

THE BIG ISSUE: A HAND UP, NOT A HAND OUT

Helen Williams, finds out what it's like to sell the world's first re-sellable magazine, *The Big Issue*



Big Issue vendor
Dave Martin

The light London drizzle has tapered off when I emerge from the packed rush-hour tube on to the crowded streets of Hammersmith. But there's still a chill wind that makes the commuters hurrying under the flyover draw their jackets closer. I check my watch as I round the corner to the Tesco Superstore. I'm a little late, but *Big Issue* vendor Dave Martin is easy to spot in his trademark orange vest. He's chatting to a young woman he obviously knows and I have to wait my turn before she turns to go into the shop and he notices me. With a friendly handshake, he proudly introduces his 'pitch', folding away his white plastic chair so that we can head to Costa over the road for our interview.

Dave, 57, is no stranger to interviews, he tells me. Over the seven years that he's been a vendor, he's featured in *The Big Issue* magazine no less than three times in his favourite regular 'My Pitch', which tells the story of a different vendor every week. 'I know the guy in this week,' says Dave. 'His name's Manea and he's Romanian. I've known him quite a while because I live near where he works, outside Seven Sisters Station.'

As an experienced vendor, Dave is pretty familiar with the magazine and its contents, and knows what sells. 'The front cover has got to stand out, so it catches people's eye. When *Downton Abbey* star [Hugh Bonneville] was on the cover – that was a ladies' choice. It's hard to please everyone, though.' Dave passes me the 29th April issue. 'This is what your students will like. The festivals issue in April is always popular.' Dave is enthusiastic about the magazine's recent redesign, especially the culture section. 'People also like 'Letter to my younger self' where you have a star and go back to when they were 16.' This week it's Eagles guitarist, Don Felder. But there is one celebrity that outshines them all. 'The 'Bob' covers are way above everything you can even think of.' These feature the cat belonging to former *Big Issue* vendor, James Bowen, whose bestselling book *A Street Cat Named Bob* and 2016 film made him a celebrity. 'Once I had 50 'Bob' pre-orders even before the magazine came out. I sold 78 of those 'Bob issues' in one day, and 165 that week. I normally sell 70 copies of the magazine in a week.'

So will Dave be getting a cat? 'It's been done,' he laughs. 'I'd like to sell more magazines, obviously. Some say a parrot might help. But you never know what it might end up saying to people: 'Buy a f***** magazine!'. Dave pauses contemplatively for a moment, then adds, 'Spider monkeys can be loving in a way... but if you don't treat it right, it's got a nasty bite... I'm open to ideas!'

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vendors being disappointed that they don't immediately make lots of money, says Dave. 'It's a waiting game. If all my customers came on a Monday, I could take the next six days off, but it doesn't work like that. You've got to build your pitch up, get a rapport with people: they get to know you; you get to know them. And it's not all about making money. I help the elderly with their trolleys, look after people's shopping, even their dogs. I like coming here to chat to people, have a laugh and a joke, listen to my music and make money. What a combination!'

The 'My Pitch' pieces are not the end of Dave's claims to fame. 'I've had a photoshoot with Bryan Adams for the magazine. I've had a piece in *The Big Issue* Foundation newsletter, been to The House of Lords. I did a reading for the Charles Dickens museum, and you could walk around the exhibition listening to me reading 'Night Walks' [Dickens' article, first published in 1861, describing the loneliness of 'houseless people'].

In fact, there is something Dickensian about the way Dave describes his past leading up to the early days as a *Big Issue* vendor. When explaining how he ended up on the streets, he says briefly, 'Family issues. My mother died of cancer when I was five, in 1961. It all fell apart from there. My father was already seeing someone else at the time and my mother was dying literally on the couch, because there were no cures or help for breast cancer in those days in the '60s. My dad remarried pretty much straight away, and other members of the family looked after me. I got expelled from school – I found it hard to learn, and it was easier just to mess about. Then it was hostels, then homeless, then hostels, then living on the streets.'

Originally from Derby, Dave travelled around a lot and eventually ended up in London. 'Basically, I was homeless and begging on the street. You're sitting there and it's so demeaning. People stepping over you. Then one day a vendor came along and said, 'You can do a lot better than you're doing now, you know. I sell *The Big Issue*.' I said, 'What's that?' and he said, 'The homeless sell

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magazines and it helps them move on, helps them make a living and get money that's legitimate."

It wasn't easy at first. 'I was a newbie, not knowing anyone, people rushing to work, totally ignoring you, giving me dirty looks. One day in High Street Kensington – which can really blow a gale – we had this cold snap. You had this constant biting wind and I stood it for a few hours and just thought, nah, I can't do this. So I went home. And then I decided, no, it's not going to beat me. So I come out in all weathers. You know what they say: there's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong type of clothing!'

Costa having closed and kicked us out, we're back near Dave's pitch on a bench outside Tesco, and he gestures proudly to the foyer. 'It took me seven years to get in there. But when I'm here, my troubles all come away. If we were sat in there talking, there'd be people saying hello all the time. They're my surrogate family.'

And things are looking up. Last November, Dave moved into a bedsit in Tottenham, North London, with the help of St Mungo's homeless charity. He rummages in his rucksack and brings out a page of vibrant Matisse-style modern art designs. 'I've got an exhibition selling my artwork this month through Café Art. I was selling *The Big Issue* in Canary Wharf outside The Northern Trust and they kept asking me what I wanted to do. And I came up with this idea. That's what *The Big Issue* do. They give you opportunities to put yourself out there. This one vendor – his name's Joel – was standing outside a law firm and they gave him a job! I don't seem to have much time for art at the moment, though. It's a living what we do, seven days a week. We pay towards rent, travel, magazines, you name it. It's a micro-business. I might have to start taking Sundays off, mebbe. What d'you reckon?'

'I've got a challenge for you,' Dave says just before we part. 'We're doing this thing called, 'Pay it forward', with the idea of increasing sales to get vendors out of poverty. Someone, like

you, will buy the magazine and when you've read it, you pass it on to a friend who'll scan my code on this sticker, and that takes them to my payment page where they can pay £2.50 and I get half of that; half goes to the Foundation. It's the world's first re-sellable magazine!'

Dave points to one of the printed interviews he's brought with him and reads out the last line: 'If it wasn't for *The Big Issue*, my life would be lifeless.' That's definitely true.'

So we can all be vendors now, effectively. Big Issue, anyone?

Helen Williams is a former magazine journalist, now an Assistant Head of Sixth Form and Head of Media Studies at St Mary's School in Gerrards Cross.

The Big Issue Group's mission is to dismantle poverty by creating opportunity. As well as the *Big Issue* magazine, it has a social investment arm, Big Issue Invest and an online shop. The Big Issue Foundation is the charitable arm. www.bigissue.com



Ross Lesley-Bayne

THE BIG ISSUE: INDUSTRY FOCUS

Year 12 students from St Mary's School, Buckinghamshire interview Ross Lesley-Bayne, Art Director of *The Big Issue* about the magazine and his unique job



Students from St Mary's getting to grips with their A level set text

If we have an interview with someone well-known and interesting then they will lead the cover. If the features are more hard-hitting and we want to create something people will talk about then we go with either something typographic or an image that tells that story.

So how does it all work?

There are around 15 people working in editorial. We have distribution offices around the country but sales and editorial are based in London and Glasgow and we have Skype meetings every morning. The editorial office in Glasgow is above the distribution office so we see vendors on a daily basis. We also interview vendors weekly for the 'My Pitch' feature in the magazine.

Who designs *The Big Issue* covers?

I'm in charge of the cover design, but I work with the Editor Paul McNamee and Features Editor Stephen MacKenzie. I'll have an idea or concept and will either commission an illustrator or photographer or more often than not design something myself. I work up the design and the editors work on finding the best cover lines to suit.

How do you decide what to put on the cover?

We want the cover to be striking at a distance; as our magazine is sold on the street it has to draw people in as

they walk past, so a big image with a strong headline is really important. We tend to keep the colours bright and vibrant again to catch people's eye and engage them at a distance. If we have an interview with someone well-known and interesting then they will lead the cover. If the features are more hard-hitting and we want to create something people will talk about then we go with either something typographic or an image that tells that story. We tend to work in a live week (the week the magazine goes to print) to keep the magazine current, but if we know in advance that we have a big interview or a themed issue then these are created in advance. Sometimes we get a clear concept early on; other weeks it takes the full week to settle on something that really works. We work on the cover every day to make sure that the version that goes to print is the best one.

What was the inspiration behind the logo and the slogan?

The Big Issue is a magazine sold to help homelessness, which is the 'big issue' in modern society. 'A hand up, not a handout' stands for how we sell

We wanted to be bolder with what we say and how we say it. So we changed the whole look and feel of the magazine, added new fonts and layouts, new features and new sections to navigate through.

so that we can push these out through our various social media channels.

How did you get this job?

I started out studying Illustration at college, I then went on to do an honours degree in animation. After university I worked as a graphic designer for a college, producing prospectuses, adverts etc. After working at the college I worked for *The Drum* (a marketing and media magazine) as a senior designer before moving on to Art Director at *The Big Issue*. So I have a pretty varied background in print and digital which helps when working on a variety of projects.

Can we ask the average salary of an art editor?!

I think the average salary is between £32-38k a year but varies quite a bit (especially in London).

Thanks to the sixth formers at St Mary's School for sending us their Q&A

The Big Issue explained in a handy infographic

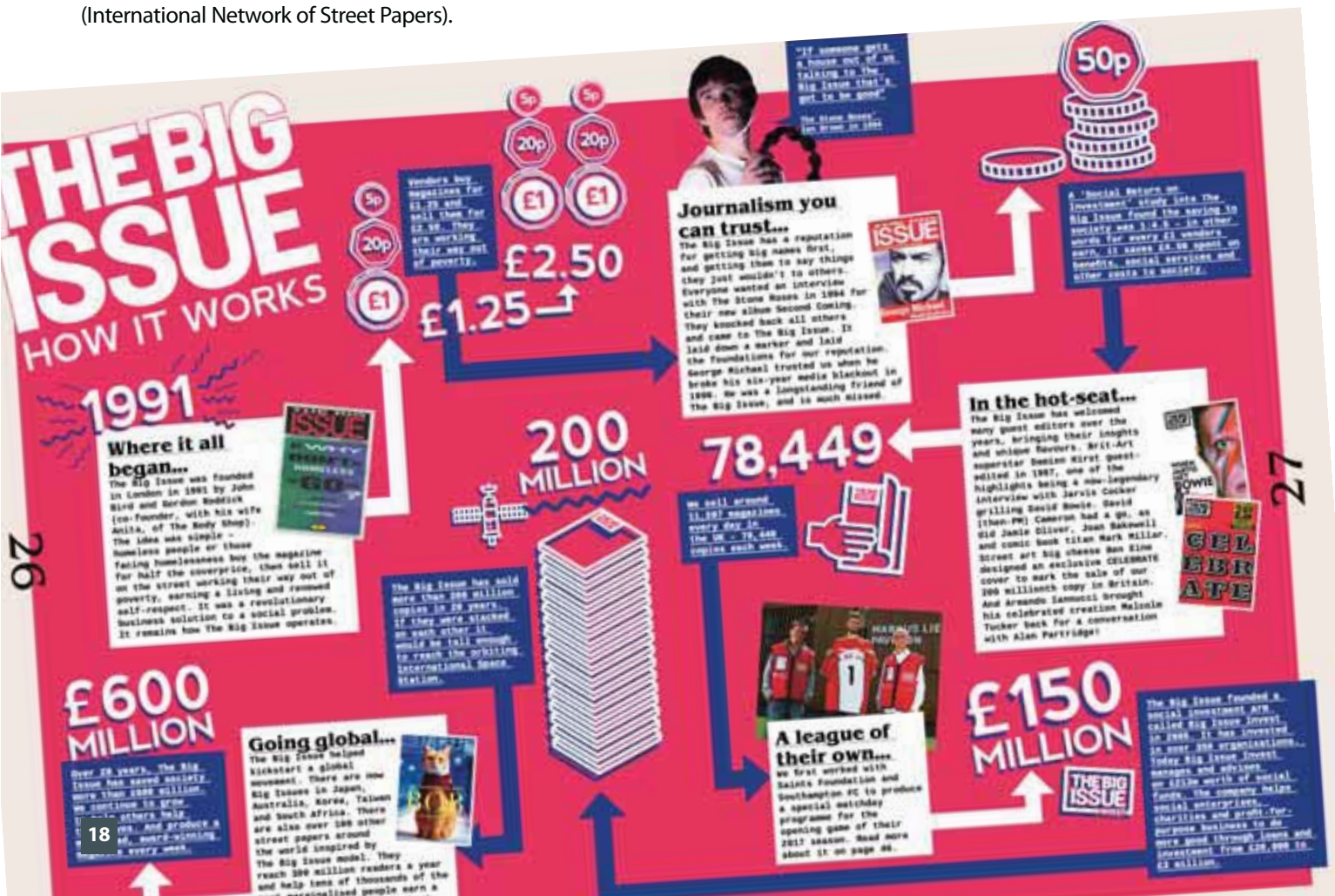
the magazine. Vendors are working and not begging, they are earning an income and our slogan reflects this.

Why, how and when did you redesign the magazine?

We redesigned the magazine in September 2018; we wanted to make it more current and reflective of the features we carry. We wanted to be bolder with what we say and how we say it. So we changed the whole look and feel of the magazine, added new fonts and layouts, new features and new sections to navigate through. We wanted a cleaner design that didn't feel too restrictive and was more creative in its approach. I think the redesign has been a big success and feel it better reflects who we are and what we do. It has just been shortlisted for best design and best cover by INSP (International Network of Street Papers).

What's a typical day at work?

A typical day usually starts with an editorial meeting where we run through where we are with the features, when everything is coming in and what artwork etc. is needed for each section. I will usually commission illustrators for our various sections on a Monday and tie in with them throughout the week. We have a variety of illustrators that work throughout the magazine. I'll then take a look through the features and look at how best to illustrate them. I may then need to do some picture research to find an image that works well or look at designing/illustrating something that will help to tell the features story. We then sit and go through things with the Editor, Paul, and look at any issues that may need to be changed. I also work on digital assets to go along with each magazine,





Big Issue, July 9-15 Donald Trump 'Flake News' issue, shortlisted for the INSP Best Cover Awards 2019

Ross Says:

We were in the grip of a heatwave; the hottest summer for years and the week that Donald Trump was visiting the UK. We wanted to show our readers we understood their issues with Trump, and that we were going to address his Fake News narrative inside. We settled on the image and the cover line presented itself. The cover appeared as placards on anti-Trump protests from London to Glasgow, and a tea-towel version became a best-selling item in *The Big Issue* Shop, feeding back in to our core mission.



Big Issue, November 5-11 Still At War issue

Ross Says:

In October 2018 we introduced a new visual look to support the core message of *The Big Issue* Group. Crucial to the magazine is the sense that vendors, as well as buyers, are a key part of our community. In our redesign launch issue (Still at War) visual change was indivisible with content changes putting vendors at the core, from the introduction/contents page to the last word 'My Pitch' feature, 'Vendor City Travel Guides' and countless additional features. Changemakers (1341) highlights the 'social echo' of individuals and organisations finding creative, innovative ways to tackle problems across the social spectrum with ideas that resonate and inspire others. For our Brexit edition (1351) we commissioned satirical artist Coldwar Steve to design a unique cover, encapsulating a chaotic time in the UK with acerbic wit and punch. It was a means of engaging readers, leading them to content, including how jobs will be impacted, alongside art created by a formerly homeless artist from recycled copies of *The Big Issue*. Coldwar Steve used his social media clout to push the magazine's mission to a huge, unfamiliar audience, and donned a vendor tabard on the streets of Birmingham to help vendors push sales and raise awareness.

