

# Bailing on Books:

## Generation Y and the New User-Generated Culture



Those little cell-phone wielding, XBox playing, instant-messaging, multi-tasking, tech-binging bandits we like to call Generation Y are almost all grown up. But are they ready to become the next stewards of the information age?

Hardly.

“After my homework, I’m going to settle down with a good book.”

Imagine the tears of joy that would sprout from a Gen X parent’s eyes if their teenager actually uttered these words. It is an unfortunate fact that Generation Y has developed an unhealthy disdain for the written word. These days kids are more into the sparkly bling-bling in the latest music videos or an iPod slideshow of their hilariously drunk friends, or first-person

shooters or bored.com. The more reading involved, the more the fun factor goes down.

It is, however, misleading to suggest kids are not reading at all – yet it’s not the kind of reading you would use to, say, get through Tolstoy. Gen Y has become very adept at scanning. They scan for information in advertisements, in magazines, on web sites and so on. In fact, to aid in the scanning process, everything on the internet these days has been “tagged” and categorized, often erroneously. Incidentally, ubiquitous tagging has resulted in some bizarre behaviour such as scannable résumés so stuffed with meaningless keywords that it’s a wonder anyone competent is getting hired at all.

Frenetic scanners miss out on a deeper engagement with the written word. The nuances of language, the subtle play of

words, the deeper meaning which lies just below the surface of the text is lost in the impatient act of scanning. It’s not just kids who are bailing out on books. Most of us find reading to be a luxury in today’s get-to-the-point-already world. Yet, to luxuriate in the prose of a master wordsmith is not only extremely pleasurable, but is also really good for you. Why? Because you get to make a connection with somebody cleverer than you are. Extraordinary ideas come from extraordinary minds. We can learn so much from those who have mastered the astonishing act of successfully translating pure thought into mere symbols. Yes, it is true kids – reading makes you smarter.

If reading the words of smart people makes you smarter, what about so called user-generated content? Does Youtube really have an edge over Shakespeare when it comes to entertainment? Well, the wisdom of the masses has always seemed suspect to me. Just because millions of people eat McDonalds, for example, doesn’t make it nutritional and delicious. It is unfathomable why people would ingest such revolting fare. In the same way, the entertainment value of the content on Youtube is utterly baffling to anyone over twenty-five. This cannibalistic consumption of culture is pointless and humiliating. There is nobody to set any standards -

no extraordinary mind to inspire the rest of us dolts to reach for more. How can we discriminate between the good and bad, or between truth and error without direction? It is precisely this inability to analyze, to be critical, to read nuance and to assess validity that caused millions to think lonelygirl15 was just some kid pouring out her woes into a camera (albeit a kid with unbelievable video production skills). And despite being a complete fake, millions still tune in to watch this actress of a “social experiment” (read: viral marketing) pretend to be real person.

With seemingly meaningless content rife on the internet, Generation Y has spawned what can only be termed a new user-generated culture. The older generation finds this culture threatening because it can’t be controlled – despite attempts to do so. Myspace was banned at so many schools, not because of lurking sexual predators or even because it is a porn star who has the most “friends”. It was banned because kids were making fun of their teachers. Come on now. Should we really get our knickers in a twist just because Myspace was appropriated for anti-establishment tomfoolery?

The dark side of user-generated culture has nothing to do with childish “slandering” (which any parent of teenage kids puts up with every day anyway). The problem with a culture of unmitigated sharing amongst peers is that it invariably becomes a culture of thievery. There’s no stopping it. For every Napster

that’s shut down, twenty more spring up to replace it. I know what you’re thinking and I agree with you. Who cares if Jay-Z makes a million less this month? He doesn’t look poor on TV – just look at all that gold around his neck. Nobody feels sorry for multi-million dollar movie companies either just because a few kids watch a grainy download of “Stupid white chicks”. Now imagine those same kids cut and pasted an essay you wrote off the internet and handed it in as homework.

The smile has just left your face for a reason. Now it’s personal.

Everybody knows writers are poor, why steal from them? Well, in this new user-generated culture words have become cheap. Not only do kids balk at reading words, they don’t care who wrote them either. They don’t care about artistry, about the blood and sweat of the craft or about aesthetics. They’re just finding a quick and easy solution to a thorny problem. And who is to blame? Well, just look at the examples we set as adults. You don’t have to look far to see that we love quick and dirty solutions. Perhaps the new user generated culture is not so new after all, only a reflection of a world hooked on a fix-it-quick ideology.

By Antoine Giraud.

