



# Risk, rescue and emergency services: The changing spatialities of Mountain Rescue Teams in England and Wales

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of the emergency services in society and, in particular, their role in controlling, mitigating and resolving risk. Using a network approach, Mountain Rescue Teams are studied in order to examine how people, agencies, animals, technology and knowledge are deployed to resolve emergencies. The paper traces the changing nature of risk in rural places and the impact of state regulation on the deployment, spatialities and practices of the emergency services. In doing so, it argues that greater attention should be paid to the emergency services by geographers.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergency services reveal much about society and space. Their work is bound up with the control, mitigation and resolution of risk, which has been conceptualised as systematic ‘way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself’ (Beck, 1992, p. 21) and is increasingly influential in the organisation of late modern society (Beck, 1992; Lyng, 2005). The concept of risk raises questions about what would happen if technologies, knowledge and practices fail but emergencies occur when risks—be they political, social or environmental—are realised. The role of the emergency services is to act immediately in these situations to prevent damage to life, property or environment (Civil Contingencies Secretariat, 2004).

The provision of emergency services is complex and increasingly fractured. Although the police, fire-brigade and ambulance services are commonly thought of as the main emergency services, there are a plethora of organisations—including the military, civil defence groups, lifeboat crews and surf rescue teams—that contribute towards emergency service provision on a professional or part-time basis. This cornucopia reflects, in part, the cause, nature, severity and geography of emergencies but, more significantly, the cultural construction of emergencies and the social organisation of the emergency services. Consequently, a focus on the emergency services has the potential to reveal the spatial politics of the risk society (Bernstein, 1996).

This paper uses the example of Mountain Rescue Teams (MRTs) to provide a lens through which to view and understand the changing spatialities of emergencies and the emergency services. It has three main aims. First it examines how changing perceptions of risk have shaped the formation, histories and geographies of MRTs. Second, it recounts how MRTs are enrolled into hybrid networks of people, animals and technology that aim to resolve emergencies that occur when risks are realised. Finally, it demonstrates how the relative position of MRTs in these networks is influenced by state regulation and the changing perception of risk. Taken together, these strands illustrate the changing spatialities of Mountain Rescue in England and Wales and, more generally, begin to reveal some of the complexities that determine the geographies of the emergency services. The following section conceptualises the emergency services before focusing on the work of Mountain Rescue Teams in England and Wales.

## 2. Conceptualising the emergency services

No two emergencies are ever the same: the exact causes, nature and consequences of an accident are unlikely to be reproduced in the same way in the same place. Consequently, the ways that emergencies are resolved are equally heterogeneous and involve different combinations of actors, equipment and skills operating in very particular environmental circumstances. This complexity can be conceptualised through a consideration of the political, social and economic networks that emerge from, across and between different spaces and environments. These

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combine knowledge, technology, environment and people into particular assemblages at particular points to produce moments of stability in an otherwise fluid society (Murdoch, 2000, 2006; Whatmore, 2002). If these networks fail (Beck, 1992), emergencies occur.

A successful sea voyage, for example relies on the technology of a ship, the skill of its crew and favourable sea conditions. When one of these fails, such as the boat hitting coastal rocks due to a navigational error, this network literally breaks apart (Law, 1994). In the long term, risk technicians may take action to reduce the risk of these events happening again, perhaps through new technologies to improve navigation, but in the 'here and now' of the emergency it is the in-shore life-boat and its crew that will attempt to rescue those in peril on the seas. Emergency services thus work to repair, stabilise or re-establish these networks and are required to do so on, quite literally, an alarming basis. In England alone there were over six million emergency calls for ambulances in 2006/2007 (NHS, 2007).

Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides a helpful starting point to analyse how different actors combine to resolve an emergency (Callon, 1986). ANT examines how diverse actors are enrolled into networks to achieve particular goals through an optimum passage point (OPP) (see Murdoch, 1997; Woods, 1998), in this case the site of the emergency. These networks incorporate both human and non-human actors such as search dogs and human handlers. Specialist technologies are also enrolled to such an extent that particular agencies have emerged to operate them. Ambulance crews, for example, would not exist without their vehicles that, in turn, would be useless without a crew. The nature of an emergency may determine the technologies needed to resolve it and, in turn, which agencies should be deployed to operate them.

These actor-networks operate in relation to, and are even enrolled into, specific environments, be they 'natural', artificial or hybrid places. For example, a surf rescue unit operates on a particular beach and is familiar with its tides, waves and surf. The sea becomes 'known' through the experience and activities of the rescue unit and, at the same time, gives the unit identity and purpose for, without the beach, there would be no rescue unit. More broadly, a need for surf rescues arises because of a cultural engagement between people and the sea in the form of surfing, swimming and other leisure activities. This relationship is blurred as surf rescue teams draw from, as well as support, participants in these hobbies. But if the popularity of a beach is to wane or become unsuitable for leisure through, say, sea-level rise or pollution, then leisure activities and the need for that emergency service will fall. These actor-networks determine, in part, the operational limits of a service and why particular services specialise in certain tasks or places.

Woods (1998) has cautioned against analysing actor-networks without reference to the wider political structures that shape the relative power of actors within them. Thus, risk can be conceptualised as a technology that is deployed by the state to control people and places (Foucault, 1979). In some cases the state has attempted to regulate more tightly particular places and practices to mitigate risk through, for example, health and safety legislation (Denney, 2005). In these cases the emergency services serve as a regulatory branch of the state, reflecting formal discourses of risk, and, consequently, they have the potential to impact significantly on places and the lives of people within them. The police are perhaps the most obvious example here, using a range of technologies and practices to make places safer from crime, often in an exclusionary manner (Herbert and Brown, 2006). In contrast, the emergency services can open up space for wider use. For example, the presence of a life-guard reduces the risk of drowning at a beach, encouraging more people to use it.

The emergency services have therefore been closely regulated by the state and their growth has mirrored the rise of the risk society. In the 18th and 19th centuries emergencies were dealt with on a local, ad-hoc basis by volunteers when the need arose. It was not until the 20th century that permanent, formal, specialised and universal services emerged. In the UK, for example, the National Fire Service was formed in 1938 to standardise fire-fighting practices.

More recently, neo-liberal practices have impacted on risk-management and the emergency services through target-setting and partnership working (Yarwood, 2007). Different agencies have had to negotiate their position in networks of services provision in relation to other services as well legislative and policy frameworks (Woods and Goodwin, 2003; Trudeau, 2008; Murdoch, 2006; Yarwood, 2007). Local partnership-working and alliances have become so important that inter and intra-agency working is now the norm for the emergency services. For example, Search and Rescue Teams in New Zealand have signed a formal agreement with the police to clarify joint working practices (Landsar, 2008). More informally, inter and intra-agency differences are often re-enforced through cultures of working that emphasise team-working, loyalty to colleagues and a certain degree of rivalry between units (Lois, 2003).

Efforts have also been made to pass responsibility for some risks onto private institutions, the voluntary sector or citizens through a greater emphasis on personal responsibility (Beck, 1992; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). Yet the politically reflexive nature of risk (Beck, 1992) means that a whole series of competing discourses and institutions have emerged to challenge hegemonic views of emergencies. Thus Cloke et al. (2005) argue that soup runs provide an 'emergency' service to homeless people through a deliberate, even defiant, desire to operate outside of government structures.

It is important, therefore, to consider both the national, formalised practices of the state and localised, individual practices in the deployment of emergency services (Herbert, 1996). The network paradigm envisaged by Murdoch (2000, 2006) provides a holistic, politically aware yet flexible way of conceptualising this complexity and answers Herbert's (1996) call for a theoretical middle ground to analyse the geographies of emergency services. If society is viewed as a series of political, relational networks that combine humans and non-humans, policies and practices, technology and knowledge in particular constellations between and across particular times and places (Murdoch, 2006), then emergencies—be they political, social or environmental—occur when these fail or breakdown. Their resolution relies on the effective operation of other networks that enable and reflect the operation of the emergency services. In turn, it is important to appreciate that emergency services are politically positioned within these constellations as a result of national policy, local negotiation and geographical difference (Woods and Goodwin, 2003). The network approach provides a way of understanding how neo-liberal changes in national policy, local actors and the heterogeneity of the emergencies combine to influence the geographies of the emergency services.

### 3. Methodology

The role and relationship of MRTs<sup>1</sup> with other emergency services has changed significantly since their formation. Consequently, their study allows opportunities to examine changing constructions of risk, the evolution of emergency services and the impact of state

<sup>1</sup> It is not the intention of this paper to provide an encyclopaedic account of the emergency services. The choice of MRTs does not imply that they are somehow more deserving of attention than other emergency services or that their work is somehow more valuable than other agencies (indeed, many other services are called out far more frequently).

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