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Why Didn't The Dogs Bark?

News Coverage of Relief Efforts Following Mining Disasters in Appalachian Communities

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Abstract

This study examines patterns of news coverage of five West Virginia mining disasters in local, regional and national news media. It grew out of an effort to follow up an earlier study of relief efforts at the Monongah mine disaster of 1907. One of the principal findings is that local newspapers consistently provided limited coverage of mining disasters and almost no coverage of relief efforts carried on in the wake of disasters. National coverage, by the *New York Times* and regional coverage by the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* reveals a number of persistent themes and some important differences.

Introduction

For the past several years, we have been attempting to gather information on community responses to coal mine disasters in West Virginia. An earlier study examined the Monongah Mine Disaster of 1907, in which at least 361 men and boys (and possibly closer to 500) lost their lives in the nation's worst industrial accident. (Johnson and Lohmann, 1993) In that context, we found a well-organized and well-documented relief effort with the involvement of national social work authorities who were in the region in conjunction with the Pittsburgh Survey which was underway at the time.

In several respects, however, the relief effort at Monongah was singular – due in part to the sheer number of casualties (nearly double that of any other coal mining disaster in U.S. history), the proportion of foreign nationals involved, and the absence of any workers' compensation or social insurance coverage, at the time. More recently, we have been attempting to discover information about the relief efforts following mining disasters in other West Virginia communities. Table 1 shows a partial listing of the most major disasters occurring in West Virginia before the Farmington explosion in 1968 – a critical watershed in the passage of federal mine safety legislation. A similar listing for mining disasters in western Pennsylvania has been identified but was not included in this report. The information in Table 1 can be viewed in the context of Table 2, taken from a 1940 *New York Times* article, which lists 20 major mining disasters in the U.S. between 1900 and 1938.

This study began as an attempt to identify through newspaper accounts the degree of publicity afforded to mining disaster relief efforts in West Virginia. In the course of its development, however, it became increasingly apparent that newspaper accounts do not offer a good source of detailed information about relief efforts or other community responses to mining disasters. Efforts to aid and comfort survivors by friends and neighbors of victims, volunteers and human service professionals have only received the sketchiest mention in press accounts of such disasters.

Coverage of the relief efforts which occur in the wake of every major mining disaster is clearly not part of long-standing journalistic formulae regarding appropriate coverage of disasters for newspapers at all levels. The 1924 Benwood mine disaster coverage by the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* made details of removal of bodies and the activities of undertakers a central focus of its coverage, giving only the briefest mention to the presence of Red Cross volunteers and Sisters of Charity. Following what has become a familiar post-modern preoccupation of the media with their own activities, New York *Times* coverage of the 1968 Farmington mine disaster gave greater attention to the manner in which reporters questions and news conferences upset local residents than it did to relief efforts.

It needs to be remembered here that what we are talking about is news coverage of the violent deaths of nearly 1000 men and boys. Studies of disaster, like newspaper reports, can easily fail to take full account of the personal, family and community tragedies associated with this type of disaster. In all cases, we are speaking here of someone's father or brother or son, someone's neighbor or cousin, or school classmate, and in many cases, their losses are still remembered and mourned in West Virginia communities today.

Local Coverage of Relief Efforts¹

Local newspapers make incidental mentions of locally organized relief efforts in Newburg (1886), Red Ash (1900), Algoma (1902), Coaldale (1905), Monongah (1907), Lick Branch (1909). Slightly more extensive local newspaper accounts for several other disasters provide a bit more information: Relief Funds collected for Rush Run survivors (1905), for example, were reportedly handled by the New River Banking and Trust Company of Oak Hill. The Coaldale site (1905) was said to be covered by the Branwell Accident Company, although details of coverage were not given. In the second Link Branch explosion (1909), relief was reportedly received from Welch and Bluefield. At Elk Garden (1911), widows and dependents were given credit and charity from the company store, and the company was reported to have paid funeral expenses.

At Jed (1912) the Jed Coal Company provided aid for widows and dependents, and at Glen Rogers (1923) we have the first local reports that dependents received state compensation. In addition, \$500 was reportedly left to the dependents of victims who had worked for the company for more than three months. At Bartley (1940), aid came from McDowell County, and there is specific mention in the newspapers of the Red Cross, Salvation Army and the "state compensation department", again presumably worker's compensation. Red Cross and Salvation Army and a "government compensation department" are again mentioned at Osage (1942). Red Cross and Salvation Army are also mentioned in Lumberport (1944), Havaco (1946), and Bishop (1958), while the Salvation Army and the "State Mine Department" are said to have provided aid at Dola (1963).

¹ Thanks are due to Johanna Clausen, Undergraduate Research Assistant of the Regional Research Institute at West Virginia University for assistance and support in gathering the information in this section and Table 1.

There is, generally, a cursory quality to local press accounts of mining disasters: There was, after all, no need to spell out the details of a situation which the entire readership already fully comprehends. Such coverage is generally intended less to report news than to offer clippings for family scrapbooks and to send to distant friends and relations.

End of an Era?

Passage of the workman's compensation law in West Virginia in 1913 may have marked the end of an era with regard to relief efforts in mining disasters. At any rate, the *Post-Gazette* reports in its April 30, 1914 story on the Eccles disaster that "Dr. C.P. Neill, in charge of the welfare work of the mine camp, said today that no charities would be asked for relief, the entire expense to be borne by the company supplemented by the state compensation provision. He is here to arrange for temporary and permanent relief, and declares that the company would provide for liberal compensation and leave no family destitute." Dr. Neill is further identified in that same story as former commissioner of labor in the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor and currently engaged in "the welfare work of the Guggenheim interests of New York." He arrived with the President of the New River Collieries Company from New York City, and also reported that "No expense will be spared by the company in providing for the survivors and the families of those whose lives were lost. The fact that there is a provision in the state laws for the compensation of widows and orphans will not prevent the company from making liberal provision for the distressed."

The old regime of relief, as represented by Monongah, was characterized by the necessity of a broad program of private donations to enable pitifully small annuity payments to survivors who had lost access to regular income, as well as their loved ones. The new regime promised by Neill was for a mixture of (equally small?) company and state indemnities. As part of the new regime also reports of organized disaster relief services by the Red Cross and Salvation Army becomes a regular feature of disaster reports after this time.

Regional and National Coverage

We wanted to get a clearer understanding of the news coverage of mining disasters, and to confirm suspicions – based on examination of the patterns of local coverage – that reporting relief efforts was typically not part of journalistic formulas for disaster coverage at any level. We examined accounts of five West Virginia mine disasters – Monongah, Eccles, Benwood, Bartley and Farmington – in two newspapers – the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, for regional coverage, and the New York *Times* for national coverage. The remainder of this paper is devoted to the results of that examination.

Gendered Divisions of Disaster Relief

A gender-specific division of labor much like that found at Monongah is evident in regional and national press reports of these disasters, with women reported as

providing food and spontaneous emotional nurturing while men are either engaged in direct rescue operations or concerned with financial aid and the long-term future.

Red Cross nurses from Wheeling were said to be stationed at the Benwood mine and are giving all assistance and comfort to the grief-stricken families. (PPG, 4/28/24) "In a single square of Benwood today there are 32 widows, one of whom, a foreign bride of less than a year, on the day of the accident gave birth to a baby. Sisters of Charity from St. John's Catholic church, Benwood, found the woman last night during their rounds of the stricken homes. She is ignorant of the disaster, physicians advising against telling her in her present condition." (PPG, 5/1/24)

At Eccles, "Miss Loata Welch, the Presbyterian home missionary in charge of social welfare work here" was reported by the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* on April 30, 1914 to be assisting with funeral services for the Protestant dead and caring for grief-stricken widows and children.

The New York *Times* and Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* accounts of the Bartley disaster offer two of the few journalistic reports of the role of the sharing of food in rural disasters: According to the *Times*, "on-lookers and rescue squads were fed from a south kitchen manned by Mrs. Alonzo Barnett, 21-year-old mother of four children, whose husband was one of those still in the mine." (NYT, 1/12/40) The *Post-Gazette* had substantially the same account, noting that Mrs. Barnett was "handing out soup, coffee and sandwiches" as one of the "wives and sweethearts of some of the trapped men" who "quickly began helping with the organization of a relief station." (PPG, 1/12/40)

Sob Sisters, Colorful Mountaineers and Fatalism

In addition to capturing such specific details of relief efforts, a number of stock themes are woven throughout newspaper accounts of mining disasters. Two stock themes of newspaper coverage important in this context are the "sob sister" theme which can easily be exploited in the circumstances of any major disaster and the kind of "colorful mountain folk" images which have been so important in the rise of regional stereotypes of Appalachia. (Shapiro, 1978) Both the *Times* and *Post-Gazette* engaged in some sob sister accounts, but the coverage of Appalachian themes was – with a few exceptions – fairly straightforward and free of stereotypical images.

One exception was a focus on fatalism "Attitude is Fatalistic" read the subheading in the *Times* account of the Bartley disaster in 1940. As if to underscore its point, the *Times* reported on a minor who wrote down his own funeral arrangements while awaiting death at Bartley. (NYT, 1/15/40) At Farmington, the theme of fatalism was also evident in the following: "The vigil of about 100 wives, mothers, brothers and sisters of the missing men, who have waited on folding chairs in the company store here, has been marked by a stoic acceptance of the risks of work in the mines. An attitude of fatalistic resignation seems to prevail..." (NYT, 11/22/68)

Nature As Symbol

Another stock journalistic theme of mine disaster coverage is that of nature as a symbol of the unfolding human drama. One such theme might be labeled "even-the-heavens-wept": From Benwood, in 1924, for example, the *Times* reported the following: "As if in sympathy with the frantic hundreds who thronged the streets near the steel company's gates, a heavy rain fell throughout the day. Wives and children of miners, seemingly unmindful of the drenching downpour, stood about in pitiful groups, awaiting news of their loved ones, for whom hope was gradually dying." (NYT, 4/29/24)

Darkness, home and children are also common points of emphasis in disaster coverage, and they come together in this *Times* account from Bartley in 1940: "Lights had burned throughout the night in homes of this isolated community of 2,500 in the heart of the rich Southern West Virginia coal fields. In those homes were 154 children of the trapped men, many of whom were wondering why 'daddy' hadn't come home from work as usual." (NYT, 1/13/40)

Gruesome Detail

The Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* coverage of the Benwood disaster was somewhat less restrained than the *Times*: Phrases like "scorched and crushed bodies" and "scantly clad, wretched women" with "tear-stained faces" standing in "cool, night breezes" with "whimpering urchins clinging to their skirts". Also, because of proximity of Benwood to Pittsburgh, the *Post-Gazette* also provided lists of names of missing and known dead. (PPG, 4/30/24)

The *Post-Gazette* coverage at Benwood was at times singularly preoccupied with death-details. The entire April 30 report, for example, focused on removal of bodies from the mine, the temporary morgue, and the arrival of volunteer undertakers from Pittsburgh and Eastern Ohio. A "special volunteer committee of citizens" was said to be formed and conferring with clergymen about funeral arrangements. Such arrangements are, of course, a necessary aspect of such disasters, but the *Post-Gazette* coverage seems to be singularly preoccupied with such details. On May 1, the *Post-Gazette* reported that a rescue worker (an orphan) turned over a "corpse" who turned out to be the "lifeless remains" of the uncle who had raised him, and whom he believed to be working in another mine at the time.

Media Event

New York *Times* reports provide documentary evidence that the Farmington disaster had become a modern media event in a way that the other previous disasters apparently had not. The *Times* reported that "A swarm of newsmen, television crews, state and Federal mine officials and representatives of the United Mine Workers Union crowded into the Champion store, a cinder block company store here displaying Christmas toys and decorations amid evidence of anguish and grief.

"For the most part, tears were held back by the 50 women and children of the missing men who gathered in quiet groups among the Christmas ornaments and tricycles on display at the store." (NYT, 11/21/68)

In thoroughly post-modern style, the *Times* also made the behavior of the media part of the story. In a report filed Nov. 25, "some relatives of the lost miners reacted in anger during a news briefing when questions were asked concerning what benefits miners' 'widows and families' would get. Some wives broke into tears and left the briefing room. 'We don't want to hear that kind of stuff,' one woman said. A miner at the briefing shouted, 'The hell with this money situation.'" (NYT, 11/26/68)

Civil Disturbance

Such outbursts reported by the *Times* from Farmington in 1968 were mild compared to the civil disturbances reported by the *Post-Gazette* from Eccles in 1914. "Pathetic scenes are being enacted at the mouth of the mine, where women and children, fathers and mothers and wives are gathered, waiting impatiently only for the worst...." (PPG, 4/29/14)

"Thousands of persons crowd about the shaft and people the hill above and every train is bringing in cars jammed with people from nearby villages. Even the roofs of passenger coaches are crowded. Miners volunteering their services in the rescue work, friends, relatives and the curious constitute the crowds that are pouring into town by train, wagon and buggy.

"Police and officers are trying to hold the grief-stricken crowd in check. Women and children rush to the mouth of the shaft and in their frenzy crowd out the workmen from the temporary fences. Wives and mothers and tiny children hang to ropes and fence at all hours of the night and day, pleading to be admitted or crying for rescuers to hasten the work...

"The little town is surrounded on all sides by high hills and at nightfall women with babies in their arms wandering over the hills raised a wail that could be heard on all sides." (PPG, 4/29/14)

The chaotic scenes reported at Eccles appear to be exceptional for mining disasters. In a more typical vein, the *Post-Gazette* reported stoic calm at the site of the January 10, 1940 Bartley explosion in McDowell County: "A crowd of between 1,000 and 2,000 persons stood outside a roped area 300 feet from the mine, warming themselves at bonfires while they settled down to wait for word from the bottom of the shaft." (PPG, 1/11/40) The following day, the *Post-Gazette* included a front-page picture of the same scene.

Politicians Always 'Take Charge'

The report above of Dr. Neill's appearance at Eccles along with the President of the coal company, where he promptly announced that he was "taking charge" of relief efforts, and that the company would make generous provision for the survivors shows

rather clearly that specialists in the fine art of manipulation of public opinion known today as "spin-doctors" were already well established by 1914.

Press reports from Eccles also show that public officials were also already well versed in what Daniel Boorstin was later to call "pseudo-events". In particular, the political inspection tour at which major politicians are interviewed and photographed at the scene of major disasters is not a recent phenomenon, although the norms have changed somewhat. Indeed, many who have worked in disaster settings recall with dismay or anger the arrival of visiting public officials whose on-the-scene interviews and photo ops often constitute a major disruption to legitimate relief efforts.

In its April 28, 1914 account of the Eccles explosion, the *Post-Gazette* headed an entire section "Governor to the Rescue." In it, the paper reported "A party, including Governor Hatfield, left (Charleston) at 5:45 o'clock for Deepwater, where a special train was made up to take them over the Virginian Railroad to Eccles. The party expected to reach the scene of the disaster by 11 o'clock tonight... Governor Hatfield, a physician himself, and Chief Medical Examiner J. H. McCullough are expected to take charge of the affairs upon their arrival." The account does not indicate what exactly Hatfield and McCullough did to "take charge" of the situation but they clearly wrapped things up in less than a day. The April 29 *Post-Gazette* dispatch states "Governor Hatfield left this evening for Charleston, having been continuously at the mine since 10 o'clock last night." Rather than reporting the governor's success in taking command, however, the article notes demurely, "He assisted in the rescue work."

Sometimes, such efforts by politicians to highlight their concern and involvement in disaster relief can backfire, as they did in 1968, for Governor Hulett C. Smith in Farmington. Like Hatfield, Smith "rushed to the scene" to take charge and almost immediately held a news conference in the stock room of the Champion store in Farmington, which served as media headquarters, according to the *Times*. In that news conference Smith said "We must remember that this is a hazardous business and what has occurred here is one of the hazards of being a miner." (NYT, 11/21/68) He also said no federal help was needed. Smith's comments were interpreted by his political adversaries as suggesting that a few dead miners were the cost of progress and that the federal government should stay out of West Virginia. Smith's comments are still regularly cited nearly three decades later as evidence of political misfeasance.

International and Racial Implications

One of the fascinating aspects of the Monongah mine disaster and the published report of relief efforts was the number of foreign nationals working in the mine at the time – many of whom were sending part of their pay to relatives at home. Many of those same foreign nationals were among those compensated by the Monongah relief fund, giving the relief effort an amazingly international flavor.

Foreign workers are not mentioned in press coverage of the latest disasters at Bartley and Farmington, although they are a factor at Benwood and Eccles. One such mention is the pregnant "foreign bride" located by the Sisters of Charity mentioned in the May 1 story mentioned above. In its May 3 report, the *Post-Gazette* also reported in the

last paragraph that "Representatives of the Greek and Italian governments have arrived in Benwood to arrange for the interests of the survivors of their nationals." (PPG, 5/3/24)

The *Post-Gazette's* coverage of Eccles also reveals something of the state of race and ethnic relations at the time: In a section entitled "Third of Men Americans" the paper reports: "About one-third of the dead men are negroes, (sic) a third foreigners and the other third, white Americans." The story doesn't indicate which of the thirds it counted as "real Americans" but the implication seems clear.

Eyewitnesses, Unnamed Sources and Expert Testimony

A stock journalistic figure, the unnamed source, appeared in the *Times* account of Bartley as "veteran miners who have witnessed many of these disasters..." (NYT, 1/12/40) Such a source might have grounds for fatalism as well as expertise on disasters, except that timing, geography and the employment patterns and the finite life span of coal miners make it highly unlikely that any individual miner ever actually witnessed many mining disasters, and certainly not many major disasters like Bartley and the others reviewed here, which occurred over a 60 year period.

Over the decades, the unnamed expert witnesses relied upon by newspaper reporters became increasingly clear about the causes of mine disasters and the need to avert future explosions.

By 1940, the *Times* felt able to fill in the background leading up to the Bartley explosion: "The (Monongah) disaster resulted in a concerted effort by the Federal and State governments and mining companies to find means to avert such tragedies. Their efforts have far from stopped such disasters, but that they have been reduced is shown by a comparison of figures in recent years. In 1920, 2272 miners lost their lives; in 1938 deaths had been reduced to 1,128." (NYT, 1/13/40)

By 1968, the shift was much more evident, and the unnamed sources of the *Times* reports were openly critical of both company and government regulatory practices: "The (Farmington) disaster here raised a rash of questions about mine safety procedures...." (NYT, 11/22/68) The Farmington coverage was also more reflective of controversy than any of the earlier accounts. A statement by the CONSOL CEO that the mine was only moderately gassy was openly contested by UMW officials, one of whom called it "extremely gassy". The same 11/22 *Times* report quotes relatives of trapped miners expressing resentment over the known gassiness of the mine, while Tony Boyle, UMW President echoes the line previously adopted by Governor Smith that explosions are inevitable.

Policy Initiatives

National and regional press coverage of mine disasters in West Virginia is an important key to understanding the climate of public opinion in the country at the time. In its use of unnamed sources, the New York *Times* was partly reflecting public opinion and partially molding it. It is critical to understanding the reciprocal connections between mining disasters and the implementation of social insurance (West Virginia Workman's

Compensation Act of 1913) and regulatory legislation (the federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.) West Virginia was the first state to enact worker's compensation for black lung following the Farmington disaster. Certainly, other factors besides press coverage are involved: Legislative initiatives were introduced at both federal and state levels following each of the disasters covered here (and others as well), but often it went nowhere for reasons beyond the scope of this investigation.

Explicit awareness of a connection between mine disasters and public policy is evident in press reports from Monongah on. For example, in its' April 29, 1914 report on the Eccles disaster, the *Post-Gazette* noted that this was the first major mine accident since the West Virginia workman's compensation act went into effect on October 1, 1913. As Dr. Neill's comments quoted above suggest, this legislation was particularly seen by contemporaries as transforming the nature of relief efforts in disasters, and eliminating the need for private, subscription-based pensions.

There were also explicit connections to the issue of public regulation of mine safety from early on. In a sidebar to its April 29 story, the *Post-Gazette* reports that William Green, secretary-treasurer of the United Mineworkers of America, "pleaded with the House Committee on Mines and Mining this afternoon for more liberal appropriations to conserve the life of the miner" at approximately the exact time of the disaster.

Subtle, but major, shifts in assumptions about where to assign responsibility for disasters is evident from Monongah (1907) to Farmington (1968): In the earliest part of the century, explosions were treated as "acts of God" or caused by the acts of omission and commission of particular miners. By 1968, coal companies and particularly the Bureau of Mines were seen as culpable. A *Times* article on November 26, 1968, for example, quotes a top assistant to the Director of the Bureau of Mines as saying , "...it isn't intentional, but we may have slid into complacency." The relation between complacency and fatality is unstated but clear. Another article in the *Times* states the "Federal Mine Safety law is weak... and that only 1/3 of 1 percent of underground coal mines were found free of statutory code violations" during the previous year's inspections. (NYT, 11/22/68) On the strengths of such bureaucratic equivocation, the legislative project of replacing a weak law with a stronger one was anchored.

The coverage of Farmington was undoubtedly a factor in constructing the rhetoric of mining reform which emerged in 1968. Both the *Times* and *Post-Gazette* made frequent references over several days to "the 78 miners now entombed in the Farmington #9 mine", and focused on the record of safety violations at that mine. Within days of the disaster, the *Times* was already predicting that "the loss of lives at Farmington should be incentive for passage of new safety regulations." (NYT, 11/26/68) In this way, mine safety reform emerged as a component of the public agenda of the time.

Whether it is due to the reforms of the 1968 act, good fortune, improving technology, declining mine employment or some other cause, no mining disaster to rival those discussed here in loss of life has occurred since the Farmington disaster of 1968.

Conclusions

Several general observations can be made based on this review of press coverage of the mining disasters at Monongah, Eccles, Bartley, Benwood and Farmington. In this section, we attempt to review and highlight what appear to be the major conclusions:

1. **None of the papers provides sustained coverage of relief efforts or other community responses.** Some of the local, regional and national coverage notes specific details of rescue efforts or particular items which at least confirm the existence of community relief efforts. However, these are almost always brief mentions, rather than sustained coverage. Clearly, in the view of newspapers at various levels and across a half-century of coverage, community relief efforts are not news. The issue of why they are not, however, is an important one, for several reasons: It is an issue of the morale of volunteer disaster relief workers, who find their efforts systematically ignored; For organizations specializing in disasters, like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, which are dependent on public support to carry out their efforts; And for a more complete and balanced picture of what actually goes on in disaster situations – the much vaunted public's "right to know."

2. **Among the regional and national newspapers there were some systematic differences in coverage apparent at all time periods.** In its mining disaster coverage, the *New York Times* lives up to its reputation as the "gray lady" of journalism. The *Post-Gazette* coverage is consistently more flamboyant in the case of each of the five disasters examined. Indeed, at times, it borders on the macabre in its fascination with reporting the clinical details of violent death. In the case of Eccles disaster, the *Post-Gazette* literally reported the movements of a shipment of coffins from their departure in Cincinnati to their arrival in southern West Virginia.

At the same time, because of its regional proximity, the *Post-Gazette* coverage is generally longer-term and more sustained than that of the *Times* (or, curiously, the local papers). In most disasters, including Eccles, which is well outside the circulation area of the Pittsburgh-based paper, it included listings of the names of victims, for example.

3. **Death and Disaster are great journalistic levelers.** The coverage of coal-mining disasters is remarkably free of media-generated Appalachian stereotypes about "rugged mountaineers" as well as racial and ethnic stereotyping. There is, however, considerable gender stereotyping in evidence: It is consistently women and small children who are portrayed as the only ones grieving or distraught. Although several specific examples of male grief are cited (particularly in the Eccles and Farmington

coverage), these are not usually portrayed as "distraught" or "grieving" men. Instead, specific acts of angry outbursts, acting out or erratic behavior are described without characterization. The journalistic formula for mining disasters clearly adheres to the myth that real men are stoic about death.

Interestingly, the Appalachian/rural commitment to family and community ("our own") comes through strongly in most coverage without labeling or stereotyping as such. The two exceptions are coverage of foreign-born mines in Benwood and African-American miners in Eccles. In the latter case, the *Post-Gazette* explicitly denies them status as Americans.

4. **There is a general absence of any type of unruly behavior in the reports.** The scene in Eccles presented in the *Post-Gazette* coverage is quite unlike that portrayed in any other disaster we have observed: Ordinarily, crowds are described with "lonely vigil" imagery: quietly waiting in the rain and darkness, etc. Crowds in Eccles shortly after the explosion are described as unruly to the point of civil disorder.
5. **A major shift in coverage is evident between all of the earlier disasters and Farmington.** By 1968, the press itself has become part of the story and media-narcissism with the media circus surrounding contemporary disaster events is already evident. This may simply be the fact of television coverage. On a more positive note, there is also evidence in the Farmington coverage in both the *Times* and the *Post-Gazette* of significantly more "background" coverage and information than is evident in any earlier coverage.
6. **Press coverage of mining disasters has major implications for understanding the dynamics of public opinion formation.** While point-in-time measures of who was "for" and "against" mine safety legislation at various points, for example, offer a barometer of that issue, newspaper accounts of mining disasters offer a much more detailed and nuanced rendering of the same issue. Each of the five disasters detailed here seems to have provoked at least isolated and sporadic calls for improvements in mine safety and greater regulation of private industry. Coverage of Farmington by the New York *Times*, however, was extended because of the nature of the mine fires which were difficult to put out. *Times* coverage very quickly broadened from detailing the local circumstances in Farmington into sustained coverage of the broader national issue of mine safety and federal regulation.

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Table 1
Coal Mine Disasters in West Virginia, 1886-1968

Town	Date	Fatalities
Newburg	January 21, 1886	39
Red Ash	March 6, 1900	46
Algona	Sept. 15, 1902	17
Rush Run	March 19, 1905	24
Coaldale	January 4, 1906	24
Detroit	January 18, 1906	18
Parral	February 8, 1906	23
Century	March 22, 1906	23
Stuart	January 29, 1907	85
Thomas	Feb. 4, 1907	25
Whipple	May 1, 1907	15
Monongah	December 6, 1907	361
Lick Branch	Dec. 29, 1908	50
Lick Branch	Jan. 12, 1909	76
Elk Garden	April 24, 1911	23
Bottom Creek	Nov. 18, 1911	18
Jed	March 26, 1912	81
Eccles	April 28, 1914	183
Carlisle	Feb. 6, 1915	22
Layland	March 2, 1915	119
Boomer	Nov. 30, 1916	23
Yukon	Dec. 15, 1917	18
Glen Rogers	Nov. 6, 1923	27
Yukon	March 28, 1924	24
Benwood	April 28, 1924	109
Barrackville	March 17, 1925	33

Table 1
Coal Mine Disasters in West Virginia, 1886-1968

Jamison	Jan. 14, 1926	19
Eccles	March 8, 1926	19
Everettville	April 30, 1927	97
Yukon	May 22, 1928	17
Macbeth	Sept. 2, 1936	10
Macbeth	March 11, 1937	18
Bartley	Jan. 10, 1940	91
Osage	May 12, 1942	56
Pursglove	July 9, 1942	20
Lumberport	March 22, 1944	16
Havaco	Jan. 15, 1946	15
Farmington	Nov. 13, 1954	16
Bishop	Feb. 4, 1954	37
Bishop	Oct. 27, 1958	23
Craigsville	Oct. 28, 1958	14
Holden	March 8, 1960	18
Dola	April 25, 1963	22
Farmington	Nov. 20, 1968	78

Table 2

Major Twentieth Century Mining Disasters in the U.S.

Involving More Than 100 Deaths

(As reported by the *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1940)

Scofield, UT	May 1, 1900	200
Coal Creek, TN	May 19, 1902	154
Johnstown PA	July 10, 1902	112

Table 1
Coal Mine Disasters in West Virginia, 1886-1968

Hanna, WY	June 30, 1903	169
Cheswick, PA	Jan. 25, 1904	179
Virginia City, AL	Feb. 20, 1905	108
Monongah, WV	Dec. 6, 1907	361
Jacobs Creek, PA	Dec. 19, 1907	239
Marianna, PA	Nov. 28, 1908	154
Cherry, IL	Nov. 13, 1909	259
Littleton, AL	April 8, 1911	128
Dawson, NM	Oct. 22, 1913	263
Eccles, WV	April 28, 1914	181
Layland, WV	March 2, 1915	112
Hastings, CO	April 27, 1917	121
Dawson, NM	Feb. 8, 1923	120
Castle Gate, UT	March 8, 1924	171
Benwood, WV	April 28, 1924	119
Matner, PA	May 19, 1928	195

Table 3
Regional and National News Coverage of
Five West Virginia Mine Disasters

Year	Community	Fatalities	New York Stories	<i>Times</i> Words	Pittsburgh Stories	<i>Post- Gazette</i> Words
1907	Monongah	361	3	3170	20	13467

Table 1
Coal Mine Disasters in West Virginia, 1886-1968

1914	Eccles	183	1	1232	13	7011
1924	Benwood	109	1	490	9	3910
1940	Bartley	91	3	2782	2	1620
1968	Farmington	78	10	7999	13*	6246*

*First 10 days only. Additional coverage after November 30, 1968 not yet tabulated.