Book review

# Review of "Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Precaution"

### by Adam Burgess, Cambridge University Press, 2004

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# Review of
# 'Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Precaution'
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Adam Burgess' book 'Cellular Phones, Public Fears and a Culture of Precaution' provides a detailed summary of the regulatory, public and scientific debate surrounding the largescale introduction of mobile phone technology in the United Kingdom, continental Europe and the United States. Published at a time when the heat of the controversy has somewhat receded, it is well placed to take stock and reflect upon the key events and developments.

In seven chapters, Burgess offers a wealth of detail on media coverage, the scientific and technological developments that established the mobile phone, its increasing social and economic embeddedness and the political and regulatory handling of public health concerns. Though it is not claimed that the several years of work leading up to this book have followed any particular method, the breadth and depth of coverage make up for this lack of scientific rigour. Burgess' anecdotal-empirical approach, that is also reflected in his style of writing, leads to a coherent story line that reads well and is bound to appeal to a broad readership not only within the professional science community.

The research is strongly rooted in a theoretical framework of social constructionism. The rise of the mobile phone controversy is interpreted as a construction of interacting public, media and regulatory discourses rather than an attempt at a rational response to a material health risk related to a particular technological innovation. The author argues that the dominant driving force behind the debate is not the protection of public health but a complex set of inter-related agendas often aimed only in their rhetoric at resolving a health issue. In detail, Burgess' descriptive-analytic research uncovers three central tendencies.

## 1. Media

Throughout the book, the study draws on quotes particularly from the UK print media. These illustrate the sensationalist approach that British journalists often chose to take

throughout the late 1990s. Burgess uses these findings symbolically (a) to indicate an increasing preoccupation of the public discourse with health risks, biased science and consumer protection and (b) to explain the rise of what he portrays as isolated scientific opinion and personal campaigning into the mainstream of public and regulatory discourse.

## 2. Science

The chapter 'radiating uncertainty' deals with the scientific debate and develops a straightforward case: conventional science has not been able to show that electromagnetic fields cause adverse health effects in humans. The existence of some biological effects is acknowledged. What has sometimes been termed 'left-field science', such as the theories developed by, for example, Hyland, as well as anecdotal reports of health effects, are discounted as lacking any serious scientific basis. In the course of this chapter, Burgess deals with the precautionary principle as the concept that appears to allow questionable science to influence the regulatory debate unduly. In the case of mobile phone technology, the author reveals the paradoxes that may result from 'scientific precaution', as exemplified by the UK's Stewart Inquiry, which concluded that there was no evidence to suggest harm yet recommended precaution; a recommendation the implementation of which necessarily had to remain vague.

## 3. Institutional handling

Burgess has developed his thoughts on the link between institutional handling and public perception of risk in previous papers and continues his line of thought. The empirical basis for his argument is the observation that risk perception of mobile phone technology seems to increase with the kind and intensity of state regulation. In other words, those states that have set up expert inquiries and tried to implement a precautionary approach have encountered an increased public anxiety and strong local resistance to base stations. In particular, the British government's response is placed within the historical context of the BSE crisis, as the major regulatory failure that initiated a shift towards regulatory transparency and attempts to increase political sensitivity to public concerns.

Despite integrating some thoughts on the nature of public perceptions as well as social mobility and campaigning in a modern, individualized society, the author never loses his focus revealing the social construction of a public health scare with all its consequences and without an apparent scientific basis. In this sense, the book represents a very readable yet detailed analysis of the key arguments and developments of the mobile phone issue woven into a theoretical framework of social constructionism.

In another sense, however, it remains somewhat unclear where Burgess is leading his readers with his analysis. The idea that controversies surrounding technological innovation are socially framed and constructed is nothing new. For many constructivist epistemologies and much of modern social theory, discursive interaction within a cultural and historical context has long replaced the natural scientific dialectic of objective truth

as a unit with which to investigate social change. Burgess' epistemological stand, however, is less clear, as he does not offer a framework within which to anchor his critique.

The book reveals a dissatisfaction with the increasing politicization of science, what is seen as unwarranted precaution in public policy and the scourge of 'phantom risk', i. e. a socially constructed anxiety that is apparently not warranted by any serious scientific findings. Burgess' critique implies that there is a way to readjust and improve our risk handling by relying on objective science, appropriate media coverage, and responsible citizens and politicians. This is an increasingly popular call among those frustrated at government's seeming inability to adequately frame the social control of risk and technology and echoes calls by a range of actors within institutional and market elites to adopt what one former UK government chief scientist has described as a 'neo-realist' stance in order to prevent our 'autonomy, intelligence and capacity for change and enlightenment [from being] compromised and diminished' (p. 281).

In the final part of the book, Burgess moves from his analysis of the cellular phone issue into a more wide-ranging polemic against what he sees as the combined dangers of the 'democratization' of policy science and the adoption of precaution as a principle to guide policy and regulatory decisions—both developments which have become established on the European political agenda. Whether one is persuaded by Burgess' wider argument, which is supported by anecdotal reference to a variety of examples, may depend on one's own prior commitments rather than the evidence presented here. From a sociological perspective, however, it will be interesting to see whether the opposition to current mainstream political thinking of which this book is an example will gain ground and reveal a new conservative idealism that differs fundamentally from the old technocratic model.