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Protesting Mobile Phone Masts: Risk, Neo-liberalism and Governmentality

Dr Frances Drake

School of Geography

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

Tel: 0113 343 3332

Fax: 0113 343 3308

Email: f.drake@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Studies of protests against mobile phone masts typically concentrate on the potential health risks associated with mobile phones and their masts. Beck's Risk Society has been particularly influential in informing this debate. This focus on health, however, has merely served to limit the discussion to those concerns legitimated by science conveniently ignoring other disputed issues. In contrast, this paper contends that it is necessary to use a wider notion of risk to understand fully how the current political emphasis on active citizenship may have contributed to the protests. It examines how neo-liberal governmentality and the move to empower people are in contention with one another. The study draws upon case material from a small village protest group in UK and argues that much of the tension arises from the encouragement of the public on the one hand to become active citizens but on the other to be passive consumers.

Keywords: Mobile Telecommunications; Risk Society; Governmentality; Citizenship

Introduction

Risk, and in particular the risk to health, often dominates discussions in the mobile telecommunications literature (Balzano and Sheppard 2002; Burgess 2004; Stilgoe 2007; Timotijevic and Barnett 2006; Walton 2002; White, et al. 2007). Burgess in particular has used a social constructivist approach and Beck's Risk Society to look at how health has come to control the agenda (Burgess 2002; Burgess 2004). There are, however, other issues buried within the mobile phone debate, which address questions of democracy, devolved governance, activism and rural agendas. By considering a mobile phone mast protest group in a rural area of the UK this paper argues that a neo-liberal governmentality approach allows all aspects of the mobile phone debate to be considered as one problem; enabling the discussion to be set in a wider context than just health. Using the work of Joseph (2007) it considers that the reflexive modernity urged by Risk Society merely reinforces neo-liberal governmentality.

Neo-liberalism is a political philosophy of governance based on market rationality and global free trade (Mitchell 2006). The neo-liberal discourse aims to create markets in all systems and minimise bureaucracy (Mitchell 2006; Oels 2005). This is achieved by a 'roll-back' of government through de-regulating industry, privatising the public sector and the commodification of areas such as knowledge and organisms, which have not previously been treated as commercial goods (Castree 2008; Goven 2006). It can be argued, however, that neo-liberalism does not simply criticise the role of the state but also requires it to provide the regulatory and institutional frameworks necessary for entrepreneurial activities (Harvey 2005).

One way to analyse neo-liberalism is through a governmentality approach (Joseph 2007; Mitchell 2006). Governmentality is concerned with how the state seeks to govern and shape our conduct and also how we shape the conduct of others and ourselves (Dean 1999). Government is a rational activity using assumed truths and knowledge about what are the best social conditions in a particular sphere and how government should operate to achieve and maintain them (Pyykkonen 2007). The government seeks to achieve its aims through a series of techniques or technologies. These are the practical visible features of government that make rationalities or its value system known. One set of techniques targets the individual through organisations or agencies. These rely on the involvement of citizens and non-citizens to govern an increasingly wider sphere of interests in a normative way. Then, the state government can step back and interfere with individual lives as little as possible (Dean 1999). A second technology is aimed at the self and is more concerned with making individuals act as moral agents (Pyykkonen 2007).

The neo-liberal political discourse is concerned with governing individuals at a distance (Joseph 2007). Looked at through the governmentality lens we can see the 'roll-back' of the neoliberal state as part of its governmentalization (Joseph 2007). The citizen now becomes a customer who is encouraged to be entrepreneurial and responsible for their well-being. Active citizens are required to make rational choices to improve their quality of life (Rose 1996). In neo-liberalism, technologies of citizenship are concerned with improving self-esteem and empowering people, but this is always within the context of the market economy (Dean and Hindess 1998). Whilst government policies may seek to advance neo-liberalism this does not

guarantee the '*production of the neo-liberal self*' and technologies of citizenship can be ineffective (Mitchell 2006).

In the 'Risk Society' thesis, the scientific and technological advances of modernity have solved many of the pressing problems facing the developed world, but instead of creating a Utopia, this advancement brings new risks that require regulation (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Consequently, according to Beck the modern world is increasingly moving away from concerns about the equal distribution of wealth to one concerned with the avoidance of risks (Mythen and Walklate 2006). Joseph (2007) argues that Risk Society structures risk as an ontological feature of contemporary society rather than seeing it as a means to governing. In so doing reflexive modernity reinforces the view that as individuals we need to make rational choices and organise our lives in certain ways so as to reduce our susceptibility to risk. It reinforces neo-liberal concepts and risk, in making social life calculable, and enables governmentality. Therefore, Risk Society tends to focus on the individual and individual action rather than questioning the broader project of neo-liberalism and thus it helps to maintain the '*social order rather than criticising it*' (Joseph 2007 p. 9)

Studies using the 'Risk Society' thesis have in the main argued that mobile phone protests are a retreat from scientific rationality (Balzano and Sheppard 2002; Burgess 2004; Walton 2002). These studies principally focus on national policies and provide insights into the maintenance of national protest campaigns. They claim that recommending precautionary measures to the use and siting of mobile phone technology by national institutions has inadvertently promoted perceived health risks. In nations where this has happened the health risks have come to dominate what

would otherwise be a local planning dispute (Balzano and Sheppard 2002; Burgess 2004; Walton 2002) Thus, health is framed as a national discourse that subsumes local issues which could be relatively easy to resolve. This leads to a tension between Joseph's notion of 'Risk Society' negating meaningful collective action and the idea of health enabling a national protest against mobile phone masts (Joseph 2007). This paper argues that in the UK the notion of health, although national in scope, is ineffectual for organising collective action, because it relies on challenging expert knowledge as defined by policy-makers. In essence the precautionary approach has made sure that citizens engage in certain protests rather than asking deeper questions about the validity of neo-liberalism. In considering neo-liberal governmentality it reveals the tensions that exist in the neo-liberal project. Thus, contestation is an inevitable feature of neo-liberal governmentality as projects of government are defined and refined.

Project Background and Methods

Berinsfield (a pseudonym) is a small village located north of a large conurbation in northern England. The countryside surrounding Berinsfield is predominantly agricultural land and there are eight working farms. Nearby country house estates own some of the farms and these have tenant farmers (Berinsfield VDS, 2002). Large areas of Berinsfield and the surrounding countryside are designated as green belt. In the UK *'[T]he fundamental aim of green belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open'* (PPG2 1995 p. 2). The village sits among low-lying hills either side of a small stream, which runs parallel to a major trunk road in a shallow valley. The location has long attracted the wealthy middle classes as a rural retreat

from the 'polluted' industrialised city to the south. Therefore, it is a relatively affluent residential village but has few amenities and transportation is poor (Berinsfield PP, 2003; (ODPM 2000)). The city has survived the transformation from industrial heartland to service centre and continues to grow, placing increasing development pressure on villages such as Berinsfield. There are around 2,000 inhabitants in the village, distributed into six distinct communities (Berinsfield VDS, 2002). The historic core of the village is a conservation area, meaning that it has historic or cultural value, which needs to be preserved. Any new development has to be in sympathy with the area. It is also a special landscape area, a non-statutory designation which seeks to protect an area from development or man-made influences (Berinsfield VDS, 2002). The rest of the village was principally developed in the interwar period and is divided into north, north-west, west, east and south communities. A trunk road separates the east community from the other parts of the village.

On 20 March 2002, the mobile phone operator Alpha applied to the Local Planning Authority (LPA) to construct a mast in the historic core of the village (Landscape consultant Alpha expert witness; Proof of Evidence paragraph 1.4.2 page 3). This would be the fifth mast in Berinsfield, and almost immediately concerned villagers began a campaign against the mast. Masts under 15m have 'permitted development rights' in England and Wales, which means that mast operators are required to apply to local planning authorities (LPA) for *prior determination* or approval. Alpha claimed that the mast was needed to improve coverage of the local trunk road. In contrast the protesters saw the mast as part of the increasing infrastructure needed for the third generation (3G) of mobile phones with their internet and video capabilities. The local authority cannot contest the need for a mast but can refuse permission on

grounds of site and appearance. If the LPA denies permission, the operator can appeal to the Secretary of State. The LPA must notify mast operators of a refusal within 56 days in England and Wales (DETR 1999).

In the Berinsfield case, permission was refused and the LPA faxed this outcome to Alpha on 23 May 2002. This is well beyond the 56-day notification period required under the permitted development rights. However, to guarantee that a mast will comply with National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) guidelines relating to microwave emissions, an International Commission Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) certificate must accompany all mobile phone mast applications in England (PPG8 2001 paragraph 99). Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) states that a certificate negates the need for the LPA to consider health issues (PPG8 2001 paragraph 30). The LPA argued that they could not consider the application until the ICNIRP certificate arrived and that should be considered as day zero and so the refusal was notified on day 56. Alpha claimed that it should be counted as day one and so this was day 57 in the process and the local council had given permission for the mast by default. For several months negotiations continued between Alpha and the local council in order to reach some agreement on an alternative site. The villagers believed permission had been refused and were unaware of any problems until 2 December 2002 when workers from Alpha started constructing the mast. This re-ignited the protests ending in a public inquiry held in September 2003, where the inspector found in favour of Alpha.

For my study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the village protest group immediately prior to and just after the public inquiry. Interviewees were

asked what concerns they had regarding the mobile phone mast. A series of questions then followed designed to explore the issues raised and how interviewees obtained information. Finally, there were questions examining the role of mobile phone technology and the related industry. Altogether 15 individuals were interviewed in 14 consultations during September and October 2003. This included two interviews with non-protesters; a parish councillor and the local authority planning officer responsible for the case. Potential interviewees were initially contacted by phone and a referral or snowball method was used to gain further interviewees (Schofield Clark, et al. 2004). The small number of active campaigners precluded other sampling techniques (Hall and Hall 1996). Of the 13 campaigners interviewed nine were women and four were men and all the residents were older than 35. This may legitimately reflect the make up of the action group. The 2001 Census data show that around 70% of residents are aged 30 or over, with an even split between males and females. The gender ratio of those interviewed may mirror the composition of the group, but several men contacted refused to take part whereas none of the women contacted refused to be interviewed.

At the beginning of the interview, all the interviewees were given a letter explaining the nature of the study and the assurance that all interviews would be anonymous. To assure anonymity for all, the village is given the name Berinsfield and the phone operator Alpha. Interviewees were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. The transcriptions were then imported into NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data, Indexing, Sorting and Theorising) for coding and evaluation focussing on the *a priori* dual themes of environment impacts and health (Gahan and Hannibal 1998).

A variety of documentary sources were consulted to provide complementary data to that of the interviews. These included official local and parish documents, newspaper reports, and written evidence submitted to the planning inspectorate. The author was also able to observe parts of the planning inquiry process. Documentation held by the local planning authority (LPA) pertaining to the planning process and planning inquiry into the Berinsfield village mast was consulted. The Berinsfield Mast Action Group provided copies of all the written evidence submitted to the planning inquiry to which they had access. This included expert witness evidence from all parties involved. Nineteen articles appeared in the local press over an 18-month period from May 2002, when the protest began, until October 2003 reporting the outcome of the planning inquiry (WDN1 to 19). Using this time frame as a sample, UK newspaper articles from the LexisNexis Executive database were also analysed. The search used the keywords (mobile phones) and (masts and rural). This identified 99 articles from a variety of local and national newspapers concerned with mobile phone mast developments in rural areas of the UK (LNE1 to 99). The articles were imported into NUD*IST for qualitative coding and evaluation.

Both the interviews and documentary sources are used to build the discussion in the following sections. Excerpts from are used in this paper to illustrate points relevant to the debate. The paper first sets the background to the mobile phone debate and the notion of an active citizen, before using a neo-liberal governmentality framework to consider citizen involvement and some of explanations for the mobile phone mast debate.

The Active Citizen

Citizenship is important across the political spectrum because it apparently provides the means to empower citizens, to encourage a sense of belonging to the community (Cooper 1993). Over the past few decades, western governments have been keen to foster active citizens (Kearns 1992). Individuals are encouraged to become involved in local decision-making and this has occurred in a variety of fields such as urban planning, local government and health as well as science (Tutton 2007). For example in the UK there has been increased public participation in planning policy in the form of Parish Plans and Village Design Statements (VDS), sanctioned by government bodies such as the Countryside Agency (PPS7 2004). '*Scientific citizenship* has been defined as the construction of *publics* as citizens who have a legitimate role in the governance of science' (Horst 2007). Involving citizens has been held up as a way of increasing public confidence in science and of achieving a consensus for moving forward (Irwin 2006). This approach to policy formation has become particularly prominent in the UK since the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) controversy in the 1990s (Forbes 2004; Irwin 2006; Jacob and Hellström 2000). The rhetoric of dialogue has been used in response to a number of scientific controversies such as the Public Consultation on the Biosciences, GM foods through GM Nation as well as the mobile phone debate (Irwin 2001). This has led to friction between public opinion and government viewpoints; perhaps the most well documented being that over GM food in Europe (Irwin 2006). Tensions are further fuelled because scientific policy does not consistently take an inclusive approach. There is a falling back upon a deficit model approach to scientific understanding, with the public seen as lacking knowledge that only experts can provide (Irwin 2006).

These types of tensions are evident in the mobile phone mast debate. In the UK between 1998 and 2001 there were four government-instigated reports about mobile telecommunications, which proponents of risk society have taken as an indication of the legitimation crisis surrounding the institutions of modernity and a decreasing trust in experts(Horlick-Jones 2005; Lash, et al. 1996). Perhaps the most well known is the Stewart Inquiry: the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP 2000). Whilst science-based experts largely made up the panel, it took evidence from a wide range of individuals and groups (Cox 2003).This could be held up as a model of the democratic approach to science policy process. Whilst the inquiry apparently accepted public health fears, the report concluded that the balance of scientific evidence suggested that neither mobile phones nor base stations posed a risk to public health. In what is seen as a contradictory move by several commentators the Stewart Inquiry still advocated a precautionary approach to mobile phone technology (Balzano and Sheppard 2002; Burgess 2004; Walton 2002). It recommended that all masts should require full planning permission because under current legislation such a procedure would allow local planning authorities to take account of all the concerns of local residents.

In contrast, a year later the report of The Trade and Industry Committee at Westminster (House of Commons 2001) took a traditional technocratic approach, where experts defined scientific policy. It is this report which has arguably had the greatest influence on the planning regulation of mobile phone masts, certainly within England and Wales. The Committee was highly critical of the Stewart Inquiry and accepted the industry's concerns that full planning permission would delay the roll-out of the network. This is notable because science policy documents usually

downplay the influence of global capitalism (Irwin and Michael 2003). The Trade and Industry Committee's report led to the maintenance of the permitted development rights for mobile phone operators. The ICNIRP certificate effectively manages the health risk in a technocratic way by appeals to scientific consensus that there is no hazard and by reference to an expert body – the NRPB. There is no need for public involvement because experts have decided there is no risk from mobile phone technology.

The deficit model approach to the public understanding of science by the Trade and Industry Committee characterises citizens who campaign against mobile phone masts as not only scientifically ignorant but also as holding back the economic development of the country, a viewpoint found in several national newspapers in the LexisNexis Executive database. A prominent technique for achieving neo-liberal government is the reliance on science and technology to foster economic growth. Therefore, the normative behaviour of individuals must be to support scientific and technological change. From a governmentality perspective, this allows the population to be divided into those that contribute to society and those that hold it back (Armstrong 2005). Individuals are not simply acquiescent, however, and can resist these characterisations. Thus, protesters portrayed themselves as knowledgeable but disempowered citizens. The Stewart Report affirmed this view of the citizen and not surprisingly protesters identified with that viewpoint.

The Countryside and Citizen Identity

A key aspect of neo-liberalism is the encouragement of individuals to take responsibility for their own well-being and the shifting of responsibility for social

risks such as health and employment onto individuals (Lemke 2000). I suggest that this draws on another feature of neo-liberalism; the commodification of nature as outlined by Castree (2008). When someone buys a piece of rural England there is the potential for the notion of citizenship and consumer to become fused. The middle-class domination of easily-accessible rural areas can be seen as an expression of neoliberal governmentality. Studies have consistently shown a strong urban-rural dichotomy, with rural areas identified as having both physical and social advantages over the urban landscape. The rural landscape is associated with good health, cultural heritage and safety. Rural villages are promoted as having traditional family values '*where safety, courtesy, friendship and civility still prevail*' (Hopkins 1998 p.70). The countryside is typically described as visually superior to the urban setting. Thus, what has drawn the middle-classes to rural villages is a particular vision of country life, which they then seek to preserve (Abram, et al. 1996; Akhurst 1995; Ward and Lowe 1999; Woods 2003a; Woods 2003b). Research suggests that acceptable changes to the rural landscape are limited to agro-forestry pursuits or those that involve the use of indigenous materials. The recent widespread rejection of genetically modified crops, however, would appear to challenge this simplistic relationship with the visual and suggest that the deeper representational meanings of the countryside are also important to consider.

Berinsfield appears to be typical of a '*preserved countryside*'[1]. A housing survey in March 1998 found that 69% of householders had been resident in Berinsfield for more than ten years (Berinsfield PP, 2003). The average residency time for the villagers interviewed was 19 years, with four interviewees having been resident for over 30 years. Ten of the 13 interviewees were from social class 1 or 2 occupations of the new

socio-economic classifications (77%), which is much higher than the local area figures (around 42%) and the national distribution (37%) given by the 2001 Census. The social community aspects of rural village life had attracted several campaigners to Berinsfield (Abram, et al. 1996; Woods 2003a). They had invested not just money in a house but also time and effort into village life and the rural landscape (cf. (Murdoch and Marsden 1994).

> *[Referring to a neighbour] He says we came to live in Berinsfield village because it was a village and there was no industry around us and no pollution or nothing like that. And he said before we know where we are, we'll be surrounded by these things [mobile phone masts] (Ann).*

Furthermore, the campaign drew support from a number of interviewees partly because they felt the need to support others within their community rather than the protest itself.

Resistance to perceived norms can be explored by considering how lay people interpret and evaluate risk to themselves, that is how they position themselves to the discourse. Typically studies differentiate between environmental risks and lifestyle or behavioural risks. A third category, embodied risks, has been suggested to account for those risks situated in the body of a person (Armstrong 2005). The mobile phone debate typically concentrates on the risk to health, which can relate to environment or embodied risk rather than lifestyle (Soneryd 2007; Stilgoe 2007; Timotijevic and Barnett 2006). The protesters had made a significant lifestyle choice in choosing to live in a rural area. From neo-liberal governmentality, however, this choice is not just

about lifestyle but also a rational one based on the idea that the rural provides a superior lifestyle, which minimises risk to the individual. The evidence suggests that for the protesters at least, the intrusion of mobile phone masts into the rural landscape represents an erosion of the boundaries between urban and rural and is challenging the protesters identity as a rural dweller.

> *These applications are just part of the gradual process of degrading the area. The ones [masts] we already have are absolute eyesores and I'm afraid adding two more would bring Berinsfield village even closer to becoming a suburb of [city] (WDN1).*

I have noted that some people seek the rural way of life because of its perceived social cohesion and sense of community, its timelessness. Mobile phones on the other hand represent mobility, people passing through, strangers who have no connection with the village and give nothing to the community. Indeed their brief presence has cluttered the air both visually and physically. The masts in this context denote restlessness, a continuous movement that is alien to the peaceful and constant countryside. They are a visual reminder that the countryside cannot be separated from the modern hectic world and thus it begins to lose its special qualities. The masts would therefore appear to pose a threat to the symbolic meanings associated with the countryside. Several entries in the LexisNexis Executive database portray mobile phone masts, '*a necessary feature of modern life*', as detracting from rural values (LNE11). The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) protested at the erection of the mast and supported the Berinsfield protest group at the planning inquiry. The CPRE is the national NGO most widely cited within the LexisNexis

Executive data. Therefore, increasing numbers of masts put at risk the countryside and lifestyle that the campaigners have actively chosen as being healthier and more desirable.

Another aspect of this dichotomy between rural and urban is that the former often represents a retreat from working urban life, particularly for the middle classes (Akhurst 1995). It is noticeable that apart from tourism, neither the Berinsfield Parish Plan nor the Design Statement mentions economic development. Both documents frame Berinsfield as primarily a residential village, not a place to work. The national desire to be m-commerce ready was therefore an irrelevance to the protesters (Kraemer and Dedrick 2000). In contrast, neo-liberalism requires the free market to penetrate everywhere. As Hamann (2009) notes, production and consumption once undertaken in public spaces is increasingly occurring in the private sphere, opening spaces once reserved for leisure to the demands of business (Hamann 2009). The mobile phone and 3G technology are the ultimate expression of this; the marketplace will be accessible at any time and from anywhere, even the remotest of locations. Thus, the knowledge economy allows the transfer of the workplace to any setting. For western governments seeking to expand markets into all aspects of life this technological revolution provides a potential means of revitalising rural economies by creating both business and employment opportunities (Grimes 2000; Hardill and Green 2003; Simpson, et al. 2003). Care should be taken in interpreting the protesters' attitude as an ossification of the countryside. Several interviewees ran micro-businesses from their homes and were reliant on the Internet. The focus, however, was on enhancing landline connections through broadband rather than mobile communications. The expansion of the mobile phone network is a further

visual reminder that the urban-rural divide that the protesters seek to maintain is increasingly being eroded.

Limitations to Citizen Involvement

Given this background, not surprisingly, key residents had already played a role in establishing Berinsfield's development priorities even before the mast controversy. In the past, Duncan, a planning consultant, had co-ordinated action to protect Berinsfield's green belt. Several of the lead campaigners against the mobile phone mast were part of the VDS committee, and they feature prominently in early local newspaper reports of the dispute. Village design statements can be interpreted as a technique of neo-liberal governmentality, which results in the offloading of responsibilities from the state to individuals or local groups. Neo-liberal institutions seek to activate citizens by making them responsible for everyday risks (Dean 1999). The local community is no longer to be regulated at a distance but through technologies of citizenship empowered and cultivated to self-govern. The rational individual has become responsible for her own security; risk is a personal affair. This results in 'contemporary pluralism' and community politics, which reach out beyond the confines of the village (Hajer 2003). In the case of the VDS local citizens are being empowered to form groups to manage the risk to their local built environment. Thus, village design statements are technologies of citizenship targeted at an at risk population. The comfortable middle classes are not often identified in this way but it can be argued that the VDS frames local citizens in this way.

Village design statements seem to offer a partnership approach and a more devolved decision-making process, which is typical of neo-liberal projects. Villagers are encouraged to see themselves as stewards of the environment. Unsurprisingly this shift in responsibilities is usually within boundaries defined by the state (Herbert 2005). Thus, much stakeholder participation is performative, in that it appears to give people some form of control but is actually more about managing political activity rather than challenging the orthodoxy (Holifield 2004). Village Design Statements are no exception and they are not allowed to hamper development or market rationality and have no status in planning law. Thus, there is a contract where citizens become empowered to the point that they influence the type but not the extent of development. The circumspection of individual involvement is rarely highlighted in these contracts. The villagers involved in the VDS seemed to genuinely believe that the VDS would exert some control over planning and this is summed up by a local newspaper report.

> *Berinsfield Village Design Statement was three years in the making. It was hard work but residents felt it would be time and money well spent if it meant their village would grow and develop as they wanted it to……The ink was barely dry when Alpha shattered the illusions of everyone who had worked on the Berinsfield vision (WDN17).*

The protesters had become active citizens and involved in a process that they thought would lead to the greater security of their neighbourhood. Given this level of engagement, it is not surprising community members were angry as they came up against the limitations of reflexive government and the retreat of the state as it continues to ensure certain kinds of economic development. They were particularly

annoyed that national policy and multinational companies were able to ignore the VDS. As Ivy a member of the VDS and protest group comments:

I think you can't on the one hand try and encourage local communities [to have] more responsibility for their environment and yet criticise them when they say something that you don't like. If that's the worry of that particular community then you have to listen to it, even if you don't agree with it (Ivy).

This illuminates the tensions in neo-liberal governance and active citizenship; emphasising the potential of resistance to governmentality. This is illustrated in the Berinsfield case when, despite guidelines to the contrary, the VDS committee initially demanded that there should be no more mobile phone masts in the parish, partly because of the four mobile phone masts already in Berinsfield by 2002. There had been some limited local campaigns against two of these four masts, resulting in one being located away from a residential area. In the end, however, the VDS committee had to compromise on the statement that "*Wherever possible, further mobile phone communication masts should be avoided*" (Berinsfield VDS 2002 p 13).

Just NIMBYism?

A common critique of these types of local protest is that they are NIMBY or Not In My Backyard. Mast protesters want the mobile phone service but not the masts in their garden. In Berinsfield, most protesters owned a mobile phone. Even if an individual did not own a phone there was often one within the house. The protesters were well aware of this paradox and justified ownership in terms of safety and

providing an emergency lifeline, in particular for the elderly and children. They noted they could choose when to use a mobile phone but had no control over the siting of mobile phone masts. The majority of interviewees (nine) stressed that they were not against the technology per se but that the four mobile telephone masts already in the parish were sufficient to provide the safety net they required cf. (Balzano and Sheppard 2002; Burgess 2004; Walton 2002). Thus, what they were questioning was the number of masts.

> *And you are having five people doing five masts it's not like television, it's not like BT is it? You've got a national grid, you know. Was that the route that we should have gone down? Should we have erected one mast and everybody could have stuck their own dish on it, in a safe environment, in a safe location […] Then we would have had one eyesore to look at instead of five (Clive).*

The internet capabilities of 3G mobile phones required an expansion of the number of mobile phone masts. The number of masts is partly determined by the terrain and technology, crucially however, the number is also determined by the level of coverage offered by each operator. Neo-liberal governance promotes free market forces as a defining norm. This discourse determines that there should be multiple phone operators competing to provide networks to ensure consumer choice and it is this which becomes the best solution if one is to compete in the global marketplace. This thinking is embedded within the UK legislation governing the mobile phone market. The deregulation of the telecommunications industry by the Conservative Thatcher government in 1984 led to a system of licensed operators. The licence governs such features as the quality of service, charging and the minimum level of geographical

coverage. In the case of the 3G mobile phones, this led to the auction of five licences with each of the five networks committed to covering 80% of the UK population. Justification for the auction, which netted the government £22.5 billion, was that it was 'for the long-term benefit of customers and the national economy' (EEMA 2001). Therefore in questioning this, the protesters are challenging the neo-liberal logic behind the 3G network in the UK. Maxey (2004) notes that reflexive activism may start with NIMBYism but go on to question the underlying logic of policy decisions.

The ownership of mobile phones, however, is creating a need for masts in the area; therefore, those subject to the risk are also creating it. This does not conform to one important aspect of Risk Society; that those exposed to the risk are not responsible for its creation. An alternative is to consider the ownership of mobile phones through the lens of neo-liberal governmentality and the technology of identity. The goods a person purchases help to shape their identities. In a society where increasing stress is placed upon the individual to provide for his or her own welfare and safety it would appear almost immoral to reject a piece of technology that could enhance that. As good citizens, protesters minimised their risk to external dangers such as crime or accidents by carrying a mobile phone but they also minimised their bodily risk by only using it for emergencies or texting. In rejecting the need for 3G technology, protesters are assuming an identity of frugal citizens who do not rely on the latest technological gimmick to provide status, entertainment or enhance quality of life.

Although national campaign groups, such as Mast Sanity, have formed about mobile phone masts, largely the protests appear local in nature. They usually arise from the installation of a particular mobile phone mast. Thus, it is easier to suggest that such

locally embedded activism is NIMBYism (Maxey 2004). Protesters are framed as middle-class locals looking to maintain a rural Arcadia; like modern-day luddites seeking to stop the march of progress. We should be aware, however, that not only does this ignore the global corporate nature of mobile phone technology but that representing campaigners in this way potentially undermines their claims. The LexisNexis Executive data reveals the competing discourse that the countryside must change and develop and that people who attempt to stop such progress are irresponsible and do not fully understand the drivers in society. Polls reveal that most people in the UK wish the countryside to remain unaltered and sympathise with the campaigners (Countryside Agency 2003; LNE35). Evidence from the LexisNexis Executive data showed that rural campaigns are framed to appeal to visitors, as well as locals, who wish to take advantage of the different qualities afforded by the countryside. There is an assumption of shared values that the countryside should be free from these visual intrusions. The views across the countryside appear to be interpreted as a common resource free to all; one that should not be subsumed to commercial needs.

There is a temptation to reduce the protests to concerns about house prices and visual amenity and how people should be compensated for their loss (Burgess 2004). This returns us to the commodification of nature under neo-liberalism (Castree 2008). The countryside becomes a commodity in a market economy. The protesters are consumers who have bought an item no longer fully functioning and therefore require compensation; a simple market transaction. Commentators essentially dismiss the risk to the aesthetic environment in anything other than market terms and in so doing draw the boundaries of what it is acceptable to discuss. The neo-liberal approach to the

knowledge economy is not questioned. Three villagers brought up the subject of

NIMBY and of those, only one openly mentioned her concern with the effect of the

mast on their house price.

For these protesters the debate surrounding mobile phone masts is not simply about

house prices. What is of importance is the shared vision and values, discussing the

financial impact on house prices are, for the middle-classes, a last resort (Brunsdon

1996). This reflects the long history of debates about landscape aesthetics, which can

be traced back through television satellite dishes in the 1980s to television aerials in

the 1950s and to the electricity network of the 1930s (Brunsdon 1996; Cowell 2004;

Jay 2004). Television satellite dishes in the late 1980s and modern day wind farms

have all been referred to as 'unsightly' and 'eyesores', just like mobile phone masts

(Brunsdon 1996; Country Guardian 2004 and WDN1). This suggests that even if the

health question is ignored the siting of mobile phone masts will never be a relatively

straightforward local challenge about adequate consultation; instead it encompasses

wider notions about the landscape (cf Burgess, 2004).

So Why Health?

Early disquiet surrounding mobile phone masts was due to the planning arrangements

that allowed mobile phone operators to site a mast with little or no public

consultation, only later did concerns about health develop (Burgess 2002; Walton

2002). This was reflected in the protest group with initial concern focussing on the

suitability of the mast site giving way to health by the time of the interviews. In

particular, Elaine, who had primarily been concerned with the mast as an

inappropriate development in a greenbelt area, became persuaded of the potential health risk. Elaine and her husband have devoted considerable amounts of time and money in protesting the mast development. Through their efforts, the group have accessed national resources and submitted evidence to the apMobile inquiry (see (Askew 2004). They have used the Internet extensively to establish contact with other local protests and national campaign groups. Elaine has now become Mast Sanity's regional representative. They downloaded health facts from the World Wide Web and distributed them to other group members. Interviewees relied on this and the national media to obtain information about the potential link between mobile phone technology and certain illnesses. This is not to imply that the group members passively accepted the media message but

> *… you know it's neither been proved nor disproved [ill health effects] to my knowledge and it depends which side of the fence you're on as to what articles you read and therefore you believe. It's rather like an editorial, whether it's a left wing newspaper or right wing newspaper (Brian).*

Drawing upon the work of Joseph (2007) I argue that in focussing upon health the protesters implicitly accept the neo-liberal framework. Instead of questioning the macro-scale problems, the focus on health individualises the problem to one of personal responsibility. Several of those within the Berinsfield group had joined the campaign specifically because they saw themselves at greater bodily risk than other members of the public. Two interviewees had brain tumours and another two suffered from migraines both of which have been linked in the national media to mobile phone technology. As active citizens, they were keen to minimise the number of perceived

causes of illness in their vicinity. Given the rural environment's strong association to health and well-being, even the masts' alleged tentative links with health problems could undermine the perception of the countryside as a healthy place. Under neo-liberal governmentality they had accepted responsibility for their health by living in a supposedly 'healthier' area and now that was being compromised.

The planning system favours those who can articulate their objections to developments in an objective and technical manner. Therefore, middle-class led action is particularly successful in opposing developments that they see as undesirable (Abram, et al. 1996; Burningham 1998; Hubbard 2005; Murdoch and Marsden 1994; Tytler, et al. 2001). The Berinsfield protesters had a wealth of experience upon which to draw. The main leaders were both medical doctors and of those interviewed three were in the medical profession, one was a planning consultant, and another worked within the media. The success of such groups, however, relies on the ability of various sections of the middle-class community to pull together (Abram, et al. 1996). In Berinsfield, although there was never a concerted pro-mast campaign, some sections in the community supported the building of the mast. The farmer on whose land the mast was erected lived close by, in the historic core of the village. Posters thanking Alpha for constructing the mast and for improving mobile phone reception appeared around the village. Even in the protest group, there was some sympathy for Alpha's actions, notably from the male interviewees. Eric, a senior executive, commented that Alpha had merely profited from a loophole in the law, he would expect any manager of his to follow up on such an unexpected gain.

From Local to National Protest

Success of local protest groups may also depend on the ability to 'jump scale', that is on the capacity to form associations with national actors that are then drawn into the local debate (Murdoch and Marsden 1995; Woods 2003a). By concentrating on the health issues these campaigners were able to draw on national debates surrounding scientific certainty (O'Riordan 1995). Thus, the debate can be interpreted as moving from a local to a national arena (Burgess 2004). Interviewees questioned the reassurances given by the scientific community that mobile phones and masts were safe by referring to previous industry cover-ups of health related issues such as smoking, BSE, asbestos and thalidomide. Thus, protesters considered any health research initiative funded by the mobile phone operators as potentially biased. The lack of long-term studies was of particular concern to three interviewees. Ten of the protesters recognised that there was no evidence that mobile phone masts caused health problems. Six campaigners, however, wanted no more masts built until there was proof that they did not cause health problems, thus requiring a level of certainty that science cannot provide (Frewer, et al. 2003). Whilst Risk Society suggests an increasing lack of trust in expert knowledge, it does not mean a retreat from scientific rationality as some commentators have claimed; in fact, quite the reverse. Science, which is able to reveal the potential health risks, is used to question the traditional political systems and challenge their legitimacy. The Berinsfield Action Group used a physicist and well-known critic of current National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) guidelines on mobile telephone technology as an expert witness. This choice by the protest group at the inquiry reflects the questioning of scientific orthodoxy but within the parameters of a neo-liberal discourse.

The appeal to national concerns served to weaken rather than strengthen the protest group. In appealing to alternative scientific evidence, the protest group seems to legitimise science as the only relevant knowledge around which to contest the mast. At the public inquiry, Elaine drew upon the uncertainty of scientific results when cross-examining the physicist representing Alpha, causing him to retort that he did not consider that there was such a thing as uncertain science. The exchange was terminated by the Inspector at the inquiry by commenting that in his opinion you could never get experts to agree. In accepting the contingent nature of science the protesters did not undermine the scientific evidence against them. Rather it becomes more a case of the weight of argument for and against. The planning system for mobile phone mast was set up to circumvent such arguments. This focus on science also fragmented the protest group to a certain extent.

> *I think the deeper we got into it the more technical it became and so different people concentrated on different parts of the argument and different people anyway were coming at it from, had their own particular concerns about it (Ivy).*

For five of the residents interviewed it was the failure and inequalities of the planning process that still concerned them. Prior to the public inquiry into the Berinsfield Mast, the local newspaper ran 19 articles, a third of these made specific reference to the village design statement whereas three mentioned health issues. The local newspaper reporters confirmed that they saw this as a planning dispute rather than about health concerns (personal communication, 2005). There was a great deal of respect for how the campaign had been run but it is notable that both Ivy and Duncan, who focussed

on the planning issue, chose ways independent of the protest group to pursue their claims. Duncan even testified at the planning inquiry independently of the protest group. There were few possibilities, however, for those interested in the planning debate to engage national actors. The mast site was not on land owned by either of the two large country estates that surround Berinsfield or near any historical building of note. Thus, although the CPRE representative and local MP spoke on behalf of the protest, there was little opportunity for this to become a cause célèbre (cf. Murdoch and Marsden 1995). The planning protest remained focussed on local injustices rather than any larger questions about the relationship between commerce and the countryside.

Discussion

The UK government has made it clear that the mobile phone network is an important economic driver and this is reflected in the legislation and licensing. As a new network utility the planning legislation and licences will ensure not just its even distribution across the country, but also the rationale of market choice for consumers. Part of the government logic behind the planning process was to guarantee that rural areas were covered, to enable them to take part in the m-commerce revolution. The 80% coverage of the population clause in the 3G planning licence was to ensure that there was not a repeat of the situation when the electricity distribution network was set up. In an unbridled free market rural areas were effectively bypassed and left without electricity (Hannah 1979). There still are instances where villagers are campaigning **for** a mobile phone mast because of poor reception (Hardy 2008). More difficult to understand is why five operators rather than say three were chosen. Even

at the time of the licence auctions analysts, as well as protesters, questioned whether this number of operators was viable or desirable (Budden 2002; Nairn 2002; Reece 2004). It is now clear that the rapid uptake of 3G services failed to materialise and have been a disappointment to operators, vendors and consumers alike (Ofcom 2007). One could cynically suggest that the auction of five licences had more to do with the revenue generated for the government than any long term benefit to the consumers or the nation.

Neo-liberal governments seek to provide their citizens with rational choices; the consumer citizen is then required to make responsible choices, which will ultimately lead to economic growth relative to other countries. The campaigners argue against multiple networks and question their utility within a rural setting. This calls into question the neo-liberal project and dominance of market forces and falls outside the typical "*'risk and consequences' framework"* (Irwin 2006 p.307). To minimise the effect of this critique protesters are framed as not fully understanding the scientific evidence and social processes requiring change in the countryside. They are not behaving as consumer citizens should because they seek to constrain the mobile phone network by requiring full planning permission for all masts. Campaigners are marginalised not simply over the scientific issues but also from determining the economic development of their locale. Participation of citizens is limited and has to be within the bounds of the market economy. The possible detriment to the local economy becomes the focus and the international and national pressures for mobile phone development are minimised. This constrains the potential for wider debates at the national level about the planning process and the implications for the rural/urban divide.

Health or bodily risk is merely one risk in this debate. Health forms the focus of protests because it has the legitimacy of scientific expertise. In effect, the health question is the one that protesters can ask. Protesters who doubt the health evidence are not disengaging from scientific rationality but are appealing to it. They are questioning the limitation of scientific knowledge and inquiring into the gaps of scientific literature. In turning to the health issue protesters are apparently latching on to national concerns and the sensitivity of the UK government to such risk issues (Burgess, 2004). The state seeks to absorb such issues and thus becomes engaged in precautionary measures that, in one sense, merely serve to inflame the debate. The reality is though that at present, health worries, public engagement and the Stewart Inquiry, has had very little impact on either planning permission for mobile phone masts or mobile phone use. The focus on health individualises the risk and negates any real national questioning of the need for multiple phone operators all operating individual networks. Risk becomes '*defined in narrow, technically measurable terms*' (Irwin 2006 p. 302). Health and the precautionary principle provide a convenient tool for the state to funnel citizen engagement without seriously undermining the neo-liberal project.

Risk analysis and risk society have provided a number of insights into the continuing mobile phone debate. Undoubtedly, the potential health risk has been a core issue; however, what this study has sought to show is that considering health purely in scientific terms is not sufficient to fully understand this debate. The responsibilisation of the citizen under neo-liberal governmentality means we have to consider the wider ways in which health and well-being are interpreted. The protesters have become

active scientific citizens but in so doing they challenge other areas of governance that require them to be passive consumer citizens. Being an active citizen is not simply a feature of the rhetoric of public understanding of science but generally of neo-liberal government. For the citizen who wishes to take part in governance, activism and responsibility are now almost obligatory (Rose and Novas 2005). The Stewart Inquiry and Village Design Statements are examples of this new participatory mode of citizenship. Both encourage citizens to shape their own surroundings and control the potential threats to their well-being and lifestyle. Thus, this study reveals the inherent tensions in the neo-liberal project, how on the one hand citizens are expected to actively engage in promoting their well-being but passively accept market forces that may threaten aspects of it.

Using governmentality has shown how protesters can be constructed as consumers who have bought a particular lifestyle - in this study a dominant feature is the countryside, which is associated with mostly positive attributes compared with the urban. The 'intrusion' of mobile phone masts puts at risk these perceived qualities of the countryside. Passive consumer citizens could simply be compensated for their loss but this study suggests that the empowered citizen, who is involved in their local community, is less likely to sit back and accept monetary redress. Thus, the paper highlights how active citizenship is in conflict with neo-liberalism rather than representing its moral strand (Kearns 1992). Therefore, with the continued policy emphasis on public engagement it is important that such debates are situated within wider social constructions rather than restricting it to one of technical risks. I would argue that governmentality provides such a theoretical perspective within which science-technology issues can be framed. The approach encourages studies to move

beyond the scientific framework to the broader issues that often impinge on such

debates.

Acknowledgements

Biographical Information

Frances Drake is a senior lecturer in the School of Geography, University of Leeds.
She lectures on climate change and has research interests in governance and
environmental citizenship.

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