

CHILE IS A STORY ABOUT JOURNALISM'S FAILURE

LE 17 OCTOBRE 2010 JEREMY LITTAU

Jeremy Littau, an American journalist, criticizes the way the Chile mine story was covered by media: was it necessary to spend so much money and to send so many journalists for that event?



Jay Rosen, as usual, beat me to the punch with his thoughts this morning on the Chile mine story. This is why I tweet more than I blog; sometimes you just say it and fill in the gaps later. I did a bit of mini-ranting last night, at least. Anyway, **Rosen**:



A big story and a great story, but does 1300 journalists covering the Chilean miners have anything to do with reality?



I've been mulling this post for a few days and have wrestled with the cadence. I don't do the curmudgeon thing very well, but this story has me feeling really, *really* cranky.

The **Chile miners story** is a wonderful news story about perseverance, ingenuity, working together, and triumph. That is what most of the world is seeing, and I know a lot of us have been hoping for a safe rescue. But this story depresses me.

In an era of closed foreign bureaus

I see a story about journalism. To know that **1300 journalists** have descended on this mining town to cover a worldwide story is a little disconcerting in an era of closed foreign bureaus and budget cutbacks. Many might question that thought given the intense interest in the story; my Twitter and Facebook feeds were lit up last night as the first miner descended ascended up the 2000-foot shaft. But the public doesn't think in terms of resources when it consumes journalism; it only has what it has in front of it.

Thirteen-hundred journalists – imagine what we could do with that. Journalism organizations are pouring resources into this as if it is the **Baby Jessica** 1980s and '90s, with fatter newsrooms and no Internet. Really, does every major TV news network in the U.S. need a camera crew and reporters out there? In an era of satellite feeds and citizens on the ground

who can pipe in material, does the U.S. media have to parachute in on a story like this?

A human interest story with a small impact on a large population

Foreign stories are worth covering, but let's be honest that this is more a human interest story with a small impact on a large population than something such as the earthquake that occurred in that same country of Chile just eight months ago. The proportion of response to story impact is perhaps the best illustration of the insanity we seen in media business choices today.

The choice to shuttle all these resources to Chile does have an impact on what we cover at home. My former Mizzou colleague **Lene Johansen** posted a **heart-wrenching story** earlier this week about poverty in Philadelphia in the wake of the Great Recession. Heart-wrenching because of the details, but more so because this kind of thing isn't on our radar everyday. Poor people don't buy newspapers. Significant resources go to cover whatever shiny object the American consumption class will chase these days. The Chile miners story, while interesting and heart-warming, is really just the flavor of the week, another form of reality TV in the eyes of the business executives making the call of what resources to spend where.

The actual story has zero effect on people in the U.S. with real problems; it's a wonderful distraction, which would be fine if it was distracting us from coverage of bigger problems at home. But that's not the reality of this reality TV news story.

Chilean journalists could have covered it

Cover it, but let's keep some perspective here.

The biggest problem here is there is not really a need to devote so many resources to this because of the wonderful advances we have made in technology. I have barely tuned in to the coverage on my TV or online. I have my Twitter feed; I knew when the first miner emerged at roughly the same time everyone else did. We have Chilean journalists – both professional and citizen – who are already embedded in that community and region who can cover it well. It's not our story. Perhaps the biggies like the NYT should be there, but is it necessary to send anyone else? Do the news networks – cable or otherwise – really need their own camera crew and on-the-ground reporters for this?

The public sees a great story, and that's fine. It really is. But on the media side, I see an industry chasing hits and page views by wasting valuable economic and human capital. Let's cheer for the miners, but let's not forget that there is suffering here at home and it should get the same, if not more, resource allocation.

Will we band together and help out the poor and downtrodden here, or is this Chile story really just a welcome break from our routine of ignoring those suffering among us? Journalism has a part to play in how we answer this question.

Update at 4:05 EDT on 10/14: Apparently the criticism is more than theoretical. Check out this news story from the NYT about how the coverage **will constrain budgets for coverage of other things at the BBC**. Hope those one-day page views was worth it! Thanks to **Carrie Brown-Smith** for the tip.

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Post initially published on **Jeremy Littau' blog**, translated into french on **OWNI**

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