

The departure (and return) of “Page 3”: the media’s conflicted relationship with cover-ups

By Democratic Audit UK

*The Sun recently announced (via fellow Murdoch organ the Times) that Page 3 – the daily appearance of a topless model in the paper – was to be scrapped. Two days later, the Sun itself announced that after the briefest of hiatuses, it was to return. The press coverage of the whole affair was, according to **Heather Savigny**, poor – missing the opportunity to shine a real light on other pressing issues such as revenge porn.*



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On Tuesday last week, the *Today* programme headlined with the historic announcement that we were witnessing the end of Page 3. While not directly reported in *The Sun* itself they noted, *The Times* had surreptitiously told us that no longer were we to be subject to Page 3 ‘lovelies’. On Thursday, however, the *Daily Mail* reported that Page 3 was in fact back.

The media play a central role in our democracy. According to liberal theory the media functions to hold power to account – to act as a ‘fourth estate’ on behalf of us, the citizenry. All very well and good. Except this arrangement is not quite a neutral as might be suggested. [Nancy Fraser](#) reminds us that a failure to acknowledge gender (gender blindness) does not necessarily equate to gender neutrality. Liberal theories of the media are blind in terms of gender and the types of power to which they refer; this was reinforced by the coverage of the Page 3 story. Indeed the consequences of gender blindness have been mapped by a wider literature: The [WACC](#) project maps the uneven descriptive representation of women across news media globally. Research by [Ros Gill](#), [Karen Ross](#), [Liesbet Van Zoonen](#) (among others) reminds us that women are often objectified and sexualised in media representations, and subject to [Laura Mulvey’s](#) (heteronormative) male gaze.

The BBC claims neutrality. However, consistent with Fraser’s argument, this is not a neutrality which extends to gender. The agenda setting *Today* programme chose to ask the views of former Page 3 models on *The Sun’s* ‘bold’ move; which brought to mind the question of whether turkeys would really vote for Christmas? This

'neutrality' was reinforced by the former glamour model interviewed on *The World Tonight*. Here again, the discussion was framed around the 'choice' of young women to exploit their attributes. A pervasive neoliberal discourse emphasises the 'choice' and 'empowerment' agenda of these individual young, thin, and predominantly white women; telling us that women are sexually liberated, mistresses of their own destiny (Although a range of experiences ranging from internet trolling and glass ceilings, to unfathomable levels of sexual violence remind us woe betide women who seek to make different 'choices').

However, the marketised, sexualised 'choice' agenda for women was complemented by the male 'choice' agenda as shown on the BBC 6 pm news. Although we saw Lucy-Anne Holmes interviewed (the founder of the No More Page 3 campaign) her airtime was minimal compared to the construction workers who the journalist chose to interview to gauge the 'public response' to the demise of topless women in the biggest selling national newspaper. While one young white man said he was no longer going to buy *The Sun*, another agreed Page 3 was the very reason he had bought the paper (which raises questions as to whether page 3's return a victory for market forces, with the potential for sales to be harmed). The final vox pop quoted a man saying that had a girlfriend at home, and questioning why he'd want to look at Page 3? In response, the female journalist smirked.

On the 6pm news on the day of the announcement, we discovered that Page 3 was not going to be replaced with Sport, Weather or [Why is my cat sad](#) pictures and tweets. Instead, it was replaced with covered nipples. Women were still to be objectified, but covered in lingerie or bikinis. Raunchy Rupert isn't daft. He was the first to introduce a paywall for his online papers, and it doesn't really come as a surprise that Page 3 was still accessible in a pay per view online form. So "slender Rupert" – if we find it difficult to see men described by their attributes, why do we not have this problem with women – may have sought to neutralise and seek to diffuse the No More Page 3 campaign, because surely their aims had been achieved?

The media could have chosen to cover this story in a different way. They could have discussed the ways in which the objectification and narrowing of choice for women to behave in sexualised way is incredibly damaging for women. The internet has spawned 'revenge porn' where intimate shots of women are posted by revengeful ex-boyfriends in order to humiliate women. Laura Bates' [Everyday Sexism](#) site points us to the ways in which women experience daily harassment and abuse on the basis of their gender. Page 3 on its own clearly is not the cause of this. But it is part of a wider culture which positions women as objects and adjuncts of men, rather than people in their own right. The media could also have chosen to interview real women on the street rather than men on building sites in response to this decision. The media could have chosen to explore the links between [sexualising women and sexual violence](#).

Academic debates rage over the extent to which media has an effect or not on their audiences; the intention here is not to seek to prove or disprove this particular point. Rather the aim is to draw attention to the way in which pictures in isolation may or may not be offensive, but when they are situated as part of a wider discourse where women are continually positioned as objects of straight male desire rather than subjects of their own destiny, it becomes easier to see how Page 3 becomes symbolic of a wider structural problem about the way in which we as a society view women and the way in which the media become complicit in the failure to challenge dominate power structures. In choosing to treat this as a light-hearted story affecting only glamour models and building site workers, the BBC demonstrated its neutrality does not extend to gender; it chose not to hold patriarchal power to account. The real cover up in this story wasn't about women's nipples at all; it was about the media's complicity in the reproduction of patriarchy.

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