

Headlines on deadline

Print media coverage
of the coal mine explosion
and deaths of 12 men
at Sago Mine

January 2006

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Headlines on deadline

On the first working day of 2006, two crews of coal miners entered the Sago Mine near Tallmansville, W.Va. Just 30 minutes later, an accident had trapped 13 of them deep underground.

Through the eyes of the media, the world watched as rescuers raced the clock in an all-out effort to bring the trapped workers safely back to the surface.

In newsrooms around the U.S., editors also raced the clock to get the most-recent news of the accident to their readers. This presentation illustrates, without making judgments, what can happen when communications break down and seconds and minutes slip away.

Monday, Jan. 2, 2006

6:00 a.m.	Two crews prepare for work at the Sago Mine in Tallmansville, W.Va., after a two-day holiday shutdown. The crews enter the mine in small rail cars, about 10 minutes apart.
6:30 a.m.	The second crew encounters a blast of hurricane-force air from an explosion somewhere ahead of them. The miners abandon their rail car, put on respirators and make their way back toward the surface. They are met by rescuers and finish the trip on another rail car. Somewhere deep within the mine are the 13 members of the first crew.
6:00 p.m.	The first search-and-rescue teams are allowed to enter the mine, beginning a slow and meticulous journey that will eventually take them nearly three miles underground. Families and friends of the miners have gathered at a church near the mine. Local and national media are on the scene

Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2006

	Overnight, a hole was drilled from the surface into a part of the mine beyond where the explosion was believed to have occurred. Air samples are found to contain dangerous levels of toxic gases
9:00 p.m.	The body of a member of the first crew is found near an abandoned rail car. That information is announced.
11:45 p.m.	Word is received at the surface that rescuers have found the remaining 12 members of the crew and that all are alive. The information is relayed to the families and the media. Church bells ring out as the families begin celebrating. Media begin spreading the word.
12:30 a.m.	Company and government officials learn that the first message was garbled. Only one miner is alive; the others are dead. That information is not made public.
2:30 a.m.	Families are told that rescuers have found 11 bodies and one survivor. Media send out revised reports.

Progression of AP headlines

Source: Editor & Publisher magazine

11:59 p.m.	Families say 12 W.Va. miners found alive
12:34 a.m.	12 trapped W.Va. miners found alive
2:49 a.m.	Singing erupts after miners found alive
3:06 a.m.	Families say 11 of 12 W.Va. miners are dead
4:08 a.m.	Miners reported alive after blast are dead
5:26 a.m.	12 confirmed dead in W.Va. mine blast
6:58 a.m.	Feds vow full probe of W.Va. mine blast
7:20 a.m.	Jubilation [sic] turns to anger, outrage

Wednesday, Jan. 4, 2006

Randal McCloy Jr., the lone survivor of the explosion, undergoes treatment in a hospital in Morgantown, W.Va. He is comatose and in critical condition.

Company and government officials try to explain how the erroneous report occurred and how it was disseminated before it could be confirmed, as well as the reasons for delaying the release of the updated information.

Newspapers across the country try to explain to readers how the “12 alive” reports made it onto many of their front pages.