

Taking a Gamble – Part A

(This case was assembled by University of Georgia journalism student Emily Yocco for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, using various articles and sources. See works cited for a complete list.)

Professor Stephen Bloom wanted his students to experience quality journalism.

The University of Iowa professor and former writer for the *Los Angeles Times* could no longer bear watching established newspapers such as the *Des Moines Register* sacrifice journalistic excellence for self-promotion, fluff and heavy advertising.

In a state where the art of reporting was dying, Bloom decided to assign his 12 masters' students to a semester-long project in investigative journalism. Specifically, these students were to look into the upcoming opening of what would be Iowa's largest casino – Riverside Casino and Golf Resort – in Riverside, Iowa: Population 928.

No newspaper had yet investigated the implications of casino gambling, despite the fact that over the past 20 years, it had become a source of revenue for the state worth hundreds of millions of dollars

By 2005, a shamelessly pro-gambling state legislature had licensed 13 casinos in Iowa. With a combined 13,180 slot machines, over the last fiscal year these resorts had served 19.7 million visitors and collected revenues over \$1 billion.

Newspapers especially benefited from the billion-dollar casino industry as these resorts provided more ad revenue than any other advertisers. Economically speaking, legalized gambling just wasn't important enough to write about if it meant jeopardizing this vital source of income.

However, an eight-week investigation in the farming town of Riverside provided Bloom's students with dirt – and lots of it.

Turns out, Riverside CEO Dan Kehl had paid a Chicago consulting firm over \$250,000 to convince locals to approve gambling in Riverside. These out-of-staters spent almost \$100 per vote for a referendum that barely passed. In doing so, they violated campaign disclosure laws by hiding contributions.

An interview with Riverside sheriff Jerry Dunbar revealed that the Riverside police force of just nine officers would be expected to handle an extra 1.6 million visitors every year. Dunbar said his officers would be overwhelmed and that the casino was a “disaster in the making.”

An investigation of an Iowa town like Riverside caught casino advocates in a lie. Despite the fact that they claimed a percentage of revenues would go to schools in the casino

districts, for the first five years of operation, these schools received nothing. In the sixth year, the casinos donated a paltry \$65,000 to them.

Bloom had not expected his students to do such groundbreaking reporting. However, he knew he couldn't keep the now-dubbed "Riverside Project" a secret from the community who would be directly affected by it.

"With our Riverside Project, the idea was to shine a light into very dark corners," Bloom said. "But would the students' reporting ever get published? What newspaper would print such explosive stories?"

Discuss:

- Is this story worth Bloom's effort? Why should he try to get it published?
- What are the implications for Bloom and his students if this story is either published or swept under the table? What about for the newspaper that publishes it?
- How can Bloom convince a newspaper to publish a story that directly challenges its biggest advertiser?

Taking a Gamble – Part B

Luckily for Bloom, he found an immediate advocate for his cause in *The Daily Iowan*.

The paper agreed without hesitation to publish the stories in a special, ad-free section, under the impression that the “Riverside Project” would be just a four- or eight-page tabloid section.

In Bloom’s defense, Bill Casey, publisher of the independent, 20,500-circulation publication that is distributed on the University of Iowa campus and in Iowa City, said that including advertisements “would undermine the copy.”

How could he know that his eight-page favor would blow up to a 24-page undertaking?

Twenty-one articles and 16,000 words later, Casey was torn between keeping his word to publish the stories and risking serious ad revenue losses, or killing the entire project.

“The costs to him – both in pages published with no ads and a possible loss in ad sales because of the content of these stories – were potentially huge,” Bloom said.

As the impending publication date came closer, the decision only became harder.

As if on cue, Riverside Casino started taking out large display ads in the A-section of the newspaper. They were looking for University of Iowa students to be potential blackjack dealers and roulette wheel operators.

How could Casey and Bloom fight against a \$100 million, 58,000-square-foot monstrosity of a casino?

The day before publication, Casey furiously paced the newsroom. "You have tenure, they can't fire you," Casey told Bloom. "Twenty-four pages and no ads? I ought to have my head examined."

Discuss:

- Knowing that this issue isn't that important to readers, is publishing the insert worth Casey's job?
- Is it more courageous for Casey to keep his word and publish the articles in their entirety, or to pare things down to a reasonable length to preserve his job?
- Who is more responsible for the outcome of this – Bloom or Casey? What part do the students play?

Taking a Gamble – Epilogue

In the end, Casey remained unwavering.

"If we don't print these stories about the casino, who will?" he asked Bloom. "People need to see this."

On May 5, 2006, *The Daily Iowan* published the 24-page, ad-free tabloid section – a full-page display advertisement for the Riverside Casino ran that same day.

Although the project has yet to affect any gambling legislation in the state, Casey was not fired and none of Bloom's students have been sued.

In regard to his gutsy decision to publish the pieces, Casey said, "You can't adequately cover the impact of legalized gambling in the daily news pages – it's too complicated."

"Sometimes you do things that don't make money. You can't do it all the time, but you have to do it occasionally because that's what newspapers ought to be doing. Why else are we in this business?"

Today, *The Daily Iowan* is still thriving as a 20,000+ circulation newspaper for the campus and Iowa City.

"In 100 years, no one's going to look at how much money we made in 2006," Casey said in regard to his decision. "What people will look at is how we covered the events of our time. That's our job."

Discuss:

- Does it matter that Bloom and Casey's efforts didn't change anything? Should that affect whether or not they're considered to be courageous journalists?
- Whose actions were more bold – the professor who undertook the project in the first place, or the publisher who risked his newspaper to print it?

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