One of librarianship's perennial problems—filing—became a national news story in the past few months. And a very curious story it was too. The Post Office, after taking advice, decided that it would be more convenient to have its subscribers' names, in its directories, arranged firstly in alphabetical order of surnames (as at present), secondly in alphabetical order of initials (rather than of forenames as at present), and lastly in alphabetical order of street names.

Present order:
- Smith, D. 12 Main St.
- Smith, D. A. 213 Great North Rd.
- Smith, David. 11 Lewis St.
- Smith, David James. 27 Old La
- Smith, Derek Zebedee. 19 Harris Rd.
- Smith, Dorcas. 13 Rathbone St.
- Smith, Doreen Jane. 29 The Avenue.

Proposed order:
- Smith, David. 11 Lewis St.
- Smith, D. 12 Main St.
- Smith, Dorcas. 13 Rathbone St.
- Smith, D. A. 213 Great North Rd.
- Smith, David James. 27 Old La.
- Smith, Doreen Jane. 29 The Avenue.
- Smith, Derek Zebedee. 19 Harris Rd.

These orders are both perfectly acceptable in current filing practice. Of the two of them the second is more in line with the latest thinking on the problem of alphabetical arrangement of personal names. It is also the method that has been used for many years in a number of large author files, with complete success. The obvious advantage of the second order is that one can find an entry relating to a person with a common surname whether one knows his full forenames or only his initials. Also in using a telephone directory it seems reasonable to assume that one is more likely to know the street in which a person lives than one is to know his forenames. As the subscriber chooses the form in which his name is given in a telephone directory, one could look for, say, a William Percy Jones under Jones, W.P., or Jones, Wm.P., or Jones, W.Percy, or Jones, William P., or Jones, William Percy. When the new system has been introduced the search for such a name will be much simpler.

The change was apparently recommended to the Post Office by a committee set up to plan for the best use of the Post Office's large, expensive and recently acquired computer, and was accepted together with other recommended changes. Up to August 1970 fourteen directories were in circulation using the new arrangement. In addition tests were
carried out to determine the public’s response to the new directories, and as far as we know, all these tests revealed a favourable public response, and an increased degree of efficiency in use. It was very probably the tie up with computers that produced the large scale unfavourable criticism in the mass media to the Post Office’s proposals. What is more difficult to account for is the strangely defensive attitude of the Post Office in respect of the largely ill-informed criticism. The scheme was denounced, for example, by the Consumer Council and the Post Office Users’ National Council (though the latter are now reported to have withdrawn their criticism); in the leader columns of the Daily Telegraph; in The Times letter column; by a Mr. de Manio in the early morning wireless programme ‘Today’; by John Crosby, a columnist on The Observer; and by the panellists on ‘Any Questions’. Among the more notable quotes was one by Lord Peddie: ‘We have got to guard against computers running our lives’. Why all these tribunes of the people chose to react in this way is a matter for speculation. But why the Post Office did not recognise the comments as being based on a lack of knowledge, and why it did not seek to inform the public of the advantages of the new scheme, these are much more puzzling. For example, The Daily Telegraph of the 11th August, 1970, gave the impression that the Post Office had completely abandoned alphabetical order in its directories. This sort of ignorance is to be expected from some newspapers, but why was the ignorance not corrected? Why were Lord Peddie’s fears of Big Brother not soothed? The answer may be that the Post Office has not yet redefined itself in its new status as a public corporation, and is thus susceptible to almost any public criticism.

The situation at present is that the Post Office, after a period of ‘reconsidering’ its previous decision, has decided to adhere to its plan and to produce all its future directories using the new filing. It is to be hoped that it will maintain its decision, and that rational and informed opinion will support the introduction of the new directories.

2—NORMAN KNIGHT

‘Change and decay in all around I see’—so wrote the author of a very popular hymn.* His lament seems to apply especially to the new telephone directories. In its infancy as a public corporation the British Post Office has introduced an innovation in their alphabetical arrangement that could be described as infantile indeed.

The telephone directory is easily the most widely consulted of any Post Office publication; it is used by virtually every adult almost daily. It is essential, therefore, that it shall be made as easy as possible to trace any name whose telephone number the user is seeking.

Despite certain inconsistencies—for example, the ignoring of commas and the use in the same alphabet sometimes of the word-

* Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847), ‘Abide with Me’.

The Indexer 7 (3) Spring 1971
Road, his name will precede that of A. Allan, whose address is 78 Harris Street.

Such a radical innovation might have been regarded as a mere wanton change for the sake of change. But the game has been given away by the Post Office itself in its explanation of the new system. This, it says, was recommended by a committee it had set up to plan for the best use of the Post Office's expensive computer. In other words, a highly expensive toy having been bought, some use had to be found for it.

In the case of the comparatively few Allans whose first forename begins with A, it may not be too difficult to trace the subscriber required. But what of the vast number of W. Smiths (including the Walter Smiths and the William Smiths)? And what happens if one does not know the name of the street or road in which the required subscriber lives? Indeed, telephone directories are very commonly used—for the very purpose of finding the address of someone to whom we wish to write.

*Catalogue & Index* (the organ of the Cataloguing and Indexing Group of the Library Association) professes to find the new system 'acceptable for filing purposes'. This, I think, must imply 'acceptable for computerized filing'. Be that as it may, it certainly runs directly contrary to the principles laid down by the British Standard for Alphabetical Arrangement (BS1749: 1969), which is quite explicit on the subject.

'Entries having the same first word shall be arranged in the alphabetical order of the second word. Similarly those having two words in common are arranged in the alphabetical order of the third word and so on.'

Nothing here about skipping one word (or initial—the same thing) and determining the order by a subsequent street name.

Perhaps the most convincing condemnation of the change came some nine years earlier from the lips of Mr. R. P. Dick, who was then in control of the telephone directories. In the course of an informative paper on their compilation read to the Society of Indexers in 1961, Mr. Dick said:

'If we decide to depart from the established order of names we are faced with a great difficulty. It means redirecting 60,000 operators and, even worse, re-educating the whole country in that particular. For fifty years we have put the names one way and, if we are going to change, it is a colossal task to educate everybody . . .

'So if an arrangement seems old-fashioned, or even wrong-headed, I think you will agree that, unless the balance is heavily on the side of change, it would be foolish to depart from the established custom.'

Numerous protests (but not so far any 'demonstrations') have been launched against the new system. They have come from such bodies as the Consumer Council and the Post Office Users' National Council; while it has also been denounced by The Times, The Daily Telegraph and The Observer as well as the B.B.C. media.

Despite these objections, the Post Office persisted in its decision. The E-K volume of the London directory, using the new alphabetical arrangement, was issued at the end of last year. It is a vast project, but it is hoped to publish the other three London volumes and most of the provincial volumes by the end of the present year. The inside cover of the E-K volume contains the following new directions:

Entries which have the same surname are in alphabetical order of initials.
The initial letter only of the forename decides the alphabetical position of the entry.
Entries with the same initials are in alphabetical order of street names.
Entries without street names are listed before those with street names in alphabetical order of postal locality.

*Illustration*

Gray B, Home Fm, Newtown
Gray B, 6 East St W1
Gray, Brian, 9 North St N2
Gray B, 17 South Av WC1
Gray B, 2 West Rd W1

The italics above are mine. Was the whole vast operation really worth while?