Communications in crisis: the politics of information-sharing in the UK’s Covid-19 response

Dan Sage, Chris Zebrowski and Nina Jorden

Introduction

Since its restructuring at the turn of the century, UK Civil Contingencies has promoted information-circulation as the primary means of binding together multi-agency emergency response assemblages. Breaking from the top-down hierarchical diagram of governance which characterised Civil Defence, a more agile and resilient approach to emergency response was envisioned to address the forms of threat anticipated in the 21st century (Zebrowski 2016). Key to this new design was the role of information circulation in enhancing collaboration within and across responder agencies. Enhancing quality and access to information would permit decision making power within emergency events to be devolved to local responders. Rather than imposing command and control from the top-down, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) would permit emergency responses to self-organise from the bottom-up: promising to improve the speed and efficiency of emergency responses (Zebrowski 2019), while also inspiring myriad critiques of the professed ‘neoliberal’ responsibilization of emergency response.

Viewed from our ongoing qualitative research within the UK’s Covid-19 response it is clear that this informational vision of emergency response has fundamentally broken down. The calamitous management of the response in the UK has been defined by centralised, top-down decision-making and serious impediments to the free flow of information between different levels of government and emergency responders. While such propensities are far from a new aspect of UK resilience practice (Sage, Fussey, and Dainty 2015), their occurrence has intensified and expanded during Covid-19. This is perhaps all the more notable given the UK’s efforts over the past decade to position itself at the vanguard of a professed new resilience paradigm of ICT, centring around the primary object of analysis of our research and analysis here: a collaborative emergency response platform called ResilienceDirect.

In this short contribution, we reflect briefly on how this informational vision of emergency response has been undermined within the UK response to Covid-19. We argue that the re-emergence of command-and-control approaches to emergency governance has marginalised the role of local responders and undermined the effectiveness of the UK’s Covid-19 response.

Our analysis is informed by interviews we have conducted with 41 emergency response professionals involved in the UK Covid-19 response between August and December 2020. A concluding section will reflect on the implications of this analysis for emergency policy and understandings of neoliberal resilience and security.

Assembling an informational emergency response

In the UK, the National Resilience Standards position ResilienceDirect (RD) as the principal information infrastructure underpinning emergency response (Cabinet Office 2020). Multiple local and national agencies involved in a response are expected to share information through this
secure platform. ResilienceDirect allows information from multiple sources to be collated together into a Common Operating Picture (COP) and circulated to all agencies intervening in a response – ensuring that everyone is ‘on the same page’. The realisation of a common vision of the event is understood to improve the cohesion of the response assemblage and allow for the devolution of decision-making through the principle of ‘subsidiarity’ wherein decisions should be taken at the ‘lowest appropriate level, with collaboration and co-ordination at the highest necessary level’ (Cabinet Office 2013a, 12). The vision of a decentralised free and frictionless plane of information exchange is said to facilitate ‘local accountability’ (Cabinet Office 2020, 2) as well as a more flexible and effective response (Cabinet Office 2013b) by speeding up decision-making, improving role allocation and overcoming geographical and organisational boundaries to collaboration (cf. Hu and Kapucu 2016).

During the Covid-19 response, ResilienceDirect has been utilised by over 80,000 users across the UK emergency response community. Many users have undoubtedly found ResilienceDirect a beneficial platform to share information and collaborate. Indeed, one interviewed senior local-government liaison officer referred to ResilienceDirect as the ‘gold thread for linking up everything’ while a local emergency response manager similarly emphasised how it helps them establish the ‘single truth’ to make decisions. But many others have told us of numerous problems encountered in accessing vital information in the context of the Covid-19 response:

So we’ve had like a very long period of no information on what we should be planning for other than figure out for yourself and understand what your own impacts are and try and guess . . . which is quite unusual . . . We’ve missed not having clear guidance from government as to what they think . . . but that hasn’t filtered down to us . . . to the point we obviously had to come up with our own modellings.

So why has the technocratic vision of free, frictionless information exchange and collaboration as pronounced in policy (Cabinet Office 2013a, 2013b, 2020) fallen apart within the Covid-19 response?

**The failure of an informational response**

One of the principal barriers to the operationalisation of this new diagram of response has been the persistence of command-and-control architectures throughout UK Civil Contingencies. While the binary of top-down/bottom-up may be useful for analytic purposes, the reality of UK resilience practice has long remained a mix of the two (Sage, Fussey, and Dainty 2015). Hierarchies abound – within response frameworks (Gold, Silver and Bronze), governmental structures (local, devolved administrations and central government) and within specific agencies (e.g. the police being more hierarchical than say ambulance services). The reality is that this new diagram has been birthed within an institutional environment still very much defined by the legacy of Civil Defence and the militaristic hierarchies which defined it.

As the Covid-19 crisis struck, political power was rapidly centralised though these hierarchies so that command and control became the dominant logic driving the response. For example, the initial worst-case scenarios released to local responders, via ResilienceDirect, from central government in mid-March suggested 80% of the population would contract Covid and 1% would of cases would be fatal. On the basis of this scenario local responders quickly assembled temporary mortuaries and intricate plans for handling excess deaths, while central government discussed with its pool of scientific advisors how to put in place restrictions to limit deaths. These national restrictions were announced on 23 March 2020 without any consultation with local responders. This approach set the tone for the response: local agencies acted on limited information while waiting for announcements from central government about restrictions. As a result, local responses were frequently rendered ineffective, inefficient or simply irrelevant. Although it might be reasonably argued that national restrictions should be taken at the national level, it was clear from the start that many local
decisions, around local restrictions or tracing local outbreaks, were also being taken with little to no input from local responders – defying the principle of subsidiarity. The reason given by our research participants for not sharing information was security: sharing information with local responders’ risked leaks to the media that would generate public confusion, distrust and non-compliance.

Notwithstanding suspicions that leaks have occurred centrally (Guardian 2020), and that in an emergency trust needs to be presumed or it will cease (Roud and Gausdal 2019), this situation has endured throughout the response. Thus, local agencies have been forced to find information from alternative sources. One remarkable example from our dataset includes a group of local government responders sending a police unit to a private Covid local testing site to effectively frighten them into providing them with local testing data to manage outbreaks after being denied access by central government. More frequently, however, local responders, have had to source information through public channels, as one Chief Constable explained: ‘one of the lockdown changes in [our city] was announced by the health secretary tweeting it. I mean, God, you know, how do you respond to that?’ In fact, all the local responders we interviewed explained how they regularly learn about government policy via Google or the gov.uk public website.

In an effort to bridge the void between local responders and central government, ad hoc bodies have been constructed or co-opted by local responders to enhance inter-LRF coordination and directly engage central government. As one respondent told us, ‘we create our own substructures to sort of go to them and show them that they [Government] are not doing their job.’ A specific example of this is the ResilienceDirect National User Group, set-up to solicit feedback on the platform itself, which has been seized as one of the few mechanisms for voicing concerns back to government about failures in the response more widely.

**Conclusion**

In this contribution, we have explored the failure of a particular mode of organising emergency response that is predicated on de-centralised information exchange and technocratic decision-making through the use of ICTs. That this failure has occurred so completely and so rapidly, despite years of policy prescriptions on principles of subsidiarity, collaboration and investments in ICT infrastructure, such as ResilienceDirect, is remarkable but not wholly surprising. The endurance of centralised command and control structures is a key part of the explanation, but it is also important to consider the extent to which this failure of the informational response paradigm matters for emergency policymaking and its outcomes. Drawing simple lines of causality from modes of organising to death statistics is a perilous undertaking but what we do know is that the UK has had one of the highest mortality rates during the pandemic, despite being heralded in 2019 as the world’s best prepared country to rapidly respond to and mitigate an epidemic (GHS Index, 2019). Yet, the fact that the ethos of UK emergency preparedness and response policy was side-lined so easily not only makes it difficult to define let alone evaluate UK emergency policy. Equally, it becomes difficult to understand how any lessons learned from this response might be implemented when policies are so easily eviscerated. More theoretically, what we can learn is that the confluence of neoliberal ideologies of responsibilization which underpin much resilience and security thinking may serve less purpose within an actual emergency event. This perhaps underlines the need for security and resilience scholars to pay less attention to critically dissecting policy discourse and more to how ideologies are composed through complex processes of organising, including those related to the infrastructures and technologies through which affects, such as trust or suspicion, can circulate. These calls are not in fact wholly new (Sage, Fussey, and Dainty 2015) but the complexity, longevity and scale of the Covid-19 response has surely intensified their exigency.
Note

1. This new diagram of emergency management was encoded within a new legislative framework for emergency management (2004 Civil Contingencies Act). Substantial efforts have been made to embed this new paradigm of emergency governance into working practices – through regularly mandated emergency exercises and the introduction of new frameworks of working (METHANE, JESIP).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dan Sage is Reader in Organisation Studies in the School of Business and Economics at Loughborough University, UK. Trained as a human geographer, his research focuses upon theorising materialities, geographies and power within organisational life, particularly in relation to technologies and the built environment. He has published across a variety of international journals and social science disciplines.

Chris Zebrowski is Director of the Centre for Security Studies (CSS) and Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Loughborough University, UK. His research investigates the historical evolution of the rationalities and techniques employed to govern crises. He is currently working as a co-investigator on the ESRC-funded research project, ‘Enhancing the use of ResilienceDirect in the Covid-19 response: a comparative analysis of Local Resilience Forums’ (ES/V010182/1) with Dr Dan Sage (Loughborough University) and Nina Jorden (Loughborough University).

Nina Jorden is a Research Assistant at the School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, UK. Trained in business psychology and human resource management, her qualitative research focuses on designing ways to understand people and technology in the complex reality of organisations and translating these understandings into organisational strategies and inform policy makers. She conducts research in both the private and public sectors.

References

Cabinet Office. 2013a. The Role of Local Resilience Forums: A Reference Document. London: HM Government. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62277/The_role_of_Local_Resilience_Forums-_A_reference_document_v2_July_2013.pdf

Cabinet Office. 2013b. Emergency Response and Recovery: Non Statutory Guidance Accompanying the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, Version 5. London: HM Government.

Cabinet Office. 2020. National Resilience Standards for Local Resilience Forums (LRFs). London: HM Government. www.gov.uk/government/publications

GHS Index. 2019. “Global Health Security Index.” Accessed 20 January 2021. https://www.ghsindex.org/#l-section-map

Guardian. 2020. “Downing Street Launches Covid Lockdown Leak Inquiry.” Guardian. Accessed 20 January 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/oct/31/downing-street-launches-covid-lockdown-leak-inquiry

Hu, Q., and N. Kapucu. 2016. “Information Communication Technology Utilization for Effective Emergency Management Networks.” Public Management Review 18 (3): 323–348. doi:10.1080/14719037.2014.969762.

Roud, E., and A. H. Gausdal. 2019. “Trust and Emergency Management: Experiences from the Arctic Sea Region.” Journal of Trust Research 9 (2): 203–225. doi:10.1080/21515581.2019.1649153.

Sage, D., P. Fussey, and A. Dainty. 2015. “Securing and Scaling Resilient Futures: Neoliberalization, Infrastructure and Topologies of Power.” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 33: 494–511. doi:10.1068/d14154p.

Zebrowski, C. 2016. The Value of Resilience: Securing Life in the 21st Century. London: Routledge.

Zebrowski, C. 2019. “Emergent Emergency Response: Speed, Event Suppression and the Chronopolitics of Resilience.” Security Dialogue 50 (2): 148–164. doi:10.1177/0967010618817422.