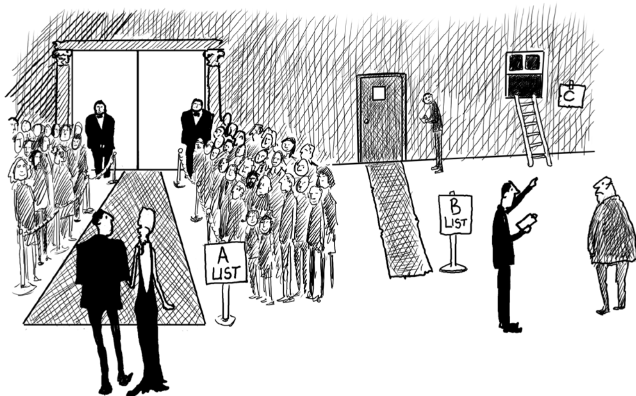
Affluent Society

Famous at Harvard and Princeton Universities, and perhaps the closest thing in his era to being America's leading public intellectual, the Canadian-born economist John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society* in 1958. The book, described by *The New York Times* as 'A compelling challenge to conventional thought', was a bestseller (and remains in print), the phrase went into the language, but, along a trajectory through time, its meaning was transformed. Galbraith's purpose had been to emphasize the gap between private affluence and public poverty, and the need for more equitable policies. He died in 2006, having lived to see greater affluence, a growing gap between rich and poor, and half the time his term used as a celebration, not a condemnation, one online dictionary even defining it as 'a society in which the material benefits of prosperity are widely available', which is not at all what Galbraith had meant. It has become a cliché through lazy use of the phrase to mean established and increasing prosperity, rather than the ever-widening gulf between the haves and have-nots.

A-list celeb



And there are Bs, Cs and downwards to Zs. As *Closer* – a British magazine celebrating people's ability to be photographed while moving between nightclubs and film premières – explains, 'every A-lister's nightmare' may well include proximity to those lower down the alphabetical listing of celeb-ness. 'Celeb', an abbreviation of 'celebrity', is American and, surprisingly, dates from the early twentieth century, the first record in print appearing in a Lincoln, Nebraska, daily newspaper in 1913. 'A-list', in the sense, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) puts it, of 'a social, professional, or celebrity elite', is also American in origin and dates from the 1930s. Some people are always fighting their way around the alphabet and wanting to be let in. During New York's late-nineteenth-century 'Gilded Age', 'Mrs

Astor's Four Hundred' were those people whom the society hostess deemed suitable to grace her ballroom, which did not include the 'New Rich' or (well-bred shudder!) arrivistes. But Mrs A. did not have tabloid newspapers and celebrity (read 'gossip') magazines to contend – or sign contracts – with. Factory-farmed celebs date from the 1980s, and, like Oscar Wilde's cynic, know 'the price of everything and the value of nothing'. The phrase is thoroughly overworked; besides, while 'A-list celeb' is generally used approvingly, anything from B down is invariably pejorative.

All the bells and whistles

A phrase meaning all the attractive, but not essential, additional extras or accessories, and, in computing, particularly, 'speciously attractive but superfluous facilities'. It is thought to be a reference to a fairground organ, those large steam-driven contraptions designed to produce loud music above the sound of the crowd and the machinery of the fair. Quite apart from the organ pipes, these had all sorts of extras such as cymbals, whistles, drums and so on, rather like a giant mechanical one-man band. The expression seems to have been in use from the late 1960s

– one source quotes an advertisement for a used car in a Wisconsin newspaper, *The Capital Times*, in June 1971 – and to have become established in computing by the late 1970s, the *OED* citing a US magazine, *Byte*, which in July 1977 referred to 'outputs that can be used to provide user-defined functions, such as enabling external devices or turning on bells and whistles'. From there it moved into commerce – applied, for instance, to the optional extras on a new car – and crossed into journalism and general business, referring increasingly to less tangible accessories, as in this, from *Financial Executive* magazine of May 2010: 'One would think that most chief financial officers, tax executives and business owners take full advantage of all the bells and whistles provided in the United States tax code.' The upshot is that the phrase is now mainly used as another way of saying that something is loaded with features, without necessarily any implication that while these may be appealing, they are unnecessary or even pointless. Just as fairground organs were phased out from the 1920s when reliable public loudspeaker systems came in, this expression has probably exceeded its usefulness.

All (other) things being equal

This phrase, from the Latin *ceteris paribus* meaning 'with other things the same', has been in use since the seventeenth century, and was once generally applied to mathematics or the sciences, where measurements have to be precise. The English translation first appeared in print in Macaulay's *History of England* (1849), and in 1889 the *Saturday Review* probably failed to allay the fears of soldiers and their families with this effort: 'Other things being equal, the chances of any man being hit in action vary . . . with the rate of fire to which he is exposed.' As the meaning lost some precision, so it could be applied to more aspects of life – 'Languages are an asset in many careers, and other things being equal, the candidate who can offer languages may get the job,' *The Sunday Times* told us in 2004; while in a February 2012 article in *The Washington Times* discussing the president's defence policy, we read of 'the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. All other things being equal, "beyond" may include: the Far East . . . China and North Korea . . . Russia . . .' But by this time the phrase had already become a cliché, meaning little more than 'if conditions stay the way they are now; if nothing happens to complicate things,' and indeed used simply to pad a statement. 'All things being equal, I should arrive about ten o'clock' means exactly the same as 'I should arrive about ten o'clock.'