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DEATH OF AN ORDINARY SALESMAN

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Introduction

Ralph Millward aged 41 was found dead on Friday 8 May 2009, near Marks and Spencer in Westbourne, an affluent suburb of Bournemouth, UK (Smith, 2009). Ralph was a seller of newspapers and although few people knew his name, hundreds were expected to attend the funeral (Bournemouth_Echo, 2009a) and it was reported in the national press that in excess of five hundred were present (The_Times, 2009). The police had to close the road to allow mourners to walk from the place of his death to the church two hundred yards away (Bailey, 2009a). So who was Ralph Millward and what made his funeral attract so many mourners?

Big Issue Newspaper

Ralph sold the Big Issue, a newspaper, which was launched in the UK in 1991. It was started by John Roddick, co-founded of Body Shop and John Bird, printer who had once been homeless himself. They made a decision to help those living on the streets to help themselves by providing them with a legitimate source of income rather than charity. Based on the New York paper Street News they launched the Big Issue, a monthly magazine in London that was sold on the street (Big_Issue, 2010a). The concept grew and the organisation now produces five regional editions in the UK on a weekly basis with sales of 18,000 per week in London's Oxford Street alone (John_Duffy, 2010). Big Issue has expanded internationally and now operates in seven countries in the world with similar newspapers operating in another thirty-seven countries (Big_Issue, 2010a). Big Issue sellers in the UK are issued initially with five (ten in London) free magazines, and after that they can buy any number of additional magazines at £0.75 which have a market price of £1.50 (Big_Issue, 2010b). Sellers are allocated a pitch, given training and can buy magazines during office hours. To be eligible, sellers must be homeless, in temporary accommodation or deemed to be vulnerable. They are required to sign a contract that stipulates that they must be drug and alcohol free, and are warned not to be aggressive towards customers. The law within England is quite specific, begging and approaching people with a view to selling (even for charity) is illegal as the case of Caroline Foxton who, she was banned from begging within Nottingham illustrates (Skelton, 2009). Advertising goods, holding a sign, voicing your wares (within reason) is within the law.

The advantage for the seller is flexible working, minimal questions asked, self-respect and a chance to communicate with society. Ralph was one of many sellers in the UK, who sold the newspaper as a way of providing money for food and other essentials. Was his background any different to the others?

Background

Little information was available to the public about Ralph's life. At the time of his death, he was living on the street, and had been for many years. It is not uncommon for people to find themselves homeless, whether through bad management or no fault of their own, and this problem has been exacerbated by the recession. Although there is a social security system operating within the UK this can be difficult to access without expert help (Varma, 2009). Many people fall through the system and need a helping hand to get back. There are hostels for the homeless, but these are often oversubscribed, and charge a small fee. Many drift between hostels and sleeping rough as the case of Simon Gravell illustrates. He used to work in the fishing industry until its collapse, then travelled the country searching for work until money for accommodation ran out. He now sells the Big Issue in Nottingham, sleeping in a hostel when he has sufficient funds, and on the streets when he does not (Nottingham_Evening_Post, 2009).

It is not the philosophy of the Big Issue to investigate or disseminate details of their sellers. They aim to offer help to those in need by providing a source of income that is accessible to all. In the long term, they hope to alleviate some of the underlying problems when the vendor articulates his problems, and seeks

help. They do provide some biographies on their website (Bigissue.com) and researching newspapers has given additional insights. Most vendors have suffered some crisis in their life, typically marriage breakdowns (Calvin_Driver, 2010, John_Duffy, 2010, Steven_Farrell, 2010), the death of a relative (Roy_Campbell, 2010) or accommodation problems (J_Birmingham, 2010, K_Brighton, 2010). Ralph's father was reported as saying that Ralph had had a long battle with alcohol (Big_Issue, 2009). It is not known what the initially caused him to turn to alcohol. Many of the sellers have had drug and/or alcohol problems (J_Birmingham, 2010, John_Duffy, 2010, Roy_Campbell, 2010, Z_Birmingham, 2010). This may not necessarily have been the cause of their homelessness but maybe a symptom of their current lifestyle. There is the poignant story of M(M_Birmingham, 2010) who has mental health problems but is living in a 'wet' house for alcoholics and being mistreated.

Of Ralph's background little was known but it emerged that he was interested in books, particularly philosophy and science fiction (Big_Issue, 2009). He was reported to swap books with at least one resident from the area, and also receive books from the church (Pendlebury, 2009). He had a father, Ken who was still alive, aged seventy-six, who was expected to attend the funeral (Bailey, 2009a), he also had a sixteen year old sister (Big_Issue, 2009). It was reported that he had largely withdrawn from the Big Issue services, no longer attending their breakfasts, but still calling in to have his hair cut once a year (Bailey, 2009a).

Starting to sell the Big Issue is not an instant solution, and some sellers like Ralph never leave the streets. A few move onto fame if not fortune. Danny May a seller who took part in a short film about homelessness was offered a part in Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes, two of his fellow actors were also taken on by agencies (Messenger_Newspapers, 2009). Some manage to progress to paid employment within the Big Issue (Calvin_Driver, 2010, Steven_Farrell, 2010), others are encouraged to undertake some training (J_Birmingham, 2010, Z_Birmingham, 2010). K (K_Brighton, 2010) the mother of a 12 year old daughter was offered employment at the supermarket outside which she had had her pitch for a number of years. Progress can be gradual but it is progress. Sean Gaskell has been selling the Big Issue for ten years given talks to schools, and is involved in fund raising. He still lived in a tent, and was getting help to move on, by getting a bank account and enrolling on a college course (Bath_Chronicle, 2009a). Ralph's story was therefore not untypical of other sellers, but was the manner of his death?

Death

Ralph did not die of natural causes, but as the result of an assault. He had multiple injuries to his head and ten broken ribs. Six teenagers were arrested, four boys and two girls with ages ranging from fourteen to eighteen. Subsequently, three of the boys were charged with murder, two aged sixteen and one aged fourteen (Smith, 2009). This assault was not an isolated incident, another seller was attacked a few days later in Bournemouth, although luckily he survived but required stitches to his lip (Big_Issue, 2009). Sleeping on the streets can be dangerous; sellers do not have the option of sleeping behind locked doors in comparative safety. The public attitude to homelessness is not always sympathetic it can lead to being called a tramp, threats and abuse (Big_Issue, 2009). In 2007 a video of a homeless man being beaten was reportedly uploaded onto YouTube, under comedy (Evening_News, 2009), a sad reflection on society. There were a number of other vendors who died in 2009, Luciano Schiano was bludgeoned then stabbed to death (Metro, 2009,) and Wayne Nicholls was found dead in an Exeter street (Fletcher, 2009), but neither received much press coverage. Stephen Pryke a seller in Ipswich was killed when he was hit by a car (Evening_Star, 2009). In this case, the press emphasis seems to have been placed on driving laws rather than the personal qualities of the seller.

One death that was widely reported in 2009 was that of Paddy McDade. He was thirty-seven years old and had been selling the Big Issue for seven years outside Marks and Spencer in the Seagate area of Dundee, Scotland (Middleton, 2009c). He was found dead on 23 January 2009 (Daily_Record, 2009) and had probably died six days earlier in his flat (Downie, 2009a). Like Ralph this again was a brutal attack with 24 knife wounds on the body (Robertson, 2009). He was described as 'a really nice guy' (Middleton, 2009c), well-known and well-liked (Middleton, 2009d) and helped 'elderly people carry heavy shopping

bags to the nearby taxi rank' (Middleton, 2009a). Again some floral tributes were laid at his pitch (Middleton, 2009b), but details were available.

Unlike Ralph Millward, the perpetrator of the crime was not found quickly. Fifty police officers were involved in the case (Downie, 2009b) and obtained witness statements from more than two hundred people (Downie, 2009c) before an arrest was reported on 7 February 2009 of a thirty-three year old man (Scottish_Daily_Record, 2009). The focus of the press in this instance was the police appeals for witness with little mention of the tributes. The only distinctive feature of Ralph's death was the age of the perpetrators, so was he an iconic figure?

Iconic figure

There seems to be little evidence to support the view that Ralph was an iconic figure. There was no mention of him in the press before his death in 2009. Very few sellers have achieved celebrity status. Some have had their biographies published on the Big Issue website (Big_Issue, 2010c), but the aim of this was to promote the work of the organisation, rather than to promote individual sellers, and most are not named to preserve their anonymity. Some sellers have received notoriety, for example Scott Lowie who after nine years working outside Rogano Oyster Bar, in Glasgow was taken inside by The Sun Newspaper, to celebrate the Big Issue's eighteenth birthday. It was interesting to note that they dressed him in a £245 Ted Baker suit plus other designer clothes before entering. Scott commented that he was unlikely to sell many copies of the Big Issue in his new suit, and was eager to change (Bendoris, 2009). His fame seems to have been short lived.

Sellers have become part of popular culture, being the subjects of poetry (Rumens, 2009), paintings (Leadbetter, 2009, Mansfield, 2009) and an award winning essay (Stourbridge_News, 2009). The press however have paid little attention to the subject of these artistic works, and many of them have remained anonymous, the emphasis has been on the talents of the producer. One advertising company made a comedy film about people who tried to avoid buying the Big Issue (Bath_Chronicle, 2009b). Evidence of a survey into charity giving, showed that nearly a quarter of people will tell a Big Issue seller that they have already brought a copy, as a reason for their failure to purchase (Clout, 2009).

In general, they seem to be part of British society, even if ignored. Their opinions have been sort on a number of factors, the success of a local Waitrose (McGinty, 2009), G20 protests (Cusick, 2009) and superstitions surrounding Friday 13th (Varma, 2009). There is a sense however that the journalist was desperate for someone to ask, rather than actively seeking the vendors' opinion as an expert.

There was evidence of the sellers having very low status within society. Readers of the Daily Mail (Daily_Mail, 2009) are advised that if they need a boost to their confidence they should try pulling 'a Big Issue seller during a downpour: he'll always stay over', the implication being that this was as low as you could get. Another writer places the Queen as one end of the scale of people to talk to and Big Issue sellers at the other (McCormick, 2009). A disgraced MP's was described as to have sunk so low in people's esteem that he would not be able to get a job selling the Big Issue (Littlejohn, 2009). A writer in the Jewish Chronicle (The_Jewish_Chronicle, 2009) compares himself unfavourably with Simon Cowell saying that whilst Simon had autograph hunters, he had a Big Issue seller speak to him. Big Issue sellers in the press have become a metaphor for all that is bad in society, describing the costumes of a badly produced play as making them look like a 'load of crusty Big Issue sellers' (Gore-Langton, 2009). The Mayor of London was described as being 'a little undignified....going around like a Big Issue seller' (Waller, 2009). Ralph was one of many sellers and was only famous after his death, was this caused by where he died?

Bournemouth

By April 2009, complaints in Bournemouth according to the Town Centre Manager

regarding Big Issue sellers were 'running at an all-time high' (Bailey, 2009c). The complaints covered a range of issues, noise, blocking the way, and drunkenness. The manager seemed concerned with the image of the town as a major tourist resort. The meeting of the local Chamber of Commerce the previous evening was also reported in the same article. One of the attendees stated that he had broken up a fight between sellers on his way to the meeting whilst the chair had complained that if he said 'No' to a magazine the response was a sarcastic 'have a nice day'. A week later in the opinion column Ed Perkins (Perkins, 2009) finds it odd that wishing people a good day was seen as sarcastic but the original comments illustrates the strength of feeling in some quarters of the town.

A spokesman for the Big Issue (Bailey, 2009c) suggested that many of the problems within the town centre were not caused by Big Issue sellers, and that they were introducing jackets to help people identify legitimate sellers. The system at the time was that sellers had an identification tag, but this obviously requires closer examination than a jacket. The town's response to the problem was to introduce complaint forms (Bournemouth_Echo, 2009b) to record all the incidents and to hold regular meetings with interested parties, but offering little help to sellers. Perkins (Perkins, 2009) raises two valid opinions. Firstly that we should not 'demonise genuine Big Issue sellers because of a few rogues, secondly he asks which the bigger issue, trying to sell the Big Issue or being homeless? Homelessness in Bournemouth was a growing problem. The cost of buying housing was above the national average and this increased rental prices. A large proportion of work in the area was and still is casual and/or seasonal being based in the hospitality and tourism industry.

The tone of the Bournemouth Echo had changed by 9 May 2009, following the murder of Ralph Millward. Ralph was described as having 'touched the hearts' of his customers, with calls for a 'special service' from customers and traders, very different from the views expressed by the council. A book of condolences was opened on 8 May 2009 (Bournemouth_Echo, 2009c) as a response to this outpouring of grief. Does the condolence book give any indication of the why the level of grief was so high?

Condolences

On 8 May 2009, an online book of condolence was opened by the local newspaper, the Bournemouth Echo. Despite most people having little contact with Ralph by their own admission he was described as a gentleman (Breeze_Family, 2009, Spiers, 2009), even putting the 'gentle into gentleman' (Hearts, 2009) a 'true gent' (Cbeebie, 2009) and 'true gentleman of the road' (Simon, 2009) although it was not clear what has prompted these comments. He was also described as 'one of the last remaining REAL people in this materialistic world' (PaulSaville, 2009) and 'one of the rare few genuine people left in this world' (Chidcot82, 2009). He was remembered for his friendly smile (AndyBB, 2009, Breeze_Family, 2009, Hearts, 2009, Roger, 2009, Sarah_MP, 2009) and love of books (Alwyn-Ladell, 2009, Hearts, 2009, John et al., 2009, John_T, 2009, Ridvan, 2009).

He was also seen as part of the landscape of Westbourne, described as an 'integral part' (Siwych, 2009) a 'fixture' (John et al., 2009), the area would never 'be the same' (Gurun, 2009, Rogers75, 2009, Salbourne, 2009) and a 'poorer' place without him (Heggett, 2009). One group (Kim et al., 2009) called for a 'small plaque' to be placed on wall where Ralph worked, and this cry was taken up by some visitors to area from Quebec (Jdichio, 2009). Another contributor (PaulSaville, 2009) suggested creating a memorial fund. There was evidence that people wanted a lasting reminder, although whether this was a tribute to Ralph as a 'gentleman' or 'homeless man' is not clear. Some suggested that we have failed Ralph (Alwyn-Ladell, 2009), and 'the vulnerable are targets of hate' (Sandi6, 2009). Others admired Ralph for selling in all weathers (BmthGary, 2009, Salbourne, 2009, Silky, 2009), whilst the more perceptive commenting on the problems of drying damp clothes (Alwyn-Ladell, 2009). There was a split between those who wanted to idolise him and those who were aware of the daily problems he encountered.

Conclusions

The analysis of the research material taken from the year of his death showed that Ralph Millward was no different from other Big Issue sellers. What was known about his life showed that others had similar

backgrounds and faced the same challenges of living and working on the streets. The only distinctive feature was the age of the perpetrators of the crime, but the press were unable to give detailed reports due to their age.

Public reaction in Bournemouth was unprecedented, and exceeded that shown towards other sellers' deaths. His death did unite the community, or at least this was what was reported in the press. Press reports may not however reflect reality, Thomas's analysis (Thomas, 2008) of the death of Princess Diana showed that the opinion of the press were not necessarily representative of all sectors of society.

In the case of Ralph, there was no mention that he should not have been living and working on the streets, yet earlier there had been calls for the removal of sellers. Ralph's image was portrayed by the press as wholesome, with little mention of his past problems with alcohol. His friendly face and shyness are stressed. If even half the people who attended the funeral had purchased a newspaper each week, his life could have been better.

The physical tributes left at the site of his death were mainly floral, but also include a teddy bear a loaf of bread and a can of cider (Bailey, 2009b). These focus on the giver rather than the deceased, a can of cider would seem total inappropriate in this instance. There seems to be little concern for other sellers in the town whose circumstances might be similar. The repercussions for Big Issue sellers in the area has been mixed, some claim that people are more willing to talk to them, but 'no high increase in sales' one was threatened with 'do you want a repeat performance of what happened to Ralph' (Bailey, 2009b).

Ralph's life and death were a tragedy. The author does not think he will get the memorial plaque, or that his name will be long remembered by the people of Bournemouth. A more fitting tribute might have been to regularly buy the Big Issue and help those in need to help themselves.

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