

David vs. Goliath – A

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

David Spett, a senior at Northwestern's prestigious Medill School of Journalism and a rookie columnist for the university's award-winning Daily Northwestern, noticed something fishy when reading last spring's issue of Medill's alumni magazine.

Medill Dean John Lavine, already a controversial figure due to his recent curriculum changes blurring the line between journalism and advertising (at least in his critics' eyes), used three anonymous quotes in two columns, including one attributed to a Medill junior in last winter's "Advertising: Building Brand Image" class, which designed a marketing campaign to discourage drunk driving among teenagers.

The quote reads: "I came to Medill because I want to inform people and make things better. Journalism is the best way for me to do that, but I sure felt good about this class. It is one of the best I've taken, and I learned many things in it that apply as much to truth-telling in journalism as to this campaign to save teenage drivers."

Curious, Spett asked around and learned from a Medill instructor that Lavine often uses the phrase "sure felt good"—as in the quote at hand—colloquially. Suspicious but far from sure, he underwent the long and tedious process of first finding a student in the advertising class, then obtaining a class list from that student and finally calling, e-mailing and calling again all 29 students, many of them already graduated, to ask if any of them had said the anonymous quote.

Sure enough, none had.

The dean of the nation's top journalism school, and Spett's own for that matter, had violated the bedrock of journalism—always tell the truth—but calling him out would place his own academic future in question and could potentially make his forthcoming Medill degree appear somewhat tainted.

Discuss:

What should he do? Indeed, what *could* he do? After all, he was just one student up against the powers that be, right?

David vs. Goliath – Part B

In a simple yet hard-hitting editorial of only 450 words, Spett revealed his findings.

“We cannot be certain these quotes were fabricated,” he wrote. “But at the very least, I find reason to be suspicious.”

Three days later, a columnist from The Chicago Tribune chimed in, generating a wave of negative press for Dean Lavine and, in turn, Medill as a whole.

That same day, Lavine defended the integrity of his quotes in a letter to Medill faculty, writing that “the quotes (Spett) wondered about are what students told me” and that “there was no shortage of material from students for these quotes.”

The following week, 16 Medill faculty, including a former dean, released a statement saying they were “deeply troubled” by Lavine's use of unattributed quotes.

“This matter has become a crisis for the school,” the letter said. “The principles of truthfulness and transparency in reporting are at the core of Medill’s professional and academic mission.”

In response, Lavine issued a letter denying all charges of fabrication, saying the quote came from an e-mail he had deleted or notes he could not find.

“I have been in journalism for more than 40 years as a reporter, editor, publisher and educator,” he said. “I do not make up quotes.”

The following week, Northwestern’s provost announced that an ad hoc committee of three Medill alumni found no evidence that Lavine had fabricated the quotes, effectively clearing him of the accusations.

Finally, in a special faculty meeting on March 12, the provost as well as the university president reaffirmed their support for Lavine and expressed hope that Medill could just move past the whole controversy.

Then two things happened.

Lavine again denied fabricating the quotes in a student forum, and Medill lecturer and Chief Marketing Officer Thomas Hayden published an open letter questioning Spett’s reporting.

According to Hayden, at least three of his 29 students refused to speak with Spett, one “bitched (him) out” and another hung up on him. In the forum with students, the dean raised those same doubts.

Discuss:

What should Spett do now? Not only was Lavine absolved of any wrongdoing, but Spett's own journalistic integrity had now come under fire.

David vs. Goliath – Part C

In the long-awaited follow-up to his original editorial, Spett explained the methods behind his initial reporting and again questioned Lavine's three quotes, all the while appearing resigned to the lack of a definitive conclusion.

“In Dean Lavine's two columns for Medill magazine,” Spett wrote, “he quoted three unnamed students. When I interviewed the dean, he did not provide evidence of the quotes' authenticity, and he has not done so since. I find reason to be suspicious that the three quotes might be inauthentic, but we will never be certain.”

The day after Spett's editorial, The Daily Northwestern went on a two-week publishing hiatus for winter quarter exams and then spring break. The paper will resume publishing next Monday with the beginning of spring quarter.

Discuss:

Should Spett return to this story after spring break, or should he just let it go?

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