

# Kit Kat Essay

## peas and queues

Good Evening. I am Sid Druen. It is my pleasure to present the Kit Kat Annual Meeting essay.

Before I get started, I would like to address the elephant in the room. Although no one has said it to me, I am sure the question on everyone's mind is,

**“How did Sid Druen become the speaker at the Kit Kat Annual Meeting?”**

I have asked myself that question many times over the last year.

**I can only tell you that my selection was the result of impeccable timing.**

When the schedule was announced last year I did not realize that my turn to make a presentation was coming due. By the time I realized I needed to give an essay this year, all of the months were taken except May. Without remembering that the Annual Meeting was in May, I took that month – the only one left. Sean Allen, our President, offered to let me off the hook, but last year that solution did not seem appropriate.

As a result, I am your entertainment for tonight. I say “entertainment” since I am following last year's extremely scholarly and well-presented essay by Past President Terry Davis on – are you ready for this? – “The Meaning of Life.”

**How do you follow an essay on the meaning of life?**

I realized that I couldn't successfully compete on topic, but perhaps I could approach my essay as a quality of life question and thereby avoid comparisons.

So I picked a topic that would hopefully be relevant and entertaining to everyone in this room. But before I get to the topic, I think I should explain the cryptic title to some of our distinguished non-Kat guests.

Titles of Kit Kat essays have been mysteriously couched in entendres, double entendres and even triple entendres so that club members can't study the subject and ask overly intelligent questions to either stump the presenter or to show how erudite they are. So far in recent history, there is no evidence that this has ever happened, but we Kit Katters are a paranoid group.

The English have a saying, “Mind your ‘p’s and ‘q’s which means “mind your manners,” “be on your best behavior,” “mind your language” and so on. There are various theories about the phrase’s etymology, and they are quite interesting. Indeed, these theories could be the subject of an entertaining Kit Kat essay. Suffice it to say, I used homonyms for the lower case letters and came up with the title.

My broad area of examination tonight is social interaction and how we treat each other. Specifically, I want to examine the alarming increase in an already polarized society. It seems that people do not want to rationally discuss world or societal problems anymore. Positions are staked out and these positions are sacrosanct. Anyone who disagrees is treated with indifference or even disdain. Some nice people are rude and uncivil in everyday interactions. There is a shocking lack of common courtesy. Why is this? How did we get this way?

I intend to take the prerogative of my advanced age to reminisce about my own childhood. Then, I want to look at the role technology plays in this **uncivil** world, and see if technology is even partially to blame. Finally, I hope to illustrate how children, students and young adults are perhaps being sheltered too much to interact with new and challenging ideas; thereby increasing polarization.

A rather tall order, but I hope enough to keep you entertained, and perhaps to give you some new things **to think, or to worry**, about.

To be sure we are thinking along the same lines, I am going to start with some dictionary definitions:

**Manners** are polite or well-bred social behavior; **Etiquette** is the customary code of polite behavior in society; and **Civility is a formal politeness and a courtesy in behavior and speech.** For ease in following my comments, I will be using “civility” in its broadest context.

It is my belief that there has been an increase in polarization in the United States. This belief is confirmed by a recent poll. According to that recent poll, a record 69 percent of those polled believe that America has a major civility problem. These same pollsters have been tracking civility trends since 2010. They report that in each year they have seen increased civility concerns. Even more ominously, the general public does not see improvement in the near future.

I usually don’t have trouble differentiating polite and respectful conversation from conversation that is not civil. Just to be sure, language that hurts, demeans,

dehumanizes or demonstrates power over someone else is hurtful and uncivil. Intent is usually quite clear by the content and context of a statement.

Just as there is an exception to any rule, I will point out later that it may be difficult to distinguish whether a statement is hurtful or uncivil. For example, in a **microaggression**, it is not always easy to tell if you are being uncivil since you don't get to decide your intent. It is a **strange, new and different, world out there**.

But, right off the bat, I would like to avoid and disassociate myself from a favorite slogan of the National Rifle Association which is:

**“An armed society is a polite society.”**

Besides being overly simplistic, it is hard to believe that fear-based politeness is consistent with a full and respectful discussion of conflicting ideas. So this NRA slogan will not be considered.

Increased polarization is evident in many facets of life, but I need only to draw your attention to the recent United States presidential election. The uncivil remarks by both candidates and their supporters are shocking. After the election, with its surprise ending, reactions on both sides seemed to escalate. I am not going to dwell on the political scene, because I believe it would be wrong to blame America's civil behavior problems entirely on the election. The election is just an example of what is happening in the United States. It is not the root cause. In addition, using political examples would be much too easy. Since we do not expect much better of politicians, I will generally avoid using politicians as examples.

**Unfortunately, we were becoming overly polarized even before the election process began.** Americans were choosing sides to defend or criticize in almost every facet of life.

Choosing is an American way of life. From football teams to television programs, people make choices every day, but many of the social beliefs being chosen today are being fanatically defended with a rabid devotion. These are choices that are not open to discussion. This polarization becomes more apparent every year. Under a “fanning the flames” approach, there are those who take advantage of these social beliefs to ignite groups on both sides. An inability to discuss ideas in a rational manner is an alarming breakdown of both our heritage and lifestyle.

The late Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Moyer, a former Kit Kat member known to many of us in this room, was greatly concerned with deteriorating civility. Tom once said,

**“Civility requires no operator’s manual, no updates to download, no complicated set of rules. It is simple; it is easy and produces positive and constructive human interaction.”**

I would like to emphasize Tom’s point **that civility produces positive and constructive human interaction.**

Civility and courtesy do matter. As noted historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, from Xenia, Ohio who attended The Ohio State University and taught at Harvard –wrote in his 1946 advice book, **Learning How to Behave**, good manners don’t complicate social life as much as simplify it. Mr. Schlesinger noted that **manners are free for all to use**, and even the **outward motions of politeness imply certain kindness, respect and consideration for others. Kindness, respect and consideration** can go a long way toward reducing polarization.

As you have perhaps detected from my accent, I am from the South – a small town in Virginia to be specific. Growing up, the phrase I heard most frequently from my mother was, **“Behave yourself.”** Those two words expressed it all to me. While I was growing up, I thought it meant I would be punished if I did not do what was proper. I now know she meant for me not to embarrass her, my father or me by behavior that was not proper and appropriate. Even long after I was grown and exempt from punishment, she would continue saying those two words as we parted. It is interesting, how just two words can affect behavior.

In the “Behave yourself” admonition I received as I was growing up, there was a good chance any misbehavior on my part would have been reported to my parents before I arrived back home. My watchful neighborhood was the personification of the “it takes a village to raise a child.”

My all-male college, a few years after I graduated, started distributing to every freshman and transfer student a handbook on manners. It is a thin book of the basics that is easily read. Alumni look back and reminisce how helpful that little book was. The little book of manners was credited with successful friendships, social events, interviewing, job placement and even mate selection.

In those days, **it seemed we were taught basic “manners” as a part of growing up; however I cannot remember having a specific lesson in manners.** Looking

back, I think we learned mostly by example. **We did as we saw and were told.** It was a kinder, gentler time when most people were respectful of others. Even the movies and television programs of the time had a moral code. For example, the subdued violence of the westerns had the “Code of the West” where respect was shown to Indians, the bad guys and women. Outside of a Disney product, it is hard these days to find exemplary behavior in movies or in television.

While we may think of uncivil behavior as a fairly recent phenomenon, in reality, it is not. The world has always had atrocities. Previously, we were not fully aware of the number and scope of these atrocities. We relied on magazines, newspapers and television for almost all our news. Events in other states and countries had to compete for a slice of the 30-minute evening news on television. Today we have had rapid advancements in communications. Because of 24/7 news broadcasts, rebroadcasts and repeat rebroadcasts, we are graphically shown the worst of human behaviors from all over the world. The internet, including social media, has also opened up whole new avenues of unimaginable activities that are even too unsuited to be shown on television.

I thought of Tom Moyer’s phrase, “**positive and constructive human interaction,**” when I looked at my own Facebook page or wall.

**Yes, in an attempt to deny my age, I am on Facebook.**

I have amassed a group of “friends” whose posts I see regularly. Recently, I have been shocked and alarmed at the vitriol and scurrilous things that some of my normal and sane “friends” post on Facebook. Admittedly, these were politically motivated posts. I would characterize some of these comments as rude, insensitive and borderline sedition. These Facebook posts are public. They can be seen by not only their own “friends”, but also by the Facebook public which is currently over a billion people. I can’t help asking myself, what are they thinking?

Companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, have established personalization algorithms that cater specific information to a user’s online newsfeeds. This **information silo** or **filter bubble** or **echo bubble** is a result of a website designer selectively guessing what information a user would like to see based on information gathered on that individual. They use such factors as location, past click behavior and search history. **As a result, users become separated from information that differs from their views. Effectively social media groups are isolated from others with different views. They only see information from sources who share similar views.**

**The choices made by the algorithms are not evident.** So users are not aware of the manipulation. Just like Google sends you advertisements for items you've searched. It is fairly easy to stream selected social network ideas to similar minded individuals. This is not unlike certain television networks that have a built-in bias in reporting the "news." The net effect is reinforcing bias and polarization. This method of curating content has replaced the function of the traditional news editor. New Columbus resident and best-selling author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D, Vance said in a New York Times op-ed piece that **people naturally trust the people they know — their friend sharing a story on Facebook — more than strangers who work for faraway institutions. And when we're surrounded by polarized, ideologically homogeneous crowds, whether online or off, it becomes easier to believe bizarre things,**

These social networking programs can create significant barriers to analytical thinking. Social discussion and idea sharing suffer when people have a narrow information base and don't reach outside their social network.

The bubble effect could have enormous negative implications for civic discourse in general. The surprising results of the U.S. presidential election in 2016, and its aftermath, have been blamed on the "filter bubble" phenomenon. Many are concerned that the practice is harmful to our democracy,

Bill Gates said earlier this year,

**“Technologies such as social media let you go off with like-minded people, so you're not mixing and sharing and understanding other points of view ... It's super important. It's turned out to be more of a problem than I, or many others, would have expected.”**

As part of the social network studies, some researchers are also looking at how children are developing in our digital age. There was an interesting item recently in the *Journal of Pediatrics*. Researchers observed diners in Boston area fast-food restaurants, looking at the family configuration of adult, child and mobile device. These researchers were trained in anthropological observation techniques, looking in detail at the interactions between children and adults taking care of them. They were specifically focusing on the adults' use of devices like tablets and smartphones. The object was to observe and to find out what kinds of questions we should be asking about digital devices as they relate to parenting. Not surprisingly, most used some kind of mobile device, either continuously, intermittently or at the end of the meal. Of the 55 groups observed in the study, only 15 had no device in play. They noted more engagement between the diners when there was not a device in play.

Steve Jobs, head of Apple computers, said at the launch of the iPad in 2010 that it was the best tool for everyone to access the internet and that **everyone should own one**. A few years later a reporter asked him how his kids like their iPads. He said they did not have one. Apparently he felt the iPad **was not conducive to his own children's development**.

Indeed, there is an exclusive private school, the Waldorf School of the Peninsular, where about 75 percent of its students are children of executives in Silicon Valley industries. The Waldorf School of the Peninsular does not allow technology in the school. No smart phones and no personal tablets are allowed. Apparently, these parents feel their children are better prepared for the future by learning the old fashioned way.

Perhaps they agree with Adam Alter, a marketing professor at New York University, who in his new book, **Irresistible, The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked**, tracks the rise in digital behavior addictions. He attempts to explain why so many people today are addicted to technology-driven behaviors like social media, emailing, and video games. Alter seems especially concerned about how children and teens interact with technology, citing that they are the most vulnerable of us all. For example, he believes that if pre-teen students have unfettered access to devices with screens, these technologies prevent them from forming meaningful relationships.

In another phase of learning, the New York Times reported in February that there has been an uptick in the number of high-school students who support the First Amendment. Ninety-one percent of 12,000 students surveyed by the Knight Foundation said people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions. While nine out of ten is not a bad outcome when we talk about a fundamental liberty such as the right to freedom of speech. It would be nice if all would support this basic right, but 91 percent is pretty good.

Unfortunately, the 91 percent figure is not the whole story. When asked if they support the right of people to express unpopular opinions that were offensive to others, only 45 percent said yes. These are high-school kids, and they may have many more adolescent concerns, so thinking through the nuances of free speech is probably far down their list of concerns. This is still a disturbing statistic. Nearly half of these high-school students would suspend freedom of speech if the public speech would be offensive to other students.

Let us hope their high school teachers are asking the important follow-up question, “Who decides what is offensive?” and “How could that power be abused under the guise of prohibiting ‘offensive’ speech?” The goal should be to produce tough open-minded young adults who are not afraid to hear and debate challenging ideas, not to keep from offending others.

I realize that some may feel high-school students may not yet be ready for the nuances of free speech. This concept is perhaps better taught in our colleges and universities.

High school is one thing, but college and university life is where most believe the free exchange of ideas gives students a broader view of life. But to consider new ideas, students must know that these ideas exist before they can be expected to discuss them.

A couple of months ago, the featured speaker at the Columbus Crichton Club was Greg Lukianoff, president of an organization dedicated to securing freedom of speech on college campuses. His organization has released a list of the 10 worst colleges for free speech. Basically, they analyzed the recent trend of United States colleges and universities to adopt a culture of political correctness that stifles free speech. In order to shield students from radical ideas, some colleges have created “**safe spaces**” where students can retreat from ideas and positions at odds with their own. A “**bubble vacuum,**” if you like.

In 2016, some law lecturers at the University of Oxford in England began using “**trigger warnings**” to alert students to potentially distressing subject matter. This drew criticism from journalists, who related the phenomenon to Generation Snowflake, and questioned how well law students educated with trigger warnings would function as lawyers.

By the way, a “snowflake” is a term used to characterize a person who became an adult in the 2010s and who is more prone to taking offence. They are said to be less resilient than previous generations, or too emotionally vulnerable to cope with views that challenge their own. It is considered by most to be a derogatory term. "Generation Snowflake" refers to raising snowflake children in ways that give them an inflated sense of their own uniqueness. (No winners or losers, just participation awards.)

Oxford University has not adopted a formal policy on trigger warnings, leaving their use to the discretion of individual lecturers. On the other hand, some United



States colleges and universities are starting to mandate “trigger warnings” to avoid upsetting students about class materials.

There have been developments in Academia outside the classroom. Some colleges and universities have cancelled invited speakers because their topics might prove too controversial for the students, or at least for some students. Recently, at Middlebury College in Vermont, there was a student riot because the invited featured author was going to present his controversial ideas in a lecture sponsored by a campus organization. A college professor was injured trying to protect the speaker from the violence of the riot. New York University and University of California, Berkeley, were also scenes of similar riots, but Middlebury is usually not expected to be in such firebrand company.

Remember my comments about the 55 percent of high schoolers who would suspend free speech rights if materials would be offensive to others. Materials that are not personally offensive to you, but are offensive to your fellow students do not deserve free speech protections according to over half of those high-schoolers interviewed.

Some of these high schoolers have progressed to higher institutions. The latest trend in some college and university settings is the use of consultants to help students identify “microaggressions” and to teach them how to intervene when they observe one. Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to certain persons based solely upon their membership in a marginalized group. For instance, asking an Asian for help with a math problem could be considered a slight and a microaggression using a stereotype, for example, that Asians are good at math. The person asked may have been the top math student in the class, but others may perceive it as a derogatory request based on a stereotype.

As if microaggressions were not enough to worry about, there is a recent trend in exposing a “cultural appropriation.” Take the recent incident at a college in California. **Latin’** students set off a furor by accusing their white classmates of “cultural appropriation” for wearing hoop earrings. (Note I used the genderless word **Latin’**. Some **Latin’** students believe Latino and Latina are charged sexist words.) Back to the hoop earrings, **Latin’** students expressed the view that ghetto styles like oversize hoops arose as an act of resistance to a “historical background

of oppression and exclusion”, and asked, “Why should white girls be able to take part in this culture?”

Naturally, there has been a backlash against these expressed themes of political correctness. Alumni who hear about such activities have started to complain to the administrators of their alma maters. They have also demonstrated their unhappiness by cutting or withholding donations.

### **Withholding donations gets the attention of the college administration!**

John Ellison, dean of students at the University of Chicago, wrote to all incoming students that the University of Chicago rejects the culture of political correctness that has stifled free speech at campuses across the nation. He wrote,

**“Although civility and mutual respect are vital to all of us, we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate that may challenge you and even cause discomfort.”**

One journalist commented that it is a sad commentary on the state of higher education that Dean Ellison’s statement is seen as a brave and bold move.

Others saw the University of Chicago letter as an attempt to corral the alumni who were dissatisfied and to send a warning to all black, minority, feminist and LGBTQ students who might be tempted to change the power structure.

I began this talk discussing the alarming increase in an already polarized United States. I reminisced about my formative years and looked at the formative years of today’s children and students. I examined the effect of technology on the thought process and how our students are learning. Finally, I mentioned some interesting protective cultures developing in colleges and universities.

Sadly, I must conclude that the polarization we are experiencing will not diminish soon. Consequently, I do not see a bright future for civility. We can only encourage good examples of polite behavior and model it ourselves. Perhaps we can reform certain news networks and social media to more fairly represent ideas, but I don’t have too much faith in that approach. To combat the polarity in our country, we need to try to understand other points of view and be willing to discuss issues, not people. Remember, a respectful civil discussion never hurt any person or idea.

**As I conclude my remarks, I hope I have not offended anyone, made any microaggressions of which I was unaware. On the other hand, I hope I have**

**given you some food for thought, and that that food went well with the excellent meal Christopher Katt provided.**

As we move in to the question and answer portion, I don't think I need remind you of my mother's admonition, "**Behave yourself.**"

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