

By Jake Pearce, Marketing and Innovation specialist – 3 December 2008

Meet Generation C; The Story Continues

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EVERYONE'S A CREATIVE IN WEBLAND

(Continued from our previous BRRandNew newsletter #10).

I was taught at school that the European Renaissance was the result of man rediscovering himself after years of slumming it in the Dark Ages. The revolution in arts and science was literally a rebirth of inner, and especially Italian, creativity. But when I read about it now, I'm told the cause was more prosaic: peace, trade and communication opened Europe to a host of new influences, especially from the Middle East. "Trade revolutionised taste in Europe", writes historian Jerry Brotton.

Are we entering a similar point in history? Could we be witnessing an explosion in creativity and culture, thanks to the new digital age? I'll nail my colours to the mast. I don't believe there's any more creativity innate in the MP3 generation than anyone else. I don't believe the C stands for creativity. Yet we may be seeing the same conditions which gave rise to the Renaissance where trade and peace led to a flowering of creative endeavour.

True, most of that original expression is not much better than home videos and angsty teenage scribbles. Ant Timpson is the first to admit the popularity of the competition has not necessarily led to an increase in quality.

But it has led to an increase in output and, crucially, an environment that values and rewards creative endeavour.

Other people have said as much. Richard Florida's 'creative class' – or what the founders of Idealog magazine have called 'commercial creatives' – is a fast-growing and important part of the working population. Gen C, however, is different. I don't believe that we're all artists, publishers and filmmakers now, at least not in a professional sense. The hardcore of the creative economy is made up of individuals who have turned their creative output into a fulltime career. They're professionally inquisitive, original, tireless and determined. They're quite a different sort of person from the after-dinner blogger. But my point is this: not since the Renaissance have the conditions been as favourable for amateurs to aspire to or actually join the creative class. It's never been a better time to be a wannabe.

Take two examples. At one end of the Gen C spectrum is MySpace, the website purchased by Rupert Murdoch for US\$580 million. Murdoch is no media slouch and what he has bought is really a fantastic media model. Speaking recently to – yes, this is for real – the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, Murdoch predicted he might be among the last of a dying breed. "Power is moving away from the old elite in our industry – the editors, the chief executives and, let's face it, the proprietors."

MySpace is a collection of millions of pages of autobiographical data, blogs, homemade movies, pictures and lists or, as the site describes itself, "an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends." Is the content genuinely creative and world-changing? If you can call teenage dribblings, incoherent ramblings and bad digital movies creative then yes, it is.

Taken by itself, MySpace might suggest that the C in Gen C stands for 'celebrity'. As with reality TV shows like So You Wanna Be a Pop Star? MySpace taps into the desire for fame embedded into our tabloid culture. Maybe after Generation X and Gen Y comes Gen W, for 'wannabe'. A UK Sunday Times columnist described it as C for 'conceited'.

That sounds elitist and a mistake – and not one that Murdoch would make. Who knows whether MySpace might not throw together another Fisher and Paykel or discover another Peter Jackson?

In fact, maybe it already has. Twenty-one year-old amateur film maker David Lehre was last heard speaking to MTV after his 11-minute film, MySpace: The Movie, was downloaded by some 3.4 million viewers. That was back in January. He's unlikely to be the last talented youngster spotted on MySpace. The site has also launched an album of greatest songs – as voted by the members – containing bands that never would have made it through the record companies' net.

A more impressive example of Gen C at work is the open-source movement. The framework of exchange is much the same as MySpace: it's digital, worldwide, volunteer-based and self-organising. Like MySpace diaries and the 48Hour films, not all the output is good. Software archive freshmeat.net lists over 30,000 open-source projects; many of those are abandoned, dying through neglect, incompetence or argument. But the projects that people find useful, like Apache, a free Web server, quickly develops a community of interest. Want a feature? Write it yourself. Want to adapt it to a new purpose? Go right ahead. If your customisation is any good, it might be accepted by the high priests of open source, the project leaders, and become part of the core software where others might improve it further. If the project leaders really like your work you might even be invited into the inner sanctum and given 'commit rights', allowing you to make changes on the original software yourself.

Consider the surprising (or maybe it shouldn't be surprising) story of Ben Goodger, a University of Auckland student who a few years ago started making his own changes to Mozilla, an open-source Web browser. Goodger was originally scratching his own itch but found he had a knack for improving the browser. Mozilla engineers noticed too, and Goodger now leads development of the Mozilla Firefox browser from Google's California offices. Last year he made the cover of Wired magazine. Not a bad career progression for someone who was merely tinkering with Mozilla because he could.

This isn't just about software; content is also produced collaboratively. Wikipedia allows us to tap into the collective expertise. Google Maps data is repurposed by people who want to create their own global maps of pizza joints, alien landings or Elvis sightings. If you have something to contribute then there's probably someone, somewhere who wants to hear from you.

The open-source movement is a metaphor for what's happening in every sector. It's the volunteer economy, the content economy and the creative economy. It's Gen C.

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For more information on Gen C visit <http://jakepearce.com>*