I believe that communications during a disaster requires improvement between all people, whether it is a family member who is directly affected by the outcome, or whether it is the media yearning to be the first to cover the story. Five main groups of people can be identified in seeking information at any disaster, including the Sago Mine Disaster; these groups include: families and friends of the missing people or in this case the miners, volunteers, media, officials, government agencies, and the public. The communication could have been improved between all of these groups during the Sago incident.

First, the families and friends of the miners should have been receiving hourly updates from the mining officials from the very beginning. During the first day and part of the second, there were several hour spans between briefings and this caused anger and frustration among the families. After waiting for about thirty-six hours, the officials finally switched it to hourly updates after the families expressed their hurt feelings that it seemed like the media was receiving information before they were. Even if there is no change, it should be voiced at the briefing to keep the families informed. That way the families know that you are still working and trying very hard to rescue their loved one even if they have nothing new to add. After the officials started the hourly updates at Sago, several families said thank you even when the official said that nothing had changed yet. I also think the families should have been informed immediately that nothing was confirmed saying that the miners were alive, and they definitely should have been notified as soon as the officials confirmed they were dead an hour later. There
was no reason to wait and let these people celebrate for three hours. The officials should have at least said that they thought there was a communication error and please stand by for further information regarding the conditions of the miners.

I believe the volunteers also needed to be better informed. First of all, the Red Cross should have utilized a local list of Red Cross workers in the area to help, that way the first group of workers could have had a break sooner. Secondly, there should have been walkie-talkies that the Red Cross members could have used to remain in contact with one another. It would also have been useful to use these to warn us when the officials were coming for a briefing. They would not have to say good news or bad, but just let us know, so we could try to start making our way into the sanctuary to position ourselves throughout the church. The problem at Sago was that the news of the officials arriving got to a few people, but not to all. Third, there should have been Red Cross training prior to the disaster to teach us how to deal with the media and what we were allowed to say and what we could not. After a brief incident of the media seeking a Red Cross worker for an interview, one person said that they took off their Red Cross vests at other national disaster events before they left the building, so the press could not identify them with the Red Cross. This removal of the vests before leaving was put into place, but this kind of information should have been shared before the disaster. I know that I never knew before this disaster that there was a national public affairs person from the Red Cross that completed most of the Red Cross media interviews.

The media also has to be controlled at disasters, while keeping into consideration that they also have the freedom of the press. I think that the media should be able to cover the story; however, there should be a set rule that you can only come so far, and if you trespass than you can be removed from the scene. Most of the media followed this wish, but one news station
barged into the church with the cameras rolling. I also think that the press should be more considerate when trying to obtain an interview. My friend has got endless emails and calls on her cell phone to do an interview with this show or this program. There should be control over how this contact information gets out, because she never gave this information to anyone. I also think that there should be a wait time, such as at least twenty-four hours after a disaster, before the press is allowed to contact the families affected by the disaster. One family was woken up at 7 a.m. when they had just went to bed around 6 a.m. after being up for forty-eight hours and receiving the news that their loved one would never return home with them. I think this is inappropriate and inexcusable. Let the families at least sleep a few hours and identify their loved one’s body before the media can start pursuing them for an interview. The news had already had the story and the official details know at the time, so the interviews are just extra additions. The last thing I wanted to state about the press was that they make sure all the data is verified before they print or announce the details. If this was done, it could have stopped some of the grief the community and others felt of going to bed after they heard they were alive on the television news cast and then waking up and saying that they were all deceased except for one.

I think the officials need to make sure that there is communication to the families. One official should be designated to come back and report to the families every hour. The officials should have also been the ones to tell the families that they were not sure if the information was correct immediately. I know that even emergency response teams knew that the miners had perished, but were told not to say anything just yet. The officials also need to set up a tighter control command center, where information cannot leak out and make certain that the people within the command center are responsible enough to handle their job. They should also ensure that the workers in the command center do not have a loved one in the disaster, to prevent the
likelihood of them grabbing a cell phone and calling someone with unconfirmed data. Cells phones should not be allowed anywhere near the command center.

The government agencies are another source that should be utilized in a disaster. The government agencies should set up a chain of command of who is the top person, who meets with the media, who controls the press, and so on. This way it is pre-established before another disaster clarifying who will be in control of what, whether it is a federal official or the local mine owner.

The public also has a right to know what is going on. Most of Buckhannon received information from the news coverage, just like anyone else. The local courthouse also took messages where individuals could list their name and number, and the court house would call them back if the church needed anything donated for the miners’ families. I thought this was a great idea; however, I think this main contact should be predetermined in a plan before hand.

I think one item that needs to be done next time is to confiscate the cell phones before the individual is allowed to gather in the briefing area during a disaster to decrease the risk of spreading false information. I believe that all the cell phones were collected at the church where families gathered during the Alma Mine accident and it worked well to prevent misinformation occurring. I also think that better underground communication needs to occur. The mishap started within the mine between the second and third rescue group. If the communication was better, this may have never occurred. I think that the mine companies should invest in high technology communication equipment to better hear the people on the other end. I also think the companies should invest in tracking devices so they are better able to see where the individuals are. If the companies know where the miners may be and there was no danger of explosion, they
could drill a hole next to them or find another way of allowing communication directly to the miners. These devices would also accomplish a faster rescue.