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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Alpha Geeks

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

In 1950, Dr. Seuss published a book called “If I Ran the Zoo.” It contained the sentence: “I’ll sail to Ka-Troo, and bring back an IT-KUTCH, a PREEP, and a PROO, a NERKLE, a NERD, and a SEERSUCKER, too!” According to the psychologist David Anderegg, that’s believed to be the first printed use of the word “nerd” in modern English.

The next year, Newsweek noticed that nerd was being used in Detroit as a substitute for “square.” But, as Ander-egg writes in his book, “Nerds,” the term didn’t really blossom onto mass consciousness until The Fonz used it in “Happy Days” in the mid- to late-1970s. And thus began what you might call the ascent of nerdism in modern America.

At first, a nerd was a geek with better grades. The word described a high-school or college outcast who was persecuted by the jocks, preps, frat boys and sorority sisters. Nerds had their own heroes (Stan Lee of comic book fame), their own vocations (Dungeons & Dragons), their own religion (supplied by George Lucas and “Star Wars”) and their own skill sets (tech support). But even as “Revenge of the Nerds” was gracing the nation’s movie screens, a different version of nerd-dom was percolating through popular culture. Elvis Costello and The Talking Heads’s David Byrne popularized a cool geek style that’s led to Moby, Weezer, Vampire Weekend and even self-styled “nerdcore” rock and geeksta rappers.

The future historians of the nerd ascendancy will likely note that the great empowerment phase began in the 1980s with the rise of Microsoft and the digital economy. Nerds began making large amounts of money and acquired economic credibility, the seedbed of social prestige. The information revolution produced a parade of highly confident nerd moguls — Bill Gates and Paul Allen, Larry Page and Sergey Brin and so on.

Among adults, the words “geek” and “nerd” exchanged status positions. A nerd was still socially tainted, but geekdom acquired its own cool counterculture. A geek possessed a certain passion for specialized knowledge, but also a high degree of cultural awareness and poise that a nerd lacked.

Geeks not only rebelled against jocks, but they distinguished themselves from alienated and self-pitying outsiders who wept with recognition when they read “Catcher in the Rye.” If Holden Caulfield was the sensitive loner from the age of nerd oppression, then Harry Potter was the magical leader in the age of geek empowerment.

But the biggest change was not Silicon Valley itself. Rather, the new technology created a range of mental playgrounds where the new geeks could display their cultural capital. The jock can shine on the football field, but the geeks can display their supple sensibilities and well-modulated emotions on their Facebook pages, blogs, text messages and Twitter feeds. Now there are armies of designers, researchers, media mavens and

other cultural producers with a talent for whimsical self-mockery, arcane social references and late-night analysis.

They can visit eclectic sites like [Kottke.org](#) and Cool Hunting, experiment with fonts, admire Stewart Brand and Lawrence Lessig and join social-networking communities with ironical names. They've created a new definition of what it means to be cool, a definition that leaves out the talents of the jocks, the M.B.A.-types and the less educated. In "The Laws of Cool," Alan Liu writes: "Cool is a feeling for information." When someone has that dexterity, you know it.

Tina Fey, who once was on the cover of Geek Monthly magazine, has emerged as a symbol of the geek who grows into a swan. There is now a cool geek fashion style, which can be found on shopping sites all over the Web (think Japanese sneakers and text-laden T-shirts). Schwinn now makes a retro-looking Sid/Nancy bicycle, which is sweet and clunky even though it has a faux-angry name. There are now millions of educated-class types guided by geek manners and status rules.

The news that being a geek is cool has apparently not permeated either junior high schools or the Republican Party. George Bush plays an interesting role in the tale of nerd ascent. With his professed disdain for intellectual things, he's energized and alienated the entire geek cohort, and with it most college-educated Americans under 30. Newly militant, geeks are more coherent and active than they might otherwise be.

Barack Obama has become the Prince Caspian of the iPhone hordes. They honor him with videos and posters that combine aesthetic mastery with unabashed hero-worship. People in the 1950s used to earnestly debate the role of the intellectual in modern politics. But the Lionel Trilling authority-figure has been displaced by the mass class of blog-writing culture producers.

So, in a relatively short period of time, the social structure has flipped. For as it is written, the last shall be first and the geek shall inherit the earth.

Paul Krugman is off today.

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