Getting the story wrong worsens W. Va. tragedy

By Robin Abcarian and Matea Gold
Los Angeles Times

The West Virginia miners tragedy was an emotional whipsaw that ended up trapping the media — print and electronic — into authoritatively reported, but ultimately incorrect stories.

Hours after authorities announced that 12 coal miners believed to be alive were actually dead, millions awoke to newspaper headlines announcing "Miracle in the Mine" or "12 miners rescued" or simply "ALIVE!"

How could the media — mostly morning newspapers, since radio, television and the Internet could instantaneously correct their errors — get it so wrong?

It was, said editors across the country, a matter of meeting unforgiving deadlines and relying on sources that seemed credible, including West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin and family members of the miners, who announced news of the miners' apparent survival around midnight Eastern Time.

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Executive editor Julie Doll: The sources seemed credible

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time, three hours before the deaths became known at about 3 a.m. Wednesday.

The key is, were the sources of information credible, and the answer seemed to be yes at the time," said Boston Globe editor Martin Baron. "They were attributed, identified and quoted, and at some point you have to print a newspaper and you can't say we don't know what else we could have done."

Baron said the Globe's first edition's headline cautiously said "12 miners reportedly found alive."

Over the next four editions, the headlines evolved to reflect the changing news. Jubilation in West Virginia became "Jubilation, then sorrow" in the editorial version of the story, which made 144,000 copies of the paper's total of 414,000.

The New York Times had incorrect stories in all its print editions, said its spokesman, Toby Umick, in a phone interview. In an e-mailed statement, he said that "all printed copies of today's Times were circulating" by the time they published the deaths at 3:25 a.m. and posted the story on its Web site. Stories in the print editions were "relied on attributed sources ..." Newspapers on the West Coast, including the Los Angeles Times and the Orange County Register, benefited from the time difference. The Times was able to stop its presses just after midnight, according to the managing editor John Arthur, when editors learned that all but one of the 13 miners had been picked up in the town of Tallmanville, Va., mine on Monday morning had perished.

The paper loaded with incorrect stories were called back, and 204,156 newspapers were discarded. A new front page and content story went to press at 12:45 a.m.

While print outlets contend with remaking front pages, television networks, who were forced to amend their broadcasts midstream during Wednesday's predawn hours, testing their abilities to absorb the news along with viewers and defy responsibility to CNN's Anderson Cooper was on the air at 2:46 a.m. Eastern time, discussing how doctors planned to treat the rescued miners, when a woman and her two children rushed out of the church behind him where the community was holding vigil. "Only one made it out alive," Lynette Rohy said in anguish.

"Have you gotten this information?" asked Cooper, who was skeptical, then incredulous, then angry as Rohy explained how she had heard inside the church.

"I don't know how this information could come out that these people are alive. ... It's been misinformation, and it's awful," she said. "All this time, we've been told of a miracle and that's why we're here, and there's no miracle, and it's awful."

By 3 a.m., MSNBC, ABC, and Fox News all were reporting the tragic turn of events. On Wednesday, the networks defended their handling of the story, saying that they had every reason to believe that the information they originally received was accurate.

"It was a very confusing situation," said John Stack, vice president of news gathering for Fox News. "There's no page in the textbook for what we went through last night. There were official or semi-official people repeating the same information until it became perceived fact."

Mark Effron, MSNBC's vice president for daytime news programming who also oversees breaking news during the night, said the network did not just "publish the story in the morning," but sought out multiple confirmations before reporting the report.

James Goldston, executive producer of ABC's Nightline who reported the apparent rescue for East Coast viewers and then broke in live to announce the deaths to West Coast viewers at 2:50 a.m. EST, said correspondent John Donovan had been skeptical of the early news that the miners had been found alive. "We refused to run it until we had specific confirmation that was double, triple, quadruple verified," Goldston said.

Still, many outlets felt their customers deserved an explanation. Dan Sheckel, a reporter with the Chicago Tribune, was preparing a column for today's newspaper explaining how the papers handled the story.

"I sometimes have the sense that readers think we've got the inside channels to the search team and we know everything, and that there's some way we have of crawling along with the search team and to know the honest-to-God true facts and for some reason withheld it," said Wyckiff.

Feds say disaster will be investigated

WASHINGTON — The White House on Wednesday promised a full investigation of the West Virginia mine explosion that killed 12 people.

Congressional Democrats called for hearings to look into both the mine and the handling of the rescue operation and the Bush administration's policies on mine safety.

"We send our prayers and heartfelt condolences to the loved ones whose hearts are broken," President Bush said. "We ask that the good Lord comfort them in their time of need."

He praised West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin "for showing such compassion" during the crisis and "for standing with us and leading the way to save those miners for showing such courage."


"The fact that the Sago Mine had a long history of serious safety violations demands that Congress learn why mining wasn't done to keep these workers safe," Miller said.

Wbensguide Wednesday. The correct news came too late for many morning editions.