

Names in the News

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Names and naming remained a popular news topic, as shown by this sampling of stories that made national, and sometimes international, news between January and August of 2008. Thanks to Erika L. Watt for helping to track down some of these stories.

‘It’s an intriguing and provocative name that translates to Web hits, phone calls and tour tickets,’ began Vicki Smith’s Associated Press article about the name of the *Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum*, which ran in our local newspaper under the headline ‘Repurposed Asylum’s Name Called Offensive’. In the summer of 2007, the state of West Virginia sold at auction a former mental hospital and the surrounding 307 acres. The Joe Jordan family paid \$1.5 million to purchase the grand, old, six-story Gothic-revival hospital, which is a designated National Historic Landmark. When the hospital closed in 1994, it was simply called Weston Hospital. It is described as one of the world’s largest hand-cut sandstone structures, which during the nineteenth century housed as many as 2000 patients. The Jordan family defends their renaming by saying that it is an authentic part of state history, and that tourists who began coming in mid-March were not offended by the tours, which focused on ‘issues such as the evolution of mental-health care, the Civil War, the Great Depression, and even architecture’. However, protestors say that advertised future attractions such as *Psycho Path* dirt-bike races, *Mud-Bog* races, *Hospital of Horrors* haunting tours in October, and a *Nightmare Before Christmas* in December ‘cheapen and denigrate the whole field of psychology’. Jerry Kirkpatrick, business and marketing professor at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, criticized the family for sending mixed signals. ‘Are they selling history? Or dirt-bike races and Halloween nights? Sooner or later, one of these themes will have to move to the forefront and the other will fall to the side.’ (Associated Press, *The Arizona Republic*, 23 March 2008)

In a fairly extensive *New York Times* article, ‘Names That Match Forge a Bond on the Internet’, Stephenie Rosenbloom showed just how much the whole business of finding out about one’s own name has changed because of the internet. For years we have known about groups of people with such common names as *Jim Smith* or *Bob Jones* getting together at conventions, which if nothing else challenged the billing departments of the host hotels, but today people who grew up thinking they had unique names are finding all kinds of ‘matches’. Writer and filmmaker Angela Shelton wrote a successful book *Finding Angela Shelton*, in which she told about travelling around the country to meet and interview forty other women named Angela Shelton. Jon Lee, a student and web developer, is trying to get famous enough that when he

Google his own name he will be the Jon Lee who comes at the top of the list, but he still has ‘to top a recruitment firm, a washed-up pop star, a dead drummer, and an I.B.M. guy’.

A variety of theories were offered as to why people are so interested in finding and relating to *Googlegängers* (people whose names pop up when you Google yourself):

- Brett Pelham, a social psychologist, calls it ‘implicit egotism’. People are drawn to anything that reminds them of themselves.
- James Bruning, professor of psychology at Ohio University, conjectures that people’s ‘fascination with their Googlegängers might be an adult expression of the common childhood wish to be an identical twin’.
- James Bruning also explained that cause and effect complicate the issue, as people with the same names often come from the same ethnic group or community, and thus children with the same names, e.g. *Bronco* vs. *Cecil*, tend to grow up with more-or-less similar sets of expectations and so are likely to have things in common.
- Stanton Wortham, a professor of education and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, is sceptical of many of the claims that are growing out of this new hobby of finding and relating to people whose name you share. He says that of course people who have the same names will have things in common, but he’s ‘not willing to grant that those sorts of patterns are going to explain or drive a substantial amount of behavior’. For example, when a woman named Georgia moves to Georgia, there are most likely considerations other than her name that play a part in the decision. (*New York Times*, 10 April 2008)

The Democratic *Unity* event, held on 27 June 2008 in the town of Unity, New Hampshire, provided a field day for wits to joke about place names. As Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton had each received 107 votes in the primary election (a ‘fact’ which stretches credibility), the Democrats chose this town for a political rally in which Hillary Clinton would concede to Barack Obama and ask her supporters to unite. On 23 June, Craig Ferguson, on his CBS *Late Late Show*, asked ‘What’s next? *Tolerance!*’ Various bloggers made equal fun of the HOUND acronym (Hillary-Obama-United-Not-Divided) and the possibility of future political events being held in such towns as *Blue Ball* or *Intercourse*, Pennsylvania.

Two commercial names that in July made big news in connection with the housing and bank crises are *Fannie Mae* and *Freddie Mac*. *Fannie Mae* was created in 1938 by the government, while *Freddie Mac* was established in 1970. Their ‘real’ names are Federal National Mortgage Association and Federal Home Mortgage Corporation, respectively. Both organizations are now privately owned but are backed by the government. They were created to provide low- and middle-income Americans with the opportunity to borrow money and own their own homes. The friendly-sounding names, especially the 1938 *Fannie Mae*, are early examples of what was to become a widespread recognition of the role that brand names can play in easing fears related to dealing with big, nameless, faceless corporations. In the 1930s, depression-weary Americans were particularly afraid of taking out *mortgages*, a word that comes from the Latin root *mortis*, meaning ‘death’. Signing a *mortgage* is literally signing a death warrant on the ownership of one’s home. (Stephen Bernard, Associated Press, *The Arizona Republic*, 12 July 2008)

The public has become so accustomed to celebrities choosing strange names for their children that *Time* magazine announced the birth of twins to Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt with only one sentence: ‘Brangelina twins born — and given not completely insane names.’ The announcement on *Time*’s ‘Briefing’ page was accompanied by a picture of a pink bib identified as *Viv* and a blue bib identified as *Knox*. Three weeks earlier, *Newsweek* had printed a three-inch squib ‘Name That Celeb-U-Tot’ on its ‘Newsmakers’ page, in which readers were asked to match three names to stamp-sized photos of celebrity parents. Nicole Kidman was to be matched to *Sunday Rose*, Matthew McConaughey to *Levi Alves*, and Jamie Lynn Spears to *Maddie Briann*. (*Newsweek*, 1 July 2008; *Time*, 28 July 2008)

New Zealand is one of the countries with a law forbidding names that would ‘cause offense to a reasonable person’. In citing this rule, a family court judge made a nine-year-old girl a ward of the court so that her name could be changed from *Talula Does The Hula From Hawaii*. Judge Rob Murfitt wrote: ‘The court is profoundly concerned about the very poor judgment which the child’s parents have shown in choosing this name [...] It makes a fool of the child and sets her up with a social disability and handicap, unnecessarily.’ Her new name was not released. Out of embarrassment, the child had been telling acquaintances that her name was *K. Brian Clarke*, the New Zealand Registrar General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, explained that registration officials usually counsel parents who propose bizarre names for their children. For example, such requested names as *Fish and Chips*, *Yeah Detroit*, *Keenan Got Lucy*, and *Sex Fruit* had already been blocked by registration officials. (Associated Press, 24 July 2008)

The Taco Bell restaurant chain found itself on the wrong end of a lawsuit as a result of an advertising campaign featuring the name and image of 32-year-old rapper *50 Cent* (birth name Curtis Jackson). Over the past five years, *50 Cent* has grown increasingly famous not only for his music, but also for clothing and footwear lines and the marketing of ring tones and video games. He has been a victim of gun violence, which he sometimes sings about, and played himself in a semi-autobiographical film, *Get Rich or Die*. The Taco Bell advertising campaign was designed to publicize its new ‘79-89-99 Cent Why Pay More?’ menu promoting cinnamon twists for 79 cents, tacos for 89 cents, and bean burritos for 99 cents. The company launched the campaign with an online video game *Shoot the Rapper*, featuring a silhouette of *50 Cent* walking across the top of a web page where viewers were invited to shoot at him. An accompanying letter written to *50 Cent* invited him to change his name to one of the featured prices for ‘one day by rapping his order at a Taco Bell’. It also included an offer to make a \$10,000 donation to the charity of *50 Cent*’s choice. The letter, which a Taco Bell spokesman described as ‘a good faith offer’, was sent to *50 Cent*, but not until after it was released to the media. The lawsuit was reported as asking for up to four million dollars in damages for ‘diluting the value’ of *50 Cent*’s ‘good name’. *Newsweek* ended its four-inch news brief with, ‘But they were making *50* more expensive!’ (Associated Press, *USA Today*, 23 July 2008; *Newsweek*, 4 August 2008; Reuters Limited, 24 July 2008)

A somewhat happier commercial story relates to the race horse *Big Brown* and his winning of the Kentucky Derby. Two years ago, owner Paul Pompa Jr. named the colt just after he renewed a freight contract with UPS. He said he was not thinking

of any commercial benefits, and neither was UPS (United Parcel Service), which uses both *Big Brown* and *Big Brown Delivers* in its advertising campaigns. However, after Big Brown won the Kentucky Derby and the UPS brand name had been ‘mentioned on television and in hundreds of news articles, netting an estimated \$1.4 million worth of total media exposure’, UPS signed a formal agreement. All was wonderful when Big Brown went on to win the Preakness and was headed for the Belmont, with a good chance of being only the twelfth horse in history to win the *Triple Crown*. However, Big Brown fell short and was pulled from the Belmont race; both his owner and trainer, along with the UPS marketing department, are holding their breath to see what the future holds for the horse. As noted in the first blog listed below, there is always a risk in such agreements ‘because a horse, unlike a race car or a yacht, is a living, breathing animal that can get hurt on the track. For Instance, YUM Brands has already suffered from associating their name with the Kentucky Derby thanks to a TV mishap that saw its executives touting their brands right after the collapse of *Eight Belles*.’ (http://www.nameddevelopment.com/blog/archives/1008/07brandnaming_is.html; http://blog.nj.com/njsports_impact/2008/07/traubter_dutrow_holding_his_bre/print.html)