

Chile mine rescue: lessons in newsworthiness

 By [Tara Turkington](#)

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As the last Chilean miner was pulled out of the ~~Phoenix~~ *Fenix* rescue capsule this morning, millions of people watching on televisions around the world cheered with relief and jubilation. This has - technically speaking - been one of the greatest news stories of all time. Here's why.



The stuff of legend

There are seven news values that define whether any story will be newsworthy or not. Any one of these can make something a big story, provided the power of the value is strong enough. When you combine more than one of them, you have a big story. When you combine all seven, you have the stuff of legend.

1. Timeliness

Timeliness, which is about when something happens, is the most powerful of all news values. In news, the *present* is the most powerful. It's also by far the most difficult to harness if you're someone looking for news coverage.

Events happen. The immediate future is very compelling, but the future quickly becomes the past. The immediate past is also commanding, but it, too, recedes quickly.

Example: in the build-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, we were all excited for about two years before the actual event, more and more so as it drew closer, until the country was beside itself come the opening match on 11 June 2010. Come 12 July, it was over and it's now getting further and further away. When did you last see an item on the news or an article about the world cup? Its timeliness has passed, so it's over as a news story.

Because it took 70 days to rescue all the miners, the news value of timeliness in the Chilean mine rescue story was unusually extended (more often a mine disaster is over in a day or two). The actual final acts of rescue, when the 33 miners trapped underground were hauled to the surface one by one in a capsule that may have looked a little Heath Robinson-ish, but did the work it needed to, took just short of ~~two days~~ one day.

That's a long time to leverage the present - similar, perhaps, to the way whoever planned the 9/11 attacks of 2001 was able to leverage the present to maximum effect by having four hijacked planes in the air at overlapping times. As the TV cameras were pointed towards the first of the Twin Towers as it burned, the world watched as a second plane flew into the second tower. If you missed the first or third or 10th miner being pulled out, you might have caught the 30th or 33rd miner coming to the surface.

This story gets 10/10 for timeliness.

2. Impact

The news value of *impact* is all about how many people the particular story affects. Here, the impact at its nucleus was relatively small - just 33 individuals. Nothing close to the hundreds of thousands of people who sometimes get killed in tsunamis, earthquakes and floods (or even to the 3000-odd killed in the 9/11 attacks).

More widely, though, there were hundreds of people involved in planning and executing the rescue. Broader than that was the symbolic impact in a story that had universal resonance.

The media always love a story about triumph over adversity, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Who could have watched those miners coming out and not had tears in their eyes? Who could not have thought about this story, and empathised with the miners, their families, even their bosses? Whose spirits could not have soared as *Phoenix Fenix* rose up each of the 33 times (and then, just as it was all over, again and again, bringing up the rescuers)?

It's a story young kids will tell their grandchildren, a story that is already legend.

8/10 for impact.

3. Prominence

On the morning of 5 August, 2010, when the 33 miners descended to work their doomed shift, no-one had ever heard of Florencio Avalos or Luis Urzua. Today, the first and last miner out are world famous.

Their *prominence* was created almost overnight: in the few hours before they were hauled to the surface and in the moments they first blinked behind their dark glasses into the light, the BBC and Sky and news organisations around the world made them household names. They will be famous for the rest of their lives, prominent wherever they go or in whatever they do.

The fact that Chile's most prominent citizen, President Sebastian Pinera, stayed throughout the rescue operation and welcomed each miner personally to the surface also added to the newsworthiness of the story. His glamorous wife, Cecilia Morel, clad in a white, tailored boiler suit, also contributed a little to the newsworthiness of the piece.

10/10 for prominence.

4. Proximity

Proximity is about where something happens. It can expand or contract, depending on how powerful the other values are.

In this case, the proximity was global. People around the world were hooked as they watched the operation.

Although Chile is generally not a country South Africans would show much interest in, it captured our attention, half a world away (it helped that our very own Murray & Roberts was involved in the rescue operation, which contributed to expanding the story's proximity for us). It's what we watched on TV late at night and early in the morning; it's what we talked about over coffee; what we tweeted about and "liked" on Facebook.

8/10 for proximity.

5. Novelty

Perhaps, more than any of the other news values, this story's most powerful news value was *novelty*. Thirty-three miners survived 69 days underground with 48 hours' worth of rations between them, and all survived pretty much unscathed. That's unusual; no, unique.

They were lost to the world for 17 days before their families - and TV and Internet audiences - knew they were alive. That's unique.

There were three shafts sunk deep into the earth, each racing one another to reach the miners first. That's unique.

There were so many surprises in the story that it's going to make a great movie, in much the same way as *Apollo 11* was arguably as good on film as when the first moon landing happened in real life.

10/10 for novelty.

6. Danger, violence and conflict

The sense of danger in the story lasted for three months, through the operation, and continues today, with us not exactly sure when the miners will all be released from hospital and if they really are okay (one has been diagnosed with pneumonia and several with infections in their teeth, for instance).

And there was potential for violence and conflict - among the miners as their resources dwindled and they stared death in the face and, one would imagine, as they bickered a little over who would be first up, last up, and what order they went up in between.

10/10 for danger.

7. Sex and scandal

And, finally, *sex and scandal* always sell, and there was a hint of this.

While underground, it emerged that Yonni Barrios, the 21st miner to be rescued, had both a wife and a mistress. Both claimed to be the woman he was missing in his hot, underground prison. But it was to be his mistress, Susana Valenzuela, who would meet him as he emerged from the capsule. Marta Salinas, his wife of 28 years, was MIA.

7/10 for sex and scandal.

So there, in terms of technical news values, is the story of the rescue of 33 Chilean miners. The story scores high on each of the seven major news values that collectively define newsworthiness. It's a remarkable story of human triumph, of heroism, of resilience, of compassion.

It has to go down as one of the greatest news stories of all time.

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