



Stolen thoughts of a football robot

Jonathan Wilson is a biased useless prick who knows nothing and is fraudulently drawing a salary

You're a mentally ill paedophile.

It's the sort of accusation you hope to avoid and, frankly, it seemed a bit of an over-reaction to my suggestion for restructuring the World Cup. Most journalists have suffered something similar; in the hour before kick-off, in fact, you can pretty much guarantee that at least one conversation in any given press-room will be a discussion of what writers have been called on their blogs that week. This is interactivity, the new holy grail of journalism. There was a time when journalism was about getting facts right, or providing wise analyses; now it's about generating traffic and comments. Little wonder if some writers and editors, desperate to satisfy those higher up the chain, start to worship at the shrine not of Truth but of Search Engine Optimisation. You could research a real story, but it's much easier and it gets more hits if you link David Beckham with

a return to Manchester United. If you can work in a love triangle with Cheryl Cole and the Pope, and suggest Hitler had something to do with it, so much the better.

"If you can work in a love triangle with Cheryl Cole and the Pope, and suggest Hitler had something to do with it, so much the better."

The moderators moved in and deleted the paedophile allegation of course (after all, in a technical sense, the newspaper whose website carries such a claim is legally liable for it) and, frankly, it was so far beyond what was reasonable that it was easy to laugh off. But other accusations cut deep. At its best the comments below an article become a forum for debate; occasionally my



tactics pieces for the Guardian generate discussion that is genuinely interesting to read. If nothing else, the fact that readers can respond relatively directly to the writer keeps us honest; factual errors are seized upon, as is faulty logic. If a reader disagrees with an opinion or an interpretation and argues his case, valuable syntheses can result; too often, though, the response becomes an attack directed directly at the author rather than the argument. Journalists are now expected to walk a gauntlet of abuse as an everyday part of their job. It's all very bizarre – no accountant or shop-assistant or street-sweeper or solicitor is expected to go about their business receiving constant messages telling them they're a useless prick who is biased/knows nothing/is fraudulently drawing a salary.

Criticise a big four (six?) club at your peril. Accuse Arsenal of petulance, United of arrogance or City of negativity and you'll spend the next 48 hours metaphorically wiping the spittle off your Twitter feed. Go in particularly hard, and message-boards will orchestrate campaigns of abuse against you.

In a sense, I'm lucky in that I'm a Sunderland fan rather than a fan of one of the big four; I made an early decision to declare my allegiance (although of course I've been accused of being a bitter Manchester United/Chelsea/Arsenal/Liverpool/Manchester City/Tottenham fan). Outside of Newcastle – whose fans, in fairness, seem relatively good-humoured and level-headed – nobody *really* cares about Sunderland, so I tend to get away without the accusations

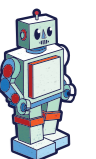
of bias that dog some of my colleagues. There are those who would say that, like a referee, journalists should steer clear of their club (or their club's rivals), but actually it's relatively easy to switch off; if anything, you find, certainly in match reports, that you tend to be harsher on your own club than on others, if only because you set them higher standards.

"If anything, you find, certainly in match reports, that you tend to be harsher on your own club than on others, if only because you set them higher standards."

The only real accusations of bias I've faced came during the World Cup when, before the semi-final, I wrote that Spain were the best side in the tournament and that Germany, for all their goals, were essentially a reactive side who had exploited the weaknesses of opponents with devastating counter-attacks. I still don't really understand how people can disagree with that, or even why they'd be offended even if they did, but I was deluged with accusations of anti-Germanness, which was variously attributed to my Englishness and to the time I've spent in Moscow. Not a single critic actually addressed the argument. If I'm talking nonsense, by all means point it out; investing time thinking up reasons why I might have said something rather than considering the validity of that something seems very weird.

"The resource is not enough; you then have to use it to construct an argument. An army may have more guns than its enemy, but it still has to fire them."

Similarly you get people whose argument consists of saying "I've been to every game since 1986; therefore I must know better than you." Well, yes, you do have a better bank of specific knowledge about the club in question, just as a player who argues that he knows better because he's "played the game" has greater experience of the inside of football than a journalist. But having the resource is not enough; you then have to use it to construct an argument. An army may have more guns than its enemy, but it still has to fire them.





Then you get the people who simply can't read. In October 2009, I wrote a piece discussing Slovenia's chances of World Cup qualification that included the line, "If they win [against San Marino] and Slovakia fail to beat an admittedly shambolic Poland in Chorzow, they will qualify for South Africa outright." This was taken by one poster as evidence of an animus against Slovakia. Since then he has repeatedly posted to remind everybody how I underestimated Slovakia. Every time I write about a side that goes on to lose – and given I write about eastern European teams a lot, that happens fairly frequently – he gleefully points out that I've got my "prediction" wrong. In this misconception, he's not alone; readers for some reason think that writing an analysis of, say, Bulgaria before they play England means you think they'll win.

Occasionally an over-enthusiastic sub-editor feeds the delusion, by writing a headline or a strap saying something along the lines of "Montenegro could threaten England at Wembley tonight." Of course if they read the actual piece before dashing off an opinion it would help, but at other times the nature of journalism creates a confusion. When a piece I wrote on likely tactical development this season for the Guardian's pull-out preview supplement went online,

it was dismissed as "sketchy" and "lacking your usual detail". Well, yes, but it was constrained by the format of the magazine, and so came in at only 700 words, rather than the 1500-2000 my online columns can stretch to. At least I don't suffer from the fate of the likes of Barney Ronay and Harry Pearson, who write comedy columns. In the paper, the position and design of the pieces indicates that it's not supposed to be taken seriously; on the website those markers are absent and so posters commonly ask "what's the point of this piece?" lamenting the "poor analysis". To which the preferred but impossible response is to seize them by the throat and scream "It's a joke".

You also get complaints and suggestions that are simply inexplicable. I remember a piece I wrote for the Guardian about Hungary's 6-3 victory over England in 1953, in which I described their defensive shape as being a step away from a back four, with three defenders protected by a very deep-lying midfielder. "I do wish you'd get your facts straight," came a complaint from somebody who claimed to have been there, going on in the usual aggressive terms to accuse me of unprofessionalism, insisting that Hungary had played with a back four. I waded in and, biting my tongue, pointed out that my description of Hungary's formation was taken from the

– incredibly detailed – diary of coach Gusztav Sebes. He was having none of it, though, and while his tone became more measured – as often happens when posters realise they're talking to a person rather than screaming into a void – he wrote that "you'd be better off talking to some of the more intelligent English players of the time like Don Howe and Jimmy Hill." Of course I would. Of course an old English player sifting almost 60 years through his memory would be a better source than the contemporary notes taken by the team's coach. I withdrew from the discussion.

Then there are those who assert things that simply aren't true. "Is Novosibirsk really further east than Almaty?" asked one poster after I'd written that Sibir, the team from Novosibirsk, were the easternmost side ever to qualify for the Uefa Cup. To which the only answer is "Yes, it is," as 30 seconds on Google would have told him. Then there are the frustrated writers, people who pick on a typo or an infelicitous phrase as though what you were writing were a haiku rather than whacking out one of the half-dozen pieces you have to do each day to make ends meet. Perhaps most annoying are the great trinity of regular complaints: "lazy journalism", "I expect better from the [insert name of newspaper] and "I can't believe you get paid for this rubbish". Of course some journalism is slack, but I was once accused of laziness for a piece on Juan Roman Riquelme, Luka Modric and the modern playmaker that was written on the basis of eight interviews conducted in five countries, plus video research stretching to several hours. If you calculated pay per hour, even ignoring time spent watching football, I got about two-thirds of minimum wage, not counting expenditure on flights and hotels.

Generally, those who respond on Twitter are less aggressive than those who post beneath articles, presumably because they have more of a sense of dealing with an actual person – or perhaps they simply realise they can be blocked. The problem there is rather those who seem to regard writers as their own personal researchers. If you can Google a fact, don't ask me.

Does that sound negative? I hope not. I genuinely enjoy some of the engagement. A fan who watches every game a team plays will have a more informed perspective than a journalist who sees a dozen or so a season. Journalists do get things wrong, we do miss things. It's good to be



challenged, to have to justify your opinions. But there are times when the whole process can feel very wearing, and I know of writers who are so sick of criticism that they now write middle-of-the-road pieces – both in terms of opinion and style – that can't cause offence just to avoid the abuse.

"I know of writers who are so sick of criticism that they now write middle-of-the-road pieces – both in terms of opinion and style – that can't cause offence just to avoid the abuse."

Interactivity should be a two-way street, but the exchange is unequal. Posters can hide behind anonymity and dish out the sort of insults and allegations that, if made by the journalist, would cost them their job or even lead to them being sued. Questioning us, challenging our opinions is fine, but remember, we are just people.

Jonathan Wilson is a Guardian journalist, Football Weekly podcast supremo and author of such acclaimed football masterpieces as *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Football Tactics* and *The Anatomy of England: A History in Ten Matches*. He promises us that the very best stuff, though, he saves for li'l ol' tfs...