

Multi-agency operations: cooperation during flooding

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Abstract

This paper presents an investigation of command and control during Multi-Agency Operations and describes a study of the successful combined military and civilian defence of Walham electricity substation from rising floodwater in July 2007; widespread flooding of the English county of Gloucestershire meant that the emergency services were unable to cope and a formal request for military aid was made. The purpose of this study was to explore:

- How the context of the situation forces responding agencies away from formal structures and procedures;
- How command intent is managed across ad hoc and fragmented systems;
- How technology could be used to support multi-agency operations.

Our findings are presented in relation to the concepts of Command Intent and Situation Awareness and we suggest that the development of a deeper, shared understanding of the relevant factors involved in an incident is required, but that this is effortful to achieve and likely to be harder to support with contemporary networking technologies. We also argue that effective coordination requires a high level of trust between responding organisations, as the ‘problem space’ is likely to extend beyond the expertise of any one group and they are reliant on each other’s expertise.

Introduction

Multi-agency incident response: the need for cooperation

Large-scale civil emergencies (also known in the UK as Major Incidents) tend to require a multi-agency response, as no single agency has the expertise or the equipment to implement a fast and appropriate response single-handedly. Whilst personnel from each emergency service are trained to deal with a variety of situations, each service specialises on a particular sub-set of the response. For that reason the specialist skills and training of several different agencies may be required at a Major Incident in order to rapidly resolve the problem. In spite of the difficulties associated with such large scale disasters and often considerable individual acts of courage in the face of danger, an overall lack of coordination between responding agencies is an enduring feature of multi-agency operations (Smith and Dowell, 2000). The multi-agency responses to two recent crises - the South Asian Tsunami