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## The view from 'My Pitch': Homeless Voices in The Big Issue during the cost-of-living crisis

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# The view from 'My Pitch': Homeless Voices in *The Big Issue* during the cost-of-living crisis

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## Abstract

This paper presents a framing analysis of 12 editions of *The Big Issue* published in the last three months of 2023. The study employs framing analysis to investigate the language used by the magazine to report on poverty and homelessness. The paper analyses the 'My Pitch' column which represents the voice of the often-homeless vendors who sell the magazine. Using Entman's (1993) approach to framing we analyse how individuals with lived experience of poverty and homelessness define the causes and solutions to poverty and homelessness. Furthermore, the paper offers a critical examination of the claims of the magazine to provide a platform for marginalised voices. We find that the magazine offers a platform for people with lived experience of poverty and/or homelessness to have their voices heard, although the My Pitch column offers limited space to inform the magazine's readers of the wider context of homelessness. It also reinforces social enterprise solutions to poverty and homelessness. This framing avoids discussing shortfalls in the UK welfare system although the narrative logic of these profiles offers latent evidence of welfare dysfunction.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Journalism, Homelessness, Street papers, The Big Issue, news, framing analysis

## 1.0 Introduction

Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown recently made an urgent call for the previous United Kingdom government to tackle poverty. In an opinion piece in *The Guardian*, Brown (2024) argued that the cost-of-living crisis made little impact on the national news agenda and that a 'hidden emergency' had been created because government ministers did not address the issue (Brown 2024). His intervention in the debate on poverty followed a series of comments from politicians who had denied its existence in Britain. Suella Braverman, the former home secretary described homelessness as a 'lifestyle choice' in November 2023 while announcing plans to place legal restrictions on the use of tents by homeless people (Otte 2020) and Lee Anderson, the former deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, described the existence of poverty in contemporary Britain as 'absolute nonsense' (Hatton 2023). When it comes to news coverage of poverty, government ministers play an agenda-setting role and they are the most likely sources to be quoted by journalists. The news media amplified these arguments denying the existence of poverty because

of their institutional reliance on official sources which are seen by journalists as having 'news value' (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017; Lewis et al., 2008). The news media's reliance on official sources creates an imbalance where official sources define the terms of the debate on poverty, while those with lived experience are largely excluded (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2017). Indeed, government policy to cut support to the most vulnerable members of society has been accompanied by pejorative coverage of people who are reliant on state support (Woodend, 2023). News coverage of poverty in mainstream publications has been given significant attention in academic research (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando 2017; Morrison 2019; Redden 2014). However, there is a distinct lack of focus on other publications and, as such, this paper seeks to offer a detailed examination of how street papers reported on poverty during a cost-of-living crisis.

Street papers are businesses that operate using a non-profit social enterprise model where they employ professional journalists to produce magazines, which are subsequently sold by vendors experiencing poverty or homelessness. This study focuses on the UK edition of *The Big Issue* (TBI), which was founded in 1991 and has developed into one of the world's most commercially successful street papers (Romano, 2010). It has sister editions in Australia, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (Burns, 2016). TBI was set up to provide income for homeless people and to act as a vehicle for anti-poverty initiatives as well as giving a voice to those living in poverty. The magazine has been able to find a path to long-term sustainability, with vendors now able to accept debit/credit card payments when selling TBI on the street. Magazine subscribers can also access back issues of the magazine through TBI's mobile app. Given that street papers were conceived as anti-poverty publications designed to tackle homelessness through social enterprise, we ought to ask if TBI also provides an alternative to the well-worn path of the news media's coverage of poverty. It is also important to highlight that because TBI is produced by journalists and editorial staff who are trained, professional news reporters (Hanks and Swithinbank, 1997), they bring with them the news values, news cultures and, ultimately, worldviews that derive from the ideologies present in any news organization operating in the broader spectrum of capitalism and the free market. Indeed, street papers sit at the intersection of enterprise and charity, and this influences the agenda and narratives we find in them.

The paper presents a literature review that covers a range of studies examining how poverty is presented in street papers to justify this study's focus on marginalised voices within TBI. The study then outlines a methodological approach underpinned by Entman's (1993) framing analysis which has been used to analyse and codify the data gathered for this paper before moving on to present

findings and analysis of the data which is organised around definitions, causes, moral evaluations and solutions to poverty and homelessness. The paper concludes by suggesting areas for further study and advocating for more research on international street papers.

## 2.0 Literature review

Prior research on street papers, specifically on TBI in the UK, has focussed on why people buy street papers and the ethics of the business model as a social enterprise (Cockburn, 2014; Hanks and Swithinbank, 1997; Hibbert et al., 2002; 2005). There have also been studies that look at the way these street papers report poverty. For example, a study examining Canadian street paper *Street Feat* makes an explicit distinction between North American street papers and TBI. The North American model presents street papers that are 'written, produced and distributed by the homeless, the unemployed and the working poor – voices that are rarely heard, let alone acknowledged in either corporate or state-run media' (Howley, 2003). In this regard, street papers are part of a long tradition associated with the 'underground or alternative press' (Howley, 2003:280). By contrast, the international expansion of TBI has been seen by North American street papers as a threat to their underground approach, they fear they will not be able to compete with the general interest magazine produced by TBI.

Some scholars have questioned the legitimacy of the relations of exchange where homeless vendors sell the street paper product (Cockburn, 2014). The existence of a market exchange means that homeless vendors need to build a rapport with their customer base with similar market dynamics to a sales or customer service role. Also, there are questions about whether audiences buy the product as a charitable donation or because of the content of the papers themselves. This has a direct link to the content of the street papers: should they be overt instruments of anti-poverty campaigns or should they reflect the mainstream press in order to increase sales and sustainability? Other examples of this body of work include a study of Greek street papers (Makridis et al., 2020) and an international comparison, using framing analysis, of how street papers presented the voices of homeless people (Torck, 2001). Torck's study, focusing on street papers in the UK, France, Netherlands and the United States, found that street papers offer 'limited space' as a platform for the voices of homeless people and tend to constrain these voices to 'special genres' (Torck, 2001:386).

Thus, TBI is torn between the competing pressures of commercial success and being a campaigning vehicle that acts as a platform for marginalised people. When representatives of TBI were asked what made the magazine special, they said:

'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' (Hanks and Swithinbank, 1997).

The first sentence of this statement places a clear contrast between a magazine written and produced by homeless people and a 'quality product', suggesting that the two are mutually exclusive. This presents a challenge for the magazine because of its explicit commitment to provide a platform for 'offering a voice in the media to homeless people'. The pressure to provide readers with a commercially successful product has been one of the main features of TBI's approach to developing the magazine. This paper examines how TBI negotiates this balance between commercial success and representation by examining the way that the voices of TBI's vendors are represented in the magazine. Furthermore, Torck's prior study into TBI was conducted when the magazine featured artwork and poetry produced by homeless people as a way of contributing to the editorial content of the magazine. Since this study was carried out TBI has updated its focus by offering magazine-style profiles of vendors selling the magazine and these offer an interesting case study in the way the magazine showcases the voices of homeless people.

### 3.0 Theoretical framework

The discourses of poverty that mainstream news organisations produce have frequently been the subject of critical academic research (Clawson and Trice, 2000; Guardino, 2019; Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2020). Scholars have broadly highlighted that prevalent narratives tend to blame the victim for the condition of poverty while ignoring its structural causes, such as persistent inequality (Abbie Erler, 2012; Lugo-Ocando, 2014). Golding and Middleton (1982) highlighted the deep historical roots of these narratives, which predominate in contemporary print journalism representations of poverty (Redden, 2011; 2014). Discourses that are used to criticise the victims of poverty have also been identified amongst media consumers. For example, Paterson et al. (2016) showed how audience reactions to the British television show *Benefits Street* was 'a site for the perpetuation of existing

stereotypes about benefit claimants', although focus group participants watching the programme did (re)negotiate their stance when other participants voiced resistance to victim-blaming narratives (Paterson et al., 2016: 212). Further linguistics research on social media responses to this programme uncovered discourses of flawed consumerism, 'scroungers' and the underclass which 'portrayed people as morally repugnant' (van der Bom et al. 2018:44). Some of the individuals featured in the show did provoke sympathetic comments from audiences, but these were not generalised from in the same way as the negative stereotypes about benefit scroungers. Below-the-line comments on digital editions of UK newspapers also focus on the deviance of the undeserving poor or 'flawed consumers' as these ideas dominate online debates about UK poverty (Morrison 2019);(Paterson 2020: 83). In relation to homelessness specifically, Toft's (2014: 803) research highlights how dominant discourses have focused on dirty spaces, drugtaking and danger; he connected these linguistic representational practices as reflecting those found in other discourses of social exclusion such as racism, anti-semitism and anti-immigration.

Over the years, the implementation of austerity policies that have cut support to the most vulnerable members of society has been accompanied by pejorative news coverage of people who are dependent on state support as a way of justifying these policies in the public eye (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2017; Woodend, 2023). In fact, mainstream commercial journalism has a long history of misrepresenting poverty by mediating it through elite sources with a vested interest in not tackling poverty as a social issue (this is done to counter demands for a fairer distribution of wealth). This coverage includes the framing of the 'undeserving poor', which has consistently targeted welfare recipients and immigrants by describing them as a deviant 'underclass' or a group of 'scroungers' (Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016; Morrison, 2019). The 'deserving poor' group in these narratives tends to comprise children and old age pensioners while the rest are 'othered' and rather vilified or made invisible altogether from the media space (Abbie Erler, 2012; Chauhan and Foster, 2014; Connor, 2021; Devereux, 1998; Lugo-Ocando, 2014; Morrison 2019). Poverty is rarely narrativized as a collective problem derived from structural conditions, inequality or lack of access to affordable housing. Instead, it is presented as an individual issue that relates to choices around existing opportunities (Lugo-Ocando, 2021; Ross, 1998). For example, the construction of narratives of 'rags to riches' transformations are developed by journalists through a 'personal narrative as formulaic ritual' (Russell, 1995: 86). Overcoming poverty is then constructed as a heroic individual act while paradoxically the existence of those living in poverty in the present is denied, or, worse, they are individually blamed for their circumstances. So mainstream news representations of poverty focus on telling individual stories that lack context (Connor, 2021; Iyengar, 1990).

A central issue in determining whether poverty is explained as an individual issue or the result of wider structural causes is the framing process, which is used to highlight the most important elements of a particular social issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). For Entman (1993: 52), framing is a process that makes particular elements of a social issue more salient and is used to promote particular problem definitions, interpretations, moral evaluations and suggested solutions to contested issues. A framing analysis of the language used to describe poverty has also fitted the dimensions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor by focusing on either villains who abuse the welfare system or victims who suffer from the demands of an unjust socioeconomic system (Van Gorp, 2010). Devereux's (1998) research on representations of homelessness in the media also explained how homeless people only appeared in the news existing at the extremes of either 'deviant behaviour' or 'pure deservingness'. Iyengar's (1991) research found that the way that poverty is framed significantly influences how the public understands it. He suggests that, when poverty is expressed as a collective outcome (thematic), it is understood quite differently than when it appears in the form of a specific person (episodic). It is understandable, therefore, that news audiences react differently to what they might see as a collective and structural issue than when they believe that the misfortune is the fault of an individual. Framing poverty as an individual issue, even from a sympathetic perspective, can have the effect of distorting the issue, because 'memorability and vividness in news portrayals of poverty likely come at the expense of support for public policy' (Nisbet, 2009: 86). The news media's overreliance on episodic explanations of poverty has the potential to distort public perceptions of the issue as has their reliance on official sources and lack of engagement with people with lived experience of poverty.

Devereux has pointed out that news media coverage of homelessness frequently fails to explain the condition or provide a context that examines its structural causes. It also relies on stereotypes and overemphasises the role of charity in solving homelessness. Furthermore, the news frequently highlights the role of celebrities and public figures in tackling homelessness and there is a persistent source bias in favour of official sources from political elites (Devereux, 2021). He describes how:

> Taken in combination, all of these factors coalesce to create a context in which homelessness is routinely represented as being inevitable (which it is not) and resulting from the individual weaknesses of people who are homeless themselves, rather than from structural causes (Devereaux, 2021).

Devereux lists a range of underlying causes of poverty such as 'state decisions to close psychiatric hospitals, cut funding for drug rehabilitation programs, regenerate (for that, read gentrify) inner-city spaces, withdraw from the provision of social or public housing or remove rent controls in an increasingly deregulated housing market' (Devereux, 2021). This paper seeks to examine whether these root causes of poverty are given sufficient attention in street papers which have been set up as vehicles for anti-poverty activism.

## 4.0 Methodology

The data collection stage of this paper began with a close reading of 12 issues of *TBI* published in 2023 beginning with issue 1585 published on 9 October up until 1596 published on 28 December 2023. This sample reflected the number of issues examined in previous studies (Torck, 2001) and also represented a period where a particular 'discursive event' (Fairclough, 1993) had taken place when the former Home Secretary described homelessness as a 'lifestyle choice'. Our first phase of close reading was underpinned by asking how TBI represented poverty. In doing this, we mapped the various sections of the magazine. The magazine usually opens with a section called *The Dispatch* which focuses on 'news, views and miscellany'. There is an editorial column written by either Editor Paul McNamee or Deputy Editor Steven Mackenzie. There is an opinion column written by the magazine's founder, John Bird, and sometimes additional opinion columns appear in this section. There is also a section for letters to the magazine. These opening sections are followed by a long-form feature and a celebrity profile, then a lengthy culture section with reviews of films, books and music and celebrity interviews. There is a section for puzzles and, at the back of the magazine, is a column entitled 'My Pitch', where homeless TBI vendors feature as interviewees. While different sections were worth studying in terms of the language they use to describe poverty, we decided to focus on the space given to people with lived experience of poverty and homelessness by spotlighting the column entitled 'My Pitch'. This dataset comprised 8,352 tokens and offered a rich understanding of how TBI vendors are portrayed in the magazine.

We printed each column from TBI's mobile application and analysed representations of poverty using the elements highlighted by Entman (1993:52): (i) problem definition, (ii) causal interpretation, (iii) moral evaluation and (iv) suggested solution. We developed a coding frame using these four categories and conducted a second close reading of each column.

Beginning with (i) problem definition, there is an absence of material defining poverty and homelessness in these columns and this is understandable.

People being interviewed in their capacity as having lived experience of these issues are unlikely to be asked directly to define poverty or homelessness. Similarly, there was very little material offering explicit or even implied moral evaluation of poverty and/or homelessness. The most likely explanation for the absence of definitions and moral evaluations of poverty is that the limited space afforded to each interviewee restricts the depth that these issues can be discussed in. Nevertheless, there is also an element of editorial choice here that suggests a formulaic approach to these interviews that limits the content to focus on the personal experiences of each of the vendors.

Being led by the data, we thus focussed on (ii) causal mechanisms and (iii) suggested solutions to poverty. The research questions we used to guide the study were as follows:

- RQ1: What are the causal mechanisms for homelessness as reported in The Big Issue?
- RQ2: How are solutions to poverty and homelessness presented in The Big Issue?
- RQ3: Does TBI give a platform for homeless people to have their voices heard?

### 5.0 Findings: **The view from 'My Pitch': Vendor profiles in The Big Issue**

### *5.1 Causal mechanisms*

There is a rich vein of material explaining the causal mechanisms for homelessness in the My Pitch column. Many of the profiles of TBI vendors highlight individual reasons for poverty and homelessness: bereavement, family breakdown and illness, both physical and mental, are often cited as causes for people experiencing homelessness or poverty (Table 1). This perspective offers a strong counterpoint to political arguments that homelessness is a lifestyle choice.

'When my mum died a couple of years ago it was a really stressful time. I didn't know where to start, so I got in contact with my outreach worker at The Big Issue'.

'I got put in care when I was younger and lost my brother back in 2015 to a drug overdose'.

'I had a mental breakdown when I worked at Honda and they got rid of me'.

'My husband had a heart attack and could not work anywhere and I needed to get him money for his medication, check-ups and special diet. …After a while my husband had a second heart attack and he left me forever'.

'I lost my leg after an accident with a tractor back in Romania. …nobody will employ me because I am without a leg. The Big Issue lets me work hard so I am happy with the job that I have got at the moment'.

Table 1: Causal mechanisms for poverty and homelessness according to Big Issue vendors.

These examples cite a range of what C. Wright Mills (1959) would call 'private troubles', which are linked to the wider public issue of the lack of support services for these individuals. There is a logic here that personal problems such as family bereavement, mental health issues and physical accidents can lead directly to periods of homelessness. This highlights deficiencies within the support network offered to these individuals and raises questions about whether the British welfare state is providing an adequate safety net for people living in poverty. As well as personal causes of poverty, some vendors highlight wider economic factors. For example, one vendor describes how:

> The Marks & Spencer store where I sell the magazine will be closing on 28 October, according to reports. I have absolutely no idea what that means for me. I only wish we could save it. A few years ago, I was knocking out between 50, 80, 100 magazines a week, I'm down to 30 now. That's how bad it is. It's just this depression and recession we've got.

This extract points to the impact of wider dysfunction within the UK economy and how the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the UK retail sector can have unforeseen circumstances which create a ripple effect that makes the lives of the most vulnerable citizens even more difficult. Nevertheless, the majority of causes of homelessness in this column are limited to negative personal experiences. The fact that experiences of redundancy, ill health and bereavement can lead people to life on the streets raises questions about whether the the UK welfare system is serving its core function. Furthermore, the lack of discussion about the wider social, economic and political issues reflect an editorial choice that exposes a power imbalance within TBI itself. Homeless vendors are humanised through a column that discusses their interests and experiences, but the column is largely apolitical. It's unlikely that all of the vendors featured have almost nothing to say about the wider structural issues involved, so the content of the 'My Pitch' column reflects an editorial choice to focus on content that highlights the interests and experiences of the vendors. As a commercially successful publication, this decision could be driven by the idea that overtly political commentary in this column would harm sales. Nevertheless, the limited discussion of structural causes of poverty in this column reflects an editorial choice to limit the parameters of the debate in a way that constructs

homelessness as an issue with individual rather than systemic causes. This logic is also evident in the solutions to poverty presented by the magazine.

### 5.2 Proposed Solutions

Finding somewhere to live is cited by vendors as being one of the most important solutions to poverty and homelessness. One vendor cites getting a caravan to live in as 'making a hell of a difference' to their life. Another TBI vendor describes finding a house to live as 'overwhelming' and how living there is 'better than a doorway and it's better than a tent'. These material changes were rare in the sample of TBI vendors. Most of the profiles of TBI vendors in the 'My Pitch' column emphasise the magazine's role in tackling poverty and homelessness (Table 2). Vendors highlight how they feel 'safe and protected by the Big Issue team' and the magazine is praised.

'The Big Issue changed my life, helped me get off the streets, and uplifted my spirit'.

'I've been drug free for two years. That's due to The Big Issue; The Big Issue got me clean'.

'Selling The Big Issue helped me get on with society, helped me be more vocal. I'm going to develop my life around selling the mag now, I'll be selling these mags till I drop dead. I reckon I've got 'til I'm 83'.

Table 2: Solutions to poverty and homelessness

The magazine is credited with supplying vendors with equipment such as a laptops, card readers for selling the magazine, and a voucher for a new pair of glasses. Some vendors credit the magazine for helping them financially during the pandemic. For example, one vendor describes how 'The Big Issue was really helpful during Covid, when I couldn't get on my pitch and sell the mag. I'm on benefits, but they were kind enough to give me extra money'. The magazine is also credited with helping vendors with administrative tasks such as obtaining a birth certificate to open a bank account and helping with a 'right to reside' application. These examples highlight the important work that is carried out by the street paper initiative. However, there is also the danger that these narratives normalise the situation where social enterprises and charities are filling gaps that should be the traditional role of the welfare state. This undermines arguments for the case for state action on poverty and implicitly suggests that, through a mix of individual effort/enterprise and charitable support as a fall-back, social problems such as poverty and homelessness can be resolved on an

individual basis without the need for state support. The absence of structural critique creates the impression that the causes and solutions to poverty and homelessness are individual rather than structural. This renders homelessness as a 'private trouble' rather than a 'public issue' and the magazine itself is constructed as one of the solutions to the problem of homelessness. The 'My Pitch' column becomes a way of promoting the magazine by locating it as a solution to many of the problems faced by the magazine vendors.

As well as the material and administrative help, there is also a sense of hope for the future in these testimonies; one vendor describes how 'The Big Issue is helping me towards a future where I might be able to work somewhere else'. Other vendors describe aspirations to set up their own businesses, work in offices or to 'finally have a tiny little flat of my own, my own little domain'. The hopes for the future expressed in these profiles are not limited to their immediate needs. One vendor is quoted as saying that 'my dream is to direct an action movie. When I watch one, it releases my stress. Sometimes I imagine that I'm shooting a film when I sell the magazine. I think every person passing by is the actor of my movie. And I'm a director'. This vendor describes how he does this to pass the time while selling the magazine. This reporting goes beyond experiences of homelessness makes a significant contribution to creating empathy for those in need by humanizing them and making them protagonists in the publication. The profiles focus on the vendors' pets and the importance of the social connections that are developed through selling TBI. For example, one vendor describes how:

> I've been doing it for two years and it gets me out there talking to people about my mental
> health issues. I suffer from bipolar and paranoid schizophrenia, so communicating with
> people and getting the support from my clients is the reason that I sell the magazine.

This emphasises the positive impact of the magazine on the lives of the TBI vendors. The magazine is frequently cited as being the solution to poverty, homelessness and beyond. In the extract above, one vendor described how selling TBI has helped with his bipolar and paranoid schizophrenia conditions. The lack of discussion in these profiles about state support is telling. The magazine here is being praised for providing a market solution to homelessness and poverty. There is an element of self-promotion from the magazine itself within this narrative structure where TBI is constructed by vendors as solving homelessness and associated problems. This narrative avoids any discussion of the structural causes of poverty and presents TBI as a market-based solution to homelessness. This presentation eliminates any discussion of wider societal inequalities and their relation to the existence of homelessness.

The language of the free market and associated promotional culture also emerge as strategies from the vendors to sell more magazines (Table 3). One vendor describes how 'You've got to be in it to win it' and vendors are frequently quoted as saying that the key to successfully selling the magazine is to be cheerful under any circumstances, one vendor is quoted as saying 'It doesn't matter if they hate you or they batter you, you have to be nice'. The fact that this TBI vendor feels the need to be pleasant to the public even when being physically assaulted highlights the dangers and difficulties of selling the magazine in public spaces. As Cockburn has argued, the public nature of street paper vendors 'makes them perfect points upon which to hang both negative and positive polemics about the moral order of economic life' (Cockburn 2014: 156). The pressure to maintain a cheerful demeanor emerges as a theme throughout these profiles, highlighting the sales pressure that these vendors are under.

> I've got a great technique for selling, I listen to comedy shows when I'm on pitch so I'm always smiling and laughing when people come out of the shop and see me, and I think it increases my chances of getting a sale.
>
> I always talk nicely to my customers and I'm very polite. I'm always smiling. Even if people are nasty to me, I always say thank you because I'm a Christian.
>
> I try and smile at them as often as I can. I'm not just sitting there when I'm selling The Big Issue. I'm trying to make eye contact with customers, and I always try to be in a good mood.

Table 3: Big Issue Vendors talk about their sales technique

Always smiling is the most common label that street paper vendors apply to themselves in these profiles and the obligation to become a sales professional due to falling on hard times further highlights the absence of the welfare state as a safety net for the most vulnerable people in society. The opportunities and support offered by TBI has an undeniably positive impact on the lives of many people suffering from poverty and homelessness. However, these extracts suggest that these opportunities are tied to a sense of conferred obligation on vendors to engage in performative cheerfulness. This highlights one of the limitations of this type of market-based solution to poverty. Vendors need to be performing a customer service role by maintaining a cheerful exterior while facing difficult personal circumstances.

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**6.0 Conclusion**

The vendor profiles in TBI have an internal logic where periods of homelessness follow on from physical and mental illness, redundancy and mental distress through bereavement. Returning to Mills' work on the link between private troubles and public issues there is a lack of sociological imagination in understanding the causal mechanisms for poverty and homelessness. Wealthy modern democracies with social welfare systems should be able to support individuals suffering from these misfortunes. However, the dysfunctional welfare system in the United Kingdom is a missing structural cause in these discussions. Former government ministers denying the existence of poverty and homelessness can be seen in this context as a way of deflecting responsibility for a welfare state that no longer lives up to its original purpose.

Charitable organisations and social enterprises such as TBI have emerged to fill the gap left by the retrenchment of the UK welfare system which has become dysfunctional following austerity measures which some argue have been designed to shrink the size of the UK state (Morrison 2019). Solutions to poverty cited by homeless vendors almost exclusively revolve around their relationship with selling the magazine and how they look to the magazine for financial and emotional support. This serves the dual purpose of highlighting the important role of street papers but also promoting them to their audience. This way of framing the vendor profiles relies on constructing homelessness as a 'private trouble' and eliminates discussions about tackling poverty and homelessness through structural political and economic levers. This is an endorsement of the important work carried out by TBI in tackling poverty, but it supports previous studies into street papers that have argued that the voices of homeless people are ring-fenced into particular sections of the magazine with limited possibilities for what can be discussed (Torck 2001). Indeed, Suella Braverman's comments about homelessness being a lifestyle choice were not explicitly addressed in this column by any of the vendor's featured.

Despite the My Pitch columns not focusing on structural reasons for poverty and homelessness, TBI does address this elsewhere, particularly in the editor's letter written by editor Paul McNamee, and a column called 'Bird's Words' written by the magazine's founder John Bird. Although not the focus of this paper, as the aim here was to foreground the voices of those living in poverty, it is notable that McNamee's column can place responsibility for poverty on government policy:

David Cameron oversaw the malignant austerity programme which, let us never forget, punished the poorest for the failings of the bankers and the wealthy and drove a generation into an uncertain and, for many, impoverished future (McNamee 2023).

John Bird's column directly references Suella Braverman's comments, noting that her words 'demonstrated how broken and indecisive government thinking is in dealing with the social issues that cause people to end up on the streets' (Bird 2023a). In these editorials, the cost of housing (particularly the availability of home ownership and the number of private landlords) and food are also identified as factors driving poverty and homelessness. The causes of poverty are linked to government policy, but, unlike mainstream news, these columns avoid focusing on episodic or individual manifestations of poverty and attempt to hold power to account in a way that is often limited in mainstream publications. These examples reflect a power dynamic where founders and members of the senior editorial team can engage in a structural critique of homelessness. This platform is not extended to the homeless vendors selling the magazine as their contribution is limited.

In terms of giving homeless people a platform, the magazine certainly goes beyond the news coverage of the mainstream press by featuring vendors in a narrative form that covers their experience of poverty; the columns show readers details about their lives, pets, aspirations and hopes for the future. However, the very nature of TBI as a social enterprise places vendors in the position of salespeople for the magazine. They are always smiling even in the face of adversity despite many of these vendors experiencing personal traumas which led them to sell the magazine in the first place. Their limited contribution to the magazine is also presented in an apolitical way that avoids discussing structural causes of homelessness and presents only individualised solutions to the issue, focusing on the support the magazine gives to the vendors. While TBI does offer a limited platform to provide a voice to homeless people through the 'My Pitch' column, the limitations of this could reinforce mainstream news narratives that present homelessness as a 'private trouble' with individual causes and solutions. This could reinforce the idea that homelessness is indeed a 'lifestyle choice' and reduce support for state-led anti-poverty initiatives.

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