

Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and A Culture of Precaution

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Risk analysis today falls broadly into two opposite, methodological camps. Those who appeal to scientific evidence to explain or critique what they consider to be exaggerated public fears, and those who focus on sociological data to highlight people's perceptions and hence seek to justify a more precautionary outlook. While most recognize that risk contains both a material element and a perceptual element, there is rarely a meeting of ways in their methods of analysis.

This is where Adam Burgess' contribution to the debate is to be warmly welcomed. Rather than falsely comparing the statistical risk of one activity with another, as many in the scientific camp are prone to doing, Burgess, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Bath has produced an explicitly sociological analysis. But rather than taking people's perceptions at face value he seeks to explain how these perceptions came to be constructed in the first place, thereby, challenging these and critiquing precaution.

Focusing on people's perceptions has become the mainstay of governments, activists, the media, and even risk consultants. These suggest that our perceptions of risks are as important, if not more so, than the actuality of the risks we face, as perceptions often determine behavior. Thus, it is held, that irrespective of the basis for such fears in scientific "fact," their effects are real in social consequence, leaving governments with little choice but to take such concerns on board and to regulate accordingly.

This conciliatory approach benefits from appearing to take ordinary people's views very seriously and incorporating these into the decision-making process. In an age when few participate actively in political life, it is commendably inclusive and democratic in outlook. It is also a godsend to governments bereft of any broader dynamic or direction. But, as others have suggested elsewhere, assuming or adapting to popular perceptions is as contemptuous of the public as dismissing them.¹ It may also be more damaging.

Burgess explores the advent and use of the "precautionary principle" in the European context,

¹ Durodié, B. (2003). Limitations of Public Dialogue in Science and the Rise of New 'Experts', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol.6, No.4, Winter 2003, pp. 82-92

comparing it with the notion of “prudent avoidance” in the United States. These approaches, he suggests, have led to the institutionalization of marginal concerns and create a lose-lose situation. Not taking precautions is taken to show a lack of concern, while funding new research suggests either an attempt to influence the outcome, or the existence of a real problem. Thus, irrespective of outcome, any action taken serves to drive public fears rather than assuaging them.

He also demonstrates how it is that once one authority, region, or country has adopted a particular standard, others feel under pressure to follow suit. Indeed, the contemporary vogue for the devolution of power to regional authorities has accelerated this trend, as new bodies are at pains to prove their purpose and adopt a campaigning agenda to distinguish their role from that of central government. All this leads to a ratchet-like effect superimposing worst-case regulations onto worst-case assumptions. The role of the European Commission is particularly apt in this regards having established safety as one of its main “*raisons d’êtres*.”²

The book’s greatest strength, however, lies in its international comparisons. Here, the extent to which social perceptions were distinctly constructed according to varying national priorities and agendas is most clearly exposed. Thus, the sheer size of the United States, combined with the availability of cheap conventional calls and the pre-existing confusion of media and lobby groups made it much harder for activists to establish a coherence there. This was despite the long-standing debates there over the impact of electromagnetic radiation. What’s more, efforts to establish a campaign against cellular phones became moderate by the specific responses to the Columbine High School shootings of April 1999 and the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. These events showed a nervous public the extent to which technology could possibly serve a vital social function, thereby effectively undermining moves against it.

In Europe, on the other hand, concerns focused on the siting of transmission towers, or base-stations. Thus, campaigns only really emerged when the masts, reflecting the shift from analogue to digital technology, needed to be located in closer proximity to the users. As more masts were required in hilly or

mountainous regions, such as Scotland and Italy, than flat ones, such as the Netherlands, so the campaigns took on different intensities there. What’s more, telecommunications towers had a different meaning in Northern Ireland, where they evoked memories of a “surveillance state” and the campaign against them was used by the authorities to unite the different communities, to Ireland itself. There, complaints largely emanated from non-Irish émigrés searching for a rural idyll, and the issue threatened to challenge the young, dynamic, and forward-looking image of a “Celtic Tiger” being promoted by the government. For other similar and rather evident reasons, in Finland, the home of Nokia, such campaigns never really got off the ground.

The role of the media is most rigorously examined in the U.K. case. Here, far from being a tabloid frenzy, concerns were first raised, and continued to be developed, by the high-brow broadsheet, *The Sunday Times*. Headlines such as “Mobile phones cook your brain” (April 14, 1996) and “Are we being told the truth about mobile phones” (December 20, 1998), reflected one particular journalist’s personal obsession. Indeed, the case is well made that once the issue hit the tabloids it also shifted from one newspaper to another as particular journalists changed jobs. In an interview with Cathy Moran of the *Express* newspaper, Burgess goes so far as to ascertain how her interest in the subject stemmed from her seeing it as a personal opportunity to do something “more worthwhile” than covering celebrity-driven trivia (p. 80).

It is the interaction between this small number of “moral entrepreneurs,” in lobby groups and the media, and governments with differing attitudes to the future that determined the shape concerns took in each country. Notably, this altered the original nature of any concerns expressed by the relatively few members of the general public to raise any issue in the first place. These originally focused on the aesthetics of transmission masts, the impact they might have on property prices and the lack of consultation as to their deployment and positioning. It was institutional influences that transformed these rather isolated “not-in-my-backyard” concerns into far more effective campaigns about the purported health effects of the phones themselves, as well as their base stations.

One development was that as ownership of mobile phones became both more democratic and more likely to occur among younger age groups, so the debate shifted from attacking “yuppie status-symbols” to focusing on the towers and their possible effects

² Durodié, B. (1999). *Poisonous Dummies: European Risk Regulation after BSE*. European Science and Environment Forum, Cambridge. Available at <http://www.scienceforum.net/pdfs/Durodie1.pdf>.

upon children. The science, as is often the case, was counterintuitive in this regard. The closer you are to a base-station, the less energy your phone requires to receive the signal. Thus the best place to site masts would be as near to children as possible. But like so many of these debates, a nervous elite ignored the real evidence in favor of hearsay and emotion. Thus it was that the then Education Minister, David Blunkett called for an “urgent investigation” of the placing of masts on schools, while the National Union of Teachers called upon the Health and Safety Executive for advice and the Metropolitan Police advised their officers to restrict usage of the technology (p. 87).

The consequence, unique to the British response, was the establishment of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), under the chairmanship of the former Chief Medical Officer, Sir William Stewart. This initiative, launched at the behest of the then Minister for Public Health, Tessa Jowell, to “keep ahead of public anxiety,” is seen by Burgess as the paradigm inquiry of our precautionary times. It sought to avoid dealing with the scientists of the National Radiological Protection Board, including instead members with little specific expertise in the field. On one hand it concluded that there was no scientific evidence whatsoever of any harm, on the other it sought to give credence to public concerns by advocating further research and urging parents to limit their children’s usage.

Unsurprisingly, this attempt to have it both ways, satisfying both scientists and concerned parents alike, satisfied neither. It led to headlines such as “So are mobiles a risk or what?” in the *Mirror* and similar confusion elsewhere. Through this process of demonstrating their sensitivity to what they presumed to be public concerns, or what Burgess calls “symbolic politics” (p. 266), the authorities not only failed to clarify the matter, but made it worse as the number of campaigns grew in its aftermath. These felt encouraged by such official endorsement and apparent recognition of their concerns. In fact, as Burgess indicates, parents might well have responded differently in surveys if the scale of the risk and money expended upon it had been put in the context of other options for protecting their children’s health.

In the case of mobile phones, no plausible scientific mechanism has been posited to explain any purported ills. Indeed, much of the research produced has been to explain various associations after they had been noticed, rather than to understand their possible cause. This approach could equally well be applied to other products and processes that produce localized heating effects, such as laptops and electric blan-

kets. But apart from generating new fears, as Burgess points out, noting an effect is not the same as assuming harm. Regardless, as Furedi suggests elsewhere, “if society wants to treat electromagnetic fields as a cause of illness, they will be deemed a cause of illness.”³ What’s more, there is a danger in dealing with problems in this way that diagnosis becomes reduced to mere description and thus the possibility of resolution becomes impossible.

Risk consultants and sociologists suggest our perception of risk to be shaped by such factors as whether the risk is taken voluntarily, the extent to which it is understood, the fear it instills, our level of trust in authority and the impact it may have, particularly on children. Burgess’ analysis suggests rather different factors. These include, the degree of political engagement in public life, the confusion of roles and responsibilities between differing authorities, the growing sense of isolation among the political, scientific, and commercial elite and their attempts to combat a crisis of legitimacy by promoting public fears.

Situating the rise of an obsession with the impact of science upon our lives into this context of a demise in broader social and political engagement in society, Burgess points to the ultimate irony that “attempts to reform science have extended the role of science in policy much further” (p. 232). In the end, it was the sheer utility of the technology that outweighed the fears that had been constructed and, as people continued to use their mobiles, so gradually the media lost interest. It remains, however, a salutary lesson in the social construction of fears that should be used to inform many similar episodes that will undoubtedly emerge in the years ahead.

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³ Furedi, F. (2004). *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (p. 136). Routledge.