

Leveson Inquiry - Witness Statement of OBJECT

Who we are:

1) This is a statement from Anna van Heeswijk for OBJECT and “Turn Your Back on Page 3”. I am the Campaigns Manager for OBJECT.

2) OBJECT is an award winning human rights organisation which challenges the sexual objectification of women and girls, and the mainstreaming of the sex and porn industries in the media and popular culture. We campaign and lobby against 'sex object culture' because of the harmful effects it has on the self esteem and aspirations of women and girls, and the negative impact it has on promoting the attitudes and behaviours associated with gender inequality and male violence.

3) Turn Your Back on Page 3 is a pressure group which campaigns against the Page 3 Industry through raising awareness of the harms associated with Page 3 and lobbying for an end to women being sexually objectified in the UK Press.

Our submission. 'A Week in the Life of The Sun, The Daily Star and The Sport':

4) This statement should be read alongside the OBJECT-Turn Your Back on Page 3 submission which examines the portrayal of women in The Sun, The Daily Star and The Sport over a one week period in November 2011. This submission can be downloaded [here](#)

5) Although differing in level and varying in extent, with a gradient of extremity running from the Sun to the Daily Star and Star on Sunday to the Sport (Midweek and Sunday), a common theme found within all three tabloids is the portrayal of women as sex objects - sexualised body parts which exist for the sole purpose of titillation.

6) This is exemplified by the 'Page 3' type feature shared by all three of these publications which depicts young women as topless, and sometimes entirely nude, in sexualised and objectifying poses which are often submissive and demeaning.

7) This portrayal of women as sexualised body parts is not restricted to the third page of these publications, and in the case of the Daily Star and The Sport, such sexually objectifying imagery is more often than not included on the front cover (Exhibits [1a](#) and [1b](#)).

8) Indeed, the Sport publishes a daily and weekly “nipple count” which can reach near or above three figures (Exhibit [2](#)).

9) Other examples of objectification in these publications include “up-skirt” photographs where the name or even the face of the subject is not featured (Exhibit [3](#)). This is intrusive and degrading and it can be said to normalise and legitimise voyeurism and sexual harassment which is a huge concern, particularly for girls and young women who are often the victims of such sexual harassment and bullying.

10) This pervasive objectification and sexualisation of women is not restricted to the portrayal of the Page 3 models or to the Page 3 type feature. Rather, to varying extents, it influences the way that almost all women are portrayed in Page 3 tabloids, including female celebrities. Examples include an article in the Daily Star on the size of “15 year old” Charlotte Church's breasts (“She’s a big girl now... Child singing sensation showed just how quickly she’s grown up after turning up at a Hollywood bash looking chest swell”). This is juxtaposed with commentary of outrage against

the satirical “sting” Brass Eye documentary’s “Paedophile special” (Exhibit [4](#)). More recent examples include a feature in the Sport commenting on the genitalia of a female newsreader which it describes in derogatory terms. (Exhibit [5](#)) (We have anonymised this example).

11) This type of treatment set out in paragraph 10 above has no parallel for men, illustrating a double standard and clear evidence of sexism verging on misogyny in the tabloid press. This contempt for women is often further illustrated by the use of 'humour'.

12) The coverage illustrated in paragraph 10 in the example from the Daily Star is also an example of the hypocrisy found in the tabloid press.

13) Within this statement, the term 'Page 3 imagery' is therefore used to describe the widespread and persistent portrayal of women as sex objects in Page 3 tabloids, not only the Page 3 feature itself.

14) Other common and concerning themes in Page 3 tabloids include a trivialisation and/or eroticisation of sexual violence (Exhibits [6a](#) and [6b](#)), and links to the sex industry through extensive advertising for sex web cams, pornographic DVDs and 'escort agencies' (Exhibit [7](#)).

Summary of our 5 main concerns:

15)

i) The persistent and pervasive sexualisation and objectification of women in the Page 3 tabloid press through sexually objectifying imagery and derogatory language (Exhibits [8a](#), [8b](#), [8c](#))

ii) The advertisements for the sex and porn industries included in Page 3 tabloids (Exhibit [7](#))

iii) The trivialisation and even eroticisation of offences against women, including sexual harassment, assault, rape and murder (Exhibits [6a](#) and [6b](#))

iv) The impact of normalising the portrayal of women as sex objects and its effect on the ways in which women and girls are viewed and treated.

v) The fact that, despite widespread concern about the sexual objectification of women and the sexualisation of children, these sexually objectifying tabloids are completely mainstream - openly displayed at child's eye level and sold without any form of age- restriction.

Summary of key conclusions and recommendations:

16) The Page 3 tabloids investigated in this submission clearly contribute to the sexual objectification of women in society.

17) This is avoidable and preventable. Indeed, it is possible for the Inquiry to make very simple recommendations to address the pervasive sexualisation and objectification of women in the UK press.

18) Page 3 imagery is already prohibited in the workplace under sexual harassment legislation (set out most recently in the Equalities Act 2010), and it is restricted from broadcast media before the 9pm watershed.

19) It would therefore be logical to recommend that Page 3 images which are considered unacceptable in the workplace, and which would not pass the pre-watershed test for television, should not be displayed in newspapers which are sold at child's eye level with no age-restriction. These recommendations would allow for consistency in media regulation when it comes to keeping harmful materials out of the mainstream and away from children.

20) Therefore, any new code of practice for the media should have provisions which address the concerns of wider society about this portrayal of women, and which are consistent with the regulation set out in paragraph 19 above.

Avoiding misrepresentation of our position:

21) The self-serving Page 3 tabloid media fail to frame this debate fairly or accurately in terms of the issues raised for wider society when women are sexually objectified in the mainstream press (in breach of the PCC code).

22) This statement is not related to the choices or the actions of the individual Page 3 models. It is about the impact that the persistent and relentless portrayal of women as sex objects has on promoting and contributing to a culture of sexism and hyper-sexualisation of women, and the effect that this has on how women and girls view themselves and on how they are viewed and treated. This is of particular concern in relation to young girls and boys who are shaping their identities and forming their perspectives on the world and relationships within it. The issue therefore, is why the print media is free to print this sexually objectifying material in mainstream newspapers which are openly displayed and not age-restricted. Especially when such material is already restricted in broadcast media.

23) The concerns here expressed are not about taste. They concern the real harm that is done to women and girls across the country when women are persistently degraded as sex objects, day in and day out, in our national press, and when female public figures and celebrities risk being treated with contempt if they don't live up to the sexualised stereotypes held out for them. They concern the story that this tells about how we as a society value women.

24) This is not about censorship. It is about applying the same regulation as already applies to broadcast material in order to achieve greater consistency in relation to restricting harmful stereotypes from mainstream newspapers which are openly displayed and sold without any age-restriction.

25) This is not about sex or nudity. Current broadcast rules rightly permit sex education and sexual health information to be shown before the watershed, along with news stories and carefully considered sexual content of dramas and soap operas which are consistent with the plot-line and are not degrading. Therefore, there is an already established distinction made between an openness in regards to sex and sexuality, and the restriction of gratuitous portrayals of women as sex objects. This distinction should also be applied to print based media.

Harmful effects of the portrayal of women as sex objects in 'Page 3 tabloids':

26) Two recent UK Government commissioned reviews into 'sexualisation'; The Bailey Review (2011) and Dr Linda Papadopoulos review into the sexualisation of young people (2010), both highlight the increasing extent to which women and girls are sexualised and objectified in the media, and the harmful effects this 'sex object' culture has on society, and in particular on children and young people.

27) Page 3 images of naked or nearly naked women – which in tabloids like the Daily Star and the Sport are found on almost every page, including the front cover - directly contribute to this 'sex object' culture as they demean and degrade women as sex objects.

28) Page 3 is particularly harmful because it forms part of mainstream national newspapers - newspapers which are sold without age-restriction and which are read and left lying around in the home, on buses and in the classrooms. This normalises the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women, making it seem unquestionable and mainstream. It sends out the pervasive message that women's worth is valued on the basis of how they look, and that women exist for the sole purpose of sexual titillation.

29) We challenge the Inquiry to ask what story this tells girls and boys when national newspapers depict men for what they do, and women for what they look like - when men are presented as active subjects in suits or sports attire, and women as passive objects, naked in submissive and demeaning poses (Exhibit [9](#)). What effect is this likely to have on aspirations, body image and perpetuating stereotypes, when such are the models of femininity presented for young girls to emulate? And what effect does this have on racist stereotypes, when almost without exception, all of these Page 3 'Idols' are white?

30) The Sun has a reading age of 12-14 (this refers to the ease of reading), the Star and Sport would presumably have ones which are similar or even lower, and there is no doubt that these newspapers, with their coverage of reality TV programmes with large child audiences, have content appealing to young people. The Sun has even promoted toys to children on the front cover of its newspaper (Exhibit [10](#)).

31) The universal access of Page 3 tabloids, and the lack of consistency in relation to their regulation presents difficulties for parents and teachers who are responsible for children and young people. For example, through OBJECT's work with schools, teachers have shared the difficulties they have when they are encouraging their students to engage with the news and to read newspapers to be aware of what's going on in the world and the children bring in The Sun or the Daily Star. The teachers find themselves in a situation where they have to confiscate a newspaper that the young person can freely buy at their local corner shop or supermarket - a fact which the child doesn't hesitate to point out - because of the sexually objectifying and degrading images that they contain.

32) As a society we generally agree that this form of hyper-sexualised and sexually objectifying imagery at the very least has the potential to be harmful, which is why we don't allow it in the work place, in schools or on the television before the 9pm watershed. If sexually objectifying imagery is restricted in the work place or on television pre-watershed, it is logical that it should not be displayed in freely available, openly displayed and unrestricted newspapers.

33) On the basis of these associated harms, it is disappointing that the Inquiry failed to ask the newspapers to justify their persistent portrayal of women as sex objects - including on the front pages of their publications - in relation to wider concerns about the sexualisation and objectification of women.

Culture of fear and the silencing effect that this has, and the need to return to this issue in Module 3.

34) Through our numerous meetings with politicians, women's organisations, and NGOs representing children and parents, it is clear that there is widespread concern about the impact that Page 3-type images have on our society, and on women and girls in particular. Unfortunately, what is equally clear is the extent to which MPs and other public figures are afraid to raise these concerns because of their fear of retribution from the tabloid press - both on a personal and a political level.

35) The public vilification of the democratically elected MP Clare Short when she raised the issue of Page 3 in Parliament in the 1980s (Exhibits [11a](#) and [11b](#)), and the more recent targeting – on a personal, not political basis - of Harriet Harman in particular (Exhibit [12](#)), but also, even if to a slightly lesser extent, of Dr Evan Harris (Exhibit [13](#)), and of the Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone (Exhibit [14](#)), provide clear examples of the vindictiveness of certain elements of the press and the way in which they use their power and influence to silence concerns and objections on the issue of Page 3.

36) The politicians we have spoken to who support our campaign would all welcome a debate with the tabloid press on these issues, but rather than engaging with the policies involved, the tabloid press chooses instead to make personal attacks on public figures who raise concerns.

37) Unfortunately, the opportunity to raise these questions to the Editors of the Sun, The Daily Star and the Sport has been missed in Module 1. It is crucial not to miss the opportunity to address the issue of Page 3 with politicians in Module 3.

38) This is especially necessary because of the extent to which the press has created a climate of fear in relation to speaking out on this issue, and because of the legally binding international obligations of the UK Government under the UN CEDAW Convention to tackle the issue of the sexual objectification of women in the media.

Recommendations:

39) Tools and mechanisms already exist to address the hyper-sexualisation of women in other media. Challenging this stereotyped portrayal of women does not call for new forms of regulation or censorship. Rather it requires applying a common sense level of consistency in relation to media regulation which applies across the board.

40) As a society, we already restrict sexually objectifying material on television before the 9pm watershed. The question must therefore be asked why it is seen as acceptable for these same images to be displayed in unrestricted newspapers? The same rule should apply to mainstream newspapers, which are not age restricted or displayed on the top shelf, that applies to pre-watershed television.

41) The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and now the Equality Act 2010 prohibit Page 3 imagery in the workplace to protect adults from what is described as the 'intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive' environment that these images create. Therefore, logically it cannot be seen as acceptable to display these same images in national newspapers, available to children. Material defined as a form of sexual harassment if displayed in the workplace should not be available in tabloids which are sold without age-restriction in newsagents and supermarkets, and which are read and left lying around in the public domain.

42) Applying the pre-watershed test to newspapers, and preventing Page 3 images which are prohibited from the work place in unrestricted newspapers, would form important steps in addressing the harm caused by normalising the sexual objectification of women and girls in the UK press.

43) This proposal, to require unrestricted newspapers to follow the same rules as pre-watershed broadcast, has cross-party political and widespread civic society support. For example, the Liberal Democrats have adopted the proposal as party policy, and the Home Office minister with responsibility for women's equality, Lynne Featherstone, has endorsed it. Other key political figures have also raised concerns about the Page 3 phenomena, including the Deputy Leader of the Opposition Harriet Harman, and other Labour and Conservative MPs. 35 women's organisations have also signed a letter to the Prime Minister asking for these provisions to be adopted, and there has been wide cross-party support for back-bench measures to tackle the problem - including attempts to require "lads mags" which have similar content to the Daily Star and the Sport to be displayed on the top shelf.

44) As well as being consistent with other forms of media regulation, the approaches suggested in paragraphs 37 and 38 of this statement are entirely consistent with the general standards of the PPC and with Article 12 of the Editor's Code of Practice which aims to safeguard against discrimination on the basis of gender.

45) Other recommendations include: the inclusion of the category of 'groups' as a basis of complaint in the PCC's (or any replacement's) complaints procedure, so as to allow readers to take action against any form of persistent stereotyping or discrimination on the basis of a group identity; gender equality and issues related to discrimination on the basis of sex to be key and distinct components of any new codes of practice for the print based media (alongside other equality issues); and the introduction of an independent press regulator which has compulsory membership and meaningful powers of enforcement, and whose code is explicit about the need to prevent the sorts of discriminatory and sexually objectifying materials covered by this statement.

Conclusion:

46) Newspapers communicate, shape and reflect the ideas and values of the society we live in. Page 3 tabloids contribute to a culture that reduces women to sex objects. This one-dimensional and stereotyped portrayal of women is a serious misrepresentation of women. The first question is why these newspapers are printing such degrading misrepresentations - a question which should have been addressed to the newspaper editors and owners themselves. The second question is why they are allowed to get away with it. This is a question that needs to be picked up in Module 3.

47) The Inquiry felt it necessary to censor the examples that we have submitted when circulating our submission to those giving evidence. We respectfully ask the Inquiry how they justify this material being available in shops to children when it is deemed unsuitable for parties to the Inquiry itself to see.

48) This Inquiry provides a unique opportunity to ensure that the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women in our tabloid press is placed firmly on the agenda as we work together for a print-based media which is socially responsible, responsive to the public interest, and which adheres to common principles of equality and social justice. This is a real opportunity to make a difference. We urge you to take it.