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from THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Low-cost 'people's computers' target developing nations to get poor on-line

By Steven Chase STEVEN CHASE
TECHNOLOGY REPORTER
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High-tech whizzes in developing countries are cobbling together bare-bones "people's computers" -- dubbed "Volkscouters" in Brazil -- to offer the poor a bridge to the Internet Age -- a market that major PC makers have overlooked.

"Multinationals don't think they can make money off products for what is the bottom of the economic pyramid," said Viswanathan Vinay, a professor in Bangalore, India, who helped build one of the machines. "[But] we believe there are commercially viable models."

In Brazil, the "Computador Popular," including monitor, has an estimated price tag of \$250 (U.S.).

It was built by academics at the behest of the government, which is anxious to help low-income Brazilians span the digital divide separating them from the wealth of information on the Web.

"They basically asked 'How low can you go?' " Sergio Vale Aguiar Campos, a professor at southwestern Brazil's Federal University of Minas Gerais, said of his government's request.

In India, academics and businessmen have developed the "Simputer," a pocket computer that reads information aloud in

local languages to help even illiterate users tap the Internet. It will cost about \$200 and runs on triple-A batteries widely sold in India.

One of the chief goals in both countries is to get more people on-line. Only about 5 per cent of Brazilians currently have access to the Internet. In India the rate is about 1 per cent, although urban centres have more concentrated user bases. By comparison, about 60 per cent of Canadians regularly use the Net.

But one of the biggest barriers to personal computer ownership and Internet access in developing countries is cost. Even no-frills PCs with a monitor cost about \$1,000. But the minimum wage in Brazil earns a consumer \$90 a month and the median monthly income in India is as low as \$30 in rural areas.

Both the Volkscomputer and the Simputer are marvels of efficiency and cost savings. They save licensing fees by using free, "open-source" Linux as the computer operating system software instead of **Microsoft Corp.'s** Windows.

The handheld Simputer packs powerful processing power, a touch-sensitive screen, a modem, text-to-speech capabilities and a removable memory card slot into a device slightly bigger than today's pocket PC. The low price tag reflects the fact it was developed free of charge by Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science, a move that saved development costs including labour that might have run as much as \$30-million in the United States.

The Brazilian desktop is a no-frills appliance whose sole purpose will be to connect to the Internet. It lacks a floppy disk drive and a hard drive normally used for data storage -- though users can add their own if they choose. Its computer chip and modem are dated by the latest standards but will suffice for the job at hand.

"You can still do a lot of useful things with a machine that others wouldn't think of as worthy of their time," Mr. Campos said.

The Brazilian government is planning to underwrite the proliferation of the "Computador Popular" by lending low-income citizens funds to buy the machines -- loans they can repay the state at about \$15 a month. It's screening proposals from manufacturers to build the machines and will introduce incentives to kick-start production.

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Commercial licences are being negotiated for the Simputer and the first units for sale in India are expected within four to six months, said Vinay Deshpande, a software businessman who belongs to the non-profit Simputer Trust that has underwritten development of the prototype machine and software.

Simputer backers envisage neighbours banding together to buy the machines for communal use. "We are quite used to sharing here," Mr. Deshpande said. Individual users' personal data can be held on removable memory cards that they can insert when sending e-mail or checking Internet sites.

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