

“The situation is hopeless, but not serious.“

Paul Watzlawick

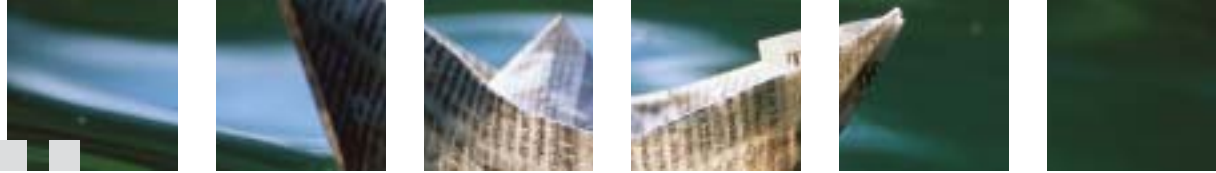
The media – a hysterical hype machine in the EMF debate?

by Peter Wiedemann

More than 30 years ago Paul Watzlawick – known from his essay „The Pursuit of Unhappiness“ – has written a book on solutions. In this book, he shows that ways intended to solve a problem may contribute to the problem – sometimes they considerably intensify the problem. For instance, too much safety produces repression; too much chocolate – usually considered as a mood enhancer – leads to nausea; foreign military forces invading another country to pacify it may intensify the fights. The issue is: When you get “more of the good stuff“ it quickly becomes „too much“:

In this dialectical perspective I will talk about whether and how the media produce social technophobia, especially, whether they amplify concerns and fears regarding wireless telephony. In short, I will talk about the mobile phone dilemma: By this I mean the contradiction between factual acceptance (nearly everyone has a mobile phone, many even two) and the concerns over risks in the public. One could object that it cannot be so bad.

- Despite intensive efforts, science has found no hard scientific facts showing a risk from mobile communication – and the FEMU database comprises 10951 publications on the effects of electromagnetic fields¹.
- Moreover, the story of mobile phones is an unprecedented victory: nothing has changed everyday life as much as the mobile phone, apart from the internet and the personal computer.
- In addition, we can see that the system “Mobile communication in society“ is robust – until now it could not be lifted off its hinges, despite all fears over risks. The system is working, but not loved – however, must we love it? Some may argue, that wireless telephony is about considerable investment, and a huge number of work places
- in short, the future of a key technology is at stake.



Therefore, caution is needed, because scaremongering is no trivial offence. So back to the question: are the media the culprit? Doubtlessly, daily newspapers like “Bild“ in Germany or “Sun“ in the UK repeatedly contribute to public concerns. However, it is my opinion that scolding the media is not really a way to solve the problem. Perhaps there is good reason that media are the way they are; according to the famous dictum of Hegel from his preface to *Philosophy of Right* (1821): “Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig.“ in English: “What is reasonable, is real; that which is real, is reasonable.“

I will try to look into this in more detail:

- First, we have to accept that media are not only drivers, but also driven in a game that is inscrutable also for them. Media are driven insofar as they have to orient their messages – according to the key/keyhole principle – to the users of information.
- Second, because media need resonance, their “worst case“ is not a false message, but boring contents and the lack of interest which do not encourage to buy.
- Third, since Sigmund Freud we know that human behaviour is controlled by unconscious drives and passions. Of course, the same goes for the users of media.

That’s why media are what they are: They have to satisfy the curiosity, the voyeurism, the passion for sensations and for excitement of fear – in Freud’s terminology for the “Angstlust“ – of the media consumers. This is a fact that must be considered, if wanting to understand the controversy on mobile phones better. But sometimes this issue is ignored or forgotten. In our political discussion about how to solve the mobile phone controversy, in particular how to enhance public acceptance of cell phone towers, we tend to start from an idealized understanding of the role of the public. It is the concept of a rational citizen responsibly dealing with risks. And it is the conviction that we can solve all problems in a fair and open discourse. To give you one example: In 2005,

the former German minister Jürgen Trittin – former head of the federal ministry for the environment – suggested that even for controversial cases, the mobile network operators should engage in more discussions with the local authority representatives as well as with actively involved citizens ...” (Press release BMU & BMWA, Nr. 075/05). Of course, this view is politically correct, but unfortunately, a counterfactual description. It ignores the power of emotions. Media consumers want to be entertained. Entertainment however means to address emotions. Crying and laughing with the news, that is the motto. Moreover – and this is a hard fact of human psychology – the uncommon and the negative news bring attention. Everyone knows: “Women bites dog“ brings more attention than “dog bites woman.“ Further, the human information processing of risk information has some special characteristics that will be briefly outlined in the following:

- Cognitive psychology has shown that numbers have a less sustainable effect than words, and words are less sustainable than images where judgements and decisions are needed. An example: The willingness to spend money increases when the dramatic fate of one refugee is described, including images. Statistics – the description of the general misery – is barely appropriate to increase the willingness to make a donation.
- Moreover, number blindness is a common deficit. Percentage calculations are not part of the general knowledge, not even in academics. Many people have difficulties to sensibly interpret small probabilities, especially distinguish between the orders of magnitude of such small probabilities (e.g. 10^{-6} versus 10^{-5}). This is not surprising, as such orders of magnitude are outside the range of normal human experience.
- As precarious is the concept of chance of many people. According to them, an essential characteristic of chance is that there are no regular patterns. So many people think that the birth sequence in a family “boy / girl / girl / boy / girl / boy“ is chance, but not the sequence “girl / girl / girl /

boy / boy / boy.“ (I have to admit that these cases are very rare in German families)

- Another issue is the omission bias: It is the tendency to judge harmful actions as worse than equally harmful inactions. One example for this bias is how people deal with “vaccination” Some parents abstain from vaccination, due to the risk of side effects. Unfortunately, they completely ignore the risk caused by the lack of vaccination.
- Associated with this are causal thinking fallacies. This is mainly the “post hoc ergo propter hoc“-fallacy (“after this, therefore because of this“).
- In addition, people lean towards the confirmation bias. People prefer looking for cases that confirm their assumptions than for cases that would falsify them.

And, finally, there are – sometimes – quite bizarre attribution patterns. In a recent Austrian study on cancer risk perception, about 25 % of study participants thought that earth radiation and water veins cause cancer. One would probably get similar results in Germany. Esotericism is just popular. Beside these judgemental fallacies there is also the general fear of new things, people fear the risk of the unknown, the unfamiliar and the foreign. But is it always correct? We should remember that the formula that the new and therefore the strange is a risk, is not always true, obviously. And: Being familiar with something is no guarantee of safety. Most murder victims knew their killers. And most accidents occur in the household and on familiar streets.

To avoid misunderstandings: This is no defence of a careless or even happy-go-lucky acceptance of risks. Instead, this is about the proper measure to deal with scientific uncertainty. The media know about these psychological conditions from experience and the media are using them – for instance, when a headline is selected as a lead for a dry news item. No doubt, from the point of attention seeking pictures are better than words, some exaggeration is helpful. So risks are presented in the form of scandalizing stories, where not only the risk, but the involved per-

petrators and victims as well as their motivations are described.

The trick is that different presentation (different stories) of an “objective“ risk leads to different judgements about the seriousness of the risk, according to the emotion provoked by the story. What follows from this? Yes, media can misinform. It is also true that it is not easy for media to combine simplification with a coverage that is correct. The matters are complicated and the public – the audience of the media – is difficult to satisfy. But that’s only part of the truth. Other important players in the drama of mobile phone risk perception were not yet named: science and politics, as well as interest groups and industry.

I would like to start with a few words about science: if science would speak with one voice, there would be no public debate. But this is not the case.

- First, because there is no dogma in science – no undeniable truths.
- Second, scientific dissent is normal for science.
- But there is third aspect. Increasingly extra-scientific interests invade science. On one hand, scientists seek the truth. On the other hand, scientists need money for their research. And they will get it if the research is thought to be necessary for society.

For this, scientists need publicity. However, scientific publishing is slow, and there is good reason for this. So some scientists find sometimes a shortcut: they publish their findings first in the media before they are published in scientific journals. The pressure to do so – and sometimes also the temptation – is huge.

Now for politics: politicians must decide and act. For that reason, they prefer usually scientific certainties and mistrust knowledge gaps and vagueness. They consider cautious scientific phrases like “according to the present state of knowledge“ or “in all probability“ as political minefields or at least traps. However, we should not forget that uncertainty is sometimes welcomed because it offers room for manoeuvre. In addition, politicians have to consider the vox populi.

And here is the role of media. The politician who ignores the media is at risk himself.

Now, I come to the next topic, the interest groups: In 1994, Jonathan Rauch published a book titled „Demosclerosis. The Silent Killer of American Government“, which is worthwhile to read. In contrast with the common view that stakeholder participation is good for democracy, he argues that the number of particular interests in their sum just do not express the common welfare. As you know: The total is more than the sum of its parts. Following Jonathan Rauch, politics is in a fix: it becomes a ritual of improvisation. Every interest group gets something in direct proportion to the political pressure it builds.

At least, we can learn one lesson: participatory decision making is not always the better alternative to democratic decision making. Now for industry: the mobile communication industry, intoxicated by the success, has overlooked the signs of the coming storm. And intoxicated it was indeed, as one can recognize from the exorbitant sums paid at the German UMTS auction. The blitz victory in the expansion of mobile phones seemed to blind the movers and shakers in the telecommunication industry. Now, they try for better solution.

It's now time for conclusions: So, what can we do? First of all, there is no true road to acceptance. In the debate on the risk of mobile telephony, many suggested solutions are right, but as a whole the debate went wrong – as Theodor Adorno says in his “Minima Moralia“: “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen.“ (“There is no right life in the wrong one.“). And sorry to say, but human beliefs and attitudes can be changed only in a long-term perspective, if at all. And the media system can't change by itself. So where should we begin? I think, a crucial point is the “hysterization“ of risk debates, which is wrong in every respect. Our primary goal should be to avoid agitation damage without giving in to indolence. A step forward in this direction would be, not to expect from science what science cannot provide, i.e. 100 % certainty. And scientists should not try to appear more

certain than they can be.

Finally, we should recognize that there is no win-win solution for all. It is sometimes a zero sum game. We can only go on, perhaps a little better, but, hopefully, a little less hysterically.

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Footnote

1 state 7/31/07



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