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Does sex have a future?

The Future of Sex

Synopsis of the June 17, 2004 WFS Washington DC chapter dinner program presented by former chapter president Eric Garland; summarized by Dave Stein

The blockbuster murder mystery *The DaVinci Code* centers on communion with God through the holy act of sex instead of through a formal church structure. Religious leaders offer only a tepid response to the author, and few if any boycotts.

A leading automotive manufacturer became one of the world's top distributors of adult entertainment, a \$1 billion per year industry, through its satellite television business. But this does not show up on their ledgers.

What's going on here?

Sex in America is going through fascinating changes, according to Eric Garland, past president of the NatCapWFS, as he shared his research for his forthcoming book, *The Future of Sex in America*, at the chapter's June 2004 dinner program. America is at the crossroads as trends in family, religion, health, education, and technology interact to change sex and what it means to our lives, noted Garland in his futuristic analysis.

THE SEXUAL EVOLUTION – ALIVE AND WELL

“There are major changes taking place today in sexual behavior, even though we perceive the 'sexual revolution' to have happened in the 60's,” says Garland. “But sex is evolving in fascinating ways. Macho NASCAR drivers and NFL coaches now talk freely about the physical shortcomings of their sex lives in TV ads for pharmaceuticals. Studies show a majority of nursing home residents are sexually active. Pornography is mainstreaming, and our communication about sex is opening up in the media.”

Nowadays, as Garland has observed, every third TV commercial during a sports event relates to sexual dysfunction. All the while, there are teen sex parties; yet teen pregnancy has dropped by 40% in the last decade.

Garland began his futuristic study of sex in America by examining trends in lifestyle elements, including transportation, personal wealth, family life, and leisure. While indeed, the sexual revolution is

often associated with “the pill” that (at least in part) freed people from the worry of “oops babies,” four present social trends and three technology trends promise substantial impact of their own.

SOCIAL DRIVERS

A major driver is the reduced impact of church orthodoxy. In 1955, 49% of the US population were church goers. By 2003, this number had dropped to 41%. At one time, noted Garland, the church was an accepted authority on matters of social behavior, in some cases going beyond Biblical proscription. Holding hands was bad, particularly if you “liked” doing it – but do people hold hands when they don't like it? Girls were admonished to carry a Bible and a phone book whenever they had to ride in the back of a car with a boy – never mind that Garland was unable to find the term “phone book” in the Bible. Today, with a do-it-yourself morality and moral relativism holding sway and the church's impact correspondingly reduced, even the Judeo-Christian prohibition against coveting your neighbor's wife is heeded less often than before. Garland also noted that members of abstinence groups are more likely to be pregnant than are non-members, because the members are not taught birth control.

Another driver is demographics, particularly aging Americans. Today, there are 35 million Americans over 65 years of age. In 2020, this number will be 70 million. Nursing home populations generally range from 80 to 102 years of age, with a median age of 80.1. Furthermore, 88% of the people there at least think about sex, and there is high activity. Also, there are syphilis outbreaks in nursing homes, and men in nursing homes buy Viagra. Another shocking statistic – the #1 growth market segment in Planned Parenthood consists of women older than 65 who are divorced or who are single again. Why is this, considering that we think of sex as a young person's game? After all, who do we show on TV?

Notes Garland, the answer may lie in the fact that there is more time for people to explore sex as they live longer, in some cases approaching 50 years after the children are grown and out of the house. As a result, the older people are more active.

Not to be outdone, the younger people are impacted by a third driver, the information age, extending to internet dating. Younger people are more comfortable with IT media. IT facilitates their communication and helps them meet other people, usually with more psychological safety.

Then there are fewer taboos on discussions about sex. At one time, television might well have adhered to a rule that when they show two people kissing, one foot must remain on the floor. Contrast that with what is shown now on programs that receive good ratings, for example, two women and one man in a hot tub on cable TV. Other behaviors and lifestyles including gay and lesbian lifestyles are also presented more openly on TV. There is also ... well, I'll stop here. When people hear others talking about these behaviors, their willingness to discuss their own behaviors is less inhibited.

TECHNOLOGY DRIVERS

Shifting gears, Garland then discussed the impact of various technology drivers on sex in America. One such driver is increased image technology and bandwidth, now extending to cameras in cell phones and thereby impacting privacy. With a cellphone camera, a girl might see her boyfriend with another girl (if someone snaps and e-mails the picture), and a breakup occurs. As Garland noted, however, privacy is relatively new, as it never existed in small villages. Even so, image technology can support surveillance by the “morality police” as well as a new level of voyeurism. On this point, Garland half-jokingly asked, “Where do you apply to watch the watcher?”

Another application of image technology is pornography. As Garland observed, we are the most pornography-soaked society in history, and there is no longer a scarcity of erotic images. In fact, children can use search engines to find pornography and then clear their history bars and caches. With nothing more than a relatively commonplace wireless device, a 7th grade boy can wire in pornography.

Improved healthcare is a second technology driver. Garland stated that people of his own generation once associated casual sex with the threat of death. Some of the risks of casual sex are now mitigated by improved healthcare. However, it doesn't stop here. Garland envisions that in the future, one might know if he/she has a sexually transmitted disease (STD) before potentially putting others at risk. He further anticipates that someday, devices in one's home will indicate if a person there (presumably a houseguest) is interested. After all, costs are down for computer processing and memory chips. Garland boldly predicted that this may happen sooner than five years from now.

The remaining frontier is sex toys. Garland predicts that one day we will have the "orgasmatron." Noting the research being done on spinal column injuries, he explored the possibility of implantable devices that are wired into the spinal column. In addition, there are already virtual devices that let one experience the pressure and texture of an object, and development is marching on. For example, you might someday experience a virtual apple via goggles and virtual reality gloves. When you grasp the virtual apple, the glove provides the physical resistance and tactile sensations. Imagine shaking hands with Abraham Lincoln and feeling the pressure of his grip! Where is this leading, asked Garland – to a full-body virtual reality suit?

WHERE DO THESE TRENDS CONVERGE?

Garland concluded by speculating on possible convergence and interactions of these trends. For example, with fewer inhibitions against discussing one's own behavior, groups of people who think that a certain behavior is OK can get together in cyberspace. Finding a partner online is more acceptable now, but Garland also noted that IT also facilitates unacceptable behavior such as child pornography. Finally, he suggested that people might treat each other more humanely but that sex may become more dehumanized.

The good news, says Garland, is that Americans will explore sex for decades with less threat of disease, fewer unwanted pregnancies, and more emotional confidence, and they will continue healthy sexuality longer than any previous generations.

Q&A (and comments!)

C. The threshold of what is pornographic will increase such that nothing is so pornographic anymore.

A. One can't judge tomorrow by today's values.

C. We might someday have the capability for a person to record all of his/her sensations and sell them.

A. Yes, but first there will need to be more research in biotechnology and neurotransmitters.

Q. Are there any mitigating trends or countertrends?

A. Yes. For example, there is increased fundamentalism in various religions including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This may be a response to a decline in church, synagogue, and mosque relevance. With the shrinking adherence, those people who remain followers of mainstream religion are more vocal.

Also, as a backlash, some people identify more with religion. "I follow God." Furthermore, some people want to raise their children in a way that they deem right, or they see society falling apart.

During the Q&A period, Garland also presented point-of-sale data for adult video sales and rentals. According to the data, which are not always indicative on the end users, the largest customer group is middle-age women. Next are younger men, followed by older men. Fourth place goes to college age girls.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Like all of the NatCapWFS dinner programs, this one did not last forever. However, it provided an evening of insight and provocation about one of the principal facets of life as a human. If you missed it, then you missed the time of your life. As the incumbent chapter president, Limor Schafman, had stated prior to the program, "We invited Mr. Garland because his talk on the future of sex illustrates an important aspect of the World Future Society's role as a center for study, exploration and analysis of world trends that affect our lives, and which we can use to create the future we want."

The Program Goes On!

How could we possibly end a program like this one? Here's some follow-on discussion from the chapter's interactive Web forum, just for you!

Eric Garland
posted Fri June 18 2004 12:34 PM

Hello NatCapWFS members,

OK, so what struck you as interesting, unusual, wrong, insane, true, or prosaic about my talk on June 17?

The one thing I think *even more* is that this topic requires more research, and more original research at that.

Human beings are complex, and I have increasing respect for them!

Thread 1

Dave Montgomery
posted Sat June 19 2004 12:18 PM

In response to the concern that you should know more about previous research: You may want to find a book by Esther Gwinnell, *Online Seductions: Falling in Love with Strangers on the Internet* (Kodansha International). Gwinnell is a psychiatrist who has analyzed romance by email.

Eric Garland
posted Sat June 19 2004 03:57 PM

Fascinating! I shall give it a look.

Also, there's a book on the neurochemistry of love and lust that I am really into.

Ken Harris
posted Mon June 21 2004 06:43 AM

I much enjoyed Eric's talk. It is the kind of lively meeting we need to have to attract attendance at the beginning of summer. He has obviously done a lot of research on the subject. However, I still think he needs to respond more adequately to the question I asked on what could turn the trends he has discovered around. Trends are not usually immutable; there are counterforces working against them. If they were immutable, anyone could be a futurist. A key to being a futurist professional is to be able to spot the things that may make the future unlike the recent past. There have been major changes in sexual mores in history (e.g., the restoration period in 17th century England); these probably can happen again.

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 08:58 AM

Ken, thanks for your kind comments and I agree with you on the need for a deeper understanding of how these existing trends could be further diverted in the future. I think that Joe made similar comments.

For example, I wonder what the overall trend of more personalized health information will do. I have made identified trends in the possibility of telemedicine where you know if you have STDs. Planned Parenthood, on the other hand, recommends that you have counselors give you this information so that you don't freak out if you are told you have a health condition – especially HIV. Perhaps we will have public health campaigns to make sure you share health information with your doctors instead of just keeping it to yourself.

Also, I was watching history channel program on the history of sex last night – it was fascinating! Especially about the fact that sexual mores have changed several times throughout the past. I am careful to make the distinction that we are living "traditionally" and that we're moving into some brave new world – I think there have been changes throughout, I would like to describe the next round of changes.

Jay Herson
posted Tue June 29 2004 04:01 AM

Eric didn't mention anything about legalization of prostitution at his talk. Do you see that as something that is coming in at least some states in the US, foreign countries?

Dave Stein
posted Wed August 04 2004 06:44 PM

Eric,

Your presentation on the future of sex was indeed enlightening! Although the subject of divorce was not a major element of your talk, I'm interested in your views on factors that influence divorce rates.

According to the *Pocket World in Figures, 2004 Edition*, published by *The Economist*, the United States has the highest divorce rates in the world. Might this not be a consequence, at least in part, of our being a "throw away" society? Examples: long ago, people tried to repair and preserve their belongings

whenever possible, but now, replacement is often more economical and more convenient than repair. Furthermore, many people buy new cars and throw away (trade in) their old ones. More recently, a number of corporations have begun throwing away (laying off) workers who no longer add to the bottom line. Has the “throw away” mindset now migrated to marriage?

Dave Stein

Thread 2

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 11:45 AM

I was wondering what kinds of trends, forces, and events you are all seeing that intrigue you about where the future of sex is going.

For example, it was brought up at the meeting that today's teens have a more tolerant attitude toward oral sex, that it has become “advanced kissing.” What could that mean?

My favorite is noticing that somewhere along the line, it became cool to talk about erectile dysfunction.

I still don't know thought that Mike Ditka, coach of the Chicago Bears, was an effective advocate for *anything* to do with sex.

Anything fun you all are picking up?

John Meagher
posted Tue June 22 2004 10:24 AM

Eric,

I think research into mental health states, happiness and sexual activity or its lack thereof would be very useful. Perhaps this has been done.

Will Aldous Huxley's prediction in Brave New World, where he proclaimed “promiscuity is a public duty” or something very similar become the new sexual moral after life threatening diseases are conquered or controlled?

Will science support a link between great health, mentally and physically and sexual activity? Similar to nutrition, do humans need a certain amount of sexual activity to remain healthy? What is the variants in individuals, some need more and perhaps others less – do we have parameters to determine what is best? Does celibacy lead to physical and mental dysfunction for the many, while some reap its benefits? Ergo – some of the problems that the Catholic church is experiencing, and other religions as well that restrict sexual activity severely may simply be a normal bell curve reaction over time to humans living under excessive constraint.

Are there serious epidemiologists researching or looking for associations in these questions, at all? If so, that may reveal some new and interesting trends and associations useful for your text.

I found your research that single men have sex in recent survey once every three months, compared to married folk with about once a week to be low from what I remember way back in the 70's and 80's. I

have seen some shows and articles that indicate that the two earner family has added stress and sex activity is down for marrieds with kids substantially, perhaps life in general is more busy. For your book it may be interesting to compare sexual activity trends in different nations, different decades and uncover if there is a relationship to reduced anxiety, tension, stress or depression or increased wellness and happiness related to sex activity in those societies.

John M

Eric Garland

posted Tue June 22 2004 12:55 PM

The relative sexual frequency of single men did strike me as a little low, but I think that there are some cultural issues associated with the statistics. The study was global and not just America. For example, in cultures where there are more restrictions for females before marriage, single males may not engage in the same type of premarital sex that has become common. You add that in with those who don't date much, and the average for single men may drop to that low of once every three months.

Jonathan Peck

posted Fri June 25 2004 01:44 PM

The averages in sexual activity and the distribution are discussed in a very interesting way by Barabasi in his book *Linked*. The majority of people have between one and ten sexual partners during their lives, while a minority has dozens. A few (Gaetan Dugas reportedly had 250 sexual partners a year and Wilt Chamberlain claimed to have sex with 20,000 women) outliers have many more. I think the distribution across cultures and ages may be much more illuminating than the averages.

Eric Garland

posted Sat June 26 2004 08:41 AM

Yes, statistics are really misleading here in many cases. For example, I think the “once a fiscal quarter” averages is distributed around the world by culture – if your village will violently aggress women for premarital sex, then as a male, premarital sex is less regular than, say, at an American university.

Bill Wyman, bass player for the Rolling Stones, reported a number of partners similar to Wilt Chamberlain. This must be distorted, since...hey...he's the *bass player*... I can attest to the unlikeliness of such a claim.

Thread 3

Eric Garland

posted Mon June 21 2004 09:07 AM

In my presentation, I assert that strict church dogma is losing its influence in guiding how individuals pursue their sex lives. I believe that fewer people choose their behaviors because of the notion of sin and more on a variety of right/wrong and “personal choice” credos.

And yet, we have a sitting president who is actively pursuing policies of abstinence for teenagers.

Is the church losing steam?

Are fundamentalists gaining power or just a louder voice?

When Gen X has teenagers who grew up without this dogma, how will morality feature into their sexual decisions?

John Meagher
posted Tue June 22 2004 10:55 AM

Eric,

I think this weeks issue of Time talks about faith and politics and delves into issues of influence on morals and sex tangentially. A split in the Republican party to form an Evangelical wing of the GOP was discussed as a possibility, not in the near future of months but perhaps sometime soon because of the heavy influence of religion on platform positions causing a rift between moderates in GOP.

Stanley Greenberg in the Two Americas found similar evidence to what you presented that church going is on a decline since a peak in 1980 ish. However those that are faithful are ardently so and lines seem to be hardening in terms of philosophy between church goers and non-goers in political terms, and this gets into sexually charged issues of abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research/new reproduction methods and sex education in schools heavily.

Over the weekend we saw the movie "Saved." It raised some interesting points regarding U.S. teens and the influences of modern adaptations of religion on their current thinking about sex. For some populations in our society church will have major influence for some time to come.

We may see a bifurcated society, where church influence is strong and another sector where it is very weak on sexual mores. How big of a difference and how this will change is an interesting question.

I think in the INTERNET age more individuals will be making their own decisions on sex and less reliant on church dictates. This will carry over to other areas as well as more people read and interpret various faith traditions more as individuals with less than 100% conformity to church dogma.

This will have profound impacts in our society but the effects in more religious/politically linked societies will be even greater.

John M

Thread 4

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 11:41 AM

A comment from the audience was very interesting. More people are relating by way of online communities, but is this leading us to dehumanizing one another?

When people are represented by pixels, does this lead people to a lack of empathy, and if so, what could be the implications of this?

Thread 5

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 11:39 AM

My third point was on the open discussion of behaviors that were formerly taboo, such as homosexuality and other alternative lifestyles. Far from the days when Luci and Desi couldn't be shown sleeping in a double bed, mass media features open examination of many issues in sexuality that have not been discussed on public airwaves.

Do you think this kind of open discussion is a first in America?

Is this really getting beyond Victorian prudery?

What will future generations take to be taboo? Or will the notion of feeling bad about your sexual proclivities be antiquated for them?

Thread 6

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 09:17 AM

Between haptics (“telefeel”) and VR goggles, we are approaching software simulations of sex that could fool our brains quite convincingly.

The implications of this as a sex toy are somewhat obvious. But I wonder, when these virtual fantasies can be created entirely by software simulation, how will we deal with potential for “thought crimes?”

Violent adult films and child pornography, unfortunately, have a market. These films are illegal primarily because those involved in the making of these films are criminally harmed.

As animation software achieves a level at which images can be mistake for reality – fooling our ideas as to color, light, shadow, depth, and flowing movement – we won't know the difference between real films, real actors, and simulations.

How will we as a society deal with virtual snuff films or child pornography? While technically nobody will be harmed in the making of these films, will we outlaw the encouragement of heinous behavior? Or might we say, “You fantasies are your own business, we will judge your behavior.”

My guess is that by 2020 animation software and display technologies will push us toward some of these questions.

Thread 7

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 09:03 AM

At the WFS meeting we talked about how this generation will be the first not to experience a relative scarcity of erotic material – porn/erotica of a number of types is everywhere online, and only a click away for anyone interested.

I'd like to expand on Joe's point: What will be the definition of "pornography"? We Americans become so used to the video/audio depictions of sex that it will not be segregated as a form of entertainment?

I'd be interested in what year you think that explicit adult material will appear on basic cable or other mainstream content channels.

I wager 2018.

Thread 8

Eric Garland
posted Mon June 21 2004 06:36 AM

Hello NatCapWFS,

So in my presentation I outlined a number of aspects of how society is changing in regards to sex. But as Joe Coates pointed out, it's important not to rest on thinking the future will be "today + better."

Given the shifts in society and technology, how do you think teenagers of 2022 might have different beliefs about sex? What could change in terms of our values?

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Yes, we think of sex as a young person's game, as evidenced by the people we show on TV and in advertisements. However, is this universal? Oriental cultures traditionally value age over youth. Is this changing?*
- *What are your thoughts on virtual communities in general – connecting more with people across the world who share your interests (including sex) and with correspondingly fewer people in your own neighborhood?*
- *Garland points out the possibility that you will know you have a disease (presumably an STD) before you transmit it. How does this relate to the smart toilets, smart houses, and smart clothes of Dick Smith's talk, also synopsized in this issue?*

Put your neurons to work, and let us hear from you, so that our greater constituency can hear from you as well.