

# Big Dave's last stand

He's having a whale of a time.

The physics department here at the University of Rural England has only ever had one real media star: Big Dave, presenter of the popular science programme *Let's Get Physical!* I have had the dubious honour of sharing an office with Dave since our beery postgrad days.

A bear-like figure with a mane of blond hair, he is probably the last Englishman to wear a gold medallion without irony. Perhaps fortunately, history does not record how he won over Sophie, the TV producer, and got the contract for his first series — but it caused heartbreak to many of his languid, dewy-eyed undergraduate fans, to whom I ended up dispensing tea and sympathy. He's a great bloke, but not someone to introduce your girlfriend to.

When his programme first aired on terrestrial television back in 2010, it was required Sunday night viewing because of Dave's charm, eloquence and his habit of demonstrating physical laws using profoundly elaborate experiments. I'm sure you remember how he demonstrated conservation of momentum using a frozen Swedish lake, a bunch of two-metre ice-spheres and a group of blonde skaters in skimpy fur swimsuits.

On his rare visits to the department, Dave was a maestro at generating novel data-encryption and compression algorithms — so it was a cruel twist of fate that the shutdown of analogue TV in favour of highly compressed digital signals led to his show being cancelled. Dave's manically bizarre set pieces just cost too much money for any of the new nano-channels to afford — although some people say it was his season-two climax 'How do you weigh a blue whale?', and the death threats that followed, that did the damage.

Dave, bitterly disappointed but charming as ever, turned back to the bench and, about a year later, came up with a world-beater: a compression algorithm

so good that 90% of the world's digital bandwidth could be freed up overnight. Needless to say, the system was a de facto standard even before it had raced through the standards committees and working parties.

Predictably, the media loved Dave more than ever. Just think — a TV presenter who could actually invent things! He became a regular sofa ornament on many of the better-quality chat shows, and his name was linked with more than one formerly coy lady novelist. Just when things were looking set for Dave, the university pulled the rug out from under him. They hired a top intellectual-property lawyer and got a ruling that it was the university, not Dave, that owned the rights to the invention. The lawyer's name was Charlotte — who I belatedly recognized as the girlfriend before Sophie.

I really thought that the frustration would sink Dave for good but, after a day in the pub recovering, he stepped right back in and offered to project-manage the release of the chipset, for the university had quickly worked out that controlling the silicon was the best way to maximize revenue. He worked tirelessly, supervising every stage of the design, coding, quality management and preproduction.

Once again, the press looked on him as a sort of god — selflessly bettering the world, smiling and waving whenever the vice-chancellor trundled him out in front of the cameras. There was even talk of a Nobel prize.

That was five years ago, and Dave's chip is now built into every video player in the world. You can't see a moving image — broadcast or networked — anywhere on the planet without it being delivered in glorious DaveVision. This alone would be enough for most people, but as he said to me the day before he disappeared: "The fame is good — but I'd rather have the money..."

He was supposed to have been the keynote speaker at a major conference on the Friday morning — but he never showed up. His phone and body-camera were off; he wasn't synching his messages — so he had effectively ceased to exist. By Sunday, the media were full of conspiracy stories about his kidnapping. Most of us, however, thought he was probably on the run from one of his former lovers. Anyway, when they screened one of his programmes — the one with the whale — at 7.30 on Sunday night, no one was terribly surprised. It took a while for people to realize that the programme was appearing on every video screen in the world — all except, interestingly, those that were running safety-critical systems.

As a student prank, it would be great. But after four weeks people are beginning to get fed up of seeing Dave's programme every Sunday night. The data forensics and encryption gurus, who are looking increasingly frantic, mutter about prime numbers and fractals — but they can agree only that Dave is one very clever guy. Clever enough to sneak his compressed greatest hits on to every chip manufactured without anyone realizing. Somewhere, they reason, there will be a pass-phrase that unlocks this 'feature'. Maybe there is, but I reckon that only Dave knows it — and it will stay that way unless he wants to agree terms.

Representatives of the networks have been cruising round the department in their scarily dark glasses and black suits. It looks like the bill to un-Dave the world will be close to \$100 billion — and they are at pains to point out that they would happily pay a good slice of that to get the passwords from Dave, which I guess was the whole point of the exercise. By next week, I think they will settle for some of his body parts instead.

So Dave, if you are out there, I think this is the time to get in touch if you are going to. And if by any chance Alice is with you — please mention that I'm missing her.

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*John Gilbey is a writer living in west Wales. The views expressed are his alone, and he is keen to point out that this is a work of fiction. No physical laws were put at risk during the creation of this story.*

