

Ken Eckert

Six Essays (2004-09)



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Should Music Filesharing be Legal?

By [Ken Eckert](#)

May 2004

In Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*, attention is paid to the concept of economic change as happening in waves, from the first agricultural wave, to the industrial revolution (second wave) to the information society (third wave). Toffler was essentially optimistic in predicting way back in 1979 that our western economy would not only recover from the shock of transition between an industrial society and an information-based one, but would prosper like never before. Although he didn't foresee such things as FTP music pirates and programs such as Napster and Kazaa, he might have expected that the music industry would fracture and decentralize its power, willingly or unwillingly, in the same way he predicted other industries such as energy and communications would. I would like to talk about these things because most media commentators live in the short run and don't concern themselves with macro-length trends. Briefly, I believe that file trading and the growth of Internet music is a good thing, and will bring more choice and power to the consumer in the long run. Let's examine why.

Toffler argued that most people spent their lives at or near home in the agricultural age, in factories in the industrial age, and are now returning home through such measures as flextime and because the problems of energy crisis and infrastructure deterioration are making it necessary. In the same way, the way most people make and consume music has also changed in the last century. One hundred years ago or more, most people who wanted to hear music made their own by playing instruments, or by listening to someone else play music. The amount of actual music was small as it relied on the skill of the musicians and the number of pieces they knew, but it was local and individual to the listener's tastes all the same.

Recorded music changed all this. By buying wax cylinders, 78s, and then LPs or cassettes, the role of producer and consumer of music became split in two as people no longer had any involvement in the making of music. People certainly continued to play instruments, but to a greater and greater extent most listeners heard their music on radios and home players, and as industrialism brought uniformity to what people ate and used, so music became uniform, as everyone was now listening to the same artists-at the expense of personal individuality. The only way a musician could achieve any measure of fame at all was to record-and recording was under the control of a few oligarchical corporations, in the same way that the means of production of goods and food were also out of the individual's control. The growth of karaoke attests to the simple fact that many people missed doing their own singing.

The Internet has smashed apart this system in less than ten years. Whereas before musical production was controlled by recording companies who monopolized expensive studios, now the number of home-made recordings has exploded, and previously hissy and muddy tape recordings are now studio-grade digital sessions, mastered with multitrack programs and special digital effects unimaginable even a few years ago. The very word *demo tape*, condescendingly signifying a home recording unworthy of a studio release, is fading from memory. In the same way, the monopoly record studios had on the distribution of music, through television and radio stations, is fading away as musicians promote and trade their own music online, or give it away for free.

For *free*-the words some don't want to hear. The situation becomes complex when money becomes involved. The competition music companies face from ever-improving so-called amateur recordings is minor compared to the slew of filesharers who believe that the music companies impede rather than make possible hearing their favorite artists, and that all music ought to be free to anyone who wants to listen to it, whether it is a homegrown bar band or ABBA. The Mp3 standard was the warning shot. Early FTP sharing programs and Napster were the coming tremors, and the floodgates flew open when Napster was squashed by litigious agents of the recording industry, possibly one of the dumbest P.R. miscalculations since New Coke. It caused an onslaught of new trading programs such as Morpheus, CuteMX, Kazaa, Soribada, Overnet, and others too numerous to count, and all continually shifting and growing in power, sophistication, speed, and stealth.

Worse, by heavy-handed and well-publicized legal cases of the RIAA group suing elderly professors, children, and indebted college students of their life savings, the RIAA blew away any chances of public sympathy they might have had remaining in North America. A generation of filesharers is presently growing up alienated from a recording industry they see as crooks and bullies. A public sees a large organization as a group of overfed, hidebound monopolists cozying up to and buying government support in backroom deals, and pulling Orwellian stunts to expose and ruin young people who are at most seen as trivial offenders. The mass of the third world, already contemptuous of or culturally

unfamiliar with copyright laws, merrily goes on pirating oblivious to western legislation. No industry ever survives by suing its customers into submission, but the RIAA has been an especially slow learner. Any sane mind on its payroll would conclude its efforts have been a complete and utter disaster.

Although the music companies roar as though they are dinosaurs sinking into the tar pits, the smart media companies, and they will surely have different names in the future than they do now, will change their strategies out of survival. There is still money to be made on music. It will be done in three ways. Firstly, it will have to be realized that the means of distribution of music is going to splinter uncontrollably just as all other media outlets are breaking up. CDs themselves are no longer one uniform standard as many don't even provide the same features as CDs of five years ago do, thanks to copy protection and other half-baked attempts at piracy deterrence. In future, there will be new and various means of listening and storing music rather than the one-size-all strategies of LPs and CDs, such as mp3 or other online formats, or even online storage systems such as virtual jukeboxes and other streaming technologies.

Additionally, some music will be sold online, and once record companies get over their initial greed and desire for punitive actions against their consumers, buying mp3s online will become a viable and profitable means of selling music. Presently, mp3s online cost as much as or even more than their already overpriced physical iterations, and people know it. The same CD which costs pennies to manufacture is sold in the music store for upwards of fifteen dollars. Part of this greed led people to pirate in the first place, and online sales won't fly if they repeat the same strategy. The first legit online scheme to sell mp3s at a price believed to represent their true value, perhaps around a quarter or a dime a download, will explode in numbers of consumers.

Second, music companies will realize that some lossage is not only invariable, but in fact beneficial as it serves as free advertising. The RIAA fought radio in its early days as it expected that people would not buy records if they could listen for free. The sky did not fall, and people bought more records than ever. The RIAA fought cassette recorders, believing the same thing, and the industry grew in size again. Again, the RIAA is fighting online trading, failing to see that not everyone wants to spend their time fighting spyware and Internet viruses and sorting through flawed downloads. The music industry may indeed be forced to shrink because of filesharing, but it will not disappear. Some people will never again buy a CD - but many others, exposed and turned on to new music they were never allowed to hear on their radio stations, will go out and buy the music - if the CD is not as grossly overpriced as it is now.

Third, the music companies will eventually realize that they cannot be the only game in town. As music production is shifting back to the individual for private consumption, the media companies will, kicking and screaming, come to a new mindset that they will not in the near future monopolize the way people hear their music. Thirty years ago, live concerts were cheap and readily available to the young listener. Large concerts now, held in giant stadiums more acoustically designed for hockey games than music, are overpriced, overamplified, and overproduced. The easy money is being made on wealthy boomers fed on nostalgia acts-but the more difficult task of grooming young listeners to attend big rock concerts has been ignored. And so that age is coming to an end as the medium, in a very Toffler sort of way, splinters and splits into either multi-band rock festivals or intimate club acts. History books will record people paying a hundred dollars to see the Rolling Stones as a sort of period curiosity.

In the same way, in recorded music, the large companies will learn that they cannot simply shut out independent music. It will continue to grow and be distributed online on forums, private pages, and Internet radio. If FM radio is to survive, it will have to ultimately begin to support and play such material. As amateurs also begin to master video production, and it is beginning to happen already, rock video stations will also be forced to adapt or die, by splitting into smaller and more focused ventures broadcasting to local or specialized audiences. Audiences of the future may begin to follow local bands that they can see in person-or they might follow a favorite band from across the world online. Or both.

Just as industrial society can't go back to basing itself on limited fossil fuels and the soulless efficiency of factory production, the music industry cannot go back to its old model of a small number of companies deciding who will be listened to and at what price. The makers of music are returning home, and some are armed with guitars, dulcimers, and banjos, but others have keyboards and digital effects and sequencers. Some may make live or recorded music as good as any professional musician - itself perhaps a dated term - and others may be as famous in their own community, physical or online.

For a while, the music industries will circle the wagons and attempt to monopolize radio and television for their own increasingly artistically desperate acts, and will vainly try to stamp out music filesharers with legislation and lawsuits. All efforts will not only fail to stem third-world piracy, and to foil increasingly sophisticated program designers, but will also alienate any remaining consumer base the industry might rely on. Out of the ashes will rise cheaper and more varied forms of music distribution, and a vastly wider choice of musical styles and recordings previously unavailable under the old system of music stores with limited inventories and slow stock-ordering systems. More people will be listening to and making music than ever-and the companies that are no longer locked into the system of treating musicians as commodities and customers as passive consumers will make money doing so. It doesn't sound like such a bad future after all.



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The End of Countries

By [Ken Eckert](#)

December 2005

If I tell you to imagine a world with no countries, it might sound like a cheesy John Lennon song. But I say this not to indulge in idealistic dreaming—it might not even be a good thing in totality—but because I believe it to be the case. Our concept of ‘country’ is fading from the affairs of the world and nationalism is becoming, to many, a dirty word connoting unthinking conformity and ugly militarism. How did this happen, and what will happen?

Historians, social historians of all stripes, and economists have many words to describe change at macro levels, that is, change affecting entire societies or civilizations. Toffler, in *The Third Wave*, sees social change in giant economic waves, from hunter-gather societies to agricultural to industrial, and to post-industrial societies. Diamond, in *Guns, Germs & Steel*, sees a sort of boom-and-bust cycle. He explains how some civilizations win over others as a result of the technological weapons which more advanced social development brings.

What’s the point? If this is so, that western civilization and perhaps eastern as well is moving slowly, but inevitably, towards the next wave of post-industrialism and knowledge economies, then the ‘country’ is doomed. By this I don’t mean literally that the citizens of any particular state or their standards of living are imperiled, but rather the concept of borders and nationalism and all that countries imply. If the base of our economies is no longer producing and trading things but producing and trading information, then our modern tools of global communication (such as the internet) can quickly nullify borders. The next time you surf the internet, think about where the page you are watching physically comes from—or if it’s even worth caring about.

There will, of course, be winners and losers. Nations which embrace the free exchange of information and become quickly wired will win in terms of the rapid synthesis and expansion of knowledge which will occur between scholars and businessmen in different countries. The losers will, first, be the societies which are closed to the world. But forbidden knowledge of the outside world helped bring down the Soviet Union, and that was pre-internet; the pervasiveness of electronic communication now nibbles away at even super-xenophobic societies such as North Korea, and who knows how long China will be able to maintain its

balancing act of globalizing its economy but not its citizen's access to information. It's hard to build a Starbucks without the ideas behind it seeping in.

Other losers will be failed states which frighten off foreign investment, or nations who are victimized by unfair trade and can't afford to modernize. But there are even surprises here. India, which has little infrastructure but a talented pool of well-educated entrepreneurs, has bypassed Toffler's 'second wave' of industrialism and is moving from an agricultural to a post-industrial economy without bothering to ever build those expensive, noisy factories. If Cuba liberalized it would have similar conditions and could very quickly boom once internet access spread. Of course, we are talking about elites. Not everyone in India has their own e-mail address, and much of the third world (and some in the first world too) won't benefit from globalization of information.

Of course, globalization has been going on for a long time. Free trade, in fact, is more of a vestige of industrialism than post-industrialism, and countries have been signing trade agreements long before ARPnet was born. In my short life I have already seen an explosion of new products, foods, styles, and ethnicities that my ancestors would have been baffled by. Opponents of globalization can gripe that some people are left behind, but the complaint that it's only Coca-colonization isn't true. Most countries of the world which have globalized to some degree have also been more Americanized; but the street has been two-way as well, and north America, at least in places, is far more worldly-looking than it has ever been before. Some predict that English will kill all other languages and dialects. But the European experience is that it's not a zero-sum game; many simply speak English and several other tongues. And there's no guarantee that English would be the global victor, anyway.

So how does this diminish the role of countries? What it means is that national governments are pinched from three directions. First, they are pinched from above. Free trade, as a classical economist will state, is good for the economy but bad for federal autonomy. The powers of a national government are curtailed by free trade agreements and by the shared interdependence of economies. Nations which get along, such as Canada and the US, suddenly find that they are impotent to make legislation in areas that affect trade, and there are many. And nations that don't get along, such as the US and China, find that political sanctions can be costly when both nations have invested heavily in the other's economy. Supranational organizations such as the United Nations further restrict countries' actions.

Second, federal autonomy is undermined from below. Countries may have to sacrifice regional interests for a free trade compact, as the US recently did in backing down on punitive lumber duties against Canada which benefited border states. The opposite may also happen when regions favor free trade and national governments don't; my province of Alberta in Canada was prevented from selling oil freely in the late 70's as the central government demanded special prices favoring the nation. Both sorts of conflicts cause independence movements, or at least bitter alienation from national governments and demands for greater self-determination.

The third threat against national governments is the deterioration of a shared culture. North America no longer has common national goals. The US is now made up of various sub-nations; southwest Mexamerica, which speaks more Spanish than English and is ethnically alien to powder-wigged founding fathers; the agricultural Farmerica of the Midwest; and the eastern seaboard zone of Greater New England, to name a few. The states are less 'united' than perhaps at any time since the Civil War. Canada has an Anglo-Gaelic Atlantic section, French-speaking Quebec, which calls its government 'the national assembly', and a western

part which increasingly does business in US dollars and watches a great deal of Fox and very little CBC, the 'national' television channel. These aren't trifling cultural distinctions. California has an economy larger than most countries, and Governor Schwarzenegger was treated with more regard than the president on a recent tour of China.

These three threats put together weaken the concept of nation-states, and there may be others. Countries haven't always been around; Germany was only unified a little over a century ago and was previously an assemblage of kingdoms and ethnic groups. Many country names originally describe a people, not a fixed place. Countries might not always correspond to ethnic groups or religions, and Africa is presently rearranging itself bloodily and slowly to tribal borders which don't match national borders imposed by colonial powers. Arab countries might see themselves as more of a pan-Islamic polity than a grouping of sovereign states.

As time goes on, the list of countries which aren't sure they're countries grows. No one agrees presently whether or not Ireland, Scotland, Quebec, Taiwan, Guam, Greenland, or a laundry list of others are countries or not. In time, no one may care. Some may continue as cultural entities but not political ones, as the member states of the European Union may turn out to be. Is Italy now a country or is it a part of a greater whole, sharing currency and immigration policy with a central authority, and yet also divided into provinces or city-states, each claiming local rule and self-government?

Groups of countries all seem now to rush into currency and trade agreements, partly because it's good economics for the winners, but also because the game is up for countries. Macro trade zones weaken a national government's power to make international decisions, and the ability for goods and information to move freely and cheaply strengthens local authorities once a central government can't control one seaport. Further, the ethnic and cultural unity that used to define a nation's core values is disappearing, eating away at the shared community project of the country itself.

Is it all a good thing? Should I now imagine a world without possessions, a brotherhood of man? Not yet, at least. The potential for city-states to become totalitarian corporate-states is there, as is anarchy. Rest assured that someone will still be there to tax us. And—bang!—the old-school, less global-looking forces of terrorism or tribalism or fanaticism could reduce all plans to nuclear rubble—if the last drop of drinkable water hasn't already been polluted by then. Wars have also echoed human development. Wars in our agricultural phase were usually over land; in our industrial phase they were over industrial ideologies, such as communism; post-industrial war will continue as well, likely on an international scale and involving international issues.

And it isn't necessarily good for the individual to be atomized, to no longer have a common sense of belonging or ancestral purpose. How do we define ourselves, and who are we? Korea, and perhaps some European states, might be one of the lucky countries which retain a strong sense of shared ethnic or cultural identity while economically and politically globalizing. Other people will have to build a new identity based on local community or faith or ethnic ancestry, or a mix—or else become citizens of the world, with a passport to 'Earth'; it sounds romantic but also a little lonely. As the Chinese would say, we are cursed by living in interesting times.



Address to the Class of 1969

By [Ken Eckert](#)

February 2003 & May 2008

When I was a grad student in Montana, I used to receive several free national campus magazines. As I remember, I got what I paid for; they were usually mostly advertisements or sophomoric cartoons. Yet one type of article remains fixed in my mind where the writers lamented how the students of today lack the convictions of their parents in participating in campus activism or social issues. Why, it asked, are students too apathetic to fight for the issues which the previous generation did?

Implicit in this writer's tone were two attitudes I found jarring. First, it was the writer's unspoken assumption that challenging social norms and campus activism are the proper and normative state for university students, and that those who do not take up the banner are somehow shirking. This activism is not generally the case historically. After World War II, North American veterans received lavish endowments to attend college, and few were inclined to bite the hand that fed them. Other than occasional battles between student guilds and Cambridge townspeople in the middle ages, western university students were usually children of privilege who were there to continue their place in society, not to upset the apple cart. The baby boomers were unusual in their campaign against the status quo; and, as usual, those from that generation use their experience as a yardstick to judge all others by.

Second, I was annoyed that only the liberal causes which that generation espoused are considered worthy of supporting. The article complained about a lack of interest in opposing militarism or capitalism, or in progressive social policies. I am not suggesting that global warming or the Iraq war are trivial or wrong-headed concerns, or that I disagree with those causes. But nowhere are students who involved in charitable or religious activities mentioned. If there's no picket sign, it doesn't seem to count.

As the west's group of baby-boomers nears advanced age, this year marks the first baby boomer filing for social security, and the sentimentality and obsession with the culture and values of the 60's still looms large. Our media follow the money, and the baby-boomers have it; every television commercial is still about their music and their financial and medical needs. I often picture myself travelling time to address an imaginary group of North

American students about the establishment they opposed. What would I tell these people if I could warn them what would happen over the next forty years?

Ken's Address

Class of '69, be careful what you ask for; you may get it. Certainly, there are problems with society the way you see it here in 1969. Your parents are tied up in comfortable lives of making money and gaining material status. Many of the institutions which define your world are corrupt or self-serving. Your government wages war on other countries and on you. You are constantly told to cut your hair, wear a suit and tie, work hard, raise children, fit in, don't ask questions, and don't be an individual. Some of you aren't treated like anybody at all because of your race or ethnicity.

Your response has been to condemn or leave the system, looking for a new way. You want to do your own thing and express yourself, free from social constrictions and conformity. You want to live naturally with the earth, dressing naturally, thinking naturally, judging no one, and not being judged by anyone. Even if you don't want to join a vegetarian commune in the desert, you feel you ought to wear your hair as long as you like, and that people would be better off abandoning their servility to church and state and the whole system surrounding it. You teach that love is all you need.

Speaking from my viewpoint in 2008, it didn't work, as all utopian schemes don't work. The Soviet Union failed because centrally planning an enormous economy was impossible, and because collectivized workers had no incentive to labour apart from brute coercion. Many communes fail because they had plenty of philosophers and no one to take out the garbage. In your case, you tore away at the social institutions which hemmed us in, and you didn't bother to replace them with anything else. Duty, tradition, faith, and the family unit may have had flaws to them, but they gave structure to our communities. And now that structure is pretty much gone.

Worse, although you might mean well, your platitudes can easily be corrupted into being based on selfishness, not on altruism. You will encourage free love, only so that you can have sex without consequences and abandon people when it becomes convenient; forty years later, there are millions of single mothers and fatherless children, and a statistical majority of marriages end in divorce. You encouraged women's equality—a laudable cause, except that young female crime rocketed, and women now feel free to treat men as sex objects just as we males once did. You opposed war in Asia because communism wasn't so bad as long as you didn't live under it, or maybe because you didn't want to serve, and Cambodia endured genocide after the fall of Vietnam. You rebelled against a stagnant campus, which is now stagnant again-- because you *won't* retire.

What were you thinking? Maybe you weren't. Or maybe you were tired of being told what to do by your parents, and like a rebellious child, you did the opposite from spite. This sort of psychological Parent / Child paradigm may explain a great deal of the establishment / hippie conflict of the 1960s. Like parents, 1969 society tells us what we should be and doesn't tolerate disagreement. Cut your hair or else. And like children, hippies want to go back to an infantile time when they could do what they wanted and life was beautiful and innocent.

And maybe the paradigm also works because many baby boomers went straight from being children to being Parents themselves in the 80's and 90's without ever being Adults. Without realizing it, you became Parents for the west yourselves, even if your values were the opposite of the previous generation. You wanted free thinking unconstrained by the old

system, and now we have free thinking constrained by the new system. Intellectuals or students on the campus who don't agree with the French deconstructionists or with evolutionary theory or with feminist activism get chased off the campus. I am not saying I agree with such people or that their motives are always good ones, but increasingly the choice is being removed because it might *offend* you.

For much of the world, communism was the great failed experiment of the twentieth century. For North America, the hippie movement and the counterculture, while not destroying our society, sapped its vitality and credibility. The beliefs and values promoted at Woodstock only held while they were convenient, and then became as empty as beer commercial slogans. You live on as people who still cannot act like adults. You sue fast-food restaurants when you spill coffee on yourself. You sue cigarette companies for making you sick. You spend government budgets into astronomical debts for your descendants because you cannot say no to yourselves but won't pay taxes.

And for all your condescending self-congratulation as the love generation, as boomer parents you won't show much of it. You will leave your children with a colossal public debt, pollute their world with tank-sized cars called SUVs, call them slackers when they can't get a job, and vote for governments which launch useless and destructive wars, fought by other people's children, to guarantee that you have gas to drive that SUV to the supermarket.

Some of you will become incredibly wealthy. Wealth disparities in the 21st century will be bigger than they were in the Gilded Age. You will not share; you will buy giant houses and hire security guards to protect them. Outside your gated communities, imagine some areas of Detroit looking poorer and more abandoned than some of the Vietnamese towns you see in newspapers. By the way, remember China? It now has the world's second highest GDP, and it's catching up to the USA quick.

Most of you are here and had time to protest because of the cheap tuition your parents worked to ensure. In future decades you will magically turn into fiscal conservatives, refusing to fund universities after you aren't there to wave picket signs. Another reason young college students in the 80's and 90's won't be into activism is that many of us will have to work part-time to stay there. One of your theme songs of the 60's was Crosby, Stills & Nash's "Teach your children well". Nice teaching.

You will do some things right. My generation of X-ers thanks you for loosening up the social restrictions. We're thankful that we can marry other races or pursue alternative lifestyles. There was some great music and movies. But you did it all for yourselves. Your parents were the war generation. You were the love generation. Unfortunately, you really only loved yourselves, and the people after you will pay for it.



What is a Gen-X-er?

By [Ken Eckert](#)

November 2007

What is a 'Gen-X-er'? A Gen-X-er is someone born between the late 1960's and early 1980's, someone like me in that sorry crew of North American children born after the demographic 'baby boom' set in motion by the end of hostilities after World War II. It doesn't seem like a useful question to ask anymore, now that journalists have long lost interest and moved on to the sexier topic of what a 'Gen-Y-er' or 'baby buster' is, the next cohort of children born after the 1980's. But essayists look in the macro range, I guess, and maybe things that weren't clear when we were growing up make sense to talk about now.

The other question sure to be asked is why bother talking about Gen-X-ers when the topic has been done to death and so many people have discussed this generation. My response is: where? I grew up in the 80's and 90's and read as many newspapers and magazines as came my way, and I just don't seem to remember this purported tide of social-interest or investigative stories dealing with my demographic, certainly nowhere near the forty-year tsunami of books, articles, television series, movies, late-night CD commercials, and articles in *Rolling Stone* smugly living and reliving the tiniest minutiae of the 1960's generation and its colossal social importance. Future historians will be puzzled to see so much about Woodstock and so little about the fall of the Berlin Wall.

About the only time I've seen articles about Gen-X-ers is when they've been thrown an investigative piece by boomer newspaper journalists, or by sycophants in lefty campus magazines trying to imitate their 'coolness'. The articles are at best pitying, painting a dismal picture of an aimless generation that can't get a job, often condescending, asking why this generation isn't as hip or as politically involved as ours was, and usually critical, describing X-ers as selfish slackers who evade adult responsibility. The enduring cliché of the 1960's generation is the hippie in a VW bus with his love beads, guitar, and protest sign; that of the 90's will be a sullen, underemployed, ambitionless twenty-some playing a video game in his parents' basement.

Another theme that has been done aplenty is the 'generational war', where the relationship is that of mutual resentment and scorn between the two groups, with neither having anything positive to say of or share with the other. That may be true. But I've never thought of this as a war, for war presumes reasonably equal combatants. Burmese troops opening fire on unarmed protesters isn't war; it's massacre. The economy, media, government, universities, businesses, and overall culture are dominated by the baby-boom generation, marginally by the X-ers, and is soon passing us over to the Y-ers. Many or most of the benefits enjoyed by boomers in their time—cheap tuition, easy student loans, student debt relief, affordable housing, employment programs—are unknown to the X-ers, as the

same boomers elected governments which turned the taps off as soon as they had to start paying for it. This is the first generation in a century where standards of living and future prospects were demonstrably *lower* than for the previous one. There was no war. If there was, we lost.

But lamenting such inequities not only sounds like complaining, but is counterproductive for two reasons. It is firstly because such binary opposites aren't completely true; there are boomers who still believe in the values they preached when young, and there are people my age who were admittedly lazy good-for-nothings who used the economic downturn as an excuse to do nothing but leech off others in the 90's. Secondly, defining yourself by what you aren't is not a very useful explanation and merely feeds back into the ready-made trope of generational war.

What, then, are the marks of the Gen-X-er? We all have a fairly consistent idea of what baby boomers can be described as: the generation which loosened up the social conventions of the 60's, protested the war, and disco-danced into the 70's while listening to all the right music. We think of the 20's generation as big rollers and flappers, and the one of the 40's as prudent and bold to survive both depression and war. The 50's generation had Elvis and all those other associations of hula-hoops and sock hops. Asking what a Gen-X-er is provides no similarly normative range of answers and probably depends on who is asked, and where, and at what time of the day. There doesn't seem to be an agreed on mental image of what we are (or, increasingly, were).

But let's look at the problem from a different angle. Who ordained that any generation must be or normatively is *like* something? It is not necessarily so that every generation had its own defining moment, just as our conception of some universal *generation* at all is more or less a World War II blip that may never be repeated. We have a certain mindset when we think of the time of Shakespeare; but we don't so much of the following century in England, which had many movements but no single stamp on it. There is no single 'restoration' style. Similarly, maybe it would be more accurate to say what typifies the common Gen-X-er experience is that there isn't one.

I realize I don't totally fit the bill in any category of labels. I was born in 1968, too late to be a boomer and too soon to fully be a Gen-X-er, and influenced by my father's values from the 40's. This is a recipe for atomism, generation-wise, a feeling that you don't totally belong on any team. And when I think of people I've known from roughly my time period, I can see that very few of us felt that we belonged to something common based on our ages. Some of us defined ourselves by our nationality; others by our faith, or lack of it; some by our politics; others by our clothing or music styles, or maybe just by our group of friends.

I don't recall a Kent State or a JFK or a Martin Luther King or a Woodstock event of my time which gave me the feeling that I was part of something seismic which only someone of my generation could relate to or participate in. The shuttle explosion, or Reagan being shot at, or Windows 95, or Wayne Gretzky retiring were all big events, but they were not uniquely important to someone my age, nor were they a cause for activism. There is no *Forrest Gump* for the X-ers to tidily draw historical touchstones together into one statement. I get the sentimental child-of-the-80's e-mails where I'm reminded that we all wore shredded jeans, or watched Ninja Turtles, or had bad hair. The memories are fun but they're pretty shallow compared to remembering protesting Vietnam. Admittedly, we had Nirvana and grunge, and I suppose they spoke to us more than Fleetwood Mac did. But not me. I hated grunge.

No wonder the media are scornful. Such fragmentation makes for poor press. What fun to write about huge crowds of like-minded youths marching together under one ideal of stop the war, save the whales, etc., and how boring to write about *some* youths protesting free trade talks about cabbage exports to Ecuador, or *some* youths supporting one presidential candidate and *some* the other. The easy conclusion is that the Gen-X-er is apathetic, and there's hardly a greater sin in journalism. Have multiple affairs or get arrested driving while high, and you're a newsmaker. Work at the donut shop while you try once again to get into college and the coverage will make rocks fidget with boredom.

We don't fit in. The baby-boomer hippie didn't fit in, but in a larger sense he did; he made up an easily-digested concept of two opposites, the old establishment versus the dynamic youngster. It formed a recognizable duo. The Gen-X-er was offered nothing, wasn't born in great enough numbers to form any critical mass, came along as the economy was stagnating, and instead of marching as one, went home. Some of us became conservative, others radical, some went to church, and some went to the nightclub, and others did all or part or none of these. Our statement was not to make one.

So now we are fading away into the stream of something bigger, of globalization, of the decline of the west, of materialism, of post-modernism, of various -ations and -isms. We aren't the lost generation, but the absent one. There are bigger fish to fry than to discuss our past or future, and young Turks to praise and damn for being hopeful idealists or cold, calculating entrepreneurs. We are not a large enough demographic to be interesting just by being here. While I worry that the boomers will pass their jobs on to their Gen-Y children and leave us out (again) while asking us to pay for their retirement benefits, I also realize that other continents and countries don't offer even the leftovers we get, and that there are enough people who would be happy to trade.

Thus I think the only attribute which marks the Gen-X-er is hybridity. We're all combinations of various things, lacking any kind of agreed-on generational model to orient ourselves to. I get the 50's and 60's teen movies, which neatly divided everyone in the high school into cool people and the squares, but I never understood the 80's teen movies which still anachronistically grouped everyone into two warring cliques. There were in actuality so many sub-groups—were we metal-heads, preppies, computer geeks, rappers, skateboarders, punkers, stoners, or some other camp, and which was the official X-er one that we were supposed to be in? Most people I knew in high school were 10-20% of everything, and would have thought the question silly: why do I have to be any one type? Thus we felt quite hybrid. The less-nice way to term this is to say we were mutts.

There's also a benefit to not fitting conveniently into a generational slot—maybe being hybrid has given Gen-X-ers greater freedom to make their own identities. Taking in a bit of everything and having a dim sum attitude to identity, having every period's music on your mp3 player and not feeling beholden to one, can also make a person richer and deeper as a person. So many of us have had endless bad jobs, or have traveled widely, if sometimes only to get a slightly less bad job. I know so many in my age bracket who have attended universities far from home, or teach or work in foreign countries, even if we go just to escape the calls from the student loan agents. I know more than I really need to about Jim Morrison, I'm *really* sick of "Hotel California," and after a while all the boomer stories start to sound the same. But many of the X-ers have their own stories to tell of their own interior scars or joys. As persons they are usually more interesting.



Election Satire is Alive and Well; Maybe Too Well

By [Ken Eckert](#)

December 23, 2008

Slate pundit Troy Patterson [wrote back in April 2008](#) about "the Satire Recession," arguing that the satire in the recent election was little more than "personality jokes" that rarely rise above cutesy, ad-hominem gags. The Canadian [CBC](#) also tut-tutted that American election satire was little more than "yo' mama" routines about John McCain's age. Post-election pundits claim guiltily that in a post-Bush era better times generally make for feebler political humor. Yet a closer comparison to other elections in the last thirty years reveals the opposite: that satire in 2008 is alive and well, and more biting, more partisan, and more aware of its own influence than before.

Consider as a good example the 1980 American presidential elections. The campaign featured a president with horrendous approval ratings who was seen as impotent in managing military problems in the middle east, and whose domestic policies ended in stagnation and energy crisis. Sound familiar? Jimmy Carter eventually squandered his gracious southern goodwill and was trounced by the genial, affable Ronald Reagan. The severest criticism of the Carter presidency came from cartoonists. As a visual medium, part of the joke was depicting Carter as a dwarf with giant lips, but the panels usually parodied Carter's vacillation or ineffectiveness. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Jeff McNelly pictured Carter as a hapless Pollyanna holding a deed to the Brooklyn Bridge signed by Leonid Brezhnev, saying "You mean he lied to me?"

Yet this was as strong as things got. Most of the media parodied not the candidates' issues or actions, but their personal tics, the "pseudo-satire" which Patterson now criticizes. Much of the spoofing merely riffed on the comedic stereotype which the candidate represented. Teddy Kennedy was introduced as "the senator from Pizza Hut." Fat guy: check. Gerald Ford was a one-gag character on *Saturday Night Live*, where Chevy Chase would depict him tripping, dropping his papers, and falling in the pool. Klutz: check. Carter's trademark gaffe would be the swamp rabbit which he claimed to be attacked by on a canoe ride. While it certainly suggested Carter's leadership impotence, the joke grew into a *Monty-Pythesque* gag of its own. Killer bunny: check.

Incisive satire exposes and shames reality. Much election humor in 1980, however, is what Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin would call in [his work on Rabelais](#) the carnival style of folk humor. A medieval festival day often involved parodies of authority figures; the church usually indulged the revelers and distinguished between something done "in earnest or in play," as Chaucer would say. Bakhtin argues folk humor includes the speaker as a target; "it is directed at all and everyone." Comedians such as Bob Hope made fun of Reagan with

friendly vaudeville gags, saying the only reason people voted for him is that they were afraid he would “go back to acting.” As Stephen Wagg says [in his book](#), *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, such humor operates within the system and does so respectfully; it was “a bit of institutionalised cheek and the President laughed to confirm that this was OK.” The style is that of a celebrity roast, and one of Hope’s DVD compilations is tellingly titled “Laughing With the Presidents,” and not *at*.

The other quirk of old-school media is the expectation that both sides should be presented. Fair play is not a part of satire—George Orwell does not give the Soviets equal time in *Animal Farm*—but at the time network comedians such as Johnny Carson, and humorists such as Dave Barry, were expected to make fun of Carter and Reagan equally. The safest route in election humor has always been to tease each candidate but save the heavy fire for broader institutional targets: the campaign prattle; the glad-handing congressman; the form-obsessed bureaucrat. Even politicians themselves can join in, as Reagan did when he said that politics is the second oldest profession, but “it bears a very close resemblance to the first.” The motive of network executives might not have been so much fairness as economics. Television programs were broadcast to as general an audience as possible, and the genuine satirist might, at best, alienate half his audience, and at worst confuse them. Yet a satirical attack is toothless if it is obvious that the comedian is merely playing a role in jest. The humorist is kidding; Alexander Pope is not.

Sometime around 1984, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, human character changed. The media universe exploded through satellite technology, as cable television stations dedicated to special audiences such as news and rock videos bloomed. Other developments were demographic, as more youth-oriented entertainers such as David Letterman eclipsed the older generation. By the mid-80s satirical treatments of “Ronnie Ray-Gun” had turned nasty. Reagan was a regular on the *Spitting Image* puppet show and mocked in pop songs such as Simply Red’s “[Money’s Too Tight to Mention](#)” (1985), which fades out with the sexual taunt, “Did the earth move for you, Nancy?” A graphically violent [1984 video](#) for Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Two Tribes” features Reagan and Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko in a bloody cage fight to decide their countries’ issues. This new bluntness anticipated things to come, and the media taunting of Vice President George Bush Sr. as an effeminate Reagan lackey—the “wimp factor”—likely contributed to the growing anti-intellectualism of the party in following elections.

In some aspects the 2008 election was a replay of 1980, where an increasingly negative McCain campaign failed to dent Barack Obama’s affable optimism. The satirical tone of the election, however, was considerably different. Physical exaggeration is normally a staple of political cartooning, but making fun of Obama’s appearance evidently had unpleasant racial connotations—and so the text had to carry the joke, and it did with a new bite. The 60’s press would not have mocked JFK’s war experience, but McCain’s continually trotting out his POW ordeals eventually exasperated pundits; one [Doonesbury panel](#) has a journalist asking McCain to e-mail the press a document, and McCain replying, “You know, my friend, I didn’t *have* a fancy laptop in prison.” McCain’s age also led to morbid cartoons portraying running mate Sarah Palin after his death. This went beyond the typical stock jokes about Reagan and jelly beans or Bill’s libido. A good test for trenchant satire is how many people miss the joke, and the *New Yorker* cover of Obama [dressed as a radical Muslim](#) found an effective way to address an unsavory topic, even at the risk of having many people read the cover straight.

Yet the general influence of print has waned in favor of a much wider media universe than existed a generation earlier. The economic constraints of having to entertain a general

audience are less applicable to much new television programming, and are irrelevant in the explosion of specialized and personal websites. There are fewer checks by advertisers or good taste on mocking political candidates. Northrop Frye, in "The Nature of Satire," would call obscenity "an essential characteristic of the satirist," and good satire is not above a fart joke; but much recent humor has been especially prurient, such as the pornographic film "Who's Nailin' Paylin" with a Palin lookalike. Independent videos supporting or attacking candidates were uploaded to sharing site YouTube, such as 'Obama Girl'. In [one episode](#) Obama Girl calls 'Hillary Clinton' to convince her to support Obama, only to be told, "Thank you! I worked my whole life to be president only to be thwarted by a girl in hotpants... [well], this fifth of Jack Daniels isn't going to drink itself." *Cracked's* online site has an [edited concession speech](#) where McCain says, "I call on all Americans, as I have often in this campaign... to wound... Senator Obama."

This sort of viral internet humor is sharper and perhaps more satirical in a purer sense than Bob Hope (the words 'zany' and 'antics' are never good signs). Although some internet spoofing can have an element of carnival silliness, it is no longer *with* the candidates. The field is no longer dominated by Hollywood or Washington entertainers, and most internet humorists have not met the politicians they satirize. Their tone is not of a joshing intimate. Bakhtin's carnival jester is present in the crowd, but the blogger is usually physically isolated, in front of a monitor. Professional outlets such as the *Huffington Post* are gaining credibility as establishment media; but any dissident crank can create blogs, flash cartoons, or YouTube videos of independent satire un beholden to commercial interests who might water it down for a wider audience.

The tradition of satirical bipartisanship has also waned, assisted by the ending of the FCC's 1949 Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which had mandated addressing both sides of issues. These developments have brought satire that is biting and uncensored, but have also fostered highly partisan audiences where group amplification polarizes opinion. Chat board websites and blogs have no expectation of objectivity, and can be expressly one-sided and abusive to outsiders. Even the *Huffington Post* openly identifies itself as liberal. Few are in doubt on Michael Moore's politics when he [asks dryly](#) in *Dude, Where's My Country?* why the Arabs think America favors Israel: "Maybe it was when that Palestinian child looked up in the air and saw an American Apache helicopter firing a missile into his baby sister's bedroom just before she was blown into a hundred bits. Touchy, touchy! Some people get upset over the pickiest things!"

Having extreme platforms often now tends to enhance celebrity rather than estranging one's audience as political entertainers such as Rush Limbaugh have attracted loyal fans who cheer on outrageous statements. Many political radio shows, with their skits and angry rants, are closer in style to Howard Stern than Larry King. A few commentators have asserted that critic Ann Coulter's writings are satirical, but the claim that her extremeness makes the joke obvious fails; Coulter's thesis that Democrats "fill the airwaves with treason" is not self-evidently sardonic in a media environment which ordinarily says such things. Critics such as Tim Rutten [who suggest](#) that political correctness has "drained humor's salutary bite from our politics" because of the *New Yorker* cover miss the larger picture of how polarized much of the mass media has become in a climate where internet users can post anonymous jibes with few outside controls.

The influence of the culture wars has extended to network television, which is increasingly given partisan labels. The McCain campaign's claim of media bias is hardly new; Adlai Stevenson griped that the press was as objective about Democrats as dogs are about cats. Yet in no earlier election has media bias been such an issue for satire. Networks were

singled out as being 'in the tank' for Democrats in the 2008 campaign; Jay Leno quipped that the election was "a huge celebration over at Barack Obama headquarters, otherwise known as MSNBC." Much of the sniping was directed at Fox network with its perennial right-wing bias, such as when David Letterman joked that "At the end of the evening, the electoral vote count was 349 for Obama, 148 for McCain. Or, as Fox News says, too close to call."

Satire has itself become a political issue. In the 1970s *Saturday Night Live* was considered edgy for even depicting a president, even if Chevy Chase's Ford did little more than pratfalls. In 2008 more people might have seen Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin than the candidate, and bloggers joked they were difficult to distinguish; Fey's statement on foreign policy that "I can see Russia from my house" was only slightly more risible than Palin's original claim. *SNL* seemed to agree with the Clinton camp's charge that the media was favoring Obama in a [debate skit](#) where the CNN moderators offer Obama a pillow and a hot and bothered Soledad O'Brien fans herself after Obama's vacuous closing remark that journalists "can take sides; yes we can." This was not quick gags but satire so pointed it was widely [accused of influencing the election](#).

And so the current state of political humor is not the decline of the "[satirical industrial complex](#)." 21st century satire has proved itself so far to be more vigorous, biting, and partisan than at any time since perhaps Pope. Are we sure this is a good thing? In 1972, Senator Edmund Muskie wept after a mean-spirited editorial suggested his wife was an alcoholic, and bumper stickers followed saying, "Vote For Muskie Or He'll Cry." Muskie dropped out of the presidential nomination race. Gentle Walter Mondale recoiled from the vitriol raised against him. Just before the 2008 election, a Montreal radio comedy team [telephoned Sarah Palin herself](#), impersonating French President Nicholas Sarkozy. In embarrassing Palin by having her ignorantly praise fictional Canadian Prime Minister Stef Carse, a Quebecois entertainer, a week after the actual national election, a certain line had been crossed. We need not worry about Palin's thin skin, but how many good and capable people will avoid politics because of such personal *gotcha* attacks?

It is *de rigeur* for lefties to blame everything on Reagan. Certainly, his ideological petulance in ending the Fairness Doctrine did not help. But no one could have anticipated shock-talk radio, Stephen Colbert, and the user-generated internet sites which have created such strong niche markets for darker and more partisan satire. Future events may reemphasize the carnival style of humor, but for now the more elegant, bipartisan tradition of print satire is fading. Political cartoonists are retiring without heirs. Berke Breathed's *Opus* comic ended in November 2008 as its [creator explained](#) that with "the cable and Web technology allowing All Snark All the Time," he wants to protect the strip from becoming as coarse and polarized as the climate around him. Even Dave Barry, with his humorous musings about his dogs and high-school pictures, [ends a column wistfully](#) by asking, "Now that this election is over, whatever the hell happened, can we please grow up and stop being so nasty to each other? Please? OK, I didn't think so." Even Barry senses the present ascendancy of mean.

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No More Friends

By [Ken Eckert](#)

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Mother Teresa once remarked that she saw more unhappiness in America than she did in Calcutta. I hope that she was exaggerating for effect, but sometimes I think that my experience living in Mexico was the same. It's easy for me to resort to the cliché of the carefree Mexican peasant when I can step on an airplane and leave and they can't, but it certainly seemed to me that when I walked among the markets I saw more people chatting, laughing, and smiling than I would in Edmonton or Chicago. There just seemed to be more joy in the air in simple pleasures. At night the streets were lively, with people in the bars and restaurants drinking and families in the parks.

Again, I have to try not to color my views by observing things as a tourist. Do I want to have this, and grinding poverty too? As well, warm weather must make a difference in people's willingness to be outside. It's easier to be happy and sociable when you live next to a beach in the Philippines and can pick some fruit as opposed to a North Dakota winter. But then, I've lived in Las Vegas too, and it doesn't get much warmer. I don't see a lot of festive faces or singing when I walk down the street here in June.

The key to all this, I think, is that I don't see many faces, period—cars with tinted windows streak by in fourth gear and stereos blasting, roar up driveways, and garage doors slam up and down. Nobody *walks* at all unless they're grim-faced joggers on a mission or exercising their pets, and they do so alone and avoid eye contact. There are no public celebrations or festivals unless they are commercial ones which are ticketed. There are not many parks, and there are certainly extremely few casual conversations with strangers. Thirty years ago I could not imagine living in a residential complex for months and not meeting or knowing the name of a single neighbor. A great number of people have no regular interaction with anyone not their relatives unless they are at work or are shopping. I have been to church services in Vegas where I was not personally spoken to once. The experience would have been less lonely had I watched the sermon at home on television.

I'm told that much of North America is becoming like this, although Las Vegas must surely be one of the worst cases, and books such as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) muster statistics to demonstrate convincingly that community involvement as a whole has rapidly declined in the last fifty years. America is becoming a nation of atomized families and individuals. Putnam has numerous academic explanations to show how this has happened; I do not know that my reason is a symptom or cause or neither, and it is substantially more off-the-cuff, but what I do see now that I live back in North America is how little our culture regards friendship.

When I was in university, to an extent I was already thinking like and identifying with my professors. I remember discussing the *Merchant of Venice* in class, and sympathizing with the instructor when his eyes drooped a little in fatigue after hearing the same ignorant comment from a student that he must have heard a hundred times in his career: Antonio keeps professing his affection for Bassanio. They *must* be gay. Why else would they keep rabbiting on about how much they cared for each other when they could be out scoring chicks?

In Anglo-Saxon England, the loyalty a soldier had for his lord was considered higher and purer than that between spouses. In Latin cultures it is still openly acceptable for male friends to kiss on the cheek, and some Arab males might even hold hands. In some totalitarian states, friendship was especially suspect because friends may come together under common interests, such as dissenting political or religious beliefs, whereas husbands and wives ostensibly have more practical and mundane reasons for being together. We all know the cliché about how the ancient Greeks felt on the subject.

Understand that I am not making any kind of moral judgment about homosexuality. I am simply arguing that these are ordinarily not homosexual relationships, but *amicus*. These men are not effeminate. Beowulf embraces his lord—then he chops warriors' heads off and attacks monsters with his bare hands. This sort of relationship, that of close and loyal friendship, is very hard to portray in the western world of the 21st century without people snickering. There are people, a lot of them writing conference papers, who cannot simply conceive of friends without assuming that the two people are in denial about their sexuality—or, if the friendship is between man and woman, that this sort of companionship merely papers over a suppressed sexual longing.

Of course, the lion's share of people in the west probably don't worry about such things or don't find anything wrong with friendship. But scratch underneath and there tends to be the view that friendship is a sort of harmless—naïve—childish pastime. Some readers likely thought this essay was about the television show "Friends" with its cutesy schmaltz, and that friendship is a sort of sentimental luxury young people have up until college, when the serious work of adults begins. Erotic love is the serious province of poems, songs, and respectable married life; friendship is the territory of teen movies and purple dinosaurs. Spouses and children are important. Co-workers and neighbors are there for the off days or to help smooth our professional lives, and are otherwise expendable. Love makes the world go around. *Just friends* is the speech we get when we're turned down.

I am not arguing for some binary solution, that we can only have affection for friends *or* for husbands or wives. Romantic love for one's spouse is still the foundation of the family unit. Nevertheless, it's ironic that our cultural obsession with romance has made marriage *harder*. If we watch romantic movies, the message is that our soulmate is out there, and he or she will be our lover, confidant, *and* best friend. That is an awful lot of expectations to load on one person, and when we find that our significant other cannot be expert in all those roles we are disappointed and cynical. These standards we set for others are not conducive to forming or maintaining marital relationships.

Thus the advice a pastor once gave my congregation for marriage: lower your expectations. It sounds at best comical and at worst cynical. It does not mean people should have no standards at all, but that they might be realistic about what one person can do for them. Otherwise, who could meet your checklist? We would all become like little Seinfelds, rejecting potential mates because they don't like music at the same volume we do or they hold their fork the wrong way. And, true to life, as we lionize perfect marriages in our media

fewer and fewer people, statistically, are married at all. When we find that no soulmate is going to descend from the clouds—we buy a cat.

The Asian attitude toward marriage and the medieval European assumption was similar: love comes after the wedding and not necessarily before. It doesn't always work for the best, as love also might not come at all; I sometimes saw people in arranged marriages in the third world who lived like roommates and had open affairs on each other. I also noticed that people in developing countries were more suspicious of *opposite*-gender friendships than North Americans usually are. But I do think that seeing marriage as an important but not all-encompassing part of our lives will make us happier people. If we accept that we need husbands and wives but we also need confidants with other interests to do 'guy' or 'girl' things with, and that this isn't indicative of a failure in our marriages or spouses, we will be better-balanced people.

How to achieve this is difficult. Third-world societies often seem to have deeper friendships between people because, with limited economic prospects, people tend to stay where they were born and there is less mobility. Friendships aren't totally calculating transactions, but there is more likelihood that we will invest the effort in making friends when we know that we'll be in one place for a long time, like it or not, and our parents and children will be as well.

When we're hired for a two-month contract in this town and then we fly to Munich for another, that investment is less likely. I do not think this has been studied much yet, but it surely is not good environmentally or culturally to have the sort of economy which encourages or forces people to move every year to a different city to keep or find a job. Not everyone of course does this. Many of the people you went to high school with in your hometown are still there. But when you return to your hometown your alumni are probably greatly outnumbered by the transients, and the level of community trust is likely diminished. There are just too many strangers.

But along with some economic shift in how we live, there will have to be a cultural shift. The social relaxing of moral codes regarding sex in the west in the last thirty years—the increasing acceptance of alternative sexual lifestyles and the openness of what used to be private—is either a sign of moral collapse or liberation, depending on your viewpoint. But that openness has also caused us to sexualize friendships with a sort of snickering innuendo, to assume that they all have an erotic component at some deeper level. And even if we see it as innocent, we dismiss socializing for its own sake as a luxury appropriate to children or the aged, but dispensable when we're trying to make a living.

That's too bad. Here we can, for a change, learn something from the third world. I feel sorry for people who roll their eyes at the word *friend*, explaining that kids have friends and adults have co-workers or business contacts—or that a man who has a female friend and doesn't try to sleep with her is a loser. As C.S. Lewis says in *The Four Loves*, these people "betray the fact that they have never had a friend."

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This e-book is also online at <http://keneckert.com/english/english.html>