THE GREAT TIMES TEN-SQUARE HOAX

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When I was at University, I ran my college debating society, and was contacted by the best-known columnist of one of the two serious Sunday newspapers in the UK (in the UK, the major papers are national in circulation). He told me to ring him, reversing the charges, no matter how late, to let him know the result of a particular debate. I did so, to be met with a very curt dismissal, because the vote did not support his view. I had taken this as a liberty permitted to named columnists. Now I know that the diseases of bias and inaccuracy are widespread, and not just confined to the tabloids (now called red tops) printing alleged pictures of a World War bomber on the moon, nor to faked pictures of British soldiers apparently torturing in Iraq.

Of course, in recent years the New York Times had a favourite son, who, they later discovered, invented stories. Equally, in a recent case concerning logology, The Times (The Thunderer, no less) displayed a variety of basic journalistic errors in three articles on the ten-square, published on 1st, 3rd, and 5th December 2005. Moreover, they did not seem at all bothered when this was pointed out. A little thought soon concludes that thousands of errors are uncorrected. In the Sunday Times, there are nearly 500 pages, mostly broadsheet. Their stated policy of publishing corrections usually results in one or two corrections per week — yet the sheer volume of words surely indicates perhaps hundreds of errors. Below, I hope to explain what happens to them.

The starting point is where their information came from. Someone went to his local paper with a word version of Sudoku, which they published. (Sudoku was introduced to Britain by The Times, who are very keen to keep the lead). The paper later also ran a story (on 30th November 2005) headed "Mawgan Porth wordsmith claims ten square Holy Grail". It was picked up by a regional news agency, who sent a reporter and photographer to the author's house. While there, the photographer was attracted by a computer screen, which was showing a partial 10-square seen by Word Ways readers in 98-47, (? means no source found, * means also with hyphen in text):

D I S C U S S I N G	
I N C A N T A T O R	
S C A R L A T I N A	
C A R N I T I N E S	plural of an amino acid, Am Heritage
U N L I K E N E S S	
S T A T E S W R E N	States' wren ?
S A T I N W E A V E	satin weave, Encyclo Britannica*
I T I N E R A T E S	
N O N E S E V E N T	nones' event ?
G R A S S N E S T S	grass nests ?

The agency report was picked up by two national newspapers — The Times and the Daily Mail. Both assigned reporters who telephoned the author. The Times led with a front page headline

The Times 1st Dec
'Su Doku' word game that baffled Ancient Greeks

the 10-letter acrostic

largest acrostic square — ten letters by ten, spelling out the same words horizontally and vertically — in the English language.

experts… say that because one of his words does not appear in any dictionary it should be disallowed.

(Ted Clarke's) claim to have constructed the world's first ten-letter square is supported by Tony Augarde, author of the Oxford Guide to Word Games. Mr Augarde said: "It's not perfect but it's the best I've seen. Previous attempts used words that no one had heard of or tautonyms, words that repeat the same sound like orangutan, which made it easier.

"Some of the words in Ted Clarke's square are not well known and he has pushed the boundaries of language, but who is to say what is a word and what isn't?"

Other experts believe that Mr Clarke has "pushed the boundaries" too far with the word nonesevent.

Ross Eckler, an expert from New Jersey, and Jeff Grant, an Australian who has spent the past 30 years trying to crack the problem, say that the puzzle is still waiting to be solved.

Mr Clarke said: "I am not claiming immortality yet, but this is the closest we've got to solving this puzzle."

The Times 3rd Dec
Since Mr Clarke's word square, the largest in any language, was published he has been inundated with e-mails of congratulations from around the world. Although some experts dispute at least one of the words, most agree that it is the "best attempt" yet at a ten-letter word square.

The Times 5th Dec
Tony Augarde "I don't think there are any (word squares) of eight letters or more that don't include disputed words."

Daily Mail 1st Dec
Ted Clarke… solution… not perfect but comes closer than any other that has so far been found.

one word - nonesevent - is now the subject of a heated debate among word puzzle experts around the world.

(Ted Clarke said), "it is widely accepted that the boundaries of language have to be stretched a little. … I think I have come within a whisker of it — and certainly closer than anyone else. But no one has ever created a tensquare using ten different recognisable words, and possibly they never will.

Ross Eckler, editor of Word Ways magazine in the United States, and New Zealander Jeff Grant, a Scrabble fanatic who has spent the past 30 years trying to crack the problem, have accepted all Mr Clarke's words besides nonesevent. Two others – satinweave and grassnest – are technically two words, but are often used as one these days. The remaining word, stateswren, is also a little dubious.

Puzzle expert Tony Augarde said Mr Clarke's is the best tensquare he has ever seen. 'It's not perfect, but it's the best yet. Some of the words in Mr Clarke's square are not well known – but it depends on your definition of what language is. Mr Clarke has pushed the boundaries of language, but who is to say what is a word and what isn't?'

A number of seven-word squares using recognisable words have been created, but squares using eight or nine-letter words require the use of obscure or archaic words and a computer program.

Another possible disqualification in the eyes of purists is that words must not be too tortuously contrived (or contrived in any way – RGG!).

Newquay Voice 30th Nov
Mr Clarke said, "I've got the only 10-square that meets all the requirements".

"World's Most Difficult Puzzle Solved", and continued on an inside page with "'Su Doku' word game that baffled Ancient Greeks took an expert 7 years to crack". As can be seen by the collection of quotes in the box, both papers made a number of similar claims: that the exhibit was the nearest to a ten-square ever produced, that experts Ross Eckler and Jeff Grant believed that the ten-square had not been solved; but took issue with just one "word" (nonesevent). None of this was invented by the agency reporter. The names of the experts and their opinions would seem to have come from a single source, the author. In fact, the person who had actually made an undisputed ten-square (and an eleven-square, and the only 9-squares with diagonals, etc, etc) was neither consulted nor mentioned. It is curious that those two remote people were chosen when I was so easy for the reporters to consult: there is, of course, bound to be a perfectly straightforward explanation.

The truth about the experts, which in some cases Ted Clarke is known to be familiar with, is that both the quoted experts (and me!) think the ten-square is essentially solved, that both experts (and me!) reject three of the rows in the exhibited square, and so of course do not regard the exhibit as a ten-square. He is also aware of my square, as he published it in WordsWorth (in breach of copyright). That his effort was an interesting attempt at the time is not in dispute.

The Daily Mail also reported Ted Clarke as having a database of more than 70,000 words, which the agency quoted Ted Clarke as saying was probably one of the largest word lists in the world (and his WordsWorth called "massive" in January 2006). They mean 70,000 10-letter words. But he does not have a database, merely a series of flat files with a single field in each record, with no indication of capitalisation, hyphenation, part of speech, source (said by Ted in the past to be impossible), or anything else. Plenty of people have larger word lists, not to mention the professionals. To make 10-squares, you need 250,000 10-letter words, which is a series of truly massive steps from where he is. The 250,000 is predicted by probability theory, and verified by a number of experiments I did. Even if he had enough words, he would then find other barriers which I believe he would find insurmountable. Note that I did not happen across 2000 10-squares by accident: finding them was the result of a logical process.

Instead of me, or anyone else who reads Word Ways carefully, the reporters contacted Tony Augarde, editor of the Oxford Guide to Word Games. Reviews of its two editions in Word Ways have been critical, and I can vouch for the very much out-of-date nature of the coverage of word squares (and word ladders). Augarde said many things (eg on 1st Dec, It's not perfect but it's the best I've seen"), some of which are uncannily akin to those of Ted Clarke (eg, in talking of squares made by others: Clarke: *fantastic words that no one could find*. Augarde: *words that no one had heard of*. Unlike nonesevent, one supposes). Augarde, a former lexicographer, said, "who is to say what is a word and what isn't?". He also said that *orangutan* was an example of a tautonym used in 10-squares: yet it is not a tautonym, and has but nine letters. He did tell me that he was misquoted, but The Times said it was a minor matter for which he did not wish a correction to be made. To quote The Times, "at no time did Mr Augarde mention Mr Gooch or inform (the reporter) of other better ten-square puzzles". So Jeff Grant's efforts over the last several years were also ignored. Tony Augarde was first quoted in the local paper in which the story started: if his name had been offered by Ted Clarke, then virtually all the content of the articles can be traced back to Ted Clarke. Another quote from Tony Augarde implies that seven-squares are the largest pukka squares.

The Times articles contained many other peculiarities of which I mention only two: that the Ancient Greeks were looking for a ten-square (in proto-Anglo-Saxon?), and that the ten-square is an acrostic. The reporter concerned had previously run stories on Cornish gangs attacking visitors (the gang explained it was a joke (a hoax), and that no-one with half a brain would have believed it),

and a carburettor devised nearly 100 years ago, suppressed by the big manufacturers, that according to my calculations would make an engine more than 100% efficient.

For a reason the reader must attempt to divine, Ted Clarke reported, "I've not stopped laughing since last Wednesday morning" (the date of the first Times article). What is true is that this is the biggest hoax perpetrated on The Times I have ever come across.

The Times article met with a rapid and uncomplimentary response from Benjamin Zimmer (whttp://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/2005_12.html). Ted Clarke was critical of this response, and published all of it without the requested acknowledgement.

The Daily Mail story, run just on 1st December, was much less strident, and I discovered that a number of people at the paper had not been happy with it: perhaps that is why the headline read "Has this man solved...?". They did, however, offer £10,000 for anyone who could do better. Too late, I learned that all words had to come from the OED, so I shall just have to keep darning my raincoat. The Australian (a sister paper to The Times) also ran the story.

It might be important to note that the matter was treated as a news item, and not a feature. That naturally leaves less time for checking.

One reason I was able to do the ten-square was the many years I had put into building up a vocabulary (not to mention various skills!). To claim a solution with a mixture of 4-, 5-, 6-, and 10-letter words seemed totally ridiculous and very unfair, so I wrote to both papers. The Daily Mail contacted me, asked for documentary proof of my claim, and after detailed scrutiny soon said they would publish a letter from me. This was done on 20th December 2005. In the letter, I claimed the first ten square, and corrected the alleged quotes of Jeff Grant and Ross Eckler.

I wrote to The Times a second time. By this time I knew they had had letters from some of the main players and various other people. No reply! There is a body (funded by the newspaper industry!) called the Press Complaints Commission, which deals with complaints about newspapers. I made a formal complaint under the heading of accuracy. Now at last there was a dialogue, mediated by the PCC. To establish the inaccuracies in the article, I was able to refer The Times to a number of the emails they had received. After two attempts, they still could hardly find any! Luckily, I was able to supply copies of some. Their defence, when it finally arrived, ignored most of what I and others said, and was in the same style as the original article, but a bit more personal: it suggested that I was motivated by rivalry. To that I remarked that I had made many kinds of large word squares: what kind of possible rivalry was offered by someone who had not done even one? The second reply was totally different in tone: The Times wrote to the PCC, "Mr Gooch has gone to great lengths and his knowledge of this field is clearly profound — would you please thank him for his consideration." They then offered the standard remedy of publishing a letter from me, as with the Daily Mail. That was eventually published on 13th February 2006 (complete with two editing errors). They put a link to my letter on each of the first two articles on their website. The PCC wrote a summary of the complaint and its resolution, and this is on their website.

I had not previously realised that letters in newspapers were often a standard way of the newspaper acknowledging error. Of all complaints to the PCC, only about half a percent are taken to the Commission itself: some are dismissed, and many are settled by this device of publishing a letter, which gives the appearance of being an individual view, rather than the agreed position that it truly is.

I had also previously thought that reporters would check information. Here the reporter took an author's view of his own work, the same author's view of the work of everyone else, and, worst of

all, the alleged opinions of experts. Those opinions were never checked. To put false views into the mouths of others is worse than lying: it is underhand and deceitful. But such people exist in the world, and I thought journalistic training would detect such circumstances. The reporter made another mistake: he approached the author of the Oxford Guide to Word Games, which must have seemed a good start, but he failed then to establish that the author knew anything worth knowing about word squares: I still cannot believe that Tony Augarde has published about, but clearly not seen, any word square this century. Word Ways has published seven articles on 10- and 11-squares by me alone since August 2002: and some of this information is elsewhere on the Web.

The standard of journalism shown by The Times is execrable, with no serious attempt to find a genuine expert in a specialised field, and not any attempt to check reported quotes. Worse, however, were the inaccurate quotes invented by someone, and placed into the mouths of unknowing individuals. That someone should now be feeling deeply ashamed. Such despicable behaviour is not acceptable in civilised society: my ostrakon is cast.

More details are to be found on the Web:
first article in The Times: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,18209-1898644,00.html
second article in The Times: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1902022,00.html
My letter in The Times: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,59-2037344.html
Press Complaints Commission resolution: http://www.pcc.org.uk/reports/resolved.asp?id=1687

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