Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution

This book is the first account of the health panic surrounding cellular phones and their supporting network of transmitting towers that developed in the mid-1990s. Treating the issue as more “social construction” than evident scientific problem, it tells the story of how this originally American anxiety diffused internationally, having an even bigger impact in countries such as Italy. Burgess highlights the contrasting reactions to the issue ranging from positive indifference in Finland to those such as in the United Kingdom, where precautionary measures were taken. These differences are located within a culture driven by institutional insecurity with regard to alleged health risks that first appeared in the United States and is now most evident in Europe. Anxieties about cell phone radio waves are also related historically to reactions to technologies such as x-rays and “microwave suspicions” about television. In addition, Burgess outlines a history and sociology of what is, despite media-driven fear, a spectacularly successful device.

Sharon Wood

Adam Burgess received his undergraduate degree from the University of London and his Ph.D. from the University of Kent. He is the author of one previous book and numerous journal articles and book chapters. Burgess has been a lecturer at the University of Reading and is now a lecturer in sociology at the University of Bath.
For my two boys, Carl and Alec

Sharon Wood
Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution

ADAM BURGESS
University of Bath

Sharon Wood
Contents

Acknowledgments v
List of Abbreviations ix

1 Themes and Influences; Phones and Risk 1
2 The Mobile “Revolution” 30
3 Mobile Discontents and the Origins of Microwave Fears 75
4 Radiating Uncertainty 123
5 Diffusing Anxiety: International Dissemination and National Responses to Mobile Fears 169
6 The Culture of Precaution 216
7 Problems of Precaution and Responsibility 256

Works Cited 283
Index 299
Sharon Wood
Acknowledgments

It is simply not possible to thank all of the hundreds of people who have helped with this project, in the main by providing and confirming information. I can only single out some of the individuals who “went beyond the call of duty” and those who helped me as a friend and colleague. On the activist side I thank Sue Ferguson, Libby Kelly, and Kathy Moran. On the industry side I’m grateful to Marianne Olson at Ericsson, who was the only person from a cell phone manufacturer or operator who proved helpful in providing illustrations and permission to use them. Mike Dolan from the United Kingdom’s Federation of Electronic Industries was also very supportive, as well as providing useful information on Australian developments. Professors John Adams, Joel Best, and Frank Furedi all encouraged the project along, and the energy and high standards of Professor Roberto Franzosi were particularly valuable in the early stages. My father, Mike, and Martina Cortesi, Brendan Craigie, Koen Delbeke, Keyhan Delibas, John Gillott, Susannah Quinn, and Dominic Standish all provided useful information and comment. Particular thanks go to the Italian scientist Paolo Vecchia, who allowed me to draw on his valuable insights. Far and above all, thanks go to Tracey Brown – my inspiration, discipline, and editor. Without her this book would never even have gotten off the ground, let alone been completed.
Sharon Wood
List of Abbreviations

BSE     Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
CPRE    Council for the Protection of Rural England
CTIA    Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association
CWA     Communications Workers of America
CWTI    Council on Wireless Technology Industries
ELF     Extremely low frequency
EPA     Environmental Protection Agency
EPL     Environmental Protection Law
ERMAC   Electromagnetic Radiation Management Advisory Council
FACA    Federal Advisory Committee Act
FCC     Federal Communications Commission
GPRS    General Packet Radio Service
GSM     Global System for Mobile Communications
IARC    International Agency for Research on Cancer
IEGMP   Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones
ICNIRP  International Committee on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection
ISPESL  National Institute for Prevention and Safety at Work (Italy)
KCC     Kent County Council
LGA     Local Government Association
MAUK    Mast Action U.K.
MCF     Mobile Carriers Forum
NCI     National Cancer Institute
NIFATT  Northern Ireland Families Against Transmission Towers
NRPB    National Radiological Protection Board (U.K.)
SAR     Specific absorption rate
List of Abbreviations

SIM  Subscriber Information Module  
SMS  Short Message Service  
3G  Third Generation  
VDT  Video display terminal  
WAP  Wireless Application Protocol  
WHO  World Health Organization