

PoliticsHome: a small new media mess with bigger significance?

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Sometimes it is the smaller media stories that have more resonance. The current [row](#) at the politics news aggregator and polling website [PoliticsHome](#) is small beer, but it should concern anyone interested in political journalism in Britain (and even beyond).

A whole bunch of [politicos](#) and [journos](#) have now resigned from the website's 'influentials panel' because they don't trust its new owner. It's interesting because of what it says about political journalism ethics. It is also interesting because of what it implies about the profitability of quality 'balanced' online political media. This is the story so far.



Rich But Nice

A very Tory and rich pollster [Stephan Shakespeare](#) (a man who was once [Jeffrey Archer's](#) London Mayor campaign manager no less) created a website that would bundle all the days political news from papers, TV and online in one place. It also had a series of 'influential people' panels that it monitored to create live polling data. [Andrew Rawnsley](#), a famous left-liberal political journalist was hired as editor in chief and [Freddie Sayers](#), a young, non-career journalist was hired as manager.

They hired the independent-minded left-wing journalist [Martin Bright](#) to help recruit other leftists to keep their panels balanced. They created a very good website which provides an excellent political news service and some mildly-stimulating opinion measures. Shakespeare was always open about what he was doing.

Shakespeare appeared to have created a mini-success in the wake of his huge triumph at [YouGov](#). Then he agreed to accept an 'investment' of an [alleged £1.3 million](#) from [Michael Ashcroft](#), the [controversial](#) Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party.

Rawnsley Resigns

[Andrew Rawnsley](#) [said](#) this was why he then resigned from PoliticsHome:

"I therefore greatly regret the decision made by Stephan Shakespeare, the chairman, to do a deal which places PoliticsHome under the ownership of Michael Ashcroft, the deputy chairman of the Conservative Party. The site has been folded along with ConservativeHome into a new entity in which Lord Ashcroft is the majority shareholder. I became Editor-in-Chief on the basis that PoliticsHome was dedicated to being a non-partisan site clearly independent of any party both editorially and financially. It was essential for users of the site that they could feel absolute confidence in the political independence of PoliticsHome. I do not believe that can be compatible with being under the ownership of the deputy chairman of the Conservative Party."

I respect Rawnsley and take his statement at face value, although PoliticsHome point out that he had, in effect, left in May. His announcement provoked a stream of resignations by [Martin Bright](#) and other left of centre panellists. Suddenly, PoliticsHome becomes a political story instead of simply covering them. Former PH panellist and Labour blogger [Sunny Hundal](#) helped stir the pot with his quick and incisive (and partisan) coverage on [LiberalConspiracy](#).

Stout Iain

Ashcroft has also invested in a political magazine Total Politics run by [Tory blogger Iain Dale](#). Iain makes a stout defence of the independence of both PoliticsHome and Total Politics. He points out that many of those who have resigned were happy to be paid by Total Politics for articles. He accuses the protestors of 'the worst kind of gesture politics'.

And another fine online political institution has also been dragged into this. [ConservativeHome](#) is the grass-roots website that supports the Tory party but allows much critical comment and reporting. It acts as a uniquely independent but partisan forum for right of centre debate. It is a wonderful example of how the Internet can create a space that is complex but hugely effective. It was created by Shakespeare and is now part of the same Ashcroft-owned package as PoliticsHome.

Tainted Love

So suddenly all these avowedly independent alternative political media projects – all owned and run by Tories, but with growing reputations for significance, insight and authority – are now directly linked financially to Michael Ashcroft. Ashcroft is a tainted figure. He has had issues with his own personal finances and has been controversial politically. He is deeply embedded in the Conservative Party as a major donor. He may well be an inspirational backer of politicians and political media. But the suspicion is that all these people have got into bed with him for his money. Loads of it.

Paradoxically, that should excuse them of the charge of bias. They only want his money, he won't have any influence. Many people of the Left find it perfectly possible to work for Murdoch so why not – indirectly – Ashcroft?

I genuinely don't quite understand their logic. They were prepared to work for Stephan Shakespeare who is a very nice man and very clever, but he is also a right-wing Tory who wanted to make a profit. They seem to accept that PoliticsHome was balanced in its coverage. It is their departures have made it a lot less balanced.

Ethical Camels

So was the straw that broke their ethical camel's back the fact that Ashcroft is formally part of the Conservative Party? Or is it because he is not a very nice man?

In the end it may just have been that feeling that it is always the piper that ends up calling the tune. Put that in a more sophisticated academic language: control of capital equals the power to frame an enterprise's overall strategy and to limit its ability to challenge those who have that power. In the news media, reputations are about perception as much as reality, and in one fell swoop PoliticsHome has dented its own.

To have done this at such a sensitive time in the political cycle – within a year of what could be a seismic election – appears clumsy but not necessarily fatal.

On a more economic note, it also suggests that Shakespeare's hopes of monetising the project in other ways have failed. That is not good news for anyone else thinking of trying to create a valuable political journalism resource. While PoliticsHome fed off others' work it provided a fantastic service and some added value. I don't think this will end it, but it certainly limits the claims that can be made for its success.

[For a much more critical and amusing take on all this I suggest reading this by [Hopi Sen](#).]

A Declaration

[For transparency's sake, I should declare that Stephan Shakespeare did have talks with Polis about possible involvement with a previous version of the PoliticsHome project. For a brief period he joined our Advisory Board, set up to help develop Polis. The Advisory Board was closed earlier this year as Polis moved to within the LSE

governance structure. I am a member of the PH100 panel in a personal capacity . I am still considering my position. Polis is a non-political, non-commercial unit within a University so I don't feel directly compromised by Ashcroft's ownership but I am intrigued to see how PoliticsHome will respond]

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