

Fellows at the RAF Club

How do you ensure the quality of a World atlas? How do you choose which places to show, not to raise problems surrounding local and international rivalries and sensitivities? Do people buy atlases to look at the areas they know or the ones they don't?

Mick Ashworth, Consultant Editor to the Times Atlas of the World, led us through the intriguing, complex process, guided and illustrated by the letters received by the Atlas's Editors over the decades.

Today's Times atlases are the product of a long association between the Times and Bartholomew, beginning in the 1920's. In the 1950's, Times atlases set the standard for how World atlases should look. However, the overlapping geographies of the five volume format made them very difficult to maintain. Morphing the atlases into the now famous single volume Comprehensive, improved the situation.

The Bartholomew Archive at the National Library of Scotland, provides an insight into the world of people's geographical concerns, often longhand amusing, varied letters, imparting a very serious perspective on maps. The errors detailed are many and varied, covering themes including geographical rivalry, content errors, ownership and place names. Rivalry is seen between missing and existing atlas places; it is essential that local rivalries be documented accurately so as to avoid bias.

Mistakes can put the Editors in the news. In 2003, the Atlas showed Jerusalem as the capital of Israeli 'outraging Muslims around the World'. This appeared on the home page of the Al Jazeera website causing an influx of 250 emails. Pacification by HarperCollins on the subject simply resulted in more emails from the Embassy of Israel disputing the change of stance while Al Jazeera marked the change of stance as a U-turn!

Sometimes policies are needed to pacify situations, as with the Sea of Japan/East Sea question, where dual

naming and common usage are recognised with East Sea in smaller type next to the Sea of Japan title.

The status of Jammu & Kashmir in the 1960's, the impossibility of verifying information accurately and accommodating all the sensitivities in mapping; the same questions are still valid today. On one occasion the Editors received an eight-page email detailing objections to the depiction of the area. The Indian government will not allow importation of mapping showing depictions differing from the approved version, impounding a whole consignment of the Atlases which did not comply.

One correspondent was so disappointed not to find Sorrento, Italy, the venue for her 50th birthday trip, marked in the Atlas. Sorrento, usually listed in the top six Italian towns, omitted by the Times Atlas! Why? Should heads roll?

Even the World's capitals can also go astray. Omitting the Benin capital Porto Novo may well have led to a nose-dive in the sales in Benin!

Place names are a highly sensitive subject; names can change over time because of local usage or new transliteration scheme choices. Ten local variants may exist for a place. How do you account for these? If you choose how do you justify it?

Occasionally impossible questions are posed such as 'How many miles between Germany & France and Germany & England?' or 'How high would you have to fly to see the World as you see it in your map?' The Editors' answer in this last case was based on focal length of human eye and lot of blinding with science.

So long as the Editors receive correspondence there will be answers to give and decisions to make regarding content. And as long as this happens the Times World Atlas will remain the pre-eminent atlas.

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