

THE CONVERSATION

Let's get real about Page 3 cover-up – The Sun still treats women as sex objects

January 20, 2015 11.25am GMT

Karen Boyle

Chair in Feminist Media Studies, University of Stirling

The Conversation's partners

The Conversation UK receives funding from Hefce, Hefcw, SAGE, SFC, RCUK, The Nuffield Foundation, The Ogden Trust, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Alliance for Useful Evidence, as well as sixty five university members.

[View the full list](#)



Feminism has won the battle, but certainly not the war. Clive Gee/PA

So finally The Sun has dropped the Page 3 topless model. In the absence of any announcement from the paper, it was a Marks & Spencer's bra which heralded the new era on Monday January 19, covering up the bare breasts that have appeared in the UK's largest-selling newspaper for the last 44 years.

Later, in what was the **first statement** from the red-top tabloid, an unnamed spokesman was quoted in The Times on Tuesday in typically irreverent mode: "Page 3 of The Sun is where it's always been, between pages 2 and 4, and you can find Lucy from Warwick at page3.com."

This might have sounded more like a twin-track marketing strategy than a feminist victory, but it is easy to be too cynical here. The **No More Page 3** campaign has galvanised considerable popular debate about key issues which have concerned feminist media critics for decades – among them: objectification, news values, trivialisation of violence against women and sexual harassment in public spaces.

Why the campaign worked

The strength of the campaign has been both the apparent narrowness of its aim – to encourage the editor to voluntarily remove the topless models on Page 3 – and the way organisers and campaigners have been able to connect this to broader debates.

While the comments on the No More Page 3 Facebook page after the story broke contained plenty predictable feminist-baiting, from supporters there was cautious optimism – characterised by a sense that the tide was changing and they were the ones changing it. Their activism is cause for celebration, particularly if that energy can be carried over to related campaigns.

A key component of the campaign has been to argue that context is all: “Boobs aren’t news”. Now the “boobs” are moving online, to be accessed by subscription, and it seems that Page 3 in the newspaper will focus instead on models in their underwear. To use an example oft cited in the campaign: children will no longer be “exposed” to topless models over breakfast.

This rather dated trope of family breakfasts accompanied by the morning paper has been a powerful one in debates about Page 3. Campaign organisers made it clear that they are not concerned about children seeing breasts per se. Rather their arguments have focused on the way Page 3 promotes a pornographic and objectifying gaze which is implicated in broader inequalities. Page 3 doesn’t cause these inequalities, but it is part of the context in which they are legitimised.

I don’t disagree, but the problem with focusing on the child and the inappropriateness of these images in a “family” newspaper, is that it suggests that a sexually objectifying gaze is fine elsewhere. To argue otherwise is always to risk accusations of being anti-sex, anti-choice and anti-nudity: all standard insults lazily fired off at any woman who speaks out against sexual objectification.



Victory. Isabelle, CC BY-SA

On the No More Page 3 website, we are assured that those involved in the campaign: “love breasts! and have nothing against the women who choose to show them, we simply feel that a family newspaper is the wrong context for these images.”

Remember who’s in control

Yet we can’t discuss context without also discussing power. Objectification is defined by power. To say this is not to argue that to be the object of the gaze is to be automatically powerless. Nor is it to deny that Page 3 models are (typically) there out of choice.



Murdoch: money spinner. Ian

Rather, it is to pose a set of questions not only about where that gaze is enacted, but also by whom, to what purpose and in whose interests. Of course, women can objectify other women (and men), but these looks receive far less cultural sanction than the innocuous, everyday, wallpaper of men’s sexualised objectification of women.

In this context, a bra-clad woman is no less objectified than her breast-baring sisters: she is still a two-dimensional image, of interest only for her body, addressing a male gaze in the most predictable of ways, contributing to a broader culture which naturalises men’s sense of sexual entitlement over women. She’s your Page 3 girl after all. Though

Murdoch has now kindly – and in response to reader feedback – moved her online. To increase his bottom line.

Lucy from Warwick is alive and well

The clip from the 1970s TV comedy Porridge which opened BBC Newsnight's segment on the story on January 19 was supposed to speak to the "dated" nature of Page 3: a relic of a bygone era, an era in which sexism was acceptable (and feminists non-existent apparently).

But the clip also highlighted the way that images of women function as objects of exchange between men. Breasts to be leered at. A joke to be shared. That camaraderie is precisely what The Sun's spokesman is banking on in directing readers to Lucy from Warwick's future home on The Sun's website.

So, in the tradition of joylessness of which we feminists are so predictably accused, The Sun's discovery of the bra – for its print edition only – is not much of a cause for celebration.

That the campaign has been so successful in opening up a public discourse about these issues, however, is.



Rupert Murdoch

The Sun

 Tweet105

 Share47

 Get newsletter