

Powerbase: A collaborative resource for monitoring power networks

David Miller and Idrees Ahmad

In early 2009, the Public Interest reporting website Spinwatch launched Powerbase¹, a collaborative database on power networks. Powerbase is a Wiki-based free encyclopaedia of individuals, institutions and issues shaping the public agenda, from PR and lobbying firms to government agencies. Powerbase focuses on power networks, on how they are organised and on associated issues such as 'spin' and propaganda in politics, the corporate world and elsewhere. It includes significant resources on neoconservative networks, terrorism expertise, policing and intelligence agencies. The project aims to serve as a resource for journalists, activists and academics, as an educational, campaigning, or knowledge transfer tool. Its research is produced under a GNU Free Documentation License to ensure free availability. By laying bare the professed or hidden affiliations of powerful actors, it seeks to highlight conflicts of interest and hidden agendas in order to promote transparency in public life. One of the most important elements of the site is that the many links between Powerbase pages on related subjects mean that the pages are picked up and highly ranked by Google. As a result, research conducted one day is easily available to any person around the world with an interest and an internet connection the next. The database also serves as a collaborative resource for compiling data and references that can later be turned into articles for other publications. This makes it an ideal resource for investigative research as it blends research and publication seamlessly. Powerbase investigations have been covered in a wide variety of outlets including the *Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Times Higher Education*, *Private Eye*, *The Ecologist*, and the *British Medical Journal* as well as on numerous websites all over the world.

Powerbase has a range of contributors including academics, journalists and activists. It now has over 10,000 articles, some of which are nothing more than 'stubs' featuring very short notes on a person or organisation whilst others are very full profiles of their subjects. We aim to make our pages the most comprehensive and well

¹ Formerly known as 'Spinprofiles'. The name was changed in Summer 2010 and indicates a broadening of the scope of the project beyond spin towards power networks.

evidenced pages on the subject on the internet. The pages are organised in categories as well as in seventeen separate portals that are significant collections of articles on particular topics and serve as the main entry points to the information in the database. Each portal is overseen by an editor, or sometimes two co-editors. Their role is to ensure that profiles are accurate, up-to-date and referenced. The portals include: Alcohol, Climate, Counter-Terrorism, Foodspin, GMWatch, Israel Lobby, Lobbying, MEPedia, Neoconservatives, Northern Ireland, Nuclear Spin, Pharma, Propaganda, Scotland, Spooks, Terror Expertise, and Water. The various portals incorporate features which enhance a researcher's ability to visualize the various interconnections between actors and institutions. The Lobbying portal, for example, features a map of the many lobbying firms in the streets around Westminster²; the Terror Expertise portal uses graphs to track the scale of an actor's interventions in the debate³; the Neoconservatives portal uses Social Network Analysis to demonstrate the overlapping and interlocking relationship between its various institutions.⁴

The Wiki Format and Collaborative Research

Unlike Wikipedia, Powerbase is not an open access Wiki. In the interest of transparency, it also does not allow anonymous posting. In order to contribute, researchers must first register under their real names. This also guards the database against vandalism, and allows for greater editorial oversight. Membership is open to anyone who either has a demonstrable record of public interest work or has no known conflicts of interest. Powerbase monitors vested and conflicting interests, front groups and propaganda agencies. It is therefore Powerbase policy not to allow people to contribute or edit Powerbase articles about themselves or organisations with which they are affiliated. Powerbase is dedicated to upholding international law, universal human rights, social justice, and environmental protection. It is opposed to deception, corruption and racism. Editors select contributors based on these values.⁵ Powerbase also accepts contributions from individuals who are not registered as Users. They

² http://www.powerbase.info/index.php/Westminster_lobbying_map

³ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Terrorexperitise:Experts_from_the_Social_Science_Citations_Index

⁴ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Neoconservatives_Portal

⁵ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Powerbase:Editorial_Policy#Who_is_allowed_to_contribute_to_Powerbase.3F

can email their contributions with references and/or supporting documentation which an editor will then incorporate into the database.

Given its commitment to fairness and accuracy, Powerbase remains vigilant for errors, and responsive to the complaints of the individuals and organizations profiled therein. If a person or organization believes that there are inaccuracies in a Powerbase article they are encouraged to write with details and supporting documentation so that amendments can be made. We also offer a right of reply and we will carry statements from people or organisations who are critical of our research and reporting.

The website's Wiki format enables researchers to collaborate regardless of geographical distance. The diverse background of researchers often allows them to approach the same subject from different angles, giving the pages depth and coherence. For example, a figure like US neoconservative activist Frank Gaffney Jr, might be the subject of one investigation because of his corporate lobbying activities on behalf of major arms manufacturers.⁶ But he might also be the subject of an investigation as the lynchpin of a network of Israel lobby think tanks. Equally important is his role as a television pundit and a columnist for the *Washington Times* who frequently comments on terrorism and war. Gaffney's multiple roles therefore make him a potential subject of investigation for at least three different portals. The information thus gathered would then present a picture that gives better insights into his multiple roles and likely motivations than if he were seen as just an arms industry lobbyist. In 2002, when he was appearing as 'defence expert' arguing for war, readers could have benefited from knowing how he stands to gain from the invasion, and the provenance of his jaundiced view of the Middle East.

A standard Powerbase profile focuses on the actions, ideology and affiliations of a subject. It begins with a brief introduction and personal/professional/institutional history of the subject. It then highlights the actions which might make the subject the focus of potential public interest inquiry. If these actions are in any way informed by the actors known ideological predilections, they would be highlighted next, followed by all their affiliations. Finally, the profile includes contact details, reading material, videos, publications, and any other resource which might aid further research. Not all profiles follow this general template however. Some profiles are of a historical nature; some analytical. Researchers are therefore allowed the flexibility to organize the information differently if that is what their subject mandates.

⁶ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Frank_Gaffney

The format also offers a useful collaborative environment for historical research. Powerbase is at present developing a comprehensive account of the historical, institutional, ideological and political forces that led to the Iraq war.⁷ This involves a timeline of key events in the lead up to war, especially in the period between 11 September 2001 and the commencement of hostilities on 19 March 2003.⁸ It lists the institutions which actively campaigned for war, maps their overlapping and interlocking memberships, and explores their ideological affinities. It uses Process Tracing to piece together key developments in the policy process. It traces the origins of each propaganda claim that was used to justify the war. It places these along the timelines to show when each decision was taken, and what factors likely influenced them. It highlights the key extra-governmental affiliations of key Bush administration officials which had a consistent record of pushing for war, long before the Bush administration came to office. It also analyses key documents such as the National Security Strategy of 2002 and the CIA's National Intelligence Estimate of October 2002 to trace the provenance of key claims.

Research Tools

Contributors use a variety of research tools to investigate their subjects. The emphasis is on accuracy and verifiability. Investigative research is time consuming and uses a range of differing techniques. We list some of the main techniques here, but bear in mind that in any given investigation most of these techniques will be used in conjunction. This is the only way to sift through the information overload of today to find the nuggets that can help to reveal how institutions and networks operate. The research usually begins with a simple or Boolean Google search.⁹ If some important information is available on a website whose credibility is suspect, researchers will look for a credible source to verify it. Otherwise it will be discarded. Researchers also use Archive.org's 'Way Back Machine' to retrieve webpages which have been modified or removed.¹⁰ For more thorough or precise searching, especially on issues of historical relevance, a researcher would use Nexis UK or another press and publications

⁷ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Iraq_War_2003

⁸ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Iraq_War_2003_Timeline

⁹ For Boolean Google searches, see:

<http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=136861>

¹⁰ <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>

database.¹¹ Researchers can next look up information on an organization or charity registered in Britain using the Companies House or Charity Commission register.¹² Simply looking up at the annual accounts filed with the Charity Commission, for example, Powerbase was able to establish that The Obesity Awareness and Solutions Trust (TOAST), was indeed an industry front group that received most of its funding from a diet company.¹³ Follow-up enquiries revealed that many of the individuals it listed as ‘patrons’ had never agreed to serve in that capacity. The story was covered in the press and the organisation no longer exists.¹⁴ Though it costs a small sum to access accounts information from companies House, this is a useful way to check up on the funding of think tanks and other institutes. This was how we were able to compile a list of the key funders of the neoconservative think tank Policy Exchange, which is reluctant to acknowledge the sources of its funding on its own website.¹⁵

If researchers are investigating a website, they will try to look for registration information through a ‘Whois’ lookup, which usually provides a registrant’s name and address.¹⁶ (In recent years, some actors have taken to using domain-anonymising services to conceal their identities.)¹⁷ Similar searches are also carried out for IP

¹¹ Nexis UK (<http://www.lexisnexis.com/uk/nexis/>) and NewsBank (<http://www.newsbank.com>)

¹² Companies House register can be accessed online at: <http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk>. The ‘SEARCH Company Information’ feature allows one to find information on all companies registered in UK. Information on Charities can be found on the Charity Commission website: <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/>

¹³ <http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=TOAST>

¹⁴ Michael Gillard, MPs ‘conned’ over obesity charity that was front for diet firm Independent on *Sunday*, 20 January 2008
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/mps-conned-over-obesity-charity-that-was-front-for-diet-firm-771266.html>

¹⁵ [http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Policy Exchange](http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Policy_Exchange)

¹⁶ There are many Whois services available on the internet – just search for “whois”. They include the one provided by Domain Tools which searches both domain name registrations and IP locations: <http://whois.domaintools.com/>

¹⁷ A popular service used by several front groups is Domains by Proxy (<http://www.domainsbyproxy.com/>)

addresses. Sometimes all it takes to expose a front group is to put its address into Google and check if another organization also shares the same address.

At times all it takes is something as mundane as a phone-call to establish a link. In 2009, a call to the London offices of *Réalité EU*, a web-based project with a newsletter which pushes alarmist claims on Iran, revealed that it is redirected to voicemail in the US. Taking down the number given on the voicemail and googling for the number revealed that it was a number in the offices of The Israel Project, a hard-line Israel lobby group based in New York. Subsequent emails received from *Réalité-EU* revealed that they were sent from a mail server registered to the Washington offices of B'nai B'rith International, a leading national Israel lobby institution, which also shared a mail server with The Israel Project. After denying that *Réalité-EU* had 'any connection whatsoever' with B'nai B'rith, a spokesperson for the organization changed her tune once presented with evidence establishing the link. She claimed the organisation only rents 'services and space on their server for cost saving reasons,' but denied 'ideological or other connection.'¹⁸ The connection and the denials become significant insofar as the organization's activities align neatly with the Israel lobby's known interest in provoking a confrontation with Iran.

Researchers also make extensive use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain information which is not publicly available from public bodies. Though Private companies are not vulnerable to FoI, their communications with public bodies are and this can be a key resource for investigating corporate lobbying. Powerbase has used FOIA to reveal the secret PR and lobbying activities behind the push for nuclear new build in 2006/7; we have also used the legislation to unearth restricted documents from the Ministry of Defence on the British Military and the development of counterinsurgency doctrine which we posted online.¹⁹ FoI documents have also helped us investigate lobbying activities. It took Spinwatch researchers two years to force the House of Commons to release the names of former MPs with a pass access to the House of Commons. We were able to show

¹⁸ Tom Mills and David Miller 'Réalité EU: Front group for the Washington based Israel Project?', *Pulsemedia.org*, 30 October 2009
<http://pulsemedia.org/2009/10/30/realite-eu-front-group-for-the-washington-based-israel-project/>

¹⁹ <http://www.scribd.com/Spinwatch>

that at least twenty five of them were working as lobbyists and were able to use their pass to gain access for their clients.²⁰

We have used EU access to documents rules to check up on European counter terrorism policy. Researchers also use Social Network Analysis to visually map out the linkages between various groups and individuals. Powerbase has used it to map the host of free-market think tanks that constitute the Stockholm Network, and also to show the connections between Policy Exchange trustees, the right-wing press, and the Conservative Party.²¹

One aim of the database is to assist citizen action by making information publicly available that they could use to hold powerful interests accountable. Ahead of the European Elections in June 2009, Powerbase launched the MEPedia portal as a resource for citizens across Europe to find out information about candidates, serving parliamentarians, political parties, their financial and political interests, and their voting history.²² With a view to making EU politics more democratic and responsive to citizens, MEPedia is heavily focused on issues of accountability, transparency and conflicts of interest. The project aims to provide European citizens with the means to track the performance of their elected representatives in Brussels. It catalogues the relationship between special interests and elected representatives with an increasing focus on the 'revolving door' between the two.²³ We hope to develop similar work on elected representatives in the UK Parliament.

As a public interest resource, Powerbase monitors and catalogues both positive and negative activities in relation to spin. We include pages on whistleblowers, on critics and victims of spin, on those whose work is spun by others, and on those who are associated with public relations – as well as on those who practice and promote spin.

²⁰ Tamasin Cave 'Parliament opens its doors to lobbying ex-MPs' Spinwatch, Sunday, 28 February 2010 <http://www.spinwatch.org/blogs-mainmenu-29/tamasin-cave-mainmenu-107/5348-parliament-opens-its-doors-to-lobbying-ex-mps> ; Michael Gillard, Jonathan Calvert, Steven Swinford and Solvej Krause Commons perk for disgraced ex-MPs The Sunday Times February 28, 2010 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7044100.ece>

²¹ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Policy_Exchange;
http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Stockholm_Network

²² <http://powerbase.info/index.php/MEPedia>

²³ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Revolving_Door

Case Studies

Neoconservatives

The neoconservatives have been active in the American political arena for nearly four decades, but it was only in the lead up to and aftermath of the Iraq war that sufficient attention has been paid them. Much of this information still remains imprecise, and barely scratches the surfaces of the vast network of institutions the movement has spawned to serve as a shadow national security establishment. Given the prominent role it played in the Iraq war and the potential of its various front organizations drawing Britain and the United States into war against Iran, Powerbase has dedicated a portal solely to monitoring the activities of this network. The portal traces the origins, evolution, and composition of the movement. It investigates its ideological orientation, sources of power, and strategic alliances. It keeps track of the neoconservatives' proliferating network of think tanks, letterhead organizations (LHO), front groups and media affiliates. It keeps an up-to-date record of neoconservative initiatives aimed at pushing aggressive policy abroad and curb on civil liberties at home in the guise of fighting terrorism. Powerbase has revealed the neoconservative provenance of such organizations as Policy Forum and Réalité-EU, and exposed the systematic use of Web 2.0 and social media technologies like Twitter for disinformation purposes during Israel's 2008-2009 assault on Gaza and the protests following Iran's disputed 2009 elections.

The portal also tracks the proliferating network of neoconservative institutions inside Britain. It has developed detailed profiles on three of the key neoconservative think tanks which seek to align British politics with the aggressive strain in the US foreign policy. Policy Exchange, Center for Social Cohesion, and the Henry Jackson Society have all made significant inroads into the Conservative Party: they were already influencing the debate on terrorism under Labour.²⁴ Powerbase tracks their activities, analyses their publications, and monitors their lobbying. It documents their controversial attempts to skew policy against Britain's Muslim population using exaggerated claims and, in the case of Policy Exchange, even forged documents. It has also exposed The Spittoon, a McCarthyite operation run by members of Centre for Social Cohesion in collaboration, for a while at

²⁴ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Policy_Exchange;
[http://powerbase.info/index.php?title=Centre for Social Cohesion;](http://powerbase.info/index.php?title=Centre_for_Social_Cohesion;)
[http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Henry Jackson Society](http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Henry_Jackson_Society)

least, with members of the government funded Quilliam Foundation.²⁵ This expose was not well-received by the interests behind The Spittoon. The website first tried to intimidate the Powerbase researcher who had made the discovery with threatening emails, followed by a smear campaign, which was coordinated with an allied attack blog, Harry's Place.²⁶ Shortly afterwards a similar smear campaign was also directed against the founder of Powerbase. Several neoconservative operators have also tried to use legal threats to shut Powerbase down. In June 2010, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens of the Centre for Social Cohesion, a frequent contributor to The Spittoon, successfully pressured Powerbase's British domain name registrar to temporarily shut down the website.²⁷

Lobbying

The right to lobby is every citizen's prerogative in a functioning democracy, but in Britain the practice is dominated by a £1.9 billion industry, which mainly lobbies on behalf of big business interests. It has doubled in size since the early 1990s and, until recent (May 2010) proposals by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government to create a lobby register, largely unregulated. People involved in the profession today range from consultant lobbyists, many of whom are employed by large PR firms, law firms or management consultancies, to in-house corporate lobbyists, business associations, trade unions, NGOs, and think tanks. Most successful lobbyists have political experience and contacts inside government. Many professional lobbyists are themselves former politicians or staffers. The estimated pay-offs, based on US figures, are staggering: for every \$1 spent on lobbying, a business can expect a return of \$100.²⁸ A lobby's success is therefore a function of its resources and access. Since access very often translates into influence, it becomes imperative for citizens to know the linkages between lobbyists and officials, potential conflicts of interests, and the revolving door.

²⁵ http://powerbase.info/index.php?title=The_Spittoon;
http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Quilliam_Foundation

²⁶ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Harry%27s_Place

²⁷ David Miller, '[A Net Loss of Freedom](#),' The Guardian, 6 July 2010;
http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Alexander_Meleagrou-Hitchens

²⁸ 'Study: Paying for lobbyists — pays off Even as Obama vows to curb their influence, the industry is booming' Associated Press, updated 4/9/2009 12:48:04 AM ET <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30113628/>

The lobbying portal has been a key part of wider Spinwatch campaigning activities including the creation of the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency in 2008 of which Spinwatch is a founder member.²⁹ The Alliance was set up in 2008 to campaign for a statutory register of lobbyists. This would allow the public to track who was lobbying whom and how much industry and other actors were spending on lobbying.

Powerbase provides an extensive database of lobbyists, lobbying firms, corporate lobby groups, the issues on which they lobby, the potential conflicts of interest of the officials entrusted with deciding on the issue, and the revolving door³⁰. Powerbase also lists lobbyists by industry. It has an interactive map which links the geographical location of each lobby group around Westminster with its Powerbase profile.³¹

Corporate Power

Powerbase also monitors the activities of corporations across various industries. There are dedicated portals for the Alcohol, Food, Nuclear, Pharma, and Water industries. The Alcohol portal aims to highlight the relationship between the alcohol industry and the policy makers, and the media, with an emphasis on the industry's involvement in the policy process.³² It also studies the influence of the industry on science and research, and contemporary debates in the field. It monitors the alcohol lobby, the revolving door, and the industry's relationship with the media. Powerbase also monitors the activities of the food industry that has often acted collectively to influence public perceptions to their advantage.³³ The growing problem of obesity in many Western countries has led the industry to establish front groups with innocuous sounding names like Association for the Study of Obesity and International Obesity Taskforce which seek to shift the debate and water down obesity-related policy.³⁴ The portal looks at the

²⁹ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Lobbying_Portal;
<http://www.lobbyingtransparency.org/>

³⁰ The **revolving door** is the movement of personnel between roles as legislators and regulators and the industries affected by the legislation and regulation and on within lobbying companies. (Wikipedia)

³¹ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Westminster_lobbying_map

³² <http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Alcohol:Portal>

³³ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Foodspin_Portal

³⁴

http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Association_for_the_Study_of_Ob

connection between obesity-related groups and companies such as Lighter Life, GlaxoSmithKline and Kelloggs. The industry also runs front groups with names such as the International Life Sciences Institute and the British Nutrition Foundation to give the appearance of professionalism and neutrality.³⁵ Powerbase looks at their funding, personnel, activities and affiliations to highlight their industry connections.

Powerbase's NuclearSpin portal has been in operation much longer. It was originally launched as a separate standalone site in response to the British Government's 12-week consultation on energy in 2006. In response the portal developed profiles on key players in the debates, including individuals, organizations, lobbyists, PR firms, journalists and government officials who were pushing for nuclear energy.³⁶ The aim was to allow citizens to make up their own mind about nuclear power while being fully aware of the potential conflicts of interest of its leading advocates. Its investigations have been covered in the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Herald*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* among others. A dedicated portal also monitors the activities of the £101 billion UK pharmaceutical industry, focusing on issues of licensing and its potential subversion by drug manufacturers using lobbyists, lawyers, scientists, public relations experts, and mass-marketers.³⁷ Powerbase profiles the manufacturers, their lobbyists, their PR apparatus, the scientists in their pay, and the compromised opinion that is part of the licensing process. Powerbase also monitors the developments around the recent push for the privatization of water as supplies around the world continue to dwindle.³⁸ Billions around the world experience water shortages, in part due to mismanagement and unequal allocation and in part due to the effects of climate change. The struggle over fresh water has taken the form of a conflict over increasing commercialisation, privatisation and liberalisation. The shift from public to private is a direct result of political and corporate elites exercising their power and will. Powerbase exposes and

esity;

http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=International_Obesity_Taskforce

³⁵ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=British_Nutrition_Foundation;
http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=International_Life_Sciences_Institute

³⁶ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Nuclear_spin

³⁷ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Pharma_Portal

³⁸ http://www.powerbase.info/index.php?title=Water_Portal

documents the interlocking relationships between the political and corporate water elites. It tracks and profiles global and regional governing institutions, lobby associations, policy planning organisations, think tanks and agents all involved in the water industry. It focuses on proponents of privatisations; but it also focuses on those who are promoting an alternative vision orientated towards publicly owned and participatory systems.

Conclusion

Following the events of September 2001, Western States have increasingly used the language of national security to put their actions beyond public scrutiny. The culture of secrecy and diminishing accountability now also encroaches on other spheres of life. Ultimately it has consequences for dissent, freedom of speech and, inevitably, democracy. Democracy also suffers when unaccountable private interests have more influence over public servants than the citizens who elected them. As citizens therefore we are obligated to continuously pushback against this dual encroachment on our rights. Voting is not the only means through which elected leaders could be held accountable. There is also another way. A timely exposé is often as fatal to one's political career as four years of poor performance. Transparency also insulates public servants from the undue influence of private interests. Powerbase is one means through which this can be achieved. It relies on the dedicated effort of citizen journalists and researchers. But the resources available to the forces invested in bending the truth through PR and Lobbying are massive. We can only hope to compete and win if enough citizens are stirred to reclaim their power. That it is effective is confirmed by the many stories that have been brought to public attention by the efforts of our researchers. Further evidence is found in the various attempts made so far to shut our project down. These have tellingly relied on legal threats instead of engaging with the content or showing that our research is inaccurate. Leading Israel lobbyist Steven Rosen once told an interviewer: 'A lobby is like a night flower: it thrives in the dark and dies in the sun.'³⁹ Transparency is the enemy of backdoor influence. Powerbase seeks to be the magnifying glass that focuses the sunlight.

Can you help? Powerbase invites as users all those who have a little time and can sign up to the values on which Powerbase stands. You don't need to be an expert researcher, just to have some time to devote to research and writing. Powerbase can help with research training if needed. To get in touch email management@powerbase.info

³⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Real Insiders,' New Yorker, 4 July 2007

David Miller

Prof. of Sociology, School of Applied Social Sciences

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

davidmiller@strath.ac.uk

Idrees Ahmad

Doctoral Candidate

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow