

# The Australian media and the Beaconsfield mine rescue

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The extraordinary rescue on May 9 of Todd Russell, 34, and Brant Webb, 37, trapped almost a kilometre underground for two weeks following a massive rock fall at the Beaconsfield gold mine in Tasmania, reveals much about the debased state of the mass media in Australia.

When the tragedy occurred on April 25, taking the life of 44-year-old Larry Knight and entrapping Russell and Webb, the media provided extensive reportage. But this was gradually wound down until it was discovered, five days later, that Russell and Webb were still alive. Suddenly, millions of people throughout the country were rivetted to their television sets, hopeful that the men would be reunited with their families, yet anxious that another rock fall might claim their lives too.

Recognising the dollar value of the remarkable story, media chiefs immediately dispatched all possible resources to Beaconsfield to cover the rescue. Within days more than 200 journalists, photographers and television production crews had arrived in the small town, boosting its population by more than 10 percent and swamping public life.

No doubt the highly-paid television anchors and senior journalists—directly confronted for the first time with the reality of daily life in a mining town—were genuinely concerned about the fate of Webb and Russell and their families. But for the corporate media executives the real priorities were ratings, market share and the advertising revenue that comes with exclusive interview rights.

While estimates on when Webb and Russell could be freed were optimistic at first—a matter of days, it was claimed—the operation was exceedingly dangerous and took longer than expected. Not only were the miners' lives on a knife edge but so were those of their rescuers, whose work could have triggered further rock falls and killed them all.

As the rescue estimates kept being extended, journalists became increasingly aggressive. Urged on by their news directors, journalists, TV camera operators and photographers were instructed to scour the town and find new angles and interviews to “outscoop” their rivals. This meant round-the-clock media harassment of local

residents—adults and children alike—who were simply treated as useful fodder for the insatiable appetite of the media juggernaut. Residents reported that some journalists were even knocking on the doors of family homes late into the night in their quest for material.

At one point, police were called in to investigate reports that a journalist had offered rescue workers an undisclosed amount of money to smuggle a video camera down the mine and film their work. Desperate to steal a march on competitors, the reporter failed to even consider that this might have endangered the rescue mission. Following this incident, mine management introduced compulsory searches of all rescue workers entering the mine, intensifying animosity toward the media and adding to the already tense situation in the township.

At the same time, journalists siezed on every piece of information, no matter how slight, in order to “fill out” their round-the-clock reportage.

After it was revealed that the men were being given a particular energy food, the manufacturer was besieged with media calls about its products. How and why was the product so good? Was the company pleased about the free advertising? Would it use the event to boost its market share? When the trapped miners were given an iPod player to keep up their spirits, the media reported it as “product placement” to die for.

And, of course, there had to be a musical signature. When Australian Workers Union national secretary Bill Shorten dubbed the ordeal “the great escape,” television producers decided that the 1963 Hollywood movie soundtrack of the same name would be the rescue theme song.

It was then discovered that Todd Russell watched Channel Seven's “Sunrise” breakfast program and that verbal messages had been exchanged between the show's anchor David Koch and Russell during the rescue mission. With media competition intensifying, this became a major issue for rival networks. Did this mean that Seven would have the inside running for an exclusive interview? What could the other networks do to counteract its advantage?

The competition for exclusivity reached fever pitch when Webb and Russell finally came to the surface after two weeks underground. Seven's Koch jumped into the ambulance carrying Russell from the mine to Launceston hospital, and the miner gave him his safety badge.

Executives from Channel Nine, owned by the Packer family's PBL, were furious and dispatched network chief Eddie McGuire to the town. He was followed closely by a number of celebrity agents, who flew in and attempted to gain access to the miners. They were after negotiation rights to cut an exclusive media deal, and thus a 20 to 30 percent agent fee for themselves.

The haggling over interview rights began as soon as the miners surfaced and continued unabated over the next six days. Overjoyed by the rescue, the mining community was now confronted with an influx of cashed-up multi-millionaire agents and media chiefs suddenly buying drinks for everyone in the local pub and voicing their "concerns" about the miners' lives and the community's future.

Seven and Nine, the two dominant national television networks, bent over backwards to curry favour with local residents and to persuade the rescued miners to sign up with them. One day after their rescue, Webb and Russell appeared on Nine's "Footy Show," which became a fund-raiser for the Knight family and the local community. Seven's "Sunrise" program responded a week later by holding a special concert in the town to raise money for miners' families and the town.

On Tuesday, Channel Nine announced it had secured the deal with Webb and Russell and would broadcast a two-hour interview special on Sunday entitled "The Great Escape". Exclusive interviews would be published in PBL-owned magazines—*Woman's Day*, the *Australian Women's Weekly* and the *Bulletin*.

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Nine and PBL reportedly paid over \$2.6 million for exclusive rights, an amount the media conglomerate has already recouped in advertising for tomorrow's television interview. In fact, Nine doubled its usual advertising rates, lifting them to \$100,000 for a 30-second spot. With 24 minutes of commercials screened during the two-hour program, the network is expected to rake in at least \$4.5 million.

The miners are also expected to receive additional income after negotiating interviews on the ABC network's "Good Morning America" and "Primetime" programs, with potential multi-million dollar book and movie rights deals expected in the US over the next weeks.

Having signed on the dotted line with Nine and PBL, Russell and Webb and their families were immediately

quarantined from all other Australian media outlets. Plans for Russell's mother to appear at Seven's "Sunrise" fundraising concert on Wednesday were quashed by Nine and all members of the Russell and Webb families banned from attending the live broadcast. Russell was even prevented from inviting "Sunrise" hosts to his home for a farewell morning tea and told in no uncertain terms that Nine would tear up its deal if he did so.

According to reports, Russell and Webb will announce that a substantial component of the money from these arrangements will be used to assist Larry Knight's family and the future welfare of the mining town.

The rescued miners no doubt deserve whatever payments they can extract from the corporate media for their families and the Beaconsfield mining community. But the money, and the media accolades, will not reverse or put a stop to the dangerous and life-threatening conditions prevailing in mines and workplaces throughout the country as a direct result of company, government and union attacks on industrial health and safety.

Miners can also rest assured that the friendly backslapping and "earnest concern" of corporate media executives, celebrity business agents and television anchors is simply part of the necessary wooing to guarantee Russell and Webb's cooperation in the production of a marketable, high-value "product".

Once every last dollar is extracted from the Beaconsfield rescue, the media and its high-flyers will simply move on and the daily lives of miners—their hopes and fears and their difficult day-to-day struggle to survive—will simply be ignored.

Moreover, if anyone has any illusions that current media largesse is an indication of a new-found concern for working people we issue the following warning: as soon as the Beaconsfield miners or any other section of the working class take up an independent struggle for jobs, wages, health and safety, or to address the myriad social issues now confronting workers across the country, the "affable" media reportage will be quickly transformed into the usual hostile invective.



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