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SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

The Damian McBride smear scandal is a symptom of an endemic cross-party culture of media manipulation, writes **Nicholas Jones**

What got lost amid the furore over Damian McBride's lurid smears against Conservative politicians was the appeal by the schools secretary Ed Balls that leaders of all the main parties should examine the conduct of their own spin doctors and publicists.

Gordon Brown was rightly blamed for having lost control of Labour's politically-driven attack dogs but David Cameron should also have been in the frame. He too had – and still has – some questions to answer.

Have the Conservatives found a neat way to keep the activities of their brat pack at arms length from Tory Central Office? Is it the lack of accountability which is part and parcel of Opposition which is giving their party activists freedom to put the boot in via the blogosphere?

And, perhaps more to the point, should more have been done to hold the lobby journalists of Westminster to account? Unattributable briefings have become the life support system of modern political journalism and it is the McBrides of this world who will always be waiting in the wings with another potentially poisonous transfusion.

Derek Draper was right in his assessment: Labour did have – and still has – a massive hole to fill in trying to build

up an online presence to match the commanding lead established by right-wing bloggers on behalf of the Conservative Party.

Just as in the USA, where the Democrats' campaign team built up an overwhelming online lead for Barack Obama, it is the hunger for power on the part of political activists on the right which has helped to put the Conservatives way ahead in the blogosphere.

But Labour's failure to generate political blogs on the left which are anything like as effective as those on the right has only been compounded by McBride's ineptitude.

When it comes to influencing the news agenda Guido Fawkes (www.order-order.com) – ably assisted by www.iaindale.blogspot.com and www.conservativehome.blogspot.com – have made all the running. And there is no doubt that because of their ability to deliver exclusive stories, these blogs have caused Labour immense damage. McBride's forced resignation was the latest in their lengthening list of political scalps.

Political websites have had an increasing influence on the news agenda because they can publish risky stories which established news outlets dare not print or broadcast. But the

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bloggers know only too well that once the information is out on the internet it is considered to be in the public domain and will almost certainly be followed up by mainstream journalists.

Here we can begin to see the true extent of the collusion which can occur. Bloggers run sensational stories which are sometimes fed to them by frustrated journalists who are unable to print or broadcast such items. Once published online, they gain greater credence and are out there, ready and waiting to be exploited by Opposition politicians.

This gets to the heart of Ed Balls' appeal that party leaders all have a responsibility to police the activities of their media apparatchiks. Balls and his wife Yvette Cooper complained bitterly about being the subject of smears on the Guido Fawkes website which were taken up by Conservative spokesmen and then used by the Tories as the basis for unsubstantiated complaints to the commissioner for parliamentary standards.

Comments which had been made about them on Guido Fawkes were, Ed Balls said, "homophobic, misogynist, deeply sexual and just awful... I would never want my children to see the things written about us".

When the shadow chancellor George Osborne accepted on behalf of himself and his wife the Prime Minister's belated apology – it took Brown five days to say "I am sorry about what happened" – he accepted that politicians should move on and should agree on how to "clean up politics".

Cameron – like Brown – will be judged on action not words. Will the

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NUJ challenges on G20 policing

The National Union of Journalists is planning a legal challenge against the police over the G20 protests after its members complained about alleged assaults and the use of cordons and "kettling".

Roy Mincoff, the NUJ's senior legal officer, is spearheading the NUJ's preparation of G20-related cases and will be contacting the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) and the Home Office minister, Vernon Coaker.

NUJ members attending the G20 protests in the City of London on 1 and 2 April complained to the union about alleged assaults by officers, the use of cordons and police refusing to release journalists from areas in which demonstrators were contained for several hours, known as "kettling".

The NUJ is also contemplating legal action against the police after officers used section 14 of the Public Order Act to order photographers to clear the area in one incident on 2 April, which was caught on video.

Police apologised for the incident where officers used section 14 of the act, which is intended primarily to disperse potentially disruptive or violent gatherings.

In other G20 incidents, several photographers have said that police pushed them and hit them with batons.

Meanwhile on 22 April a Liberal Democrat MP released video footage of a journalist detained within the police cordon at one of the G20 protests in London in early April. Tom Brake, a party spokesman on home affairs, was filming with colleagues inside the so-called kettle in the Bank district. The video has now been submitted to the IPCC.

Tim Gopsill, editor of the NUJ magazine the *Journalist*, attended the G20 demonstration as an observer.

He said: "Trapping people in a cage for hours on end was an outrage, whether they were press or not. For journalists it meant they couldn't get out to work on their reports, which was an assault on press freedom – journal-

ists should have freedom to leave events as well to get into them."

Last year, a UK parliamentary committee asked the police not to obstruct journalists doing their work during protests. In its report the parliamentary committee said: "It is unacceptable that individual journalists are left with no option but to take court action against officers who unlawfully interfere with their work.

"Journalists have the right to carry out their lawful business and report the way in which demonstrations are handled by the police without state interference, unless such interference is necessary and proportionate, and journalists need to be confident that they can carry out their role.

"The public in turn have the right to impart and receive information: the media are the eyes and ears of the public, helping to ensure that the police are accountable to the people they serve. Effective training of front line police officers on the role of journalists in protests is vital."

This piece by NUJ activist **Peter Lazenby** appeared on the *Guardian's* Comment is Free website in response to comments by columnist Roger Graef on the role of citizen journalism in exposing the truth behind the death of news vendor Ian Tomlinson

Roger Graef is right to celebrate the empowerment of communities through citizen techno-scrutiny of police at the G20 protests, where citizen media delivered much-needed transparency. This has added significance in the light of reports that professional journalists were prevented from doing their jobs on 1 April. Despite the suspicion some professional journalists feel for amateur colleagues, established and citizen media clearly worked together at G20. The old tale of Sheffield journalists who made a point selling under-priced turnips, cabbages and potatoes outside the shop of a greengrocer infamous for supplying free sports reports to their employer is consigned to pre-digital history. There are greater threats.

A further issue highlighted by Tomlinson's death is that much of the initial coverage was appalling, evidenced by the readiness of many sections of the establishment media to present "official" versions. With all its benefits, citizen-media is not a panacea. It cannot replace the vigilance and tenacity of good investigative reporting, as shown by the *Guardian's* use of photographs and footage of Tomlinson. This was investigated and verified by journalists whose revelations changed the angle of coverage by other newspapers and broadcasters.

These reporters persisted despite criticism from the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) that they were "upsetting" Tomlinson's family and the IPCC statement that there was "nothing in the story". The family later expressed gratitude for the coverage. Under the NUJ code of practice, a

journalist should "at all times strive to eliminate distortion, news suppression and censorship". Here, the truth is emerging despite many journalists' initial acceptance of official statements.

But journalistic standards are falling because there is widespread retrenchment. Jobs are being axed despite healthy profits. Those journalists left in the regional media are often tied to keyboards and telephones, regurgitating news releases, just as many sections of the media regurgitated the fiction that Tomlinson was a G20 demonstrator, and repeated as fact a police statement that medics were prevented from giving treatment because they were targeted by "missiles". There is continuing contraction in national newspapers, and many evening papers previously producing several editions, packed with spirited and changing news, are now largely written the previous day.

This is happening following the extraction from regional newspapers of billions of pounds in profits to shareholders and directors. My own employer, Johnston Press, is a case in point. Last year's profit was £120m, down from 30 per cent but still more than 20 per cent of turnover. As management dispensed handsome profits, it also borrowed for an over-ambitious expansion programme. With advertising revenue plummeting, its debts are 10 times its share value. Journalists are being told to pay with their jobs.

Nothing obstructs the professional media's capacity to keep the public informed more than cuts in jobs and standards. Journalism is being seriously undermined, yet employers are seeking a relaxation of monopoly rules to enable further mergers and reduce competition. The NUJ campaign Stand up for Journalism is highlighting the devastation of the profession caused by the continuing demand for bloated profits. The campaign needs the support of all who value the freedom of the press and who seek to maintain quality journalism.

Peter Lazenby is joint father of the NUJ chapel at Yorkshire Post Newspapers

Burnham agrees to keep product placement ban

By Jonathan Hardy

In March, culture secretary Andy Burnham announced the Government would maintain rules that prevent product placement (PP) in programmes made for British television.

The EU Audiovisual Directive allows countries to permit PP in certain genres, so the CPBF, and others, responded last autumn to a consultation on implementing the Directive. Despite relentless lobbying by ITV, and other advertising and media industry groups, the Government has decided that "no conclusive evidence has been put forward that the economic benefit of introducing product placement is sufficient to outweigh the detrimental impact it would have on the quality and standards of British television and viewers' trust in it".

Endorsing arguments we

have long put forward, Burnham acknowledged "very serious concerns about blurring the boundaries between advertising and editorial".

EU Commissioner Viviane Reding mounted a late lobbying effort urging the Government to liberalise PP, as Berlusconi's government in Italy is set to do. The aim, she stated, is to allow broadcasters and producers to access new revenue sources so as "to improve the level-playing field with US competitors".

But Reding and UK proponents also press the contradictory claim that safeguards will ensure that rampant US-style commercial integration will not occur. As ITV, PACT and others present it, we would have product "placement" but not promotion, with no interference by advertisers in editorial decisions. The Government is absolutely

right to be sceptical. Paying for prominence would undermine, however gradually, all the existing safeguards, and abandon the principle that advertising and programmes should be kept separate.

We are asked to believe both that PP is desperately needed to save struggling commercial broadcasters, and that these selfsame players will not compromise commissioning, programme making or editorial integrity to serve commercial goals. In themselves, promotional arrangements between advertisers and media are notoriously difficult to police. That is why the twin safeguards of undue prominence rules together with prohibiting paid placement must remain.

The Government's decision holds until a review in 2011/2012, however an incoming Conservative

Government would permit PP, and the Liberal Democrats too support liberalisation.

While Michael Grade's call for a judicial review of the Government will probably remain angry sabre-rattling, we face a renewed challenge to underpin arguments with further research and to present a strong coalition stretching across civil society, consumer and creative interests alike. BECTU's endorsement of product placement is deeply regrettable and we must work with unions such as the Writers' Guild to build the level of appreciation of the corrosive damage of PP so powerfully articulated by the Writers Guild of America. So this is an important victory, but one that reveals how vital it is, as Burnham put it, to "continue to preserve editorial integrity as technology advances".

Commission scuppers protection for asylum seekers

By Phil Cooper

The latest example of how the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is failing to protect the rights of the individual in the face of bad or inaccurate reporting makes very bad news indeed for refugees and asylum seekers.

This group of people have a tough enough time as it is and are frequently the brunt of red top headlines designed to whip up resentment and hostility towards them.

At present the PCC's guide to editors states: "An asylum seeker can only become an illegal immigrant if he or she remains in the UK after having failed to respond to a removal notice."

In giving its judgment on a complaint about an article that originally appeared in the *Croydon Advertiser* the PCC effectively removed this level of protection.

The case involved an Algerian asylum seeker, who we shall refer to as Mr MT. He was interviewed by an *Advertiser* reporter in November 2007 and the resulting story claimed in both the standfirst and in the text that he was an "illegal immigrant."

The article went out of its way to denigrate Mr MT. The introduction said: "He is living entirely at your expense and he shouldn't even be in the country."

Phrases such as "he moaned" and "he griped" litter the piece. It also includes a statement from an unnamed Border and Immigration Agency official claiming Mr MT could expect to be deported.

But the fact of the matter was that, although he had been refused asylum, he had not been issued with a removal notice. He was also still in receipt of food vouchers and accommodation provided by the local authority, which would not have been provided if he was in the country illegally.

These points were made to the PCC on Mr MT's behalf by the Croydon Refugee Forum assisted by the media officer from the Hammersmith the Fulham Refugee Forum.

An initial response was rejected by the complainants and they wrote again drawing the PCC's specific attention to the wording of its advice to editors:

"An asylum seeker can only become an illegal immigrant if he or she remains in the UK after having failed to respond to a removal notice."

The final response, received last November, stated there was no breach of the PCC's Code of Conduct. It explained it away like this:

"The Commission was satisfied that the article would not have misled readers as to [Mr MT's] status. While he had not failed to respond to a removal notice, [Mr MT] was still not in the country with overt legal sanction as an asylum seeker, and the authorities were apparently in the process of organising his deportation."

So, the current wording of the Code is meaningless and can be circumvented by editors if a person is "apparently" going to be processed for deportation, according to the views of an unnamed official. But the unnamed official got it wrong. Only a few weeks after the article had appeared Mr MT was granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

No thanks to the *Croydon Advertiser* or the PCC.

Phil Cooper is the media officer of the Hammersmith and Fulham Refugee Forum

Local newspaper crisis

Local news is under threat

The big local newspaper groups are ruthlessly cutting costs by axing jobs and titles – and now they are lobbying hard for a relaxation of ownership rules. **Granville Williams** reports

Johnston Press, one of the top four owners of local newspapers, is to sell the offices of the *Wakefield Express* building in the centre of Wakefield. It is the latest in a series of bad news stories about the fate of the local press across the country, but the move has prompted a vigorous campaign by journalists on the paper to keep the historic paper close to the community it serves.

Management are seeking the cheapest alternative premises, and are likely to move the paper to an out-of-town location due to high city centre rents. The National Union of Journalists' chapel believes that moving the award-winning paper from the city centre would be disastrous. There are fears the move could start the centralisation of other Johnston Press-owned titles in the Wakefield district at an out-of-town "news factory".

John Robinson established the *Express* in 1852 as a liberal newspaper.

More mergers are not the answer

By Barry White

Ministers are quietly drawing up legislation that would tear up merger regimes for television, regional newspapers and local radio as part of the biggest shake-up in media regulation since the beginning of the decade, reports Dan Sabbagh in the *Times* on 16 April.

"A short bill – the Digital Economy Bill," wrote Sabbagh, "is being prepared to implement the conclusions of the Digital Britain review, which will determine the future of Channel 4 and is expected to provide help for struggling newspapers and broadcasters."

"Although it is a convention that ministers do not publicly discuss the bills that comprise the Queen's Speech in the autumn, Andy Burnham, the culture secretary, has been privately telling media companies that new legislation is likely.

"The expectation of a bill gives regional newspaper groups and radio companies hope that they will benefit from an easing of regulations, with the Government increasingly

sympathetic to a relaxation of the rules that could allow consolidation between the publishers Trinity Mirror and Johnston Press or the radio groups Bauer, owner of Magic and Kiss, and UTV, the owner of TalkSPORT.

"Without new laws, ministers have concluded that it will not be possible to introduce changes called for by Digital Britain. However, the problem for Labour is that any Bill will have to be scrambled through before a general election, expected in May or June next year.

"That means that the Bill is likely to be short – about 30 or 40 clauses – and will concentrate on implementing the recommendations of the Digital Britain review that require changes in the law, rather than a root-and-branch look at communications law."

The proposals were attacked by Jeremy Dear, general secretary of the NUJ who said: "If the Government is considering changing the rules to bail out the media companies they must insist on enforceable guarantees about journalism and jobs. Well over 100 MPs have signed an Early Day Motion

supporting this demand for guarantees."

His views were echoed by media commentator Roy Greenslade. Writing in his *Guardian* blog he said that mergers were not necessarily the answer to the underlying problems afflicting media companies.

"It may offer short-term relief to various companies, though I also have my doubts about that, but it certainly will not solve the fundamental problems of newspaper publishing in the regions.

"The main source of revenue, advertising, will probably start to recover next year, but not to the levels previously enjoyed. Declining newsprint sales will not be reversed. Funds for further, and ongoing, online investment must be found (and will therefore scare away would-be investors).

"Merge away, Sly. Swap titles. Create geographical monopolies. Acquire broadcasting platforms. Rationalise printing plants. Achieve greater economies of scale. Dance to the City's tune once more.

"But where will it leave journalism? Will there be enough reporters to cover

councils and courts? Will journalists be able to escape from their desks to meet people on the streets? Will all this merging and swapping really be of genuine public service, as the Government has been told?"

Meanwhile Andy Burnham, culture secretary has called a local media summit on 28 April at Portcullis House, Westminster. Participants are invited "to discuss ideas to help local media make the transition to the digital age... Within the policy context of the Digital Britain Report, this summit will give the Government, relevant representative bodies from newspapers, radio and television, as well as other interested stakeholders, the opportunity to share thoughts on the way forward and help set the direction for the future."

If Sabbagh's story in the *Times* is true, and Burnham has been privately telling media companies that new legislation is likely, the exercise is just cynical PR and spin. If, however, Burnham is sincere and wants genuine discussion, the proof will be in the final outcome.

Local newspaper crisis

In 1952 his great-grandsons commissioned a film, *Wakefield Express*, directed by filmmaker, Lindsay Anderson, to commemorate the paper's centenary. By 1952 the company had grown to five newspapers all reporting the communities they were based in.

Anderson's evocative film shows a reporter visiting the courts and council, bumping into people on the streets, visiting the vicar and the local working men's club. The film reminds us of the vital but threatened role of the local rag. It is also a far cry from the reality for many journalists on local papers today where the lack of staff going out and finding stories leads to newsrooms where no-one ever leaves the office. To fill a paper there is an over-reliance on press releases (predominantly from the local council, which often go in to the paper completely unchallenged), on contributed copy and on safe community stories.

The fate of the *Wakefield Express* group fits into a bigger picture. In January the seven biggest local and regional newspaper groups (Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Newsquest, Northcliffe Media, Guardian Media Group, Archant and DC Thomson) set up the Local Media Alliance (LMA) with the explicit aim of changing the law on local media ownership.

The LMA has been extremely active, lobbying Lord Carter's Digital Review and submitting evidence to the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) Local Media Review. As newspaper groups cut journalists' jobs, close local news offices and titles it is madness to change media ownership rules so that they can wreak even more damage on a greater scale.

The CPBF in its response to the OFT review argues strongly against any relaxation of the ownership rules: "The focus on acquisitions, and delivering annual profits far in excess of other businesses was at the price of neglecting the journalistic core of the business. The result has been declining circulation which has exacerbated the current crisis facing the industry due to the fall in advertising and the rise of the internet."

The CPBF response also argues there should be support for new entrants: "This could be in a variety of ways. If

groups close down titles they should relinquish ownership of the title and the opportunity be given to new consortia to revive the title.

The CPBF has had a long-standing policy that a Media Enterprise Board could operate at national, regional and local level to intervene to support the launch of newspapers, magazines or online media projects designed to fill gaps in the market and to promote diversity. Polly Toynbee suggests in the

Guardian the idea of small, locally-run independent trusts.

All of these proposals should be part of an open debate suggested by Andy Burnham's remark that we need "new models to sustain local news in the future".

At the heart of this should be the focus on sustaining high-quality journalism, something which seems to be rather lower down in the priorities of regional newspapers owners.

CPBF to hold major conference

By Granville Williams

The CPBF has been conducting a major project, Media Ownership in the Age of Convergence, and the culmination of the project will be a conference, Media For All: The Challenge of Convergence, on 31 October 2009.

It will draw together a range of speakers to address key issues on media ownership and regulation. The conference takes a global perspective because many of the threats and challenges the media face are not specific to the UK.

That's why we're pleased to announce one of the keynote speakers is John Nichols, Washington correspondent for the *Nation* and founder, with Robert McChesney and Josh Silver, of the Free Press Media

Reform movement in the United States.

It will be an ambitious event, with a wide range of speakers in plenary and breakout sessions. The objective of the conference is also ambitious. We want to present the kind of policies which we think will need to be campaigned for to protect and develop high quality and accessible media. Full details of the programme will be available by the end of May but we want you to put the date in your diaries now and make it a priority to attend.

We are also planning an event for Friday evening, October 30, at the same venue. This will be much more of a rally with film, music and speakers. Full details to follow, but put that date in your diary too. A website will be set up to process bookings and offer attractive early-booking discounts.

CPBF AGM 2009

This year's AGM will be held on Saturday 4 July from 10.00am at:

**NUJ Headquarters
308/312 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8DP**

(Nearest station/ underground King's Cross)

Reports, election of National Council, future activities and discussion on the future of local media post-Carter

As newspaper groups cut journalists' jobs, close local news offices and titles it is madness to change media ownership rules so that they can wreak even more damage on a greater scale

A cheap confidence trick

Julian Petley assesses the Press Complaints Commission's latest annual review

The Press Complaints Commission's *Review* of 2008 reveals that last year it received 4698 complaints, a record high and an 8 per cent increase over the previous year.

Inevitably the *Review* claims "we are confident that this is not a sign of dramatically falling standards in the industry, but of increased awareness and accessibility of the PCC", but as the PCC undertakes no research to back up such a claim, others are of course fully entitled to take the opposite view.

Over half the complaints were either not taken forward by the complainant(s) or fell outside the Code's remit. In all, the PCC issued 1420 rulings. In 721 cases it found no breach of the Code, in 102 cases it felt sufficient remedial action had been taken by the publication concerned, and in 552 cases the matter was resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant. Twenty four complaints were adjudicated and upheld, and 21 were adjudicated and not upheld. 71.4 per cent of complaints concerned accuracy, 8.8 per cent privacy, 6.9 per cent intrusion into grief or shock, and 3.4 per cent harassment.

The *Review* covers 2008 but was of course written in 2009, not at all a good year for the PCC with increasing numbers of those traduced by the press simply bypassing its services and going straight to the courts, high-profile witnesses queuing up to slag it off before the department of culture, media and sport select committee enquiry into press standards, privacy and libel, and the publication of the first part of an extremely critical report on its activities by the Media Standards Trust.

Given that much of the criticism of the PCC is directed at its inability or unwillingness to stop newspapers prying into private lives in matters which are not remotely of public interest, it is perhaps unsurprising that the *Review* contains a "Special Report" on privacy.

This points out that "anyone can now publish information online", unhindered, except in the case of UK newspaper and magazine sites which now fall within the remit of the PCC, by the requirements of the PCC Code. In such circumstances, it argues, it would be meaningless to introduce privacy legislation, and to apply it only to newspapers would be anti-competitive. Self-regulation should thus continue as its effectiveness is ensured by the

"buy-in" of the newspaper industry.

However, it's perfectly possible to envisage a quite different scenario in which, desperate to compete with online content which falls outside the remit of the PCC, newspapers constantly push at the envelope of the PCC Code, and the PCC, which is after all paid for by those newspapers, simply lets them get away with it. The suspicion that this is exactly what will in fact happen is greatly increased by the Special Report's contention that "as the public interest in seeing pictures of people in the news increases, so does the level of justification for publishing them without consent The public has a right to see images of people who are in the news, whether they have a fleeting brush with fame or deliberately seek publicity".

But this is purest tabloid-speak – just because some may want to see images of people in the news it doesn't remotely mean they have a right to do so, unless it is genuinely in the public interest (and not in the PCC's flawed, feeble and truncated definition of it).

But even if it tried to rein in the newspapers, one very much doubts they would take any notice. Take, for example, their record on corrections negotiated by the PCC. The *Review's* "Report on Prominence" proudly boasts that 85 per cent of corrections and apologies appear on the same page as, or further forward than, the original article, or in a corrections column. The *Review* makes much of an adjudication which the *News of the World* had to publish in the wake of a front-page story headed "Burrell: I Had Sex with Diana", about which Burrell had not been consulted. The story also ran on pages 4-7. However, the *Review*

conspicuously omits to mention that the adjudication took up only about a third of page 28, and occupied approximately 6 per cent of the column inches of the original article.

Quite lacking from the *Review*, however, is any account of its adjudication in the case of a front-page story run by the *Star* on 29 September 2008. This was headed "Peaches: Spend the Night With Me For £5k" and stated that glamour girl Peaches Geldof is bagging thousands of pounds a night from people desperate for her company. The article, which clearly implies that Peaches was selling sexual services, was published by the paper in the knowledge that it was untrue.

After Peaches had complained to the PCC the paper agreed to print a retraction, but refused to do so on the front-page because "the subject matter of the apology and of the complaint is not proportionate with a front page apology. The headline on page one was a taster for the article as a whole, which appeared on page 5". A very small apology, about 30 cm², thus appeared on page 2. Piling pusillanimity upon sophistry, the PCC meekly endorsed the *Star's* refusal on the grounds that "while the front page may have been open to a certain interpretation, it did not contain any specific claims about the "services" offered by the complainant".

Of course, no sane person would expect the PCC to do anything which might cut off the lifeblood of its paymasters, but one really does wonder how many more judgements like this it is going to take before politicians wake up to the fact that the PCC is a confidence trick which long ago ceased to inspire the slightest confidence.



Inspirational solidarity



SHAFTED – THE MEDIA, THE MINERS' STRIKE AND THE AFTERMATH
Granville Williams (ed)
Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom
£9.99

By Julio Etchart

The 1984-1985 miners' strike was a defining moment in British industrial relations. *Shafted*, edited by Yorkshire freelance Granville Williams and published by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has been published to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the start of the strike. It bravely explores the ways in which the media covered the strike and looks into the devastating impact of the pit closure programme on mining communities.

It analyses the pressures on journalists who reported the strike, with accounts from prominent reporters, among them Pete Lazenby of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Nick Jones of the BBC, and Paul Routledge of the *Times*. But the book also looks at the important contribution from the alternative media and the coverage of the long conflict by freelance photographers and filmmakers.

It was the official line at the time that, by defeating the NUM, Thatcher crushed the trade union movement. Fortunately, this incisive title reminds us of many instances of strong solidarity and cohesion in our organisations, a prime example being the refusal by all the *Sun's* chapels to run a front cover showing a cropped picture of Arthur Scargill to appear as though he was giving a Hitler salute to illustrate the editor's headline: "Mine Fuhrer". The historic 15 May 1984 edition instead ran a blank front page stating that the tabloid "decided reluctantly, to print the paper without it". An early victory against the future Murdoch empire!

However, according to Williams: "The cumulative impact of the propaganda assault on the miners by the overwhelming majority of the national newspapers was to present to their readers, over several months, a distorted view of the strike."

Even the *Mirror*, originally sympathetic to the miners, changed its

editorial tone, after Robert Maxwell acquired the paper in July 1984. The broadcast media was equally biased against the struggle, and coverage of the central issues of the dispute, (the ballot, violence, the return to work movement, the personality of Arthur Scargill) was framed in terms that favoured the National Coal Board and the Government.

But an ethos of self-organisation developed to counteract the increasingly vicious posture of the mainstream media. A collective effort by a group of alternative newspapers and publishers from up and down the country tried to tell the story from the miners' point of view. They included the *Other Voice*, the *Brighton Voice*, *Durham Street Press* and the *Islington Gutter Press* among many others. Publishers Leeds Postcards and Pluto Press launched special edition cartoons and cards that raised more than £50,000 for the strike fund.

It was the *Other Voice* that set the record straight on many issues, showing John Harris's picture of a mounted policeman clubbing photographer Lesley Boulton at Orgreave and bringing attention to the BBC reversal of videotape to show police cavalry charging in response to miners throwing stones rather than what really happened – the direct opposite.

Shafted reminds us that, in this post-G20 world we live in, with the ghost of mass unemployment taking its daily toll, we can draw inspiration from the resilience and strong solidarity ethic of the trade union movement of a generation ago, so that we can all face together this uncertain times in hope and with dignity.

www.julioetchart.com



Shafted editor Granville Williams

Shafted launch a great success

By Granville Williams

The *Shafted* book launch in Leeds on 12 March was very successful and packed out. Since then we have sold the book at the Barnsley event, organised by the Yorkshire NUM, commemorating the deaths of two miners, David Jones and Joe Green, in the 1984-85 strike; showings of Ken Loach's *Which Side Are You On?* and other films with mining themes at the Showroom in Sheffield; and a book launch at the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff. On March 8 we also sold the books at *Maggie's End*, a play based on the death of Margaret Thatcher at the Shaw Theatre, London.

You can buy copies of the book at: www.cpbp.org.uk/shafted

There are a number of other events coming up around the book. If you would like to organise a meeting and invite someone to speak about the book contact the CPBF national office.

MONDAY 11 MAY LIVERPOOL

Writing On the Wall Festival Shafted: The Media and the Miner's Strike and Militant Liverpool

On the 25th anniversary of the miners' strike of 1984 the CPBF, in association with WoW, presents a night of discussion on the role of the media during the dispute, and of Liverpool's battle with the Tories during that year.

Speakers: Brian Reade, *Daily Mirror* columnist, broadcaster and writer; Nick Jones, industrial correspondent during the 1984-85 miners' strike for BBC radio; Peter Lazenby, industrial reporter for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* at the time of the strike; Granville Williams, editor of *Shafted*; Paul Astbury, one of the 47 Liverpool Labour councillors surcharged and removed from office following their campaign against Government cuts.
7pm, The Casa, 29 Hope Street, Liverpool L1 9BQ Entrance £4/£2

THURSDAY 14 MAY SHEFFIELD

Morning Star Public Meeting The Media, the Miners' Strike and the Lessons for Today

Speakers: Granville Williams, Peter Lazenby
7pm, The Harlequin Pub, Nursery Street, Sheffield. S3 8GG (free parking in Aizlewood Mill after 6pm)

SATURDAY 4 JULY SOUTH YORKSHIRE

South Yorkshire Festival, Wortley Hall near Sheffield

Volunteers needed to help with a book stall noon-6pm and a public meeting on the Media and The Miners' Strike to be held in the hall on the same day.

News

From page one

Conservatives give an assurance that they will refrain in future from seeking to exploit unsubstantiated claims about the personal and family life of politicians when it appears on political websites and when there is no other verification?

Can Cameron explain why the Conservatives have apparently abandoned the party's long-standing promise to purge the burgeoning ranks of special advisers and change the law to force them to obey the civil service code of conduct?

Perhaps Cameron should be reminded on the repeated undertakings given by his immediate predecessors – Michael Howard, Iain Duncan Smith and William Hague – that an incoming Tory administration would halve the current cadre of unelected advisers (74 at the latest count), curtail their powers and cut the taxpayers' bill for spin.

Sir Gus O'Donnell, the cabinet secretary, acted swiftly to implement the prime minister's request that the code of conduct should be strengthened. All special advisers would be required to sign an undertaking that they understood the new guidance: if they were caught "disseminating inappropriate material" they would automatically be sacked.

Previous cabinet secretaries have issued similarly-worded warnings in the past but to no avail. Sir Gus acknowledged his limitations when appearing before a select committee and when he all but admitted that he was powerless to stop the advance leaking of Government announcements through

unattributable briefings by special advisers.

Cameron has established a "democracy task force" but no fresh commitments have been made. Given the fact that he was a political adviser himself, the Conservatives' media-savvy leader is only too well aware how effective spin doctors can be in attacking, and defending, either Government or Opposition.

At the age of 25, Cameron cut his political teeth preparing campaign briefings for John Major in the 1992 general election. He was one of the leading lights in a Tory brat pack that was mockingly dubbed "Patten's puppies" because of their predilection for stunts endorsed by the then party chairman Chris Patten which were aimed at destabilising Neil Kinnock.

The Conservatives won the 1992 election against expectations and it was the Tories' success in humiliating Kinnock which drove on Alastair Campbell once he was appointed Tony Blair's press secretary in 1994.

In the long build-up to the 1997 election Campbell and his acolytes ran a brutally efficient campaign which often outsmarted even the most cunning foot-in-the-door journalists. Once Blair was elected, the Labour spin machine began to slowly, but surely, fall apart.

What more contemptuous compliment could McBride have deserved than Campbell's taunt that, on reading the offending Downing Street emails, he had been "struck not just by their unpleasantness, but also their incompetence". Campbell can after all rest on his own laurels when it comes to compe-

tence: he did more than anyone else to feed the despicable journalistic witch hunt to out Andrew Gilligan's source which ended in the tragic death of weapons inspector Dr David Kelly and the destabilising of the BBC.

If action had ever been taken on existing code of conduct – let alone on the new stipulation forbidding the "preparation or dissemination of inappropriate information or personal attacks" – then Campbell & Co would have lost their jobs within weeks of Blair taking office in 1997.

In March, at a seminar organised by the Hansard Society, Draper acknowledged that Labour had a "massive gap" to fill because the Conservatives' bloggers were dictating the online agenda. Political blogs acted as a catalyst for news about politicians and he thought Labour was missing a trick. He insisted he was not "some lunatic" setting out to create a name for himself but a Labour activist who was in the "mainstream of the party" and whose site had already attracted comments from cabinet ministers like Peter Mandelson and union leaders such as Derek Simpson of Unite.

Unless Labour established a commanding online presence, Draper feared the party could lose out. He predicted that in the 30 days of the next general election campaign, there was every likelihood that for "three or four days at least" the news would be dominated by stories which started in the blogosphere. His prediction could hardly have been more prescient: the McBride-Draper tale of shameful intrigue dominated the news for four days, spanning the entire Easter holiday.

Free Press is edited by Julie-ann Davies on behalf of the National Council

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