Mike Wallace: 1918–2012

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

I was not surprised when I heard that Mike Wallace was dead at 93. The famous “60 Minutes” interrogator had been in failing health for some time at a care facility in New Canaan, Conn.

The end came Saturday. CBS announced the news on the Sunday Morning show. I thought Mike would have liked the timing – just hours before the weekly “60 Minutes” broadcast. The news could not have been more timely. There had been years to prepare for this hour and do justice to one of the country’s best-known broadcast journalists.

But there was no real obituary. Morley Safer said a few deeply felt words, then told us the show would give the life and legacy of Mike, the full treatment, next Sunday – a week away!

I'm sure, like many others, I was baffled and disappointed. News organizations are supposed to be ready for such moments. You could bet a paper like the New York Times would not have been unprepared – and it wasn't. The news broke too late for Sunday's Northern California edition but there it was on Monday morning's front page: "Mike Wallace, 1918-2012: Fierce '60 Minutes' Interrogator Who Didn't Blink.'"

Under a picture of Mike, the caption read: "Mike Wallace hurled fierce questions for more than 50 years." Inside a full page of text and pictures rounded out the record. The San Francisco Chronicle also caught up with the story on Monday morning.

I wondered: Has "60 Minutes" suffered deep cuts in budget and staff as so many others in the media? Was the absence of a timely obit on the show's marquee performer connected to downsizing?

Instead of the life and times of one of its own reporters, "60 Minutes" devoted the hour to a seminar on Europe's debt crisis, an inconsequential piece on the sport of polo and a fine story on a symphony orchestra in the Congo.

All could have waited on the first Sunday after the death of its star journalist who, over a span of more than 40 years, helped make “Sixty Minutes” perhaps the most successful show in television history.

A week in the news game is a millennium. By then Mike’s story could be deader than a door nail.

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