

## **“Have We Got a Message from ETI?”**

### **Three Dress Rehearsals for Contact Online**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Invitation to ETI (IETI) project is based on the assumption that a smart probe from some advanced civilization may be on earth, observing us undetected. One of the things that this alien probe might be able to track and monitor is the World Wide Web. A particular website has been designed to draw attention of any alien “lurkers”. There have been 75 responses received by the project since its inception in 1996.

This paper reports three of the most important claims received at the Invitation to ETI project’s website, describes the actual communications taken place between the claimants and the project’s principal investigator Dr. Allen Tough, explains the steps taken to verify these claims, and it further explores the implications of the claims and reflects the process in which they were handled. Although none of the three claims turned out to be real ones, there were meaningful lessons learned, puzzles solved and principles revealed. Indeed, we gained profound sights in reaction to these claims, and they provided us valuable opportunities to think, act and react as if there was a real claim. We became better prepared as a result.

#### **Introduction**

The Invitation to ETI (<http://www.ietl.org>) project was founded by Dr. Allen Tough (<http://www.allentough.com>) in 1996. It is based on the assumption that a smart probe from some advanced civilization may be on earth, observing us undetected. One of the things that this alien probe might be able to track and monitor is the World Wide Web. A particular website has been designed to draw attention of any alien lurkers. On behalf of a group of nearly 100 scientists, scholars, artists and individuals interested in establishing contact with ETI, the Invitation to ETI project uses its website to invite any ETI to abandon its present policy of silence and to establish communication with us.

In the nine years that we have issued our invitation to ETI on the web since the project’s inception in 1996, 75 messages have been received from people claiming to be ETI. When we mentioned the need for scientific evidence, most of them faded away. Among the four most important claims we have received, we are reporting on three of them here, because Shuch (2005) has written a separate paper, reporting on the fourth one. It is important to share with those interested these claims and the interactions that have taken place between the project’s principal investigator, Dr. Tough, and the claimants.

In the following section of this paper, the three claims will be described in sequence. This is followed by the discussions on the reflections and implications of the claims. The last part of this paper explains the lessons we learned from these claims and how they impact on the future directions of our project.

### **BadlyDrawnUK**

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, for the first time, Dr. Tough received a message from someone using the identity of BadlyDrawnUK. He claimed to be an ETI and said that he could “provide advanced physics and technological information of things in practical use elsewhere which even the most advanced scientists or senior projects personnel do not possess”. As he would in handling any such claims, Dr. Tough responded to the claimant with a warm and open tone. He explained that he hoped the claimant would provide such convincing evidence that even mainstream scientists, reporters, and politicians would be certain that ETI was authentic. The claimant responded by saying that he would demonstrate this extraterrestrial power by shutting down all British television for one minute at 8:00 p.m. on August 15<sup>th</sup>.

Although this was likely a hoax, as a scientist, Dr. Tough believed that he had to investigate the claim even if there was only a 1% chance of it being genuine. At least, for the first time, a claimant offered clear-cut testable evidence. Dr. Tough was very cautious in proceeding at this stage, and he saw no need to notify the authorities. In addition, he felt strongly that it would be a serious error to put this item on the BBC website or other communications media beforehand, because it would ruin the experiment. He was concerned that if there would be any publicity of this interaction between him and the claimant, and then the TV channels went dead, it could have been caused by some prankster who read the news item, but not by BadlyDrawnUK. In order to verify the test, Dr. Tough looked at the IETI members’ list and wrote to the seven members that lived in the U. K. and informed them what was going on. These people all agreed to check the proposed demonstration of evidence at the stated time. In the mean time, Dr. Tough continued to email with the claimant before the test would take place.

The act did not take place as promised and nothing happened to the British television system. In fact, before 8:00 p.m., the claimant admitted that he was a hoax. In a sense, he dropped his alien mask and became a person. He turned out to be a web designer in Birmingham who was bored in his office, having nothing to do and decided to play an act of “feeble amusement.”

### **The Prime Number Guy**

On August 15, 2001, Dr. Tough received a claim from someone claiming to possess ETI intelligence. The claim contained answers to some of the ten questions posted to ETI on the project’s website, and the claimant asked us for a test (preferably mathematical) rigorous enough to convince mainstream science.

Again, Dr. Tough would not overlook this claim because a verifiable test was proposed to demonstrate the ETI authenticity. As always, Dr. Tough drew wisdom and input from the Invitation to ETI group in his dealing with this claim. He emailed a dozen scientists in the group that included Paul Davies, Al Harrison, Claudio Maccone, Rob Freitas, Ray Norris, Steve Dick, Michael Michaud and Gerald Nordley informing them of this claim and asked for suggestions and advice on further steps. Davies and Norris suggested using the prime number test.

At the time, there was an ongoing contest on earth to find the biggest prime number, so Dr. Tough went on the web and found websites that talked about these. He found two huge prime numbers and multiplied them together and gave the answer to the claimant. He wanted the claimant to tell him what two prime numbers he had to multiply to get that number. The assumption was that if the number were eighty digits in length, factoring it would be within the capabilities of current computers; however, if a number were about 110 digits, that would be beyond any machine available at the time of the test. Therefore, Dr. Tough thought if he gave the claimant a number that contained 100 to 120 digits, and the claimant solved it, then the claimant would be more likely to be an ETI, or at least the claim would merit further investigation.

Dr. Tough sent his first mathematical question to the claimant directly. The claimant solved the first one, which was 40-50 digits, in a few hours. But the claimant did not solve the second question that had been given to him. Before Dr. Tough went further in questioning him, the claimant acknowledged that he was not an ET. In fact, he was a bored programmer in New Orleans, interested in playing games. At this time Dr. Tough decided that the claim would not require any further verification.

### **The TwelveasOne Messenger**

This claim was an unusual one. On August 11, 2001, Dr. Tough received an email message via the Yahoo group mechanism from someone calling himself “TwelveasOne”. The author of the message claimed that he did get messages from ETI. Because we cannot exclude the possibility of ETI contacting us using the disguise of a person on earth, we must accept any opportunity to verify a claim.

Dr. Tough replied and asked 10 specific questions to be answered by the claimant. These questions covered a wide range of topics. He asked about the star or planet they originally came from, the culture they had, who their neighbors were in the galaxy and beyond, what humans should do to achieve contact with ETI, the destination of the universe, their assessment of us, the path human society should take to achieve our potential, our contribution to the universe, etc. The claimant provided answers to each of these questions. To Dr. Tough, these answers appeared to be profound and complete, bearing “the ring of truth about them.” In addition, TwelveasOne seemed to have a deep, accurate knowledge of SETI. When Dr. Tough asked what sorts of evidence could be provided, TwelveasOne said that he could provide “ideas for discussions, research, warnings and advice, governmental regulations, considered judgment and a divine ‘right of passage’ to the unknown”.

However, three months into his online communication with Dr. Tough, TwelveasOne was still ignoring the request to provide some hard evidence proving his ET authenticity. This was when Dr. Tough decided to consult the group of 100 scientists and asked them how to proceed next. Their unanimous instruction was that Dr. Tough should not “spend more time corresponding with TwelveasOne until he has evidence of the claimant’s true identity.”

Eventually, on July 02, 2002. Dr. Tough received a message from someone named Hugh Matlock, admitting that he was the “human being channel” who channels the messages from TwelveAsOne, “the author of the messages.” Although Dr. Tough does not believe TwelveasOne is communicating from a genuine ETI, he continues to communicate with him even until this day. According to Dr. Tough, the communication with TwelveasOne is more like two people interested in the ETI topic.

### **Reflecting on the Lessons Learned**

BadlyDrawnUK was someone who claimed to be an ET. The situation was real, and although the claim turned out to be not true, it was a claim that had to be dealt with. We regard the whole process of communicating with him and investigating his identity as a good rehearsal for us, because we became better prepared when/if the real claim does take place. In this case, Dr. Tough and his team had to (and managed to) behave appropriately and react quickly. The fact that we had uncovered the hoax within a week is quite encouraging.

The Prime Number Guy was someone claiming to possess ET intelligence. He seemed to know more and be wiser than most people. The fact that he passed Dr. Tough’s initial mathematical test made us believe he was worth pursuing. Responding to this particular claim required extensive online information searching and idea gathering on the part of Dr. Tough, who used his personal computer at home, which could possibly be monitored or “hacked.” This experience made us realize that we might someday be dealing with the FBI, CIA or some other large, well funded intelligence office. For this reason, we had to figure out ways to make the design of each test foolproof. If someone had monitored Tough’s web surfing, he would know which prime numbers Tough had examined. In the future, it might be better to use public computers to search for the ideas on the web and come up with the prime number, in order to reduce the risk of being monitored.

TwelveasOne claimed to be the messenger of an ETI, who turned out to be a person maintaining that he was the “channel” for the ET messages. We have no way of determining if this was true or whether he even believed his own claim. It seems that the correspondence with TwelveasOne could teach us a lot about the psychology of Contact. In fact, subtler forms of this kind of projection accompany almost all our discussions about ETI, and in the event of contact, they will form a profound cultural filter. Indeed, as team member Richard Burke-Ward wisely pointed out, “our own biases and need to project ‘other-worldliness’ onto them, rather than just ‘otherness’ may defeat many

practical attempts at communication or negotiation...We might romanticise or demonise ETI, if we're not very careful".

Reflecting on the three most important claims, we have come to realize that a hoax could be anyone. How we reacted to these three claims reflects the rules adopted by the project to selectively pursue online ETI claims. It is our position that any claim where there is going to be hard evidence is worth taking seriously. This rule turns out to be effective. In dealing with most claims, after Dr. Tough explained to the claimant that there was a group of scientists and people with Ph.D.s, waiting to verify their hard evidence, he never heard from the claimant again. When the claimant indicated the willingness to provide hard evidence, the project would take the suggestion or proposal seriously. In all three cases, Dr. Tough needed to go to the web and his colleagues in the group first to invite criticism and suggestions on how to proceed after he decided a claim was worth pursuing. In addition, he included all his colleagues that specialized in certain relevant fields to help him decode what was going on. The teamwork with scientists and colleagues seemed to have been effective in dealing with these claims.

Although none of the three claims turned out to be real, we gained profound insights in reaction to these claims, and the claims provided us valuable opportunities to think, act and react as if there was a real claim. We became better prepared as a result of these "dress rehearsals". As rightly put by BadlyDrawnUK in one of his messages to Dr. Tough, "Experience is the best teacher, and the worst experiences teach the best lessons."

### **Important Principles Revealed**

The Invitation to ETI project was launched under the assumption that a highly advanced civilization would send super-smart probes to other civilizations to explore and study their neighbors. We have chosen the web-based invitation to ETI as our way of reaching out and inviting the communication. Looking back on our research efforts in the past nine years and evaluating all the responses we have received, we remain contented and hopeful.

When the project was first started in 1996, there were a couple of worries, and neither of these worries turned out to be true. One worry was that we would be too stupid and credulous, far too open minded or far too accepting of claims. The ways in which we dealt with the number of claims have shown that we never were easily convinced by any of them. Moreover, the real time practice has shown that we are tough minded and scientific about the pursuit. The other fear was that we would get negative publicity somehow, and this never happened.

It is our understanding that ETI has a choice to go to the government, officials, and the United Nations, if it wishes to do so. Or if it so chooses, it could contact us by responding to our invitation online. In the event that the project's principal investigator and the relevant group should ever be convinced of an authentic ETI contact, we would take all necessary steps to inform the world. By the same token, should we sense that there could

be any danger to the humankind, we would certainly notify the authorities in a timely fashion.

Every scientific project has a chosen focus. We believe our research focus remains a concrete and viable one. In line with our goal to seek contact with probes of ETI that might be lurking on earth undetected, our focus is to look for highly articulate and responsive reply from a super-smart alien intelligence. Given our limitations in knowledge and expertise, we are not motivated to pursue research into UFOs, orbs, abductions, ancient astronauts, and many other fascinating claims and reports of anomalous phenomena. We believe that anyone with anomalous experiences to report can search for a compatible organization on the web and find relevant networks of informed people.

### **Looking Ahead**

Seeking contact with ETI online is an innovative and fascinating project. Over the past few years, not only have we investigated and dealt with several dozen so-called claims, we have learned many useful lessons from responding to each of these claims in real-time situations. In addition, we have received messages from individuals from all over the world interested in learning more about our project and the phenomenon of ETI pursuit, many people also offered valuable advice and warm encouragement to our endeavors. All of this has made our project an even more worthwhile and rewarding one.

As the Invitation to ETI project is continuing into another year, we are considering two aspects of it that might change. One of the possible changes is to simulate and analyze the first 30 days after contact (should a real contact take place) to see how we can prepare ourselves for that chaotic period. It is believed that the answers to this question would better prepare us for the actual contact. The other aspect of change in the project is to reflect on the fact that ETI is probably a million years ahead of us in ethics, wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, science and philosophy, and think through the implications of that advancement (Tough, 2000). These implications could be truly profound and have a constructive impact on how we search for ETI.

Indeed, it is the mission of the Invitation to ETI project to continue its efforts to attract, seek and verify any web-based claims of extraterrestrial intelligence. As Dr. Allen Tough (2005) states, "A good scientist checks out all the possibilities. It is often the most outrageous one that turns out to be correct."

### **References**

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