

Guido and the McBride Smear: storm in a digital teacup or blogger breakthrough?

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In the brown stuff

Most of the lessons from the [Email Smear Scandal](#) are political rather than journalistic, but it does allow us to revisit the [Great Political Blogger Debate](#). Is this an example of the trivialising of politics by partial online gossips? Or is it another example of how the digital diggers are storming both the walls of the political and news media fortresses?

One very New Media Literate MP, [Douglas Carswell](#), has hailed the blogosphere scoop as a blow against political corruption in general:

“Politics in Britain is fundamentally broken. The internet is merely helping to expose the bogusness of what we currently have to put up with. It’s not only spin-doctors and spivs who’ll lose out to bloggers. The commentariat will find themselves [commented on](#) – and made accountable. We’ll start to see quite how ineffective our legislature is at holding those with real power to account. We’ll start to understand why the opinions of many of those in SW1 today are so often at odds with those of the rest of the country. The web will break the predominance of corporate party machines, the corporate media and corporatism – each of which helps currently sustain the SW1 class. Politics will have to become “open source” and more democratic. Our politics doesn’t need to be the way it is today. Our failing Westminster system was created in the age of steam trains. We can upgrade it for the age of broadband. More direct democracy, less of the faux representative kind.”

OK, so you might expect an ambitious opposition MP to say that kind of thing. I am sure he can remember the same calls for a change in our political culture back in the mid-90s as John Major’s government collapsed under an avalanche of sleaze. But his point about the role of new forms of digital journalism is interesting – but is it true?

I am a [fan](#) of Paul Staines and his [Guido Fawkes blog](#). He pushed and pushed until this slimey little tale saw the light of day. Handling this kind of muck always leaves a stain (forgive the pun) on the messenger but Guido has always been clear that he is playing in a sport where your clothes and probably ethics don’t stay spotless for long. Unlike some professional correspondents he has always tried to be transparent. (Which is why it is a little disappointing, though understandable, that he has not named or described his source.)

This is not the biggest political scoop of the year nor likely to be the most significant. But it is one of those grubby little insights into the Westminster machine that indicates just how badly it is working. For Gordon Brown to have clung on to this kind of person and implicitly sanctioned this sort of tactic simply shows again how the PM was at least as prone to the dark political arts as Blair and Campbell, if not more so.

So this story does matter. It is more than just a Bank Holiday amusement for the political classes. So in that sense it is another triumph for the blogosphere. And in a very [Networked Journalism](#) way it connected into the wider mainstream media. It was rather awkward to see Staines and Draper indulge in a very private squabble on the

BBC's [Daily Politics programme](#). Especially as that totem of mainstream mediadom Andrew Neil evidently could not quite understand what was going on and why it might matter. Well, we can all see why now.

The only people who seem to be criticising Guido for blowing this story is McBride himself. He has claimed that it is the blogger's fault for putting these juvenile private thoughts into the public domain. Hmm...I leave you to judge the solidity of that particular argument.

But back to Carswell's clarion call for a digitally-driven cleansing of our democratic system. I absolutely agree with him about the power of a more participatory media to expose and even help fix some of the problems with our decaying political processes.

However, the point of Guido is that he is still the exception rather than the rule. We still do not have a rich enough online political media to do the job that Carswell and I want done. It is partly because Government itself is not prepared to open up. It is not helped by the current slashing of journalism budgets by mainstream and public service media in the face of economic and structural crisis. As I argue in [SuperMedia](#), you won't get a healthy independent or citizen journalism without a thriving and diverse 'professional' news media.

The point of the Email Smear story is that Paul Staines was the catalyst but that it was the [News of the World](#) that brought it to the attention of the wider public.

And that then begs the question of whether we as a society are prepared to back the hacks, be they bloggers or mainstream. What will people like Douglas Carswell really do to foster both the health of mainstream and alternative media? Will the next government be prepared to invest in media literacy, digital creativity and public service journalism of all types?

Excellent piece in the [Telegraph by Robert Colville](#) explaining how Labour misunderstood the blogosphere and how people like [Janet Daley](#) and [Stephen Pollard](#) fail to understand that the blogs are MORE trusted than mainstream political media because they are 'amateur' and collaborative:

Internet gossip sites say some pretty nasty things – that's why they're fun. But at the same time, the kind of lies and cyber-bullying envisaged by Draper and McBride tend to get exposed by a sort of communal cross-checking.

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