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## 1990 Presidential Address

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### Some Comments On Alternate Naming Systems

Edward Callary<sup>1</sup>

Judging from some of the articles which have appeared within the past decade, there is currently a healthy concern over the generality of names and naming practices. Several articles have suggested that naming may be less general than we had thought and that there may in fact be a number of different naming systems, each one specific to the domain or domains being named, and, furthermore, that these naming patterns may differ significantly both from one another and from more "mainstream" naming of people and places (especially places). Celia and Richard Millward's study of ski-trail names, significantly subtitled "A New Toponymic Category," Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper's study of campsite names, subtitled "A New Onomastic Category," Jean Humphrey's study of yacht names, and my own study of radio station names<sup>2</sup> each suggests that there are domains separate from the mainstream which exhibit their own naming patterns and adhere to their own naming practices.

While these four studies certainly do not exhaust the possibilities of alternate naming domains, nor even their published reports, they do provide a basis for establishing what turns out to be the surprisingly consistent nature of alternate naming and thus allowing us to contrast alternate naming with more mainstream varieties.

Perhaps the major thread (and one which runs consistently through these alternate naming domains) is the lack of (or perhaps I should say spurning of) straight-forward, plain-English names. By contrast, there is a great deal of verbal play and tropes of many kinds; allusion and implication, hints and suggestions, and broad parody flourish. This playful use of language results outwardly in humor and inwardly in covert naming processes, where considerable work and knowledge are required in order to interpret a name.

Puns, in-jokes, and topical humor abound in these alternate areas; all aspects of names — phonetic, semantic, syntactic, and orthographic (often several simultaneously) — are played upon by the namers. Ski-trails, campsites, even yachts and radio stations are given wittily-wrought names which we would never think of applying to our towns, schools, streets, or parks.

Even the rules limiting the names of radio stations to no more than four letters and the understanding that station names must not wander far from the established norms of decency do not limit the creativity of the station namers. Many station names seem to have been chosen primarily because they provide a short, up-beat and easy way to remember the name of the station. WSEX in Chicago is a prime example. Who could forget a station with the name WSEX? or WZRD ("the Wizard")? or WXEZ ("E Z Radio")? A delightfully-creative name is found in that part of far southern Illinois known as "Egypt," where

station WKRO serves the area surrounding Cairo. Cairo is pronounced [KAY-row] (unlike the city in Egypt) and WKRO is literally "k-row," at once playing upon the local pronunciation of Cairo and reinforcing the local identification and pride which this pronunciation represents.

In other areas, Cornog and Perper report campsites named *Scumcroft Manor*, *Not OK Corral*, *Pineappleopolis*, and *Bandana Republic*. Humphrey reports yachts named *Codfather II*, *Seaquel*, *Agony of de Fleet*, and *Freudian Sloop*. And Millward and Millward report ski trails named *The Racer's Edge*, *Pasture Ability*, and *Fanny Hill*. Verbal play is so pervasive that Cornog and Perper are prompted to remark that "creative irreverence is the unifying characteristic of these . . . names" (2).

All names are not so approachable, however; many, and perhaps even a majority, have become either so intentionally cute that they are known only to a small group of insiders or so opaque that they are uninterpretable without knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the name. Again, these are practices found in each of the four domains, but most extensive among radio stations where more than half are uninterpretable to the uninitiated. The stories behind several of these names are reasonably well known, but most remain obscure. The story behind the naming of Chicago's WGN is one of the better known. WGN is owned and operated by the Chicago Tribune, which named the station to honor its image of itself, the "World's Greatest Newspaper." A similar story, but one much less well known, lies behind the naming of WLS. Like WGN, WLS was named by a corporate giant to promote both its self-image and its self-interest. The letters WLS stand for "World's Largest Store"; the station was originally owned by Chicago-based Sears, Roebuck and Company.

Behind these relatively less-opaque names lie the more obscure *WNVR* ("News Voice Radio"), *WCRM* ("Christian Radio Music), *WBMX* ("Black Music EXperience"), and the impenetrable *WJPC* ("Johnson Publishing Company"), *WSBC* ("World Storage Battery Company"), and *WPNA* ("the Polish National Alliance"). To the initiated, these are the meanings of the names, but to most of us, they are identifying groups of letters, merely letters and nothing more.

The practice of giving "in-group" names is even more dramatic in the other areas, where outsiders, not being privy to the information needed to interpret the names, are destined to remain outsiders. Millward and Millward list a number of these "inside" names, many of them jokes, where neither non-skiers nor those with a general knowledge of skiing are necessarily among the initiated; specific knowledge of the mountain where the trails are located or of the names of other trails is necessary to understand a trail name. Examples are *Out of Sight* at Gunstock, New Hampshire, and *Monday Mourning* at Sunday River, Maine (194). Campsite names are rich in this kind of covert naming. *Jerry's Kids* has nothing to do with Jerry Lewis, but to a different Jerry, ostensibly the patriarch of the camped clan, and *Gene Busters*, where the Gene referred to is Gene Shay, the festival MC (Cornog and Perpich 2, 3), and not biological genes (although I suspect that a number of plays on "Chromosome Gene" are made each season).

Yacht names are especially noteworthy, both for their frequent use of insider names and for the depth of knowledge required to interpret a name. Humphrey reports a number of these, where both the basic meaning of the name and its connotations and allusions are clear only upon knowing popular culture and the name of the yacht's owner. *Anna-Quaintance* is owned by a Quaintance; *Flakey*, by Flake; *Sea Jay's*, by C. Julstrom; *Clairvoyant*, by Clair; *Zak Attack*, by a Zakolan; and *Smiles*, by Miles, which puns along several dimensions at once.

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The covert nature of such a large number of these names is all the more remarkable when we consider how opposed this practice is to more familiar names, especially toponyms. For the most part toponyms are given openly and intentionally; they proclaim a denotation and connotations which the namer intends to share with the world: "this is Hebron"; "this is New Hope"; "this is Sioux City." The names are overt and are relatively transparent; their message is presumably to be shared by the namer(s) with all who contact the name. In this sense toponyms are generally inclusive. But this is decidedly not the case with names in the special categories we have been considering, where, in all four areas, naming is, as like as not, to be done in such a way as to exclude much of the world from understanding. The names are cryptic, however, rather than arbitrary, so they can be shared with others, although the "others" usually remain a very small circle. An extreme case is *WRMN*, which was named for the three daughters of the station's original owner: Rachel, Mary, and Nancy. Since *WRMN* is such a limited and obscure name, I can imagine it succumbing to folk etymology or "origin unknown" status within a few short years of the original owner's family's severing relationships with the station. Apparently these names are chosen primarily for the satisfaction of the namer and to limit an understanding of the name to a select few, either intellectual or social insiders. If the names are opaque and proclaim nothing to the outside world, then so be it.

Another general characteristic of naming in these alternate domains is an overwhelming concern, even within the apparent contradiction imposed by covert naming, with local identification. Considerably more than half of the radio station names identify their home communities or home organizations, a remarkable fact when we consider how ingenious some station namers have to become in order to identify locally, since the first stations in the area get their choice of the more desirable call letters. The first station in Danville, Illinois, took the name *WDAN*, straight-forward and proclaiming "Danville"; the next to come along wanted to identify with the town as well, but the obvious name was already taken, so the second station was named *WDNL*, still reflecting "Danville," but at a moment's hesitation and a considerable loss of fluency.<sup>3</sup>

Although it seems to be an especially important concern for radio stations, many campsite names refer specifically to the Festival for which the encampment takes place (Cornog and Perper 2-3); many ski resorts maintain a local theme, such as railroad or mineral names (Millward and Millward 197, 208); and there is evidence of local identification within the Chicago Yacht Club. One off-shore yacht is named the *Wild Onion*, a reference to the aboriginal designation for the area which has become Chicago (Humphrey 103).

There is another major difference between toponyms and the names given in these alternate areas: the relative use of commemoratives, which are so common among toponyms. While commemoratives constitute a substantial number of all place names, they are conspicuous by their nearly total absence in the alternate domains. Radio stations in particular are named by their owners after themselves, usually by using their initials; thus the reason for the naming (the commemoration) generally remains obscure. *WMAQ* was founded by William A. Quinn and *WJJD* by Jefferson J. Davis. In the world of place naming, while it is true that people often name areas after themselves, most commemoratives are given by one person to honor another rather than to commemorate oneself. Yet, in stark contrast to the thousands of toponymic commemoratives, there is the one radio station, *WRMN*, named to honor Rachel, Mary, and Nancy, and several trails named after famous skiers.<sup>4</sup> And while these do need explanation, they constitute such a small proportion of the total of all station names, trail names, and campsite names that their presence is the anomaly which much be explained.

While the names of radio stations, ski trails, campsites, and yachts are remarkably similar, they are far from uniform and differ interestingly among themselves. There appears to be a higher proportion of lighthearted, joking, and generally frivolous names among the names of yachts and campsites than among the names of radio stations and ski trails, which tend to be more prosaic and literal (especially the names of radio stations). Apparently one's naming imagination has greater freedom at the campsite than it does in the boardroom. This is somewhat surprising, since station naming is such a personal activity and is done in such a self-satisfying way (the listening public does not care what a station is named; its name is nothing more than a group of letters that serve to identify it and a number would serve just as well, as the BBC has amply demonstrated) that we might expect more personal creativity and less self-naming, which is reminiscent of carving one's initials on the bathroom wall. Whatever the reason, naming a radio station is seen as more serious than naming a boat, and the word-play and humor is kept to a minimum, the freshness of WSEX notwithstanding. Overall, however, and although the names of the alternate systems share many qualities with more general naming, it is the remarkable and systematic differences between the names found in the alternate domains as a group and more mainstream naming which is striking and significant.

I was searching for a metaphor to help me understand these relationships and to put the various naming strategies into perspective when I heard a paper by Allen Walker Read, entitled "Changes in the Place-Name Cover of the United States"; significantly not "Changes in the Place-Names of the United States," but "Changes in the Place-Name Cover of the United States." And this proved to be the image I had been searching for. I now began to look at names not as a mass distribution, but as a series of covers or blankets which are placed successively over successive landscapes of places and peoples. And if we look at names as belonging to one or more different name blankets, we can begin to appreciate why some naming patterns are different from others. Imagine the blanket of original naming. This blanket (of necessity) is laid upon the natural landscape and it is largely descriptive. This is the blanket of the *High Points*, the *Rocky Mounts*, and the *Big Bends*. Next come blankets naming the places of human habitation, towns and cities and human-associated natural phenomena; these bring with them the transfer names, the commemoratives, the inspirational, and the literary names. These and many other similar blankets contribute to the layers of names imposed upon the physical landscape.

But there are landscapes other than the physical, and these are named as well, but only after the physical landscape has been named to a substantial degree. Further overlays of name blankets, which apparently include the naming of such domains as radio stations, ski trails, campsites, and yachts, are qualitatively different from the earlier blankets because they name not the physical landscape but aspects of the human, cultural landscape, which, through habitation and civilization, has been developed and superimposed upon the natural one. These cultural names, since they are several times removed from the original layers of names, are not intended to identify or label physical realities, but the realities of human intelligence and the human spirit. As such, since they reflect the beliefs, wishes, dreams, and desires of the namers, they serve a different purpose from earlier names and play a different role in the larger naming picture. They can not only afford to be creatively different; it may be necessary for them to be creatively different. Far from being surprised, we should expect them to be different from the names of the natural landscape.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, even though they belong to different naming domains and are characterized by different naming patterns, *WSEX*, *Fanny Hill*, *Scrumcroft Manor*, and the *Freudian*

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*Sloop* are names just as surely as *Sheboygan* and *Chicago* are names. And it is precisely this fact which we must take into account if onomastics is to progress as a science and advance beyond a description of the isolated fact and build theories of names which will include all acts of naming, including such apparent "exceptions" to general naming patterns such as the names of radio stations, campsites, yachts, and ski trails. There is a great deal of work to be done, and to do it well may require that we look at the object of our discipline a bit differently from the way we have in the past, but I believe that, just as language is language, naming is naming, whoever the namer and whatever the named. One day, we may well have that most desirable of constructs—a comprehensive theory of names which explains how and why all naming is one.

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### Notes

1. This is a shortened version of my Presidential Address to the American Name Society at the Annual Meeting, December 27, 1990, in Chicago, Illinois. I would like to thank those ANS members present for their many perceptive comments and suggestions after the address.

2. Many of the station names and their meanings can be found in Zivin.

3. This drive for local identification can become all-consuming. DeKalb, Illinois, has six radio stations, four of the names are modeled on *DeKalb* (*WLBK*, *WDEK*, *WKDI*, and *WDKB*). The names of the others, both public stations, are *WNIU* (for Northern Illinois University) and *WNIJ* (for Northern Illinois Jazz).

4. Both Herb Krause and Virgil Vogel have pointed out to me that there is at least one other radio station which is a true commemorative: *WEVD* in New York, named in honor of Eugene V. Debs.

5. The notion that there are layers of names is of course not new; it is axiomatic in toponymic research. But these layers are usually considered as layers of names which are scattered across the land; to my knowledge this is the first time the term has been used to refer to the object(s) of the naming rather than the names themselves.

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