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THE IRISH INDEPENDENT

Corporate bookies controlling the game

There will be a major ad campaign on the risks of gambling, sponsored by those who run the show



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Published 18/01/2015



Next week, some of the biggest bookmaking chains in these islands, including Ladbrokes, William Hill, Paddy Power and Coral, will be launching the Senet Group, an "independent body" set up to promote "responsible gambling".

Before we go any further, let us pause for a moment's reflection on the genius of these people who, without missing a beat, can declare that a body set up by Ladbrokes, William Hill, Paddy Power and Coral is "independent".

Lesser men would simply say they are setting up a body, but the bookies, always looking for an edge, have to call it "independent".

In an attempt to see off any proposed legislation by the British government, there will be a major advertising campaign to highlight the potential risks of gambling - perhaps as a response to all the major advertising campaigns which have highlighted the potential risks of not gambling.

Not that they need to worry greatly about any legislation promised by parties running for election. The corporate bookies are very much in tune with the spirit of the age, in which most governments, including the Irish one, are broadly in favour of anything which tends to facilitate large transfers of money from the weaker elements in society to the top people.

But the bookies are taking no chances anyway. They too are reading the papers in which, most weeks now, there's another story of personal catastrophe which has befallen some unfortunate punter who just lost his way in the labyrinth that is online gambling.

They too are noticing these Twitter accounts being set up all across the world with names like Re-Think Gambling, Stop Predatory Gambling, or just Compulsive Gambler, which are calling bullshit on the Byzantine PR campaign that is "responsible gambling".

So they are acutely aware of the need to control the situation, an awareness which was apparent in the days just after Christmas, when the papers ran a story about a man in Galway who had a €5 football accumulator that won him €421,000.

It was a great story indeed, a magnificent achievement by that man, and one that directed our attention away from the fact that the big Leopardstown meeting had turned into a kind of Armageddon for the punters, with several hot favourites down the glen.

A headline which honestly reflected the state of the betting world at that time would have read something like, "Hundreds of Men Annihilated in Scenes of Absolute Carnage."

Instead it went something like "One Man Dies And Goes to Heaven".

So the overall message which was conveyed by an acquiescent media was roughly the opposite of the truth - and there's a pattern here.

The corporate bookies, with their ruthless brilliance, tend not to be contented with the mere half-truth.

In Britain, for example, they seek to convey the impression that they are wholly committed to "responsible gambling", while in their offices they have machines with fixed-odds games such as roulette which are known not only to be monstrously addictive, but to take up to 100 quid a time.

Desperate men can be seen losing thousands in a few minutes, and yet the bookies have resisted obviously responsible suggestions that these machines should not be taking 100 quid every 20 seconds, they should be taking a maximum of maybe two quid.

This would work, even on those obviously rare occasions when the antennae of the staff somehow fail to pick up the signs that they may be in the presence of an addicted gambler - the companies acknowledge that some clients may have a problem, but they say it is only a small minority.

Therefore the vast majority of the punters pumping a hundred quid a time into those machines do not have a problem, they are just having a laugh.

Sometimes the disappointed players can be seen physically attacking these machines, demented with anguish, an image to keep in your mind as you watch various well-spoken industry leaders making apparently constructive suggestions that they will no longer be advertising "free-bet" or even "free money" offers on TV before 9 o'clock, so "responsible" are they.

As for the accusation that certain clients might be using those roulette machines or fixed-odds betting terminals for the grand old custom of laundering money through the bookies, well, that would be - and there is no other word for it - irresponsible.

The strategic purpose of this "responsible gambling" shtick was examined recently in a piece in The Guardian by Matt Zarb-Cousin, himself a recovering addicted gambler who wrote that "like other addictions, gambling addiction is the consequence of a complex interplay between an individual and a product. But while the betting industry would claim it would like to encourage responsible gambling, these semantics imply that those who become addicted to their products are entirely to blame, and that their products are not. The narrative... is one that seeks to absolve the industry of blame... this shifts the focus away from whether operators are behaving responsibly with the products they offer."

And the best of all narratives is that of the online punter in Swindon last Saturday who turned £20 into £16.5k in just over 20 minutes with a £10 each way fourfold on the Saturday racing.

He got it done "in the time it takes to throw together some oven chips and a couple of fish fingers".

Oh lucky man!

Sunday Independent