



The *spiked/O2* online debate '**Mobile phones and health: What are we scared of?**' was the second in a series of debates about the way that mobile phones shape our lives in the twenty-first century. Launched in October 2005, this six-week debate discussed the ongoing anxieties about the impact of mobile phones on our health in the context of a substantial body of research finding no evidence of health risks.

The debate culminated in a seminar at the Commonwealth Club in London, bringing together contributors to the online debate and other interested parties to reflect upon the role of science and the precautionary principle in our mobile society.

spiked is a London-based online publication whose provocative edge attracts readers of all ages and nationalities. We also provide a forum for further discussion, through our pioneering online debates and live events at venues across London.

O2 is a leading provider of mobile services in the UK, Germany and Ireland and owns O2 Airwave - an advanced, digital emergency communications service. The views expressed in this debate do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of O2.

'We are sponsoring this online debate to stimulate views around the number of issues that surround health. Perhaps more importantly we want to understand better (and share that understanding) people's attitudes towards mobiles and health.'

Peter Erskine, CEO, O2 Plc

Mobile phones and health: What are we scared of?

View the debate in full at www.spiked-online.com/mobilehealth

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The experts

Our online debate asked readers to consider the question ‘What caused the great mobile phone panic, and how well has society dealt with it?’, and invited responses by email.

We published five position papers by experts on this issue.

Mike Dolan, executive director of the Mobile Operators Association (MOA), discussed the operators’ response to the Stewart Report of 2000, which after reviewing the available scientific research found no evidence of a risk from mobile phones or masts, but counselled that Britain take a precautionary approach to the technology.

As mobile phone use increases, so must the development of the networks that underpin it.

Mike Dolan, executive director, Mobile Operators Association

Adam Burgess, lecturer in sociology at the University of Kent and author of the influential book *Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution*, discussed the role of the media and the UK government in the creation and management of health scares surrounding mobile phones, and the broader implications of this. The handling of this controversy, he said, ‘has set an extremely dangerous precedent in how public risk issues are to be managed’, making it ‘now acceptable and routine to hide behind simply saying there are lots of uncertainties and ‘more research needs to be done’.

The mobile phone scare is a lesson in how journalists and policymakers should not react to concerns about a new technology.

Adam Burgess, author of Cellular Phones, Public Fears, and a Culture of Precaution

Alan Meyer, legal director of Mast Action UK (MAUK), argued that this pressure group has always accepted the need for the network of masts to support the mobile phone revolution in communications. However, MAUK works with local groups and individuals to oppose the insensitive siting and location of telecom masts; and his position paper outlined the reasons why.

This new technology may still be found to have adverse effects, which may only become clear after a prolonged period of years of usage.

Alan Meyer, legal director, Mast Action UK

Jack Rowley, director of research and sustainability at the GSM Association, gave an overview of the international situation regarding public anxieties over mobile phones: which issues are similar to the UK, and which are different.

The UK is not unique in its concerns about possible health risks, but the media and political responsiveness is much higher than in other countries.

Jack Rowley, director of research and sustainability, GSM Association

Stuart McWilliam, a journalist specialising in mobile phones, added a different dimension to the discussion with a report on the ways mobile phones are now being used to monitor certain diseases, such as asthma or diabetes.

If you suffer from a chronic disease like diabetes or asthma, mobile phones could help keep you healthier for longer.

Stuart McWilliam, journalist

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The respondents

The online debate ran for six weeks. Over 60 individuals from the UK, Europe, Canada, the USA and India contributed to a highly-charged discussion. Policymakers, campaign groups, academics and those working in the mobile communications sector contributed alongside members of the public.

Respondents debated, among other issues, electromagnetic fields, the problem of proving something to be safe, the actions of industry and the broader social impact of mobile phone technology.

Cancer and ill health apart, what about 'happy slapping', 'happy raping' and 'happy killing' - all recorded on a mobile phone?
Ingrid Dickenson, Mast Sanity, UK

Of course cancer rates are rising - it's an inevitable consequence of people living much longer than was historically the case.
Colin Hunt, Canada

As far as I know, there's no evidence of mobile phone use causing death and injury, except in the context of the motor car.
John Nightingale, Australia

[N]o one in a public and responsible position will publicly say that mobile phone microwave technology - and other electromagnetic fields too, for that matter - are safe ... They cannot and dare not say these things, because there are too many unanswered questions.
Rod Read, ElectroSensitivity-UK

The distrust of mobile phones is ridiculous from a scientific point of view, but is entirely explicable in the context of widespread cynicism, distrust and profound expectation of the worst.
Stuart Derbyshire, senior lecturer, University of Birmingham School of Psychology, UK

If I could site a mast in our garden, I would.
Jeremy Zeid, UK

We also interviewed six members of parliament (MPs) about their views on the question of whether mobile phones cause ill health and the views of their constituents; their attitude to the precautionary approach advocated by the Stewart Committee; and whether they agree with those who argue that the public health message about mobile phones has been confusing.

In the absence of a strong government campaign to actually make clear what the science is, where research is being carried out and what sensible precautions people can take ... then it's inevitable that some of the more exaggerated claims about health risks from mobile phones and masts will in fact take precedence.
Phil Willis (LibDem), MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough and chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Mobile Communications

There's been a lack of anticipation from the industry of the need to deal with what are predictable public concerns, and a lack of leadership from government.
Norman Baker (Lib Dem), MP for Lewes

I think all one can do is abide by the view of the experts, so that's what I'd back
Andrew Mitchell (Con), MP for Sutton Coldfield

No one has rung me up to say they're worried about using their phone. A number have got objections to mobile masts ... As I understand it, radiation from masts - unless you're actually dancing with it - is far lower than radiation from the phone you actually use.
Peter Bottomley (Con), MP for Worthing West

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The London seminar

Over 50 people attended the London seminar at the Commonwealth Club on 29 November 2005. A panel of five speakers gave introductions outlining their thoughts on the subject, followed by a discussion. The audience included industry representatives, policymakers, academics, and *spiked* readers.

The speakers were:

Richard Brown, group director of public affairs, O2;
Mike Dolan, Mobile Operators Association;
Alan Meyer, Mast Action UK,
Jack Rowley, GSM Association;
Sandy Starr, *spiked*.

Their introductions raised issues ranging from relations between mobile operators and local communities, the usefulness of the precautionary principle as an instrument of public policy, and the dissemination of information about the science on mobile phones and health.

The audience discussion dealt with these concerns and others. Jane Vincent from the University of Surrey asked where she might be able to find a definitive statement on the risks of mobile phones. An attempt to find an answer using Google had produced an overwhelming amount of material with little way of knowing what was reliable and what was not.

Richard Brown argued that in fact the O2 leaflet on mobile phones and health distributed at the meeting was a good statement of the facts, but asked 'Is there in fact anyone that people would believe?' Technology analyst Joe Kaplinsky was sceptical in response. The leaflet did provide useful information, he argued, but undermined itself by offering suggestions on how to reduce your exposure - suggesting, by implication, that there might be some danger after all. However, as Jack Rowley later pointed out, the industry's information on mobile phones and health is dependent upon the health authorities' official message - so when the UK government and the World Health

Organisation promote an ambivalence about mobile phone safety, industry is to an extent hamstrung in providing a clearer message.

Two attendees from the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Health took issue with the claim that the debate around mobile phones and health was about the precautionary principle - the Stewart Committee, they argued, advocated a precautionary *approach* to mobile phone use.

A generalised cynicism towards statements from those in authority was a point discussed at some length, with a number of contributions pointing to the role of the BSE crisis. Having stated in good faith that there was no risk from BSE to humans, the appearance of variant-CJD had caused the UK government to backtrack on this statement. Even though the number of deaths has been very small, many noted that experts were now extremely reluctant to give a definitive statement of safety for anything.

Professor John Adams from University College London noted the defensiveness of the medical profession, who he suggested ironically were suffering from Compulsive Risk Assessment Psychosis, or CRAP. With others, he pointed out that it is impossible to prove a negative, and therefore impossible to prove there is no risk from phones or masts. However, the assumption that there must be some kind of danger from phones was producing what he described as a 'negative placebo' effect.

Many of the speakers referred to the negative effects of fear in their summing-up. Sandy Starr noted that excessive caution could prevent innovation, while Jack Rowley noted the vast sums spent on phone research to date. As Richard Brown noted, almost every research project published in recent years calls for more research. Where do we draw the line?

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The last word - for now

Once the *spiked/O2* debate closed, we asked some of our key contributors for their final thoughts and reflections on the issue. We hope this will inspire an ongoing debate about science, risk and the precautionary principle in relation to new technologies.

The government and its advisers need to give further thought on how best to communicate complex scientific issues to the media and the public in order to avoid confusion and minimise misunderstanding. Academic research into the public perception and communication of risk could be helpful in this regard.

Mike Dolan, executive director, Mobile Operators Association (MOA)

When looked at internationally, the UK public is not very concerned about possible health risks. However, there is evidence that governmental responses that speak of precaution increase public concern.

Jack Rowley, director of research and sustainability, GSM Association

The needs of the huge majority should not be allowed completely to ignore the equal needs of the small disadvantaged minority, who have genetic predispositions which can be adversely affected by the emissions from mobile phone masts and antennae.

Alan Meyer, legal director, Mast Action UK

All the mobile operators have a clear duty to be mindful of scientific findings and public concerns around mobile phones, and will continue to be open and transparent around such issues. But we should not forget we have an equally important duty to provide people with the modern communications that enhance the quality of people's lives, save lives, and are an everyday part of everyone's life.

Richard Brown, group director of public affairs, O2

Further information

The *spiked/O2* online debate 'Mobile phones and health: What are we scared of?' was the second in a series of debates about the way that mobile phones shape our lives in the twenty-first century. The archived debate can be accessed in full at:

www.spiked-online.com/mobilehealth

The next debate in the Mobile Society series, in spring 2006, will discuss the issue of child protection. For further information about *spiked* debates, contact *spiked's* commissioning editor, Jennie Bristow, on +44 (0)207 269 9222, or email Jennie.Bristow@spiked-online.com

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