

News and views

The Alphabet

A Letter to the Editor

Dictionaries, telephone-directories, subject-indices, membership-lists, etc., etc., are arranged in alphabetic order. But if two or more people write a scientific article, a painful problem often arises concerning the order in which the names of the authors should be placed. "Alphabetic order, of course!" says an innocent bystander. "Certainly not!" come voices from many quarters. "It should be the senior author (by age, or position) whose name should be quoted first" conclude some people interested in the problem. "No, the senior author should put his name at the very end to give a chance to youth!" retort the others. "Maybe one should list names in order of relative merits in accomplishing the work," suggest the adherents of still another school of thought. "But who is going to decide whose contribution was most important?" ask the critical-minded ones.

The disputes about the order in which the names of the authors are to be placed in the printed article often lead to quite amusing situations, such as the one which took place in a certain research institute quite a number of years ago. The assignment was to study the properties of a certain chemical compound by using the radiations of all different wave lengths. Within a few months the work was concluded, and by the combined efforts of three persons the properties of the aforesaid chemical compound were studied by means of infrared, ultraviolet, and x-rays. The researchers were summoned to the office of their group leader, Dr. A, who raised the "important question" of how their names were to be placed in the joint article on the subject.

"Why, in alphabetic order, of course", volunteered Mrs. X, who was doing infrared spectrography. But, looking on the grim faces of the others, she immediately realized that she had made a social mistake. Indeed, the other two researchers were Mrs. Y and Mr. Z!

Thus it was decided to pull the tickets from a hat in the best tradition of country sweepstakes, and a janitor agreed to play the role of the innocent lottery boy. The first ticket was "Mrs. X", the second, "Mrs. Y", and the third, "Mr. Z".

"You see, even the law of chance honors the alphabetic order!" exclaimed Mrs. X, who had gotten interested in the game. But the faces of the others remained grim, and a vague suggestion was made that the experiment be repeated a few more times to establish a better statistical pattern. However, for some reason no repeti-

tion was made, and for the time being the order was accepted.

Later in the day Mrs. Y came to Mrs. X's office. "Look here," she said. "Both you and I are just working here part-time, and we are not career women. But Mr. Z has a wife and children to take care of. Would you mind too much if we put his name first?"

"But, of course!" replied Mrs. X, "it does not make any difference to me. Alphabetic order, X, Y, Z, would in fact correspond to arranging the contents according to increasing frequency, since you took the ultra-violet spectrum, and Mr. Z worked with x-rays. We can just as well arrange the subject matter according to increasing wave length, and have it Mr. Z (for x-rays), Mrs. Y (for ultraviolet) and Mrs. X (for infrared)."

"Oh, no! exclaimed Mrs. Y. I would not think of having my name ahead of yours!"

As the result, in the printed article the names appeared in the order:

A, Z, X, Y.

This bore no relation to the alphabet, in which case the names would have read:

A, X, Y, Z.

Neither was there any relation to contents of the article, in which case the ordering should have been:

A, Y, X, Z, A.

Another extremity of honoring the alphabet, the Greek alphabet in that case, was the inclusion of the name of Bethe (β), in an article of Alpher (α) and Gamow (γ) on the origin of chemical elements. But this was just a frivolous, although friendly, gesture.

Frivolity aside, a serious proposal can be made to the editors of *The Physical Review*, and, for that matter, to the editors of all other scientific magazines:

The names of the authors in multiauthor articles should appear in alphabetic order, and it should be so stated in a special announcement. In special cases, when one of the authors feels that his name should come first in violation of alphabetic order, a special footnote stating his merits should be added to the title of the article. It would be highly desirable that this question be taken up at an early meeting of the American Physical Society, and that a definite decision be reached.

G. Gamow

The George Washington University

National Science Foundation

Annual Report Stresses Need for Funds

One of Mr. Truman's last official acts as President of the United States was to transmit to Congress on January 16th the second annual report of the National Science Foundation, which had been submitted by NSF Director Alan T. Waterman in review of the Foundation's work during the 1952 fiscal year. A week earlier,