

## Curse that psychic octopus. He makes me look a fool

### David Spiegelhalter

It's definitely time to retire. Along with all my profession, I am being humiliated by the apparent ability of Paul the Psychic Octopus to predict the results of Germany's World Cup matches. I've collected an alphabet of letters after my name from 35 years of analysing statistics and making predictions, and yet some soothsaying cephalopod, doubtless with few GCSEs, has got six out of six correct, including the two defeats.

No interviews with Paul are currently available and so we don't know his thought processes when his delphic tentacle reaches out and picks the winning team, but he is probably not analysing the data on past performance, which forms the basis for most football prediction systems.

I recently tried my hand at this and suffered the derision of John Humphrys for my failure. Analysts at leading banks also took time off from money-making to make World Cup predictions. JP Morgan predicted England to win (although they put Holland and Spain second and third), while UBS, Goldman Sachs and Danske Bank all had Brazil as the most likely winner. Sadly this performance is unlikely to affect their bonuses.

That octopus is destroying my life's work. I work in a team concerned with improving "risk literacy", who go into schools and explain how lotteries are unpredictable whatever your auntie says, and that just because red has come up on roulette four times in a row, it doesn't mean that somehow it is black's turn. And that rather remarkable "coincidences" happen by chance alone, such as in a class of 35 children there is an 81 per cent chance of two children having the same birthday, or that if you flip a coin 20 times there is a 75 per cent chance that you will get a run of at least four heads or tails in a row. Also when Derren

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Brown flipped ten heads in a row, it was only after he had been flipping for nine hours and they showed only the bit of film when he finally succeeded.

Most remarkable predictions turn out to be down to this kind of selective reporting and, at first, I assumed that we were hearing only about Paul's success and not about the hundreds of other sea creatures picking North Korea as World Cup winners.

But Paul's predictions are now being publicised beforehand, without any Nostradamic ambiguity. The pressure is on — can he perform under the full media spotlight or will he do a Rooney and disappoint? For some bizarre reason, I can't help hoping that he does get his next predictions right today, even though it will mean that my erudite lessons in chance will in future be greeted by derisive sneers of "OK prof, how do you explain the octopus?"

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