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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Wouldn't you just know it? Sun's Page 3 cover-up turned out to be a storm in a D-cup

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Something for the weekend, sir? Yui Mok/PA Wire

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There were newspapers articles, there were radio debates, there were thousands of tweets, and there was (understandably) joyful triumphalism from those who had campaigned for its disappearance. But it was not to be. After three days of sardonic “thanks for the mammaries”-style commentary, it became apparent on Thursday that The Sun had not ditched its commitment to bare breasts on Page 3 after all.

With typical bravado – and in its unique style – readers were greeted with the news that:

Further to media report in all other outlets, we would like to clarify that this is page three and this is a picture of Nicole, 22, from Bournemouth.

We would like to apologise to the print and broadcasting journalists who have spent the last two days talking about us.

And talk they did. In the Guardian, **Simon Jenkins** bade farewell to nipples with a cautionary dispatch about the dangers of censorship, **Lucy Hunter Johnston** in The Independent reminded us that even though toplessness had gone from Page 3, it was but a small victory and the objectification of women would continue. On Five Live, the now legendary **Nicky Campbell** phone-in show asked: “Page 3 – loss of harmless fun, or good riddance to harmful rubbish?”

And in this august organ, **Karen Boyle** celebrated the activism which had brought about The Sun’s perceived change of heart.

So was there ever any intention by The Sun to drop – let’s face it – one of its biggest selling points? Or was it all part of a clever campaign by News UK to drum up publicity?

Breaking news

It began on a Monday with a report in The Times (on page 3, naturally) by its media editor, Alex Spence, with the headline: “The Sun has got its top on ... Page 3 covers up after 45 years.”

Spence went on to write: “The Times understands that Friday’s edition of the paper was the last that will carry an image of a glamour model with bare breasts on that page”. The report quoted The Sun’s editor, David Dinsmore, as saying, rather cryptically: “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 last was a reference to the fact that punters could still go behind the website’s paywall to look at pictures of topless women).

Crucially, Spence reported that Dinsmore “would not discuss the change”. And this is precisely what the Guardian found when The Sun refused to respond to any calls, emails or texts from them **throughout Monday**. They were keeping shtum while the historic event was gaining momentum.

Perhaps seasoned commentators and writers should have smelled a rat at this point – but in a sense why would they? Hadn’t Rupert Murdoch himself openly questioned the validity of Page 3 in the recent past? Replying to a tweet in 2013 which said “seriously, we are all so over Page 3 – it is so last century!”, Murdoch responded: “You maybe [sic] right, don’t know but considering.” In March last year he tweeted that he thought it old fashioned – before adding, tellingly that “readers tend to disagree”.

In any case the story originally appeared in The Times under Spence’s byline – a mark of authenticity in itself. The fact that The Sun chose not to speak to the Guardian is also nothing more than par for the course. The relationship between the two newspapers has always been antagonistic and has

veered between distant and hostile ever since Nick Davies began his investigation into phone hacking at the News of the World.

Navel gazing

But The Sun wasn't speaking to anyone, never mind the Guardian and by the Wednesday the discourse in the mainstream media – never shy of gazing at its own navel in search of fresh bits of fluff – was at its zenith.

So why was the media so eager to run with a story that was neither confirmed nor denied by The Sun itself? The answer probably lies in the inexhaustible thirst for new stories and angles in a culture of 24-hour news. In our speeded-up world, news organisations never sleep – narratives are updated hourly and the desire for an immediate response to events inevitably means occasional inaccuracies. Put simply, there is an incredible amount of pressure on journalists to react and produce more copy, more frequently.



In yer face. Lamerie, CC BY

There is the possibility of course that The Sun was genuinely retiring Page 3 and that, irked by the satisfaction of its legion of opponents and the sense its own readers didn't really wish to see the back of it, it decided against the move. It could even be that Page 3 returned this week for a final hurrah. As the Guardian reported, a senior editor at The Sun is reported to have said: "If I were the boss, I'd put in a topless pic just to spite everybody."

More likely, though, especially given the way that Dylan Sharpe (The Sun's head of PR) has taunted Roy Greenslade, Steve Hewlett, Harriet Harman and others on Twitter this week, the whole effort was an organised hoax designed to fool and ultimately humiliate those who have campaigned for change.

In essence, this is childish and shallow behaviour – perfectly described by Sarah Ditum in the New Statesman as "displaying all the wit and moral intelligence of a small child grinning at you with cornflake-coated teeth and saying: 'Fooled you! I didn't really brush my teeth!'" But what can you expect? Kelvin Mackenzie is back at The Sun, dontcha know.

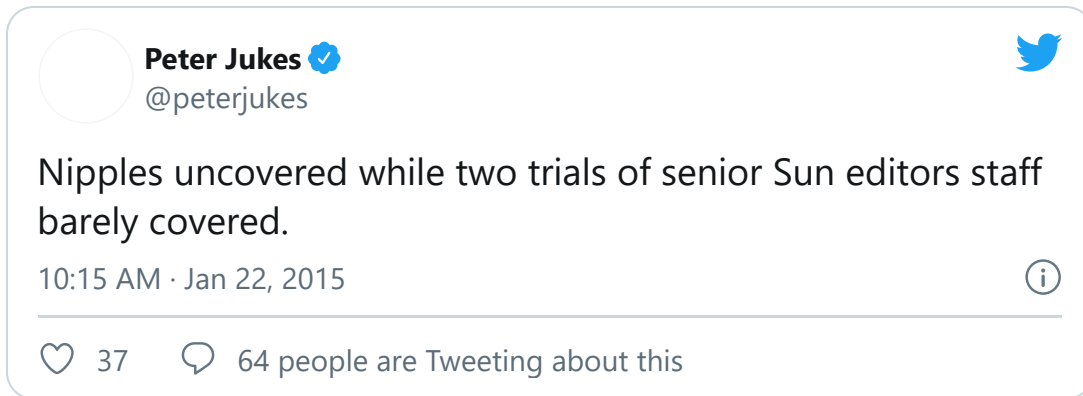
'Leftie' gullibles

But here we are and here I am again writing about Murdoch and The Sun. In the next few days expect the narrative to concentrate on the quality and effectiveness of the PR "campaign" and the gullibility of "leftie" journalists.

The Sun will celebrate itself, the world will keep turning and the anti-Page 3 lobby will regroup. One thing we can be certain of is this: Ditum's poignant words on the matter herald a call to arms rather than an acceptance of defeat:

For one riotous, rumspringa day, women got to live in a world where in a small but symbolic way our bodies weren't put on display as consumables.

The last word (tweet) to Peter Jukes, the author, playwright and journalist who has spent many hours reporting the various trials involving The Sun and News of the World journalists :



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