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Numberless nevertheless

by Barnet N. Berin

In the United States, things were never the same after a universal credit card, good for everything private and public, was adopted. It was agreed to use the Social Security number. Once put into effect, there were strange developments.

Letters began to arrive without their usual greetings of "Dear _____," but rather, "Dear XXX-XX-XXXX."

This turned out to be acceptable, and people began to be referred to by their numbers. To those who were not close friends, letters tended to be formal: "Dear XXX-XX-XXXX, please send $5." But to friends, "Dear XXX, please send $5." However, the short form was a failure: Social Security assigns numbers by states so thousands had the same first three XXX's. While the $5's poured in, conversation became confusing because so many persons responded to the same three digits.

Fractions, decimals, irrational numbers, roots, and powers were experimented with but quickly dropped since both private and government computers would reject these.

People wore their numbers on their lapels. It was so efficient that, in time, names were dropped for numbers, leading to complaints and some unhappiness.

Even-numbered persons were preferred and became an elite class. Odd numbers were considered odd. Numbers ending in zero were considered neither odd nor even and ended up in numerical analysis.

For some reason, certain combinations of XXX's became desirable. Others were frowned upon, and these people joined the inferior, odd-numbered class. Of the even numbers, those ending in two were considered superior, and fortunate college candidates whose numbers ended this way were admitted to the better schools even though their College Board scores might not have qualified them. A study of Nobel prize winners, funded by the Commerce Department's Economic Development Administration ($200,005), suggested certain favorable combinations. The Social Security numbers of famous people were published annually for parents eager to favorably number their children. Einstein's Social Security number was retired from circulation as too big a burden to carry. (His sweatshirt remains on the wall at the Institute for Advanced Studies.)

For a fee, genealogists would consult with numerologists for ideal number-names for babies and would trace a person's ancestors, who simply shared the same number, not the same blood.

Numbers were taking over our lives. Worse yet, 000-00-0000 became depressed, refused to eat and had to get special vitamin supplements to survive, while 999-99-9999, full of odd-number disappointments, became obese and was put on a crash diet.

It was proven, numerically, that astrologists had been right all along; the position of the stars (coordinates, i.e., numeric identification) did determine our fate. The executive branch came out of the closet.

Inevitably, the Social Security Administration had to change its way of issuing numbers. Instead of being assigned by computer, numbers were sold at huge auctions. Especially desirable ones brought as much as $100,000. The auctions raised so much money that Social Security taxes were reduced, the deficit decreased, and the 18th version of Gramm-Rudman phased out.

Eventually, the number of acceptable positions in a name had to be increased, for subsequent births, to accommodate the number of possibilities and avoid duplications. Later, people would go to court to have their numbers shortened, or made more attractive (even-number ending), and this created problems, nasty ones, for the courts. This almost led to a war of numbers between the three (!) branches of government.

Commercial products were alphabetical at first, then alphabetic/numeric, and finally numeric. There was much litigation over proper rights to a trade-number.

Gradually people noticed that numbers could be shorthand for commands and then, gradually, for basic conversation: number 7 = How are you? and number 9 = Fine, how are you? This was quite efficient, since you could 7/9 quickly and sincerely and then go about your business. It was noticed that all bad words had four digits. Four zeros became an unrepeatable oath.

But it got out of control. The whole world was talking in numbers and understanding each other. This was considered undesirable by statesmen, lovers of the romance languages, and distinguished linguists unaccustomed to such simple communication. Number theory moved from the department of mathematics to the department of languages, renamed the department of numbers at most learned institutions.

However, this didn't last. Some xenophobic countries began to change bases and adopt new number systems, so that the original number system of base ten (ten fingers, ten toes), began to be supplemented by other systems. Unfortunately, the computer's base of two (zero and one, yes or no) was felt to be inferior to other bases (including base one, "no" only, in a tiny principality noted for its sloth), and each country began to adopt a different base. The French adopted base four. It was said, unkindly, that this was in tribute to Napoleon's characteristic pose. In time, this multiplicity led to primary, secondary and tertiary number languages so that everyone's language was once more unique and conversational ability, between countries, decreased numerically.

We were drawn back to the past and became somewhat muddled, with writing and conversation once again confused between countries.

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and age characteristics of the sample were acceptably close to 25% of the overall workforce distributions.

Since the selection algorithm was arbitrary, some comparable rule (e.g., SSNs ending in 00 to 24) probably would have produced similarly acceptable results.

More recently, I have used the same technique on a smaller scale: to allocate assignments among students in large class, their Student Numbers (which are derived from their SSNs) are the control.

Howard Young