How the papers got it wrong in W.Va.

Between midnight and 3 a.m. Wednesday, the news out of West Virginia went from bad to great to devastating.

Depending on when newspapers went to press, their headlines reflected one of those three moods. Also depending on when they went to press, they might have published an inaccurate story.

We did.

Thirteen men had been trapped in a coal mine since Monday. The body of one was found Tuesday evening. Shortly before midnight, word came that the 12 others were found alive. The information was confirmed for reporters by the governor of West Virginia and miners’ family members. Three hours later, mine officials said the information was wrong. Only one of the 13 miners had survived.

The speculation is that someone overheard a phone call, misinterpreted what was said, and spread word that the miners were alive.

The Journal and Courier went to press about 1 a.m. and then remade a couple of pages about 30 minutes later to give you results from the Orange Bowl, which went into triple overtime before Penn State got its win over Florida State. We had delayed our usual press time by 30 minutes in an effort to get in news about the Orange Bowl.

When we decided to push our deadline back for football, we didn’t know there would be breaking news from West Virginia.

On Wednesday, we took a few calls and answered a number of e-mails from readers who wanted to know how we could be so callous, irresponsible and incompetent. Don’t we check our facts, asked one.

In this case, the news came from The Associated Press, which has had reporters in Tallmansville, W.Va., since Monday. The Associated Press was there when family members began spreading the news that the miners were alive. The AP was careful in its initial reports, noting that neither the mining company nor the governor’s office had confirmed the news. But about 12:30 a.m., the governor did confirm the report. The story we used moved across the wires about this time.

Because of the processes required to turn an image on a computer screen into a printed page, our newsroom has to send its final pages (electronic versions) 20 to 30 minutes before the press can start.

We can remake pages after the press starts and substitute them for the earlier pages, as we did with the Orange Bowl.

But by the time the updated news came about the miners, our press run was over. The papers were out the door and on their way to readers. We did update our Web site this morning to give readers the devastating news about the miners’ deaths.

We weren’t the only newspaper caught with bad information. The late editions of The Indianapolis Star, Philadelphia Inquirer and Chicago Tribune were among those that reported that 12 had survived the mine explosion.

Papers with earlier deadlines missed the embarrassment. They carried stories before the faulty information was disseminated. The early editions of The Washington Post and The Indianapolis Star, for example, reported that one man was dead and that 12 others were feared dead.

I don’t blame those who ridicule and insult the media for getting the story wrong. And there may be lessons learned from analyzing how it happened.

But I’m not sure what I would have done differently — or had the AP do differently.

Doll, executive editor, can be reached at 420-5242 or jdoll@journalandcourier.com

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E-mail: editor@journalandcourier.com
Fax: 420-5246
Mail: 217 N. Sixth St., Lafayette, IN 47901