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Paul McNamee

Editor, The Big Issue

Media Masters – September 2nd, 2021

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Paul McNamee, editor of The Big Issue. The iconic publication that provides work and income for homeless people. The first editor to manage The Big Issue across its national and regional editions, as well as online, Paul was appointed to the role in 2011, Belfast born Paul has established a reputation for championing voices that are often ignored by the mainstream media. He's been named magazine editor of the year three times by industry body PPA and was named British editor of the year in 2013 and 2016 by the British Society of Magazine Editors. A regular contributor to the BBC, he has worked for a wide range of publications, including Blank, the Belfast music magazine he founded back in the nineties with the broadcaster, Colin Murray. Paul, thank you for joining me.

Not at all, thanks for the invitation.

It's a real honor. I'm a huge fan of what you're doing. I think the initiative and the purpose behind the magazine, as well as the magazine itself is a great read. It's a good read and it's doing good. That's my view. You must rightly be proud, even though you feel there's much to do. It's one of the best jobs in media, is it not?

Yes, I think it is. It's a curious job being editor of The Big Issue because you're doing something that, as you said in your introduction, has real world benefit for the people who interact with the magazine. We exist for the vendors. They come to us, they buy the magazine for half the cover price. They sell it. That's how they make their living before lockdown, we were moving around 80,000 copies a week across the UK, which is, that's a good sale. That's manageable. That's okay. So you can see then, that is a lot of money that is going to people who would not have money otherwise, we're not a charity, we don't get government grants to do what we're doing. We're a publisher, a social enterprise, so money's reinvested, but we're a publisher. So you feel as the editor, you've got responsibility to those people, you've got responsibility to your readers. You've got responsibility to your proprietor and board, but you know that in any given week, you're helping people in a situation where they don't have anything to make their lives better. And that is a really, that's a positive thing. And it

brings responsibility. You know that if you don't get it right on the cover and our covers are slightly different than other magazine covers, maybe we'll come on to that. But if you don't get it right on a cover, people are going to struggle to make money, therefore struggle to eat. So again, while it's a positive, you've got this thing always lurking there saying you better get this right kiddo. Otherwise they're in trouble.

I love the magazine. I've been reading it for years. And I mean I love the magazine, but I love the good it's doing. I'm actually giving people a hand up, not a handout. It's working, it's not begging. I hugely bind to the premise of The Big Issue, editorial and charitably, but I've barely read it over the last 18 months because of the pandemic. The on-street sales are a lifeline for the big issue vendors, but the streets have been emptied, they've been deserted of people. How have you coped?

Well, I wish you had told me a few months ago, Paul, that you were having trouble getting it cause I could have told you all about how you can access it and then carry on enjoying it and helping. It came last March as it did for so many people in the world that the shock of COVID changed everything. And it changed everything immediately, radically and it caused an existential crisis within The Big Issue. I remember on a particular March day, I had taken my dog Toasty to the vet, he had a problem that he needed to get sorted out. And I was driving by from the vet and John Bird, our boss, the founder of The Big Issue rang and John doesn't tend to ring when it's around press day. And he doesn't interfere in the day-to-day business of the magazine. So I thought this is a little out of character. We knew we were going to have to go into lockdown and he said, look, we're going to have to pull the magazine. We can't print. It's not safe for the vendors in the street. They are at risk because of COVID, we're going to have to remove it. We'd been talking about what was coming, but that was when it becomes as radical and as in the moment, as I thought, good Lord, what am I going to do? So we pulled it. The printer said, well, you gotta print X number of thousand to make sure that the press keeps going. So we did that and I pulled into the car park at Sainsbury's, and I thought in that moment, this is it. This, this could be it. The magazine had been around for nearly 30 years. We calculated a couple of years ago that if you put every single Big Issue that had been sold, not printed, sold in Britain on top of each other, it would reach past the International Space Station. So that is a vast volume. And that's a vast amount of income for people with nothing, but there in that moment, you think, what are we going to do? And over that weekend, there were a lot of phone calls, a lot of emails, a lot of tough questions. And we decided we were going to do something. We were going to make this work. And we started coming up with radical changes to how we operate it. Because as you pointed out, The Big Issue is on the streets. It is a street magazine, it is for people who either are homeless or at risk of homelessness, whether they are rough sleeping or in dangerous positions or non-permanent positions. Yet if they've got no means to get to the street, what's it for? So we thought, right, this is what we're going to do. We're going to find a way to get into retail. We've never sold The Big Issue in shops. So in we went to the shops, we're going to set up subscriptions. Big Issue had a small amount of subscriptions, but never really engaged in that. And you know, it's hard to build a subscription base from relative low numbers. But we did that in a matter of weeks, we got up to 10,000. We said, right, we're going to do some

fundraising. We're going to encourage people who want to help. And then we're going to use that money. And we're going to redistribute that money to our vendors who can't earn at the moment. And within a period of time, we'd raised enough to distribute through food vouchers, money, cash, over a million to vendors, which it's still that number went up, but when we hit a million, I thought this is remarkable because we stood on the cusp of collapse. We could have soared, or we could have crashed in the rocks beneath the cliff. And we soared. And we were able to do that because people got behind us. The Big Issue means a great deal to people, you mentioned, it's an iconic brand, but there's a real, beautiful human connection that people have with The Big Issue. And so we were able to encourage people to support us so we could support our vendors. And that's what we did, Paul, for a number of months. Also, just to add an extra wrinkle here, of course, people would then within the magazine had to work from home. So from an office and our magazine, the editorial is produced in Glasgow. That's where our base is for the whole of the UK. We have a couple of offices. We have some stuff in London, but the majority are in Glasgow. So suddenly from being together, not just that we have to change the content because some of the content wasn't really there or relevant. So you've got all these challenges all at once, hammering in at you. And everybody stood up and said, right, we're going to do it. We are going to make this work. And we're going to be here when the thing ends, however that presents itself, because those people need us. And that is what we did.

It's almost like staring into the abyss, isn't it? You didn't foresee this coming. And yet there you are wondering whether you'll even survive.

Oh, yes. That's exactly what it's like, because The Big Issue is successful because people work hard on it. Sometimes I feel as though it's a bit like one of those wild west towns from an old film that it looks like there's a lot there, but if you push behind it it's a front. And what I mean by that, it's not that I'm making little of it. I'm making the point that very few people make this brand very big and they do it and they're committed to it. And that commitment to it and to the vendors keeps it afloat. And a lot of that, you've got these great people working within the organization coming up with great ideas in order to keep it going. It was a very scary time. And let me just one other thing. And I know I'm rabbiting on a wee bit here. When we started doing the subscription with proper focus, we did it very quickly. And the day people started getting the magazine, within maybe two weeks of lockdown and they started getting it through the door and it happened. And I remember sitting, looking at my screen and people started tweeting that they got their magazine, and then others started a conversation. And this became this incredible flood of people. And it was one of the most emotional moments that I've had in my time at The Big Issue, because I just thought, okay, then we're here, we are here. We are going to do this just in this growth of joy from people getting their magazines through the door.

You came up with the frankly innovative strategy for subscriptions during the pandemic and stocking in retailers. I did continue to read the magazine. I used to buy it in Waitrose.

Yes, the magazine's raison d'etre was being on the street. So the idea of going into the shop to sell is anathema to the makeup of the magazine. But when you're faced with the struggle to survive, you find that you will try things. And so ideas came that perhaps hadn't been entertained before, or have been entertained and said, no we can't do it. There was none of that. It was just right. Let's try it. Let's do that. Give them a ring. Who do you know there, right? He knows somebody there, gets him to ring them. And so you get into like this. Another thing that we did that also helped, I think was we talked for a long time about how, if people were to subscribe to the magazine, how they could make sure money went to their individual vendor, essentially they're subscribing from them. And we'd never quite resolved that. But we resolved that quickly when we were in lockdown. And so we had a map online and said, right, if you click and find your vendor, you can make sure that you subscribe or that the money from the sale goes to your vendor during this period. So we had that as well. We just kept coming up with these novel ideas. We had a raffle, you know, like some kind of school fete. We had a raffle, but the raffle was a bit different because during the period of being editor, one of the great joys of Big Issue is that when we ask people for things or to be involved, they tend to say yes. And over time you build good contacts. And the people always say, look, I love the Big Issue, whatever I can do to help just ask. So I asked everybody, everybody. And so we had things like a screenwriting masterclass, we had Sergio from Kasabian with guitar lessons. We had a whole host of actors with something else, you know, we had this incredible collection of talent, giving their time for the Big Issue for people to enter a raffle. So we just kept coming up more and more in order to keep us afloat.

You also launched the campaign to try and prevent an avalanche of new homeless people as a result of the pandemic.

That came, the first part of that, I should say, came as the first lockdown ended. We had seen, and we'd worked out that there was a hidden homeless potential epidemic that people who had previously been comfortable to a degree within their lives, might not have massive savings, their job might not pay vast amounts of money, but they were managing to keep their families afloat. They were keeping homes, a roof over their head, running their car. They were to a degree the readers of The Big Issue, but because of furlough, because of lockdown, because jobs were so uncertain, their incomes have been sliced. And we knew that if they fell into debt associated with rent, or they just couldn't get back into the workforce, there was a real potential for them to become the next new different kind of homeless people. People who, there is a cliched version of a homeless person is and it's not them. So we knew that that's where it was going to be. We had to work to help them. We put together a plan to have like-minded organizations, either help them stay out of debt, meet their debt requirements, or they just work. And so we started that campaign. We built a job, a part of the site was the jobs board. So people could get along there. We had a tool kit for people to search for jobs. And now it's grown into something else. We've called it, The Stop Mass Homelessness Campaign. And that is really about finding a way to deal with this crisis before it happens. We feel that this autumn could be very hard for an awful lot of people, again, because debt has grown when they can't meet rent repayment or mortgage repayment. If it's because the job that they had isn't there anymore, and they're going to something that's on a smaller salary, we want to do

something to help. So that's where The Big Issue is now positioning. That's where we're positioning ourselves as a campaigning organization.

Do you think he's going to get worse? In other words, that more people are going to need you than ever?

The truth is we don't know. We fear that more people will need The Big Issue and other parts of that kind of safety net. We fear that not just a person who sold The Big Issue before, but a person who's never sold The Big Issue is going to need it. But we don't know the full extent of that. You know, every week there's a changing picture in the jobs market, and every week there's a changing picture in the housing market, however, we want to be ready. If we can prevent that happening, it's much better than watching it happen, then trying to fix it afterwards. So we're working on not necessarily the worst case scenario, but with a dose of realism, that things are not going to be easy for an awful lot of people, particularly when furlough finishes.

The magazine is famous for its A-list cover interviews. I read when doing some research for this podcast that you said that getting an interview with The Pope was a lot easier than getting Marcus Rushford. Can you tell us the process of how you actually put the magazine together? Who were you still hoping to get? Do the big names come to you first? Do you go to them? I know that putting the cat on the cover is the most popular seller.

Yeah. The streetcat Bob. I'll start with streetcat Bob. And then I'll work back through your questions. He, in case any of your listeners are unaware, he was a, and he became this pin up cat. He was a companion of a guy called James Bowen who maybe a decade ago or less had sold The Big Issue around Covent Garden and then was also a busker for a time. And people recognised that this cat was always with him and behaved in ways that cats don't and would sit around and a particular publisher thought, this is an interesting story. So she spoke to James and asked him to tell his story, and that story became 'A Streetcat Named Bob' because James had homeless issues, he had addiction issues. And he said that the cat had helped him overcome all of this. And as it turned out in a way that was true because the cat, the success of that book helped him move into a different kind of life. And when the book was published, we knew we wanted to tell the story because The Big Issue was a big, big part of the story. And The Big Issue remains a big part of James' life. So we put a Streetcat Bob on the cover, and it just went like the clappers. It was hard to keep up with the demands and that. So as you might imagine, we knew we were onto a winner here. So the cat became a cover star on numerous occasions over the last four to five years.

Total Legend.

He died sadly, last year, maybe the year before last. The cat won't be on the cover quite so much anymore. But he is remembered very fondly by all of us and by an awful lot of readers as well. So yes, the cat has been a part of The Big Issue's

success over the last number of years. In terms of the other things, do people come to us? Yes, they do. They come to us and they know that The Big Issue isn't there to stitch people up. We have got particular interviews that we like to do, like A Letter To My Younger Self interview, which has been running for over 10 years. And it became a successful book. We're doing another book, a paperback version of that this Christmas. And there's another one then coming, another Letter To My Younger Self for Christmas 2022. So people come, they want to be in that. Younger Self has had everybody from Desmond Tutu to Paul McCartney, to hosts of people that you might mention, you may think of and when we interview people, we do try and get into something that others don't get into. And I think because of who The Big Issue is, people trust us. So we do tend to open a tap that others can't. In terms of covers, that doesn't mean that they always get on the cover, because I think the easiest thing in the world is just to stick a big face of somebody famous on the cover and keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best. And that's not really what we're about. And I want the covers, when we're doing a cover to say something, to mean something, it has to work on the street. It has to work from a distance. Sometimes our covers are a little more simplistic than others. We don't follow normal magazine tropes and what other standardised retail mags will do, because ours have to work in a particular way. They have to look similar but different every week, so that if a vendor has a passing trade, that somebody knows it's not the same one. I want us as a title to feel as though it means something, we have something to say. That's not to say that every now and again, there won't be a famous person on the cover, but at least when they're there, we are asking something of them that perhaps others aren't. And to take it back to the Marcus Rashford question, I think as me being slightly tongue in cheek with that, The Pope interview, it was colleagues of ours. We were working with them from the Netherlands who had links to the Vatican. And so that was a relatively smooth operation to get to The Pope, to get the interview. Marcus Rashford sort of grew to become this, if I had to plot and put together the ideal, Big Issue cover star in terms of somebody who's famous, has got a real social conscience, who uses their fame to try and affect positive change, who uses their fame to try and make change within government and I know that will help shift magazines, Rashford would kind of be there. So it was really important for me to get him at the end of last year also because it was coming at the end of that terrible year, for vendors. So I wanted them to have a big banker at Christmas, but Marcus Rashford is hard to get hold of. There's quite a few European games for Manchester United, just at the period we were trying to get him and it was touch and go. And when you're trying to order magazines for Christmas and work out where things are going to be, and the distribution team are saying, well, is he going to be on the cover and the editorial team are saying to me, what are we going to do? And I'm having to say, it's going to happen. Trust me, it's coming. Knowing in the back of my head, I haven't got this boy yet. What are we going to do? So it just took a little time to get the interview, and I think we got the interview on the day we were going to press. So that was quite a quick turnaround. There was something else. If that hadn't happened, obviously, Paul, I'm not going to go with a blank page, but it was important to get him to send the message as well. The Big Issue could get him because nobody else was getting him at the time.

How close have you been to a blank cover where you've been banking on something coming through and then it doesn't? Do you always have a plan B? Do you have an emergency celebrity? I mean, I could be that person if you ever can't get someone good. I could be available!

Now you put yourself forward. That is very useful. And I may look to that in the future. We don't, maybe we should. Not so much now, but in the past I had a habit of, if I didn't like the cover, I would, even on press stages, bin it. Say that's not working. An old editor once said to me, you can keep working it as long as you want, but if it's not working, it's not working. And it's true. Experience will tell you instinct, your gut, that that cover that you're trying to put together. That is just not the right cover. And sometimes you will in the rare case, and you will go with it because you need to get something to the print. But I think sometimes it is bold, foolhardy, brave, whichever way you want to describe it, move to say, no, forget that that's not who we are, that cover doesn't work. We're going with something else. And it does cause slight difficulty with the team and they think oh God we've been working for a number, could be weeks to get this together and now this fellows just binned it, but we will find something else. We always find something else. You know, it's The Big Issue. We will be out on the street come what may. I don't like doing that. I think that's not necessarily a great way to operate, but I am prepared to do that if I feel that the outcome will be better than the current situation.

I'm fascinated by what The Big Issue is. Because if you read The Times you're slightly right of center, if you read the Telegraph you're older and slightly further right of center, The Guardian is obviously left-leaning. What are The Big Issue readers? Obviously they have a desire to help homeless people, but that aside, what else do they have in common? How do you communicate with them? How do you perfect the product as it were? Is it one of those things that people are so in love with what you're trying to do and what to help that they almost don't pay attention to the magazine and editorial? Do you get that people want to buy the big issue and would do so even if it wasn't sold by homeless people?

Paul you've asked, I think about six really good questions that I ask myself frequently as well. So I will try and untangle them and answer them as we go along. I'll start with the last one. Do people buy it regardless of the product? Yes. Some do. It is a truth and a reality that for some people, the medium is the message. The content within is secondary to them feeling as though they're helping an individual vendor. So there will be regulars, there's no real demographic for them. Except anecdotally, vendors will tell me that some of them may be a little older and they are not necessarily interested in the content of the magazine. They just want to help that vendor. So they'll show up when they're doing their weekly shop, outside Morrisons. And they'll say, how are you doing? Good to see you, thanks for the magazines and here's your weekly money. There's a percentage like that. And I have to accept that. Now as an editor, obviously you want people to engage with your product, but they won't always do that. However, one thing is clear and we've done a few reader surveys over the time. Unlike a lot of other publications, we've found that social media is a boom for

learning what our readers really like, what they feel and how they react. And reader surveys over time, it's made me think differently about how we put together the magazine. So standard magazines are siloed. You know, it may be, you're a woman in your late twenties who has an interest in fashion, but also in some social affairs, you might go to Grazia. You could be a younger guy, perhaps 18 to 25, you're interested in film, you go to Empire, whatever it is, there are these silos. The Big Issue can't operate in a silo system like that because A, we have to attract anybody we can on the street, we have to sell magazines and B, we have a diverse range of things that go on the cover. So what I did was rather than have a vertical silo system, I had a horizontal response. And within that horizontal response, that is essentially people who are interested in things. So our readers are socially minded. They want to feel as though they're engaging and making the world a better place. They want to learn perhaps a bit about things that they won't get in other places. They won't necessarily go to The Economist for it. They won't necessarily go to New Statesman for it, but they will have or Spectator, but they will have enough of it in The Big Issue to help them feel as though they're in a wider news world. I don't mean breaking news. I mean an analysis of what was going on, but the key thing that unites them, whether they're in their late teens or in their early eighties, is that they are interested in the world and want to make change. So that is where our content comes from. That is why we can equally carry in an interview with Benedict Cumberbatch. But that interview of Benedict Cumberbatch is him showing some level of political awareness or engagement or annoyance levels of poverty or whatever it is, as we can from, with an essay from a Nobel economist, who's dealing with the same things, interesting people saying interesting things. And that speaks to our readers. So that deals with that aspect. And that allows us to have a very broad palette when it comes to who we can bring in. The magazine is pretty structured, I'm a simple man, it's front, middle and back. But within that, there's this flexibility to do certain things. And I guess we haven't even started talking about what we're trying to do digitally yet, because that's a whole other development. But yes, how do we keep that going? How do we keep looking at where the demographic is? We ask people questions. We see which pieces they react to on social media. We understand that various platforms have a different demographic themselves. So we will use that to market or to promote the content we have. I can tell by reader's responses to letters, we use both old fashioned means of people communicating with us. We invite people. This idea of community is important. The Big Issue isn't the kind of stand-alone proclamation from the top of the mountain, it is a community of like-minded souls. Whether you're writing editorially, you're reading it, whether you're buying it or selling it, who share a particular intention to make the world better.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but if I was asked to define it, there does seem to be a Big Issue way of covering things and certain stories that resonate with readers. As I say, I'm a regular reader. I was reading the current issue about that poor gentleman who was working for UberEats and got sacked by algorithm. I felt a real sense of injustice there because it doesn't just seem to be in UberEats' interest to have done that. The whole thing just seems ridiculous. And yeah, I can also see it from that poor chap's point of view who's there to stand up for people. He's one ladder away really from homelessness and he's hard working. And yet he seemed to just can't get a break.

Yeah. I mean, that is an interesting one to choose because I do think that that burning sense of injustice that metallic tang that you get on your tongue sometimes when you know that somebody through no fault of their own is in a ridiculous situation, whether it is because of some on guide at hand of a computer, or indeed the guide at hand of somebody who's looking to line their own pocket. I do try to get something of that into the magazine. We do try to get something of that online, but not just, I think the important thing here is that it isn't just to do that because, you know, just to do that, it's to do that with the sense of, what can be done? What is the next step? Where can I go to do something about it? Where can I go to become engaged? Where can I go to become an activist? Where can I go to either help that person or to do something similar? So there has to be that it's like call and response, I suppose, that we will illustrate the issue. And then I hope, show some way that something can be done about it.

You mentioned earlier there about the digital proposition. I'd love to explore that because building on the wider existential question, which is what is The Big Issue about, what is it about digitally?

I remember when I began at The Big Issue, even then, and this is going back a decade or so, maybe a little more. The debate then was about whether there should be a website at all. You know, because there was a circular conversation about whether or not it would consume the content that would then mean that the vendors couldn't make anything. Why would people pay for something you could get for free? Which I suppose a question a lot of publishers have been grappling with and some more successfully than others have found resolutions. But the truth is that clearly you can't exist unless you exist online. And The Big Issue, when we are successful paper product, and since we've returned to the streets, we're doing okay, we're not doing as well as we did previously, the streets are a little more empty there, perhaps fewer vendors than there were, it's harder to sell, it's a much more cashless environment now and while a lot of our vendors take card payments, which we've been working on for some time, a lot still don't. So it's harder for them. So therefore you can't rely on the paper the way you did even two, three years ago, we knew that there was a reckoning coming, but perhaps we hadn't caught up quickly enough to do something about it. So then to your question, what is The Big Issue online? Well we went through a bit of soul searching on that as well. Initially during the lockdown period, it was a means of selling subscriptions. It was a hook, get them in, but it can't be just that, you know, it can't exist just like. One of the good things that happened. One of the positive things that happened was that a guy called Paul Cheal came in as chief exec and he had a lot to do with not just stabilising the ship, but getting us ready for what came next. And he wanted us to think very hard about what the digital output was. So we've come up with a plan, there's particular editorial pillars that we are going to, we hope to become not just leaders, we want people to come to us first, if they want the news on these particular subjects. We'll use that to build up to a certain level of readers and uniques, and those things that you need to become a viable digital product. And we will use that then to increase the income for The Big Issue and also to sell more magazines or encourage people to get to the magazine. There's a secondary bit as well that we're working on, called the Breakthrough Project in which we're looking to train people from marginalized, difficult communities

who wouldn't otherwise have come into the industry. And they will produce particular sorts of content. They're younger, and it'll be very much their voice and their focus, we will use The Big Issue platform for that. But we also want to find a way to have much more synergy between online and in magazines. At the minute they're both successful in their way, but we'd need to grow the digital platform much more. And I need to make sure, and we're working on this at the moment, that the content that we produce online, that it can carry in the mag, even though it is essentially news and we're not a news magazine really anymore, but there's enough means to change it enough to make it work for the magazine as well, and vice versa from magazine to online. So we've got a really good digital editor who's come in and is overseeing a whole overhaul of the process, because the truth is this, we have to have other means, we have to have other platforms. We have to have other ways to get The Big Issue out there to get The Big Issue message out there until our opportunity for people who need opportunity in society.

People have a really strong personal relationship with their street vendors. How has that changed in lockdown other than the fact that they haven't been able to buy from them? I know for example, that I've seen the adverts that when you subscribe, you can assign a cut of the money to an individual street vendor. Have you tried selling copies on the street as well yourself?

I have tried selling and it is hard. It's really, really hard. And I would encourage anybody who thinks that it is an easy thing to do to get in touch with me and I could get them a tabard and they can go out in the street for an hour or two and see what it's like. I went out to do it in the center of London. So it was pretty busy, with my old mate, Colin Murray who you mentioned, we set up Blank magazine many years ago. He did it as well. And he said that the tabard was like an invisibility cloak. To a degree that is what it's like. You think here I am somebody who's got confidence in myself, out on the street. But as soon as I put this thing on, people don't want to see me. They don't want to stop. They don't want to look. So you have to overcome that. As soon as you put it on, people make judgments about you. They decide that they understand how you've come to be in the position you're in that you're selling The Big Issue. You've got that to overcome. And then people get very, not everybody obviously, but a number of people get very high and mighty and think that they then have a right to judge and to bring personal abuse, maybe physical abuse towards the person wearing it. A lot of our vendors suffer through this. And when we obviously try to help and make sure that we can do something about that. So wearing the tabard. It's hard. There's a lot of people that have personal, strong relationships with vendors, and will look out for them if the vendor isn't there for a week or two, will get in touch and say, where's my vendor. You know, it's as close as that. And they become parts of the social fabric in towns and villages and cities across Britain. They have been for a generation, but that doesn't mean it's easy to sell because you still, you know, vendors still need to shift the number of copies a week and they can't all be too regular. So they have to find a way to do it. And that comes back to my point from earlier. I have to make sure that the cover is strong enough that even with the invisibility cloak on, even with that, I can make something in the cover that makes people stop for a second, for a couple of seconds, for a fraction of a second. If I can do that, chances are I've got them. And then they'll come, they'll engage with the

vendor, they'll buy the magazine. And we'll start a new journey with the new person. During lockdown of course it was really, really terrible. Why were helping vendors as much as we could and the frontline Big Issue staff were remarkable really. While the vendors went in the street, they were communicating with them as much as they could, whether they were ringing them or finding out where they were going to visit them, texting, whatever way they could do just to keep their spirits up because they were telling us that loneliness was a big factor. And so we did a few things. One, we come up with this thing called The Big Miss You. It's a very simple podcast. We thought we can't have people meet the vendors. We'll do it virtually. And it was called The Virtual Street Corner. So we got vendors to record messages for their customers. And then we got in touch with customers and had them record messages for the vendors. And we put it together into this podcast, bit rough and ready, but really, really emotional, that was one thing we did. The other, we find out things that they needed that were beyond money, or supermarket vouchers. There was a woman who sold The Big Issue because she had an accident at work and it left her with real severe movement problems. But you found that being outside, being in the air, moving around, helped her, she really liked it, and it was good for her mental health as well. When that was taken away, disability was really hammering. And she couldn't move. One of the frontline staff came up with the idea of getting her a rowing machine, in the accommodation she was in. So they sourced it and The Big Issue bought a rowing machine, delivered it to this woman. She said it saved her during lockdown. So these things that The Big Issue does that aren't always seen and known are vital to people who otherwise would be without. And the emotional connection that vendors have with customers and with strangers, let's be honest sometimes strangers are great. It's as valuable as the financial aspect, the financial aspect obviously keeps people going. You can't live on air and goodwill, but the emotional connection allows for particularly vulnerable people is remarkable.

How does one become editor of The Big Issue? I mean, you came to The Big Issue from the Scottish edition and then became nationwide editor. What was the root? Did you always envisage that you might end up here? Did you always admire the title? Tell us about your career.

I started out in local newspapers in Northern Ireland. When I was pretty young, the Daily Mirror was a paper that came into the house, and I loved football reports in it because I was a big football fan when I was younger, I still am but that was everything then. And I discovered that the blokes who are writing football reports get paid for it. And I thought, what a way to make a living. I came from a family who were not professional. My father's a barman. My mother was a hairdresser and then a hospital cleaner. My uncles were farmers, electricians, plumbers, that sort of thing. So, you know, it was trade or semi-skilled. And I discovered that you could get paid money, cash money in your hand for going to football matches and writing about it. And I thought, if I'm not going to play professionally, then maybe I could do that. So that was my initial thought. I want to do this. And growing up in Northern Ireland in the seventies and eighties. It's a tricky time. Well, you follow the news. We certainly followed the news within my family very carefully. And so that idea that you would become the person who reported these important things that were happening. That also stuck with me. So as I got older, I thought I do want to be a journalist. This is the

route I want to go down. And I think it's an important thing to do. I've seen what it means to people in my own place of growing up and I want to be part of it. And then it became something else, it became about music, I loved music. I read The NME and Melody Maker, and bands didn't come to Northern Ireland really. They couldn't get insurance, they were scared, who knows. They wouldn't come. So I'd read the ads in the back of The NME thinking they were mystical places. And I'm sure I've said this before that Northampton Roadmender, which subsequently I went to when I was working in The NME, discovered it wasn't quite the mythical place that I thought it was when I was growing up. But these sorts of places, they sing out to you. So I then wanted to work in the music press. And I started out in local papers. I worked in The Fermanagh Herald, which is way down at the bottom of Northern Ireland. And I started as just a local club reporter there doing all the stuff that reporters do. There's a new teacher in a school. You better go and speak to the headmasters. You know, these kinds of things, nothing glamorous, then at back court reporting so you learn all about that. Colin Murray and I knew each other. I was working as a barman in Limelight. He was a DJ and we'd said, right, we're going to do this. We're going to put this magazine together, put Northern Ireland music properly on the map. I'd recently graduated. I was maybe 23. He was maybe 20. We had no idea what we were doing, but we found a way to get money. And we put this thing together and it was oddly successful in its own little way. It taught us ever since really, Colin is a genius. Really. I admire him incredibly, and we worked out ways to make this magazine work. And we worked out things that I still use now, ways of dealing with freelancers, I had to work out how to speak to the printer, or what paper stock to order, all these kinds of things that somebody who's very, very young and new and the trade, you don't think you're going to have to do. But anyway, we did. A couple of other things happened. We both went to London. I went to The NME, and I was there for years. Then there was a period back in Northern Ireland, I was working for a whole set of different papers, writing for whoever needed. And I got asked to be launch editor or for another magazine called Brat. And at that point, the chief exec of The Big Issue had seen it and asked me if I'd come over as deputy editor of the Scottish edition first, because The Big Issue use to have regional additions, there's a Welsh, Scottish, Southwest, the English, each have their own editors, which when you think about it, given the way the industry is now, that that was mad. All those places competing for content and advertising with all the salaries. But that's how it was. So I started, as I say, in the Scottish edition as deputy then became editor. And then when the company said, look, we got to think about how we're doing this. I said, national title. Then I took over as national editor. So, it took a little while to get there, but each step over the last 20, 25 years, I've been doing something that's taught me well for what was going to come.

What type of journalist did you want to be at the beginning?

I wanted to be a football reporter. And then I wanted to be a news reporter, quite a serious news reporter then a music journalist. And then I didn't think about it then. I just knew that I wanted to be a journalist, you know? And I think the thing with working in local papers, which when I'm looking for staff I'm favorable towards people who've done time in local papers and got their experience there. It teaches you to lose some of your vanity. Cause you just have to do everything. It teaches you pace,

a good local paper, you'll have to turn around quickly. It teaches you how to build up good connections and a good contact book. Even if it's on a small scale, it shows you how to build it. And so I think going through that process was a great value to me. You just got to get your head down and do it. I've said when I do some talks with students about journalism and where they're going with it and what comes next, and I've said so many times and I will always say it. Journalism is not a profession. It is not a profession. It's not something like surgery or engineering or any of these things that you spend time and you build a bank of knowledge up and then you go and apply it. Journalism is a trade, you learn a bit, you've got hopefully some talent and some ability. And then over time you learn more and you apply that as you go and you build your way of working in that way. You're a tradesperson. And I like that. I think it's important that people recognize that. And don't think that it's a kind of specialized profession. It's not.

What advice would you give to someone that's an aspiring journalist starting out in their career? Would you try and dissuade them from doing it? I mean, newsrooms are empty these days. There are fewer jobs than ever. Is it more difficult to get into journalism if you're starting out in that first run of the ladder? Or is it easy because you've got more opportunity to make a name for yourself with podcasting and blogging and so on?

I think if you, if you really want to do it and you've got an ability, I could tell pretty quickly with somebody, whether they've got it, that they can get through to it. I mean, journalism doesn't just mean being in a newsroom and being a news reporter. I think it's useful if everybody does that at some point, but that's not the be-all and end-all. Not everybody has to do that. It is difficult to get into journalism. It's more difficult now, I think, than it was for me. When Colin and I were starting you know, I found my way to the Fermanagh Herald. Although having said that, I was living in Belfast. I was taking a 90 minute bus every day, each way to get to this work. So I guess you have to accept that when you're starting at the bottom, make sacrifices, take the work. But at least there was something there were opportunities in the local press, there were opportunities in the national press. If you did the job, you would get paid for it. There was no way that you were going to be told, no, this is just you gaining an experience. This is good for your profile. None of that nonsense, you do a job, you get paid. But one of the reasons why I'm really committed to finding a way to bring through a generation of disadvantaged kids or even just working class kids, is that I don't want the trade to be full of people who are there because they can afford to be there. You know, people don't have money behind them. We've got to give them money. We've got to put money in front of them to bring them in. So I want to make sure that I am involved in any organizations and schemes that help promote that. The thing that we're doing with the Breakthrough Project and Big Issue is one of the most exciting things that I've been involved with in a number of years. And I know that there's people out there who will never have thought of journalism, but who are potentially brilliant. And I want to find them and I want to help them. And I want to tell them that you don't have to go down this route that perhaps school has told you you have to, your family has told you you have to, there is another way. So I wouldn't discourage people per se, from going into journalism, I would let them be aware of the difficulties, the salary potential that isn't perhaps what it used to be, but the world needs

journalists. It needs them whether it's somebody who's reviewing Hi-Fi or somebody who is talking about what's happening in Afghanistan, there needs to be somebody who can tell the truth and they can find an articulate, interesting way to tell that truth.

I mean, you didn't come from a media family background. You've worked your way up the ladder haven't you by local titles. You've grafted to where you are. You're passionate about expanding opportunities for people to get into journalism, though. How can they increase their opportunities?

Publishers need to take some responsibility here. And I feel a bit sorry for some newspapers, because when it's a conglomerate who owns a whole host of papers and all they look at is the bottom line. They don't care whether they're bringing through young talent or not. But I think some publishers do need to stand up and take responsibility because if they keep that going, if they keep that race to the bottom going. They're not going to bring enough people through. And what we'll be left with is just major publishers with particular political views, bringing a few people through. Whereas I want to see it on a much wider scale. I think we all have a responsibility and to take that responsibility seriously and not just to pay lip service to it, but to take it seriously, to bring people through, particularly those who haven't otherwise got an opportunity to go through. There is no easy solution to it. There is no easy answer, but I think it needs people at a senior level to stand up and say, alright, we're going to find some money to do this, and we're going to train people. And one thing I really want to do is that when they come through our program, The Big Issue program, which I hope once we start this year, it will run for a number of years for many years, is that when people come out, they will have two things. One, they will have a great deal of really useful experience to take to the next potential job. That's if we can't find them work in The Big Issue, by the way, they'll also be paid proper money. We're not getting people in on some small amount, I want them paid properly. They will be paid properly for the work they're doing. And the second thing I think is that over years, over time, people will say, ah, they've got that Big Issue qualification. That's a real mark of quality and importance that will grow and become something else. And I think seniors in different publishing houses should have some of that to them as well and they're coming out of our place. We have got pride in how we have created this.

Do you think homelessness ultimately will be solved within a generation or so, is it just a lack of political will? Is this something that 20 years from now will marvel that it was even a problem and it's obviously going to be solved? Or is it an endemic problem in society? Is it that governments of all political persuasions just don't care enough? I'm involved in prison reform and reducing recidivism and parts of the problem is that society just doesn't care about prisoners enough. They actually don't want to rehabilitate burglars because they've got a vengeance mentality. You mentioned people being rude to street vendors and seeing them as invisible, which in a sense is even worse. Is it just that people aren't very nice and that's why it can't be solved? And there's just not enough nice people out there?

I don't think it is. I think homelessness is not one thing. That's the first thing we say with this, rough sleeping, street homelessness is one aspect of homelessness and it's the most visible one. That's the thing that you see in your towns and your centers, that I believe could be fixed at the drop of a hat really quickly. It happened when COVID hit, the government said everybody in, and they did. They got them all in. Now it was easier because hotels and other places weren't being used. So people could be housed but with a relatively small amount of money, they got people off the streets. And there was a great number of those people who perhaps had said, well, I'll never get off the streets, but suddenly thought, well, hold on. I don't have to live with a substance abuse problem. I don't have to deal with these mental health problems on my own. There is another way, that was a massive positive thing. While I am hard on this government for a host of things, that they should be applauded for because that was a very, very good initiative. However, homelessness is not just that, you know, we've talked a little about what the big issue is trying to do to avoid mass homelessness coming from those who aren't homeless or have never experienced homelessness. But there's also another side that people who are in non-permanent accommodation, whether they're sofa surfing, or they are kids who are coming out of care and they haven't got any were permanent and they're on waiting lists and they could fall into real extreme poverty. Or as you say, prisoners who were ready to rehabilitate, but there's no accomodation for them. So there's all aspects to it. I think if you really wanted to end it and not just rough sleeping, you need to get back to the base of it societally, what drives poverty? What makes people have nothing? What are the structural inequalities that are preventing people from excelling that are preventing people from feeling human in the world that needs to be addressed and it needs to be addressed properly and not just lip service, a couple of million thrown here and there. Do people care enough? Well, I think people care, it's hard to quantify that kind of thing. And I think that frequently, it's easy to say people don't and we can look at how governments make people turn on refugees or the other different parts of the community and say, well, it's their fault. Look at them, they're taken from your mouth what should be yours. That's another set of particular leaders and politicians who I rail against and make sure that we hold up on the challenge within The Big Issue. But I think there are a great deal of people who want to do good. I think they're not, and again I want to be careful here, because I don't mean do good in that kind of wet phrase and don't really achieve any change. I mean, there are people who want the world to be better for everybody who believe that there is a way to do it. And if they're given an opportunity and they're showing how they can do it, I think they will engage. Of course, we're not going to come to a conclusion here that solves everything. But in short, rough sleeping can be solved quickly. Structural problems driving poverty can be dealt with if we really get a hold of them. And we need to prevent people from falling from a place where they're not in homelessness to a place where they are.

Let's talk about John for a second. I've known John for many years; he's a legend. And he's a friend of mine, as you know, he's a force of nature. What advice did he give you when you started out as editor? What's your relationship like with him? I mean, the guy is just a marvel.

I thought about this, I was trying to think what advice he gave me. And he's not the sort of person who will settle on some kind of t-shirt slogan as the way to go, you know, here's your advice. It isn't like that, John is an inspirational character. He fills a room when he enters a room, he's one of those rare people who people are drawn to. One of John's great assets, he won't tell a lie. He just tells the truth. And it sometimes upsets people. It certainly inspires others, but he, because of that, I think things are clearer. You know, he'll just tell it. And it's not one of those people who says, you know, what you see is what you get. It's not done as a performative thing. It's just the way he is. We share an interest in ecclesiastical architecture, John and I and so less so now but we used to have meetings in different cathedral cities around Britain, which that's a joyous thing to be able to do. So once a year, maybe once every nine months would say, we're going to meet in Durham or we're gonna meet in Litchfield or we're going to meet in Lincoln or wherever it was. We'd go along independently, and would wander around the cathedral. We'll each take it and we'll take our notes or pictures or whatever we're going to do. And then we'd meet. And we would discuss the direction of travel for The Big Issue. And John would have some ideas and I'd have some ideas and we'd come to some kind of conclusion after it. It wasn't that he would be absolutely prescriptive that this is how I want my title to be. He would have particular areas that he'd like covered, but it doesn't go beyond that. So I think as a boss, as a chief, as a proprietor, the intention is always to fight poverty is to find ways to get people out of poverty and to prevent people getting into poverty. And I think that beacon, that bright light, that guide is what we try to bring into The Big Issue, but not all the time in every article, but as a guiding principle. And so I think if anything, I can't think that he did give me any advice. One thing he did say was I should stop smoking.

But all cool people smoke. If you sort of lean nonchalantly against a brick wall smoking, that looks cool. That's how you attract the ladies.

Maybe that's where I'm going wrong. Cause I haven't smoked in over 10 years. So perhaps that's my problem.

Yeah, you need to start smoking again. John's wrong on that. Last question then Paul, what's next?

Well, The Big Issue is ever changing as society is ever changing. I suppose you could argue that the magazine, like a lot of magazines, has a very simple, straightforward level as words and pictures on a page and you go from there, but those words and pictures in the page have to mean something, have to say something. So we were changing the way that the magazine looks and we're undergoing quite a radical redesign. It's coming up to the 30th anniversary of The Big Issue, that time in 1991, when John Bird and Gordon Roddick launched it and society is as we've discussed a bit changing and I wanted the magazine to feel a bit more impactful. So you will see some radical shifts within the look of it. And some of the content. We're also relaunching the website at the start of September, again, to meet the challenges of trying to bring new readers in and how that will then translate into readers for the magazine. So within the output part of The Big Issue within digital and

paper, there's two very, very big changes we're hiring or trying to encourage a new generation and new voice to come through both in Breakthrough and other places. There's other aspects of The Big Issue that's about offering opportunity, whether there's a plan for an e-bikes scheme, that will be giving job opportunities to people in particular towns and cities to manage that e-bikes scheme who perhaps wouldn't have jobs and opportunities and other places, we're working on the campaigns. There's a number of different things that we're doing because during the lockdown, I suppose the thing that we learned was that people need The Big Issue. People really love The Big Issue. It means something to them. And we want to make sure that that just carries on, The Big Issue will exist as a street paper, but it has to become bigger. The Big Issue brand, The Big Issue organisation, The Big Issue opportunity has to grow. And that is where we're going to go in the next year, five years, who knows for how much, longer/ 30 years is a long time for a publication to exist, who knows what people thought was, how long it was going to exist when it kicked off in September, 1991, yet here we are, a legacy news and entertainment magazine. The next 30 years that next iteration will build on all the successes that the magazine has had so that the company, so the organisation is able to do an awful lot more for a lot more people.

Well, Paul, you're an absolute legend. The magazine you edit is fantastic in its own right. But it's also changing society for the better. I'm an absolute, huge admirer of what you're doing. I wish you very best of luck for the future. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Well, thank you for inviting me to do this. It has been a pleasure speaking to you, Paul, you're very, very kind and generous with your time.