

***The Big Issue* and other street papers: a response to homelessness**

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SUMMARY: *This paper concerns The Big Issue, a magazine that is sold on the streets by homeless people in the UK, and describes how it was started, who reads it and how the homeless are involved. It also describes the work of The Big Issue Foundation and discusses the growing number of street papers being produced in many other countries and the development of an international network of street papers.*

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1. At current exchange rates, this means a selling price equivalent to about US\$1.30 with \$0.75 being kept by the vendor.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN TWENTIETH CENTURY Britain, homelessness is an ever present problem. Without wishing to point the finger at any government administration, it is clear that practical solutions are needed. *The Big Issue* has a unique approach to the problem of homelessness. It is a magazine which is sold on the streets throughout the UK by homeless people. It is sold for 80 pence and the vendors keep 45 pence, having previously bought them from *The Big Issue* for 35 pence.⁽¹⁾

It is a unique approach primarily because, until the launch of *The Big Issue*, much of the help extended to homeless people was in the form of charitable assistance. The motto of *The Big Issue* is "A hand up, not a hand out". We believe that by earning money, homeless people can win back some of the self-esteem they have lost by being homeless and this is most effective when earned through self-help.

II. HOW DID IT START?

IN 1990, WHEN Gordon Roddick of the Body Shop (an internationally renowned socially responsible business) visited New York, he saw a publication called *Street News* being sold on the streets by homeless people who kept half of the cover price for every copy that they sold. In Britain at this time, due to a variety of circumstances, there was an increasing number of young people sleeping on the streets, especially in the cities. Having seen at first hand a practical way in which homeless people could be helped, Roddick was keen to set up a paper in Britain similar to the USA's *Street News*. He suggested to his friend John Bird, who worked in the printing industry, that he con-

sider the idea of launching the UK's first street paper. The first edition of *The Big Issue* hit the streets in September 1991, as a monthly paper.

Due to popular demand, *The Big Issue* went fortnightly in August 1992 and became weekly in June 1993. Although launched with capital from the Body Shop Foundation, it is now financed through sales and advertising revenues with surplus revenues going to *The Big Issue* Foundation (see section VI for details). When launched, there were four staff and many volunteers; now there are 90 staff in the London office working in the areas of editing, production, the Foundation, administration, accounts, advertising and distribution. Initially, circulation was 30,000 a month; this has now grown to almost 300,000 copies per week and this ten-fold expansion in circulation has led it to be labelled "the publishing success venture of the 1990s". The initial *Big Issue* in London has spawned three separate editions: *The Big Issue Cymru* sold in Wales, *Big Issue in the North* and *The Big Issue in Scotland*.

III. WHAT IS THE MAGAZINE ACTUALLY LIKE?

THE BIG ISSUE is a general interest magazine combining news, campaigns and exposés with entertainment, films, music and clubs. Box 1 is the contents list of Issue No.222 which gives an idea of the magazine's coverage. It is not part of any other media group (unlike many of the publications in the UK) and it does not support any political party. This allows the magazine to be independent in thought and action.

From the outset, we knew that *The Big Issue* could not just be about homelessness. We had to make sure that people would want to read the paper and not get bored by reading about the same thing. Certain famous people have chosen to give us exclusive interviews - such as the singer, George Michael, who gave *The Big Issue* his first media interview in six years. However, stories about homelessness and about other important social issues of the day are also covered. Prominent British politicians, including the Deputy Prime Minister and the leaders of the two main opposition parties, have also given interviews and were asked very specific questions about their views on begging and homelessness.

IV. WHAT ABOUT THE VENDORS?

THERE ARE BETWEEN 8,000 and 10,000 vendors who sell *The Big Issue* (including its regional issues) in any one year. Some remain vendors for years whilst others do so for only a few months or a few weeks; the length of time is largely determined by their personal circumstances. Each vendor has a defined pitch where they can sell the magazine - and obviously some pitches are better than others in terms of how many copies of the magazine can be sold. But the income the vendor makes also depends on how long they sell for each day and how

Box 1: Contents List for *The Big Issue* No.222, 3rd-9th March 1997

News: *The Big Issue* scores its first Empty Homes campaign victory; US spy trial could unlock Lockerbie bomb secrets.

Preview: This week in film, art, music, books, media, clubs, theatre. Interview with the director of the film *The English Patient*, Anthony Minghella.

International: To mark International Women's Day, images of women in war.

Street Lights: Homeless writing from around the country.

Missing: Can you find these people? The National Missing Persons Helpline.

FEATURES

Cover Story: Crossing the Desert to Bridge the Gap: High-flying city bankers meet *Big Issue* vendors in an Egyptian adventure.

Out TV: Why Larry Grayson and negative portrayals of gay culture are a thing of the past.

Radio Heads: Andy Kershaw and John Peel (two of the most popular disk jockeys on British radio, both also well-known for playing new, innovative bands) get their rightful place in the schedules.

Gory Girl: Minette Walters, the crime writer who's like Miss Marple with a machete.

good they are at selling. Each vendor has to regularly re-register their pitch and show that they are still selling. No-one can force a vendor off their pitch unless they are not working on it regularly.

When a potential vendor comes to *The Big Issue*, they are asked to provide proof that they are homeless - for example, a letter from a day centre. Then they have a one-hour induction in which our services and the pitch system are explained. To become a vendor, they must complete a two-week training period and sign a code of conduct. They are also informed that if they are claiming unemployment or welfare benefits, they should declare their earnings and sign a statement to this effect. After being "badged up", they receive ten papers on credit. After this, they have to purchase copies of the magazine for 35 pence and sell them to the public for 80 pence per copy.

It is difficult to know what happens to our vendors after they stop selling *The Big Issue*. Some have gone on to university, some have gone on to jobs as diverse as working on the London Underground (London's subway trains) and advertising agencies. When someone stops vending, they may not always tell us and we have no way of tracking vendors or of finding out what happens to them unless they particularly wish to keep in touch.

2. These statistics came from Rights of Admission Reserved, a survey being carried out by seven media companies which is studying the youth market with particular reference to advertising and media.

V. WHO READS *THE BIG ISSUE*?

SEVENTY SIX PER cent of *The Big Issue* readers are under the age of 44 and 60 per cent are under the age of 34. For 15-24 year olds, this is the third most popular magazine. Fifty-four per cent of readers are female.⁽²⁾

VI. WHAT MAKES *THE BIG ISSUE* SPECIAL?

MANY PEOPLE ASSUME that *The Big Issue* is written and produced by homeless people. However, our first priority is to ensure that what we sell is a quality product. Therefore, all the editorial staff are trained, professional journalists. The magazine includes two pages called *Streetlights* which are dedicated exclusively to poems and articles by homeless people. In this way, *The Big Issue* is unique in offering a voice in the media to homeless people.

The Big Issue is based on the philosophy of self-help. We offer an approach which is not based on charity or handouts. Yet a recent survey showed that the biggest benefit vendors find from selling the magazine is the fact that they have contact with the public and the social interaction this provides.

VII. THE BIG ISSUE FOUNDATION

THE BIG ISSUE Foundation is a charity funded from surplus revenues from the magazine and donations from trusts, corporations and the public. Its aim is to give homeless people the chance to make their own choices and learn new skills, to help them move off the streets into a home and into a job or training. The Foundation offers different services across the country:

- Housing and resettlement through which *Big Issue* housing workers help vendors to find safe, affordable accommodation, whether just for a night, a few months or as a permanent home. Tenants are also offered any support they may need in managing the responsibilities of a new home.
- An outreach team, many of them ex-vendors, who support, help and organize vendors on the streets into effective sales teams. They allocate sales pitches and sort out any pitch problems to ensure vendors' safety and security while vending.
- The Training and Education Unit provides individual programmes for vendors who want to learn typing, computer skills, word processing and desktop publishing. It also finds and funds places on training and education courses and offers work experience opportunities both at *The Big Issue* and with other organizations. All *The Big Issues* run a range of creative workshops to help homeless people rebuild their self-

confidence, from writing and drama groups to art, photography and video workshops.

- A drug and alcohol worker provides basic counselling to vendors concerned about their drug or alcohol use and there is a referral service to specialist agencies, if needed. Experienced vendor support workers are a constant source of emotional support and practical advice. If they are unable to help solve particular problems, they introduce vendors to other organizations with the necessary knowledge or expertise.

VIII. INTERNATIONAL STREET PAPERS

a. Introduction

THE BIG ISSUE'S success subsequently paved the way for a growing street paper movement across Europe. Today, over 60 street papers are sold on the streets of European cities and towns in a dozen different countries. The first paper in Eastern Europe was launched in 1994, in St Petersburg. Street papers have also been developed in other regions and last year *The Big Issue* was launched in Melbourne, Australia and in Cape Town, South Africa, joining the three-year old *Homeless Talk* in Johannesburg.

Street papers throughout the world are now playing a major part in fighting the double tragedy of economic marginalization and its counterpart, social exclusion. They are, to date, a phenomenon of the North, where the informal sector is not as pronounced as in the cities of the South. Begging, however, is widespread in the North and is an activity to which street papers provide an economic alternative.

b. Europe

On any one night in the countries of the European Union (with a population of some 340 million people), around 1.1 million are without homes, up to 5 million are permanently homeless and up to 15 million live in "severe housing stress" in sub-standard conditions.⁽³⁾ In Southern Europe, where the family structure still plays a central social role, statistics indicate that the problem of homelessness is not as acute for the indigenous population as in Northern Europe, although the problem is growing. Homelessness is most prevalent in Britain, France and Germany.

The nature of social exclusion differs from country to country. Many of the homeless in countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy are refugees from Albania, Africa or the former Yugoslavia. Whilst in the UK it is only homeless and ex-homeless people who sell *The Big Issue* because that is where the greatest need exists, it is homeless, refugees and the unemployed who sell street papers in many countries in Europe. *Das Megaphon*, the street paper in Graz, Austria, for example, is sold mainly by

3. Avramov, Dragana (1995), *Homelessness in the European Union: Social and Legal Context for Housing Exclusion in the 1990s*, FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless), Brussels, 196 pages.

Nigerians, not Austrians, and *Terre di Mezzo* in Milan, Italy, is sold mostly by Senegalese, not Italians.

Diversity is the hallmark of Europe's street papers, with each paper marked by differences in editorial content, circulation figures, size and status. Whilst *The Big Issue* believes in the dual concept of general interest editorial combined with social issues, the editorials of most European street papers deal predominantly with social issues. Many are either written by homeless people themselves or contain a high input from them. Circulations range from 3,000 to 300,000 per month. Some are supported by charities, others are extensions of existing homeless projects and a few operate as non-profit businesses.

Over half of the European papers are in Germany where over 35 towns and cities support their own street paper. Such titles as *Hinz und Kunzt* (Hamburg), *TagesSatz* (Kassel and Göttingen) and *Asphalt* (Hannover) have circulations ranging from 3,000-60,000 per month, with most providing some support services for their vendors. *Biss*, selling in Munich and Augsburg, is an example of a paper that has successfully built up its readership, recently changing from a bi-monthly to a monthly magazine sold by up to 50 regular vendors and with a circulation of 40,000. A non-profit organization, *Biss* provides training in computer literacy for its vendors and helps them to find accommodation.

A recent positive development in the European movement has been the emergence of national networks. In Holland, the launch of the *Straatmedia Groep Nederland* (SGN) in Rotterdam in January was the second of such networks (the first being in Northern Italy). The SGN aims to foster a spirit of cooperation between the six Dutch papers whose combined monthly circulation is 150,000. It will concentrate on formulating a strategy for future joint action and on projecting the street paper movement into the public, government and media eye. German street papers are also considering establishing a national network during 1997.

Although homelessness is also a growing problem in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, the street paper concept is still in its infancy in this area. St Petersburg's street paper *The Depths* was launched in 1994 in a city which has over 50,000 homeless people. It was inspired by a copy of *The Big Issue* which had been brought to the city's night shelter, *Nochlyezhka*. Valeriy Sokolov, founder of the shelter and of *The Depths*, has been a tireless campaigner on behalf of the homeless in St Petersburg and has helped bring the issue to the forefront of government and public consciousness in a country where homelessness was formerly illegal.

The nature of homelessness in St Petersburg differs from that in Western Europe. There is no welfare safety net in Russia and those who sell the paper are suffering from the most extreme poverty. This has had repercussions for the paper's economic stability as many vendors are unable to buy their copies initially and the organization has had to subsidize the paper. A partnership between *The Depths* and *The Big Issue Scotland* has recently been forged through securing a funding package

from the UK Overseas Development Administration (the UK's official aid agency) which will ensure that financial and technical support flows between Edinburgh and St Petersburg over a two-year period enabling the paper to become economically viable.

c. North America

Following the launch of the world's first street paper, *Street News*, in New York in 1989, the number of papers has grown to nearly 40, extending to the west coast and northwards into Canada. Up to 3 million people a year spend some time in shelters or on the streets in the USA,⁽⁴⁾ so the papers have become an important source of income to some of the most marginalized people.

Unlike European street papers, the American papers - although not the Canadian - are tabloid format. Most have some homeless people involved in running the paper and distribution methods differ. They do not operate as businesses and tend to be integrated into existing homeless projects.

The most successful street paper in terms of circulation (120,000 a month) is Chicago's *StreetWise*. One of *StreetWise*'s successes has been its partnerships with grassroots organizations and advocacy groups, and the development of secure roots in the local community. This has enabled them to draw upon support at a local level on a consistent basis.

To date, there has been very little cross-fertilization of ideas between North America and Europe. A national network, the North American Street Newspapers Association, was launched at the first conference of North American street papers in Chicago in August 1996. A member of the International Network of Street Papers (see below) explained to the delegates how the network operates in Europe and the benefits of working together as a unified movement.

IX. INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF STREET PAPERS

TO HARNESS THE growing movement, The International Network of Street Papers (INSP) was set up in July 1994. Coordinated from the international department of *The Big Issue* by two staff members, this international network was, until the end of February 1997, financed by the European Commission. The membership and activities of this network were confined until that date to the countries of the European Union.

The International Network provides an advisory service to those wishing to set up papers as well as those working on established titles. It also raises the profile of the street paper movement in the mainstream media and with other organizations working with the socially excluded.

Membership of the network is based upon being a signatory of the street paper charter, a code of ethics whose main thrust is that papers should use resources to finance social support

4. National Coalition for the Homeless, Washington, USA.

for the vendors and not for individual gain (see Box 2). The charter was established specifically to counter the growth of a minority of papers in Europe whose profits are not ploughed back into social initiatives and which operate for the financial benefit of their owners.

Box 2: Street Paper Charter

The charter of the International Network of Street Papers sets out the principles of the international street paper movement. These are:

- 1. Aiming to help socially excluded people (in some countries, only homeless people apply to this category) help themselves through providing them with the means of earning an income and facilitating their re-integration into society through providing social support.**
- 2. Using all post-investment profits to finance social support for the vendors or the socially excluded. Each paper supplies its annual accounts to an agreed independent organization for the purpose of financial transparency.**
- 3. Aiming to provide vendors with a voice in the media and campaigning on behalf of the socially excluded.**
- 4. Aiming towards creating quality street papers which the vendors are proud to sell and the public are happy to buy. This breaks the cycle of dependency through empowerment.**
- 5. Aiming towards social responsibility in business in terms of editorial, staff, vendor and environmental policies.**
- 6. Supporting prospective street papers that share a common philosophy and intend to sign the street paper charter.**
- 7. That no charter street paper shall enter the established selling area of an existing charter member.**

To date, the network has 20 international members. The benefits of working within a group, and of having European Commission funding, has been that members have benefited from the various activities and projects that such funding allows. For example, a highly successful staff exchange programme took place throughout 1996. Twenty-one members of staff, from vendor support, distribution, housing units and training programmes, from street papers across Europe have visited their counterparts to exchange ideas and work practices.

This was followed up during the year with the social review of the charter principles by the New Economics Foundation, one of the UK's leading organizations in the area of social auditing. The importance of social auditing is that it is an effective way of assessing the social impact and ethical behaviour of an organization in relation to its aims and those of its stakeholders. The analysis of how the street papers assessed the charter principles provided a valuable insight into how the members would like to see the network develop.

The International Network has also hosted two international street paper conferences in London. In 1995, delegates came from the European Union and Eastern Europe. Last November, street paper delegates from four continents - Europe, North America, Africa and Australia - met for the first time. These have been the only occasions when street paper workers have been able to come together in such numbers to exchange ideas and discuss the role of the global street paper movement.

X. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

WE NOW BELIEVE that one of the most important tasks for the international street paper movement is to establish partnerships with other organizations working in the social and business field. The International Network of Street Papers is a member of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)⁽⁵⁾ and *The Big Issue* is a member of FEANTSA⁽⁶⁾ and the Social Venture Network.⁽⁷⁾ Since the street paper movement bridges both the NGO and the business sectors, these partnerships provide it with a presence in both areas.

The International Network of Street Papers had a presence in Istanbul at Habitat II, the second UN Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul in June 1996, attending the World Business Forum and workshops, and networking with NGOs and other international organizations. It was an excellent opportunity for creating cross-sectoral partnerships. *The Big Issue* was nominated as one of the 100 urban best practices at Habitat II, demonstrating street papers' effectiveness in the fight against homelessness worldwide.

Network members sent copies of papers and merchandise (such as vendor bags, T-shirts and caps) to St Petersburg for the opening of the first ever exhibition on homelessness in Russia last May. The exhibition, organized by *The Depths*, proved extremely popular with the Russian people and raised consciousness both in the political and public domain.

XI. THE WAY FORWARD

FIVE AND A half years after the launch of *The Big Issue*, the rapid expansion of the movement in Europe has now begun to level off. Papers are growing, merging and, on occasions, failing. Whilst the success of street papers as a unique and innovative way of combating social exclusion cannot be contested, we need to guard against a backlash of exploitation and compassion fatigue. The street paper movement needs to become sustainable. No movement can continue to make inroads into the problem of homelessness unless it is continuously rethinking its strategy and developing its initiatives.

The success of street papers is, unfortunately, built upon the tragedy of homelessness. Whilst they are not going to eradicate homelessness on their own, street papers are playing a large part in raising the profile of homelessness amongst the public and governments of Europe and elsewhere.

5. European Anti-Poverty Network is an independent coalition of NGOs and groups involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion in the member states of the European Union.

6. FEANTSA, European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless, is a research and lobbying organization whose long-term objectives are the reduction and elimination of homelessness in Europe.

7. Social Venture Network is an international network of socially and environmentally committed entrepreneurs and business leaders dedicated to changing the way they and the world do business.

Useful Addresses

International Network of Street Papers, c/o *The Big Issue*, 57 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5NP, UK. Tel: (44) 171-418 0418; fax: (44) 171-418 0428; e-mail: insp.lon@bigissue.co.uk

Big Issue and the International Network's World Wide Web page: <http://www.cocoon.co.uk/users/bigissue>

FEANTSA (Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless), 1 rue Defacqz, Brussels B-1050, Belgium. Tel: (32) 2 538 66 69; fax: (32) 2 539 41 74.

European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), rue Belliard 205, boîte 13, B-1040 Brussels, Belgium. Tel: (32) 2 230 44 55; fax: (32) 2 230 97 33.

Social Venture Network (SVN), 6 Junction Mews, London W2, UK. Tel: (44) 171 402 4315.

North American Street Newspapers Association Website: <http://www.speakeasy.org/nasna>

National Coalition for the Homeless, 1612 K St. NW, No.1004, Washington DC 20006, USA. Tel: (1) 202-775 1322; fax: (1) 202-775 1316.