop. And a commendable effort to extend this capability throughout the world, to children in particular, is making progress. At the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Tunisia in November 2005, Nicholas Negroponte of MIT Media Laboratory unveiled the prototype US\$100 laptop developed by his group. The laptop runs at 500 MHz, using an open-source operating system and applications, and can be charged using an a.c. adaptor, or a crank handle (although this was inauspiciously snapped off by Kofi Annan at the launch event). The programme to distribute the laptops, due to begin next month, is led by a non-profit spin-off organization, called One Laptop per Child, and will initially target Brazil, Thailand and other countries in the Middle East, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Also on the list is the state of Massachusetts in the USA, whose authorities have committed to equipping every child with a laptop.

The power of this technology, which can function as a computer, electronic book or media player, in the hands of every child would be phenomenal. But those of us to whom it is already second nature to power up a laptop might do well to remember the value of personal interaction. Why not make it your resolution, as the gregorian calendar turns to a new year, to power down and enjoy the company of your colleagues, to free yourself from the distractions of what's happening elsewhere and benefit from the fruit of interaction?

After all, E. M. Forster didn't have broadband in mind when he wrote

*Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon.  
Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted,  
And human love will be seen at its height.  
Live in fragments no longer.  
Only connect...*

— *Howards End*