

Sense of Risk - The Case of Health Risks Associated with Mobile Phones

During the last decades, increasing risk awareness has caused prudent consumers, cautious consumer politics and more and more sensitive citizens to respond to health and environmental threats. A high sense of risk is characteristic for modern societies, which means the functioning of governmental security and regulatory institutions for the good of the citizens, politically aware non-governmental organisations ready to grasp new risk issues, vigilant media monitoring, and the reporting and even amplifying of modern dangers and public fears. It also means that well-equipped science is constantly producing sophisticated risk analysis of the prevalent menaces to people, and reflective individuals are eager to convert their way of life according to the newest demands produced by the government, media and science. The focus of this paper is recent worldwide worry about the risks of the low-frequency electric and magnetic fields of mobile phones and their base stations. The paper will deal with the questions of how high the Finns evaluate the possible health risks of mobile phones, what factors affect the perception of risk and how the international media is reporting on the issue. Empirical analysis is based on two different sets of data. Analysis of the survey data (N = 1338) indicates that the majority of the Finnish population does not evaluate the low-level radiation of mobile phones as an important health risk and that social background does affect people's perception, but another study on the same data revealed that the biggest correlation regarding the risks is not between the social background factors, but between how people value their mobile phone and how much they use it. An ongoing follow-up study on international media reports on the safety and health issues related to mobile phones (N = 732) indicates that the contents of media reports vary in Europe, Asia and North-America, and that the same research results are reported with different emphasis in different newspapers. This paper will also deal with the complex mutual relationships between the different actors and institutions, amplifying and debilitating the individual and collective sense of risk.

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