



Media Lab Asia, Simputer join hands to reach the masses

From Rajesh Parishwad
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The recently launched Media Lab Asia, the world's largest academic research programme aimed at bringing the benefits of emerging technologies to the masses, would develop applications for rural people using "Simputer", developed by scientists from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and industry professionals.

"We have placed an order for 100 simputers for our regional laboratories which have been established at the IIT campuses in Kanpur, Chennai, Delhi and Mumbai. We plan to develop software applications for rural people on the Simputer," said Prof Alex P Pentland, founder director of Media Lab Asia.

Describing the Simputer as "community" product instead of personal hand-held device, he said the regional laboratories would invite engineering students for internship programmes and ask them to develop software applications for simputers.

Prof Pentland who is in Mumbai to participate at the ICT 2002 conference said the regional laboratories had started working on projects in different areas of healthcare, wealth creation and building environment for children to learn among other things.

"We have started in a small way. We are not yet completely ready. We are in the process of finding the best people, researchers and scientists. And some NRIs who want to return India are joining us," he said, adding that the Media Labs Asia would soon have a chief executive officer within next couple of months.

The Media Asia Lab was started by Massachusetts Institute of Technology's renowned Media Laboratory and Indian Government in participation with technical universities.

On the research work of the Lab, Prof Pentland said it would lay emphasis on projects that touch all sections of society from villages to cities, from government officials to local agriculturists, from athletes to disabled.

He classified the research into four broad areas - World Computer that enables multi-lingual programming and web access; Bits for All, which would explore different new and cost-effective methods of connecting every person on earth; Tomorrow's tools, a world of pervasive digital intelligence and Digital village, envisioning sustainable village through culturally appropriate use of new technologies.

Prof Pentland predicted, "In the next 5-6 years, the innovations developed for rural people would have far greater impact than those developed for the rich people."

However, he clarified that it was difficult to forecast what kinds of devices that would emerge.

Noting that India had world class assembly line for hardware, Prof Pentland said the country should focus on developing new hardware designs if it wanted to be a global leader. "There are many companies working on different projects but they don't adhere to common standards like in the US. A precompetitive industrial consortia should be established in this connection."

Asked on the scale of funding from industries, Prof Pentland said there was tremendous enthusiasm from industry representatives but the Lab was not ready to accept the grants until they did groundwork and delivered some results.

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