Should we be happy to carry on in the same old way, satisfied that nothing will radically change? I think it would be foolish. If anything can be certain in this uncertain existence, it is that life a few decades from now will be totally alien to anything we can now imagine. We can cheerfully forget such phenomena as the indexing word-processor—a short-term gadget, useful only for as long as the traditional index is useful. Unrecognizably different will be the gadgets used by our children or our children's children, and the main reason for the difference will be that not only the means of data storage but also the data themselves will be different—and, on top of all that, the desires of the 'consumer' will be different. The indexer of tomorrow faces a hard task.

We live in interesting times, as the old Chinese curse has it.

Towards the random index

Madsen Pirie
President of the Adam Smith Institute

An insidious form of discrimination is highlighted in a paper by two top sociologists at the City University of New York. 'Expectation and achievement in lower alphabet groups', by Professors P. Young and R. Walters, draws attention to problems caused by alphabetic discrimination.

Although it does not sound as exciting and dramatic as racism and sexism, nor is apparently capable of arousing the same fervour of opposition, alphabeticism is no less real as a source of inequality and discontent. Just as Ageism, the discrimination against the aged, has been with us for centuries but has only recently attracted media attention, so alphabeticism is a bias which western societies have perpetrated almost unconsciously, but which has only now been identified and exposed.

Alphabeticism, at its simplest, is discrimination against those whose names come in the lower part of the alphabet. Alphabetical lists have become so ingrained into western society that many of us discriminate unconsciously, never realizing that we make our friends and colleagues with the lower alphabet initials wait for our attention. A good test of our own fairness is to ask how many times, in drawing up lists for Christmas cards or invitations, we have used reverse alphabetical order to achieve some kind of balance. Very few of us can honestly answer that we do so about half the time.

Blatant alphabet elitism!

Now the new study by Young and Walters shows some of the consequences of alphabetic discrimination. In a twenty-year survey based on several hundred children, the authors show that the low alphabet child gets used to coming last on lists, to having low priority. Such children come to place the same low valuation on themselves; and the survey shows that they have lower ambitions and expectations, and expect to gain less out of life. At the adult stage they have salaries 16% below average, hold less than two thirds of the top managerial posts held by their high alphabet counterparts, and are five times more likely to suffer depressive illness or to attempt suicide.

Stephen Williams, the secretary-general of OTOZ, the group which represents and campaigns for lower alphabet citizens, explained that there was nothing in the new research which was not already known to his members through bitter personal experience, but that he was glad that the general public would now be forced to admit the facts of their own discriminatory attitude. 'My members are branded as second class', claimed Williams, 'from the first hospital list of new babies, through the first class register in school, and on through life to the last list of the deceased in a cemetery'.

'. . . Low-alphabet pride . . .'

I asked Williams why OTOZ did not simply recommend its members to adopt high alphabet names instead of their own. He told me that one group in Buckinghamshire had actually done that, changing their names by deed poll to Aaron-Smith, Aaron-Thompson, etc. His group opposed this measure for two reasons. Firstly, it was easily neutralized; and this is what had happened in the Buckinghamshire case. The rest of the community had simply followed suit, thereby restoring their high alphabet advantage. Secondly, to change the name was to admit its inferiority. Instead, OTOZ preferred to cultivate 'lower alphabet pride', teaching their members that there was nothing wrong or abnormal in being low-alphabet.

He preferred to lead OTOZ in a campaign to prohibit the use of discriminatory alphabetical lists. He cited a private member's bill coming before Parliament which would require Telecom to publish telephone directories in random order instead of the current alphabetical listing. Williams is optimistic about his group's success in breaking down the notion 'that B necessarily follows A'. He feels that the new technology will also reduce alphabetic discrimination by promoting the use of numbers for identification on a much more widespread basis.

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