

The UK's Science Media Centre model of science communication

An uncensored history

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Early in the research for my PhD thesis, *The Procrustean Approach: Setting Exposure Standards for Telecommunications Frequency Electromagnetic Fields* (2010), I examined the UK's Science Media Centre (SMC) as an example of how science can be manipulated by a supposedly scientific organisation with a hidden agenda to support vested interests.

As this was not directly relevant to my thesis topic: RF standard setting, the resulting paper was not used in the thesis. However, I became interested in revisiting the topic when the Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC) published on their scimex website¹ expert criticisms on a recent Catalyst program "Wi-Fried"², which included statements (in part) from the following organisations:

- 1) The Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety agency (ARPANSA):

It is the assessment of ARPANSA... that there is no established scientific evidence that the use of mobile phones or Wi-Fi devices cause any health effects.

- 2) The Australian Centre for Electromagnetic Bioeffects Research (ACEBR:)

...there is no substantiated evidence that the low levels of radiofrequency emissions encountered by mobile telecommunications can cause any harm.

As both these claims run counter to my thesis findings and do not agree with my understanding of the science,³ I thought now was an opportune time to re-examine the issue. I was even more interested to see that on the current AusSMC website, the industry trade group, the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) is listed as one of a number of Supporters.⁴ Both the above statements are in line with AMTA policy. It is also stated on the AusSMC/simex website that "*The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association is a supporter of the AusSMC, providing 0.6 per cent of our sponsorship budget*".⁵

In addition to this, the AusSMC has a direct connection with the UK's SMC as clearly stated on the AusSMC website:

The Centre is based on the UK's acclaimed Science Media Centre (SMC), an initiative of Baroness Susan Greenfield from the University of Oxford. The AusSMC

¹ EXPERT REACTION: ABC's Catalyst programme 'Wi-Fried' about EM radiation and health, <https://www.scimex.org/newsfeed/expert-reaction-abc-catalyst-programme-wi-fried-about-em-radiation-and-health>, Accessed Feb 18, 2016

² ABC Catalyst program <http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/4407325.htm> Accessed Feb 18, 2016

³ For example, In 2011, due to the findings of the 13 nation Interphone study, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified radiofrequency and microwave emissions as a Class 2B possible human carcinogen.

⁴ AusSMC, Supporting the AusSMC, <http://www.smc.org.au/about-us/sponsors/>, Accessed Feb 18, 2016

⁵ EXPERT REACTION, op cit.

was inspired by the Baroness during her period as an Adelaide Thinker in Residence in 2004.⁶

It is necessary to point out, however that the AusSMC has a wide range of diverse supporters, including universities and corporates. In many areas the AusSMC does an admirable job in providing excellent sources of expert scientific advice – and in this role they play an important part in science communication with their science advisory panel.⁷

However, when it comes to contentious issues, in this case the possible hazards from telecommunications technology, there may be a conflict of interest between giving impartial scientific advice and the opinions of vested interests that help fund the organisation and therefore have an influential voice in directing who gives scientific advice under the AusSMC banner.

Considering AusSMC’s close association with their British counterparts, their funding structure, and the SMC’s claim that there are now “over twenty Science Media Centres around the world – either in operation or being established”⁸ all working under a “unified charter”⁹, the following paper, although written 10 years ago, gives an important historical perspective to the founding and promotion of the Science Media Centre model globally, all based on the British model. It also raises serious concerns over the impartiality of the SMC model in science communication when tendering expert advice on contentious issues when vested interests are part of the SMC structure.

And so, with no apologies, here is my 2006 uncensored history of the SMC model of science communication.

Don Maisch

Retro-Marxism and the founding of the UK’s Science Media Centre (SMC): Removing the bullshit from science communication or what?

Don Maisch

Oct 2006

“Good science is governed by a whole set of rules and processes, that make it harder to bullshit in science than in any other area of public life.”

Fiona Fox, the Director of the SMC

⁶ AusSMC, Our History, <http://www.smc.org.au/about-us/our-origins/> Accessed Feb 18, 2016

⁷ AusSMC, Science Advisory Panel, <http://www.smc.org.au/about-us/our-people/science-advisory-panel/>, Accessed Feb 18, 2016

⁸ Science Media Center of the United States, <http://www.sciencemediacenter.org/usa/smcs/> Accessed Feb 18, 2016

⁹ Callaway, E, Science Media centre: Centre of Attention, http://www.nature.com/news/science-media-centre-of-attention-1.13362?WT.ec_id=NATURE-20130711, Accessed Feb 18, 2016

Abstract

In the UK, two organizations, the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) and the Science Media Centre (SMC) have been established in order to improve the quality of science communication to the public for a wide range of controversial issues, from GM crops, mad cow disease to telecommunications. The vehicle to accomplish this is by adherence to their "Guidelines on Science and Health Communication" which the SMC claimed would lessen the distortion (bias) in the media and remove the "bullshit" from science communication to the public in the U.K. An examination of the establishment of SIRC, the SMC and Sense about Science, however, traces their lineage to a small but influential pro-industry development group of individuals. Guardian journalist George Monbiot has argued these are part of the "pro-corporate libertarian right".¹⁰ Its participants have taken on key roles in the formal infrastructure of public communication used by the science and medical establishment. Key players include Frank Furedi, Dick Taverne, Tracey Brown, Clair Fox and her sister Fiona Fox who has been Director of the SMC since its inception in 2001. Fox has used the SMC to promote the views of industry and to launch fierce attacks against those who question them. This small select group of individuals has worked consistently to establish a pro-technology model for science communication in the UK under the guise of "good science". This model tends to downplay evidence of health risks from technological developments that may hinder the implementation of those developments, under the guise of expert advice from the "Science Media Centre". This model of science communication is now being 'exported' to other countries, threatening the impartiality of 'expert' science advice given on contentious issues inimical to the interests of SMC's financial supporters.

Overview

On May 6, 2004, the Institution of Electronic Engineers (IEE), a British professional industry organisation for electronics, electrical, manufacturing and IT professionals, issued its updated position statement on human health risks posed from both radiofrequency radiation from telecommunications and power frequency electromagnetic field (EMFs). The IEE (now the IET) is a British industry organization, similar to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) which whom it has a shared electronic library (IEL).¹¹ The IEEE has developed the U.S. C95.1 radiofrequency standard. This standard claims that the only human health hazard¹² from RF exposure is heating at acute (high level) exposures. The standard is therefore designed to prevent thermal biological damage from high level exposures and does not address possible adverse effects from low-level environmental exposures. An examination by this author on the history of the C95.1 RF standard reveals that the exposure limits were created and maintained by industry and the U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) in order to allow unfettered technological development free of restrictive exposure standards.

The position statement, from the IEE Policy Advisory Group on Biological Effects stated the following:

¹⁰ Monbiot G, Invasion of the Entryists <http://www.monbiot.com/2003/12/09/invasion-of-the-entryists/>, Accessed Oct 20, 2006

¹¹ Journal Reviews and Reports, The IEEE/IEE Electronic Library Online. <http://www.istl.org/99-summer/journals2.html> Accessed Oct. 19, 2006.

¹² Other than an electrocution hazard from direct body contact with active conductors.

After analysing the past two years of peer-reviewed literature on the topic, the group's conclusion is the same as that reached in its last statement in 2002 ... the balance of scientific evidence over the past two years does not indicate harmful effects occur in humans due to low-level EMFs up to 300 GHz...The absence of any new and robust evidence of harmful effects is reassuring. The cumulative evidence from a large body of research compiled in the last 20 years suggests, in general, that the existence of harmful health effects is unlikely.¹³

In reaching its conclusions, the IEE's Policy Advisory Group recommended adhering to the "Guidelines on Science and Health Communication" produced by the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) in partnership with the Royal Society and the Royal Institution.

Science policy and public communication in a Revisionist context

In the U.K. a number of organisations, some well established, and some recently formed with radical political agendas, have been involved in revising science policy by establishing guidelines for both scientists and the media on what gets communicated to the public. This also includes new guidelines for the peer review process. The organizations involved in this revision are the Royal Institution, the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) and the Science Media Centre (SMC).

In the early 1990's, U.K. government science policy was transferred from the Office of Public Service and Science to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)¹⁴. As DTI's primary mission is to support policies that encourage trade and industry it was inevitable that pressures would have to come into play to have a science policy that keyed in with these objectives. In 1999 the U.K.'s House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, issued a report on genetically modified foods. The Select Committee recommended that "media coverage of scientific matters should be governed by a Code of Practice, which stipulates that scientific stories should be factually accurate. Breaches of the Code of Practice should be referred to the Press Complaints Commission."¹⁵

The two organisations that drew up the Code of Practice were the Royal Institution of Great Britain¹⁶, under the Directorship of Baroness Susan Greenfield and the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC)¹⁷ with which Susan Greenfield is also affiliated. Baroness Greenfield is a well known neuroscientist and Professor of Pharmacology at Oxford University who has authored a number of books on aspects of the human brain as well as presenting numerous radio and TV documentaries on the human brain. Greenfield

¹³ IET Policymakers & Medis. Latest News: IEE Reaffirms Low-Level EMFs are Low Risk – More Research Should still be Conducted. <http://www.iee.org/News/PressRel/z06may2004.cfm> Accessed Oct. 19, 2006.

¹⁴ *Brave New World of Zero Risk: Covert strategy in British Science Policy*, Martin Walker, Slingshot Publications, October 2005.

¹⁵ Guidelines on Science and Health Communication, http://www.sirc.org/publik/revised_guidelines.shtml Accessed March 3, 2006

¹⁶ The Royal Institution (UK) was established in 1799 with a charter to "diffuse science for the common purposes of life". It provides services such as school lectures and forums on science for the general public. With its long history it very much represents establishment policy on science communication. See: <http://www.rigb.org/rimain/index.jsp> Accessed March 3, 2006.

¹⁷ According to the SIRC website, the Social Issues Research Centre is an independent, non-profit organisation founded to conduct research on social and lifestyle issues, monitor and assess global sociocultural trends and provide new insights on human behaviour and social relations. SIRC aims to provide a balanced, calm and thoughtful perspective on social issues, promoting open and rational debates based on evidence rather than ideology.

enjoys close ties with the UK government. In 1999 Greenfield was invited by the Prime Minister Tony Blair to give a seminar on the future of science at No. 10 Downing Street and in 2000 was consulted by the UK Secretary of State for Industry on science funding. In 2001 the government awarded her a life peerage to henceforth be titled as a Baroness.¹⁸

In November 2001 SIRC “in partnership with the Royal Society and the Royal Institution” released its “*Guidelines on Science and Health Communication*”.¹⁹ These guidelines lay down the procedures journalists and scientists should use in reporting science stories in the media. It was claimed that following the guidelines will lessen the distortion and sensationalism of media reporting of controversial science and health issues and to ensure that scientific stories should be scientifically accurate without unjustified “scare stories” and articles offering false hopes to the seriously ill.²⁰ Additionally the guidelines stated “scientists themselves have an equal obligation to ensure that they present their findings to the public in an accurate and responsible way.”²¹

The guidelines propose what is essentially a risk management procedure on science information sent to the media to eliminate information not considered factual in the opinion of SIRC/RI. Any reporting on scientific issues that is not backed up by an established body of peer reviewed research, such as health concerns over mad cow disease, GM food safety or the ubiquitous use of mobile phones, for example, would have to be “balanced” with opposing expert comment from a select list of suitable experts drawn up by The Royal Society and the Royal Institution. This essentially is a tactic originally developed by the tobacco industry and now widely used by opponents of public health and environmental regulations to manufacture scientific uncertainty. Its purpose is to delay or block regulation of their activities by questioning the validity of the scientific evidence.²²

According to the SIRC/RI Guidelines, whenever studies are reported in the media that radically challenge existing assumptions, [such as GM foods or cell phone safety] care must be taken to include statements from scientists with the opposite viewpoint to explain why the findings “might be considered premature or even unfounded”.²³ In addition positive findings should be combined with risk comparisons. The SIRC/RI guidelines state:

We recommend that, whenever possible, novel risks should be compared with risks that readers and audiences will be familiar with in their daily lives. For example, can the reported risk be compared with that of being struck by lightning, crossing the road, taking a bath or flying a hanglider?²⁴

¹⁸ Adelaide Festival of Ideas. <http://www.adelaidefestivalofideas.com.au/speakers/greenfield.asp> Accessed March 9, 2006.

¹⁹ Guidelines on Science and Health Communication, (as above)

²⁰ *ibid*, page 3.

²¹ *ibid*, page 4

²² Michaels D¹, Monforton C. Manufacturing uncertainty: contested science and the protection of the public's health and environment. *Am J Public Health*. 2005;95 Suppl 1:S39-48. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16030337>

²³ *ibid*, page 9

²⁴ *ibid*, page 10

In section 6 of the guidelines it is claimed “[u]nfounded scares can cause very serious damage to public health,”²⁵ SIRC has in fact coined a new term, “riskfactorphobia”, a condition in which people become hypersensitive to health scares.²⁶

Section 6 of the guidelines also brings in the concept of making risk/benefit comparisons. For example, this could be a newspaper article reporting on a study finding an increased risk of acoustic neuromas from cell phone use but then comparing that to the benefits of the cell phone as a “social lifeline”.

The *Guidelines on Science and Health Communication* can be read as a manual on risk assessment/risk management of controversial science issues and many of its recommendations mirror those of the U.S. Harvard Centre of Risk Analysis and its founder John D. Graham.²⁷ The HCRA was found to have a significant conflict of interest in its advice by soliciting and receiving funding from over 100 industrial corporations, such as Dow Chemical, DuPont, Monsanto, Exxon, The American Petroleum Institute, etc. and has worked to limit government regulation of its funders’ activities. Graham, who was in charge of overseeing environmental regulation in the George W. Bush administration, used his position in the White House to emasculate environmental regulation of polluting corporations. Graham also played a central role in setting the parameters of risk assessment used in telecommunications standards²⁸

Concerns over the advisability of SIRC dictating guidelines on how the media and scientists report science to the public were expressed by none other than the *British Medical Journal* in September 1999. The BMJ disclosed that SIRC shared the same offices, directors, and leading personnel with the corporate public relations firm MCM Research. MCM claimed to use “social science” to solve the problems of its clients. MCM applied its expertise for an extensive list of corporate business interests including the liquor and hospitality, financial, communications and private sectors.²⁹ Before it was removed from the MCM website shortly after the BMJ article exposed its connection with SIRC, MCM asked prospective corporate clients:

Do your PR initiatives sometimes look too much like PR initiatives? MCM conducts social/psychological research on the positive aspects of your business. The results do not read like PR literature, or like market research data. Our reports are credible, interesting and entertaining in their own right. This is why they capture the imagination of the media and your customers.³⁰

As its primary recommended link on the MCM website, SIRC is mentioned as providing “a balanced, calm and thoughtful perspective on social issues, promoting open and rational debates based on evidence rather than ideology.”³¹

A joint SIRC/MCM research paper “Evolution, Alienation and Gossip: The role of mobile telecommunications in the 21st Century” by MCM co-founder and SIRC consultant Kate Fox, is an example of the kind of “interesting and entertaining” reports manufactured by MCM for its clients. The fact this paper was listed on the same SIRC

²⁵ *ibid*, page 10.

²⁶ An end to health scares? *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 319: 716, 11 September 1999.

²⁷ D. Maisch *op cit*, pp 36 – 43

²⁸ *ibid*.

²⁹ An end to health scares? *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 319: 716, 11 September 1999

³⁰ *ibid*.

³¹ <http://www.mcmresearch.co.uk/links.html> Accessed March 9, 2006.

web page as its *Guidelines on Science and Health Communication*, apparently as a valid scientific paper, was cause for concern, considering what the Fox paper stated:

Gossip is not a trivial pastime: it is essential to human social, psychological and even physical well-being. The mobile phone, by facilitating therapeutic gossip in an alienating and fragmented modern world, has become a vital 'social lifeline', helping us to re-create the more natural communication patterns of pre-industrial times... Gossip is the human equivalent of social grooming among primates, which has been shown to stimulate production of endorphins, relieving stress and boosting the immune system".³²

The key finding from the Fox paper was simply: "Mobile gossip is good for us". As for the issue of a possible increased risk of brain tumours from mobile phone use Fox took a novel approach:

Risk-therapy. Enjoyment of gossip is also about the thrill of risk-taking, doing something a bit naughty, talking about people's 'private' lives - this is particularly important for the reserved and inhibited English, but all humans have inbuilt need for risk-taking.³³

On SIRC's web page titled "*SIRC in the news 2001*", the Fox telecommunications study was reported as:

According to the Social Issues Research Centre, a study showed that mobile phones are a "social lifeline in a fragmented and isolated world..."³⁴

Just two paragraphs further on, under the heading "Excellence in Science", the SIRC stated:

Reporting the facts, not fiction. In response to concerns that the quality of health and science reporting is not always of a uniformly high standard, the Royal Society, the Social Issues Research Centre and the Royal Institution have together published guidelines on science and health communication.³⁵

The possibility of harm from mobile phone use was also downplayed in James Harkin's article "Birds on the wire" published on the SIRC website. In this article Harkin claimed that those who criticise the technology do so because they argue that cell phones are "essentially hostile to social life" and have been blamed for a "burgeoning litany of social ills", from causing a crime wave to a growth in teenage illiteracy. Harkin rejected the issue of public concerns over possible health impacts of the technology by dismissing it as simply "irrational public anxieties". As Harkin saw it, mobile phone technology had become a scape-goat for already existing public anxieties that have little to do with the technology itself. As for the precautionary advice from the IEGMP Stewart report³⁶ on

³² Fox K, Evolution, Alienation and Gossip: The role of mobile telecommunications in the 21st century, page 1 <http://www.sirc.org/publik/gossip.shtml> Accessed March 3, 2006.

³³ *ibid*, page 2

³⁴ *ibid*.

³⁵ *ibid*.

³⁶ Mobile Phones and Health, the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP), chaired by Sir William Stewart, April 2000.

mobile phones Harkin considered that it had “done more to stoke irrational public anxieties than assuage them”³⁷, supporting SIRC’s definition of “riskfactorphobia”.

Harkin claimed that the Stewart report was responsible for inflaming community activists over their “irrational” concerns over masts on schools and churches and resulting in local authorities enacting restrictions on siting in response to community concerns. Harkin saw this as having seriously impeded the rollout of 3G wireless technology which he claimed promised to enhance the relationship between citizens and local public service providers. Harkin saw a problem for the rollout of 3G coming from local government’s reliance on overly conservative cost-benefit analysis that “errs somewhat recklessly on the side of caution”. He concluded that using “relative risk factors” together with an understanding of the benefits of mobile phone technology would put phone fears into perspective. Harkin then called upon local governments to “take greater steps to make their own properties and land available for the siting of phone masts.”³⁸ Harkins’ views on mobile phone risk mirrored those of John Graham on telecommunications, mentioned previously.

The UK Science Media Centre

In January 2001 a new “independent” Science Media Centre (SMC), created by SIRC/RI, was opened at the Royal Institution with the support of the UK science minister Lord Sainsbury. The Media Centre aimed to help “sceptical and impatient journalists get their stories right on controversial issues such as animal research, cloning and genetically modified food”.³⁹ An article on the SMC, co-authored by Greenfield, stated that “Greenfield’s aim is to help journalists find the right scientist to talk to at the right time.”⁴⁰ The task of connecting the right scientist to journalists on any issue fell to the SIRC.

The close working relationship between government science policy and the so-called independent media centre was seen in an article promoting the Media Centre by Baroness Greenfield which was co-authored by Tristram Hunt who worked from Tony Blair’s press office at No. 10 Downing Street.⁴¹

A conflict of interest in SMC’s claims of ‘independence’ is seen when the majority of its funding comes from the corporate sector, including industry trade organisations, and in particular from the pharmaceutical and Bio-tech industry.⁴² SMC claimed that this did not affect its independent status as none of the then 70 funders individually contributed more than 5% of the total running costs (£250,000 annually) of the Centre. For example, as long as AstraZenica, BP, The Chemical Industry Association, GlaxoSmithKline, Kraft Foods, Merck Sharp & Dohme, the Mobile Operators Association, ARM Holdings, Pfizer, Rothamsted Research, Shell Chemicals, Syngenta, Unilever, Wyeth, the Vodafone Group, Wi-Fi Alliance etc. each donate no more than £12,500 annually, SMC’s ‘independent’

³⁷ “Birds on the wire” by James Harkin, SIRC website, http://www.sirc.org/articles/birds_on_the_wire.shtml
Accessed March 5, 2006

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ New independent media centre aims to give scientists a voice, *The Financial Times*, January 30, 2001.

⁴⁰ GM Watch, Profiles: Science Media Centre (SMC) <http://www.gmwatch.org/profile1.asp?Prid=121> Accessed March 12, 2006.

⁴¹ No. 10’s Press Office and the Blairite Baroness, Norfolk Genetic Information Network, 9 December 2001. <http://ngin.tripod.com/09120a.htm> Accessed March 3, 2006.

⁴² See the SMC website for current and previous funding bodies. <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/funding.htm>
Accessed March 13, 2006.

status was not compromised! SMC did not mention what the total annual contributions were, but if each of the 70 funders contribute the maximum of £12,500 that would be a potential £875,000 annually, making a tidy profit for the SMC.

Warning bells over such an arrangement should sound when considering the findings of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors:

Conflict of interest exists when an author (or the author's institution), reviewer, or editor has financial or personal relationships that inappropriately influence (bias) his or her actions. . . The potential for conflict of interest can exist whether or not an individual believes that the relationship affects his or her scientific judgement. Financial relationships . . . are the most easily identifiable conflicts of interest and the most likely to undermine the credibility of the journal, the authors, and of science itself.⁴³

Multiple examples of the problems inherent of accepting corporate money were examined in the July 2003 National Conference "Conflicted Science" sponsored by the Centre for Science in Public Interest (CSPI) in the U.S. The conference examined how the increasing commercialisation of science is eroding scientific independence by the lure of corporate funding and government pressures for closer working relationships between the scientific and corporate sectors to stimulate economic growth.⁴⁴ Of particular relevance to SIRC and SMC was the presentation by Cornelia Dean, former science editor of the *New York Times*. Although the *NYT* had excellent resources to report on science issues, far more so than most news organisations, Dean said that "In recent years, the growing commercialism of science has made the problems of science journalism even worse, both in terms of learning the news and reporting it accurately, and learning and reporting the financial ties of those who make the news."⁴⁵

The conference consisted of approximately 38 presentations from university professors from a wide range of departments, such as epidemiology, environmental planning, public policy, public health, nutrition, botany, paediatrics, chemistry and criminal justice, as well as scientists, researchers and journalists. An examination of the abstracts from the conference clearly indicates that the public can no longer trust 'science' as it is presented to them in the popular media, even if it originates from supposedly 'independent' sources. A growing trend was seen, where non-profit organizations, public universities, and health charities increasingly come to depend on corporate donations to continue their work – and end up becoming messengers for corporate interests.⁴⁶

One example given at the conference was of the American Cancer Society where in 2002 it accepted more than \$100,000 from each of almost 100 different corporations, mostly pharmaceutical, chemical and cosmetic companies. In its "Look Good, Feel Better"

⁴³ *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication*, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, page 8, Updated February 2006. <http://www.icmje.org/icmje.pdf> Accessed March 14, 2006.

⁴⁴ Conference deplors corporate influence on academic science, *THE LANCET*, Vol. 362. July 26, 2003.

⁴⁵ Book of abstracts, Conference on Conflicted Science: Corporate Influence on Scientific research and Science-Based Policy, page 10, July 11, 2003. Available at: http://www.cspinet.org/integrity/2003/cs_conference_abstract.pdf Accessed March 14, 2006.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

program, which was funded by the perfume and cosmetic industries, the ASC said nothing about the potential problem of carcinogenic chemicals used in many cosmetics.⁴⁷

Another significant cause for concern was seen when Fiona Fox was appointed the Director of SMC, as well as being a member on the "Sense About Science" working party on peer review. Even though she was placed in an important position to influence science communication she had no background in either science or science communication.⁴⁸ In addition, "Sense About Science" was hardly what one could call an independent organisation as it was funded by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) as well as several individual pharmaceutical companies.⁴⁹ Fiona Fox also neglected to disclose her previous membership and involvement (as Fiona Foster) with the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP)⁵⁰ and its later reincarnation as the pro-technology, pro-enterprise group the Living Marxism (LM) network.⁵¹

The Revolutionary Communist Party / Living Marxism network

The RCP was established in 1978 under the ideological leadership of Frank Furedi, a sociology lecturer at the University of Kent. In 1987 the RCP ran in the general election, hoping unsuccessfully to replace the Labour party. By the mid 1990's it was clear that the Soviet Union was crumbling and that Western-style communism of the type RCP promulgated had no future. A new direction was needed for the RCP cadre and perhaps heeding Margaret Thatcher's prediction that the next industrial revolution would be a scientific one, they decided to devote their energies to developing a new ideology based around science. "Living Marxism", the magazine of the RCP network for which Fiona Fox regularly contributed articles, described its mission as promoting "confident individualism" without social constraint. RCP through its magazine, campaigned against gun control, was against restraints on tobacco advertising, child pornography, and whale hunting. Conversely they were in favour of human cloning, and freedom for corporations.⁵² As Martin Walker explained in his extensive analysis of the network in "*Brave New World of Zero Risk*", the basic premise of this group was that scientists must be given freedom from regulatory constraints and that there should be no democratic discourse over the directions science took because that also led to constraints on science.⁵³ In 1997, the year Tony Blair's New Labour took office, the RCP disbanded and its monthly journal "Living Marxism" was re-badged in the form of a glossy magazine "LM" and henceforth dropping any mention of communism or Marxism.⁵⁴

Using the tactic of "entryism"⁵⁵ that the RCP/LM network employed to further its ideology, in the late 1990's the group infiltrated sections of the media and ended up

⁴⁷ Conflicted Science by Judy Brady, Greenaction for health & Environmental Justice. <http://www.greenaction.org/cancer/conflictedscience.shtml> Accessed March 14, 2006.

⁴⁸ http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Fiona_Fox Accessed March 15, 2006.

⁴⁹ *Brave New World of Zero Risk* (as above) page 7

⁵⁰ Lobbywatch.org, Profiles: Living Marxism (LM) <http://www.lobbywatch.org/profile1.asp?Prid=78> Accessed March 12, 2006.

⁵¹ <http://www.lobbywatch.org/profile1.asp?PrId=45> Accessed March 15, 2006.

⁵² Invasion of the entryists by George Monbiot, *The Guardian*, December 9, 2003.

⁵³ *Brave New World of Zero Risk* (as above) page 35

⁵⁴ Invasion of the entryists (as above) page 31.

⁵⁵ Entryism is a political tactic by which an organisation encourages members to infiltrate another organisation in an attempt to gain recruits, or take over entirely. In situations where the organization being "entered" is hostile to entryism, the entryists may engage in a degree of *subterfuge* to hide the fact that they are, in fact, an organization in their own right. Other entryist groups have gone to the extent of hiding both their political views and their organisational existence. (From Wikipedia)

broadcasting its ideology on scientific and environmental issues on Channel 4 and the BBC, where LM spokespersons argued, among other things, that environmentalists were preventing human beings from fulfilling their potential.⁵⁶ In 2000, however, LM went too far when it accused Independent Television News (ITN) journalists of fabricating evidence of Serbian atrocities against Bosnian Muslims. ITN then successfully sued LM and the subsequent large damage claim against LM saw the demise of the magazine. Like the Phoenix rising out of the ashes however, LM was soon back, in the form of the Internet magazine *Spiked!* and the think tank, the *Institute of Ideas*.⁵⁷

Spiked! online continues the tradition of LM magazine. Mick Hume who runs *Spiked!* formerly edited LM. *Spiked!*'s managing editor, Helene Guldberg was LM's publisher and the staff and many of the article contributors are members of the old RCP/LM network. *Spiked!* is avidly pro-GM and even opposed GM farm crop trials because they were an unnecessary obstacle to the introduction of the "beneficial" technology.⁵⁸ *Spiked!* also enjoys close relations to the PR firm Hill & Knowlton, in whose offices many *Spiked!* seminars are held. *Spiked!* calls itself an independent voice but somewhat revealingly *Spiked!* states on its website "If you like *spiked!* and want more of it, please put your money where our mouth is – today."⁵⁹

An investigation by researcher and activist Jonathan Matthews (www.gmwatch.org) found out that another think tank closely connected to the Science Media Centre, *Sense About Science* (SAS), had successfully lobbied the government to support GM technology and had the same phone number as the publishing house *Global Futures*, a LM creation. Both the Director of SAS, Tracey Brown and the assistant Director Ellen Raphael were found to have direct links with LM and both studied under the founder of the RCP/LM Frank Furedi. Additionally, both Brown and Raphael also worked for the PR firm *Register Larkin* which acts to protect the interests of corporations involved in GM technology.⁶⁰ The list of individuals and spin-off organisations all previously connected with LM leads to both the SIRC and the SMC. According to the PR watch organisation *Lobby Watch*, these people are "a network of political extremists who eulogise technologies like genetic engineering and reproductive cloning and are extremely hostile to their critics...it is a network which engages in infiltration of media organisations and science-related lobby groups in order to promote its agenda."⁶¹

SIRC / SMC peer review?

The SIRC's Science Medic Centre has a two page pamphlet available on its website, "*peer review in a nutshell*" that underscores the importance of the process for science presented to the public. In addition, the SIRC/RI Guidelines stress the importance of using peer review papers, or subjecting lesser papers to a critical expert analysis from a select list of experts before disseminating to the public. It states on the SIRC website that the work of SIRC is "guided by an Advisory Board consisting of eminent scientists and consultants in a variety of disciplines". It is therefore assumed then that Kate Fox's paper "*Telecommunications in the 21st Century*" and James Harkin's article "*Birds on the wire*" were critically examined and approved by SIRC's Advisory Committee before being

⁵⁶ Invasion of the entryists (as above)

⁵⁷ Invasion of the entryists (as above)

⁵⁸ GM Watch, Profiles : Spiked! <http://www.gmwatch.org/profile1.asp?Prid=124> Accessed march 20, 2006.

⁵⁹ <http://www.spiked-online.com> Accessed March 19, 2006.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

published on the SIRC website for public viewing. So much for SIRC's quality of peer review.

Considering the level of public concern and scientific controversy about possible health hazards from telecommunications technology and the ongoing research on possible hazards from the handsets, are these examples of accurate and responsible reporting to the public to address public concerns? Or is SIRC just using the concept of peer review to give a semblance of credibility to its support of the government's policy on telecommunications? As for putting a value on that policy, in 2004 the telecommunications sector was estimated to have added £47.4 billion to the national economy. With the advent of 3G technology it would be expected that that figure would increase substantially.

A matter of policy

While Kate Fox's telecommunications paper on the SIRC website could be dismissed as just so much light-hearted banter, Harkin's article "*Birds on a wire*", seriously called for more public land to be made available for phone masts. This, and his rejection of the validity of community concerns is in obvious support of both Government policy and the telecommunications sector, which Harkin admitted consulting with for the material in his article. In regards to how many additional masts may be required for 3G technology, estimates of up to 135,000 additional masts would be needed in the U.K. That is about four times as many masts built currently in the country as of 2006.⁶² With the prospect of that many additional masts, sweeping the concerns of local people aside would be a tough call to say the least. As for Harkin (and SIRC) echoing government policy on telecommunications one only has to consider the Parliamentary debate that took place in March 2006 on the Telecommunications Masts (Planning Control) Bill. This Bill was notable in that it removed development exemptions for the carriers and required full local government planning permission for all new installations (not pre-existing). It also required greater consideration of the health issue, requiring a statement setting out precautionary measures that would be undertaken to protect human health and allowing easier public challenges against all installations that were close to schools and hospitals and other sensitive locations.⁶³

During the Parliamentary debate on the Telecommunications Bill representative Nick Herbert reminded the government that their manifesto during the previous election was that "People want a sense of control over their own neighbourhood." Herbert went on to say that the issue would continue to grow as the new 3G technology would require up to four times as many masts as presently existed, meaning about 135,000 additional masts for the country. Because of this Herbert added, it was "no longer acceptable to sweep the concerns of local people aside."⁶⁴

In reply to Herbert, Jim Fitzpatrick, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, said that the government did not support the Bill and explained that he wanted to set the discussion in the wider context of it being "one of the Government's objectives to create

⁶² Testimony of Nick Herbert, Member for Arundel and South Downs, discussing the Telecommunications Masts (Planning Control) Bill, Column 571, March 3, 2006.

⁶³ Campaign for Planning Sanity, Forum on issues connected to the proposed Telecommunications Bill. <http://www.planningsanity.co.uk/bill2006info.html> Accessed March 11, 2006.

⁶⁴ The UK Parliament, Testimony of Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) *Hansard*, 3 March 2006: Column 570.

the most dynamic, competitive communications industries in the world, ensuring universal access to a choice of diverse services of the highest quality and that citizens and consumers are safeguarded.”⁶⁵

As for the “benefits of mobile phone technology” Fitzpatrick went on to explain that in 2004 the UK Telecommunications Sector contributed £47.4 billion to the UK economy and that there was a need for more base stations as demand for services increased.⁶⁶ Fitzpatrick admitted that there was significant disquiet about masts, with proposals for masts often accompanied by protests and objections, which sometimes had some justification and sometimes not, “often because local communities are not sufficiently well informed.”⁶⁷ As for any health risks Fitzpatrick alluded to a lack of any health risks and referred to the...“approximately 25,000 articles {that} have been published in the past 30 years about the biological effects and medical applications of non-ionizing radiation”. Fitzpatrick then claimed that “Scientific knowledge about the matter is arguably more extensive than for most chemicals.”⁶⁸ Such a statement ignores the fact that the vast majority of the research (articles) he refers to was done either on ELF powerline studies or animals exposed to acute levels of RF to determine immediate thermal hazards. In both cases this research does not address the health issues of possible hazards from prolonged exposure to environmental level microwave emissions, such as in the 3G GHz frequency range. This was specifically noted in an Australian telecommunications research review by the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) (1994) that concluded that with the research done to that date, “Safety of RF radiation cannot be assessed in the absence of reported serious effects when so little research has been aimed at the problem.” The CSIRO author, Dr. Stan Barnett also noted the words of researcher Allan Frey back in 1988 about the appropriateness of research directions: “...the significant research, that which does not use high intensities and is not thermoregulatory oriented, has been largely squeezed out for reasons unrelated to science.”⁶⁹ Even though Barnett’s CSIRO report was released in 1994, those conclusions are just as valid today.

Contrary to Fitzpatrick’s claim of an extensive scientific knowledge, he was apparently unaware of the conclusions of ICNIRP’s peer review Standing Committee on Epidemiology in their review of the available RF epidemiological literature. This was undertaken to update the earlier RF epidemiological section in the ICNIRP guidelines, summarise the current scientific understanding, improve future methodologies and plan for future studies. The committee concluded, in part, that:

Results of these studies to date give no consistent or convincing evidence of a causal relation between RF exposure and any adverse health effect. On the other hand, the studies have too many deficiencies to rule out an association...Despite the ubiquity of new technologies using RFs, little is known about population exposure from RF sources and even less about the relative importance of different sources. Other cautions are that mobile phone studies to date have been able to address only relatively short lag periods, that almost no data are available on the consequences of childhood exposure and that published data largely concentrate on a small number

⁶⁵ Testimony of Jim Fitzpatrick, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of the deputy Prime Minister, Column 571, March 3, 2006.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, Column 572

⁶⁷ *ibid*, Column 573.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, column 573

⁶⁹ Barnett S, *Status of Research on Biological Effects and Safety of Electromagnetic Radiation: Telecommunications Frequencies*, CSIRO Division of Radiophysics, page 7-8, June 1994.

of outcomes, especially brain tumor and leukemia... Another gap in the research is children. No study population to date has included children, with the exception of studies of people living near radio and TV antennas. Children are increasingly heavy users of mobile phones. They may be particularly susceptible to harmful effects (although there is no evidence of this), and they are likely to accumulate many years of exposure during their lives.⁷⁰

When asked why his government killed the Telecommunications Bill (2006) the Prime Minister Tony Blair simply said “There must be a balance between people’s objectives and making sure that we get the facilities that we need. We constantly keep under review the issue as to whether those are safe or not. As far as I am aware, the evidence points clearly and surely to the fact that they are.”⁷¹ It would seem that the SIRC and SMC shared the same viewpoint.

Tomorrow’s People

Baroness Greenfield, one of the founders of the SMC, wrote of her vision for the future in her book *“Tomorrow’s People: How 21st Century Technology Is Changing the Way We Think and Feel”*(2004)

In *Tomorrow’s People*, Greenfield argues that as a result of the impact of new technology, from biomedical science to information technology (which includes telecommunications) we may be seeing a “makeover” of society “far more cataclysmic than anything that has happened before”. This makeover includes “a huge impact on our brains and central nervous system” including the prospect of “directly tampering with the essence of our individuality”.⁷²

Greenfield warned of the possibility of a bleak future for the majority of the world’s population (somewhat like Fritz Lang’s 1927 cinema classic, *Metropolis*)⁷³, if the technologically advanced world doesn’t utilise technology wisely for the benefit of all. Greenfield pictures a future where the march of technology is an unstoppable force with the challenge for humanity being how best to adapt to it.

She saw the danger of an advanced technological society developing alongside a “vast majority” of the world’s population in the underdeveloped world being left out of the advances of technology with them being “exploited and abused in ways more sinister, pervasive and cruel than even that witnessed by the worst excesses in the colonialist past.”⁷⁴

Greenfield foresaw the solution to this imbalance in the use of new technology. One example given is the development of GM modified trees to use as fuel combined with solar energy systems to allow high tech cottage industries to flourish in rural areas,

⁷⁰ Ahlbon A, Green A, Kheifets L, Savatz D, Swerdlow A, Epidemiology of Health Effects of Radiofrequency Exposure, *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Vol. 112, Number 17, pp 1741 - 1754, December 2004.

⁷¹ Testimony of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Hansard, 8 March 2006, Column 817.

⁷² Susan Greenfield, *Tomorrow’s People: How 21st Century Technology Is Changing the Way We Think and Feel*. Penguin Books, Sept. 2004

⁷³ Just as Greenfield sees the technological future of humanity as heading to a divide between a small technologically advanced society and a larger technologically backward world, Lang saw the future as humanity being divided into two groups, the thinkers who were the privileged elite taking advantage of technology and the workers, the repressed impoverished masses who ran the machines (technology) while the machines ran the lives of the workers.

⁷⁴ *Tomorrow’s People* (as above), page 268.

allowing people to remain living in the countryside. Greenfield predicted a future where “all food, whether home-cooked or takeaway or a mere pill, comes from genetically modified produce.”⁷⁵ A future where all those concerns over GM foods proved unfounded with GM foods the only way to successfully feed the developing world. A world where GM and nanotechnology-altered food was superior to natural foods.⁷⁶

As far as concerns over possible health hazards from high technology, (be it from GM foods, vaccines, new pharmaceutical drugs, telecommunications, etc, etc.) Greenfield saw it as just symptoms of technophobia, the fear of or aversion to new technology, especially computers and high technology. Those concerns she considered as just sensationalist and scaremongering. Greenfield stated, “GM foods, mad cow disease and brain-scrambling mobile phones have compelled the most ostrich-like technophobe to question what might be happening in the remote and rarefied stratosphere of the laboratory.”⁷⁷

This would seem to suggest that even to question technology is to exhibit technophobia?

As for the growing power and intrusion of corporate industrial involvement in science Greenfield saw this as a positive. According to Greenfield: “First, there is a growing need for innovative science in the private sector as companies in high-tech industries, particularly pharmaceutical companies, depend for survival on having novel products in the pipeline.” As for future research it will take place in “Universities as well as behind the walls of leviathan pharmaceutical and other high-tech industries...”

Summing up Greenfield’s “Tomorrow’s People” it does present in detail the many novel social challenges facing humanity in the future from high technology but totally avoids any mention of the possibility that there may be unintended hazards which she conveniently dismissed as just technophobia. Her glowing portrayal of everything high tech and the corporate world’s benevolent role in advancing the coming high-tech world is at odds with ample evidence that the corporate world’s actions are, on the whole, anything but benevolent. Recommended reading here would be “*The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*” by Joel Bakan, “*Toxic Sludge is Good For You! Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*” by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton and “*Brave New World of Zero Risk: Covert strategy in British Science Policy*”, by Martin J. Walker.

The SMC model exported to other countries

Currently (as of 2006) there are at least three national SMC organizations based on the British ‘parent’. These are the Australian SMC (AusSMC), The New Zealand SMC and the Canadian SMC. This article does not claim that the ‘sins’ of the parent are necessarily those of the offspring.

However, the possibility of a pro development/industry/technology bias due to an ideological ‘inheritance’ from the UK SMC, and the risk of undue corporate influence from the funding arrangement, does exist.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, page 23.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, page 25.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, page 2.

For example, the Australian SMC (AusSMC) is based on the SMC model established in the UK. AusSMC was granted permission to use the UK SMC's intellectual property and all operational, published and training materials. In addition the AusSMC's Board of management set-up is similar to that of the UK SMC⁷⁸ and includes UK's SMC Director Fiona Fox⁷⁹ who in earlier years was a member of the UK's Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and the Living Marxism (LM) network mentioned earlier. Fox's role in Australia was to help establish the Australian branch and ensure conformity with the UK's SMC science policy. Baroness Greenfield is also directly involved as a member of the AusSMC's Science Advisory Panel.⁸⁰

In order to keep its independent status AusSMC took on the SMC funding arrangement of inviting funding from a wide variety of sources (media groups, industry, government, professional associations as well as individuals) but upping the ante to a maximum individual ceiling donation of 10% of the total estimated running costs of \$300,000 annually.⁸¹ For a contribution of \$30,000 a year for two years a sponsor gains the right to be represented on the AUS SMC Board. A lesser "Gold sponsorship" contribution of \$15,000 gives recognition on all AusSMC printed material and online. Gold sponsors could place specific issues on the agenda of the AusSMC Board and participate in any discussions on that issue.⁸² The obvious problem with this arrangement is that it favours industrial corporate interests with "deep pockets" to ensure they have an input on what version of 'science' gets communicated to the media and public.

Establishment of the Australian Science Media Centre

In 2002 South Australian Premier Mike Rann established the Premier's Science and Research Council and as part of that plan invited Baroness Susan Greenfield to Adelaide as a Thinker in Residence to "*develop a strategy to reignite our passion in the sciences.*"⁸³ During her two visits to Adelaide (9 weeks in 2004 and 6 weeks in 2005) Greenfield helped establish an 'independent' Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC) which aimed to improve the interaction between scientists and the media, thereby enhancing "the quality and quantity of media coverage of science in Australia".

As with its parent UK body, AusSMC started developing "a screened database of science experts and science press officers from a wide range of topics and scientific disciplines". Once alerted to a news story, such as the controversy over mobile phones and brain tumours, the AusSMC would contact the "best experts" on the issue and "persuade them to make time to talk to the media".⁸⁴

Under this arrangement, bias is possible with any number of corporate interests being able to individually donate either \$15,000 or \$30,000 annually to be given direct access to

⁷⁸ [ASC-list] Progress: The Australian Science Media Centre (meeting in Adelaide) No. 2, 2004. <http://lists.asc.asn.au/pipemail/asc-list/2004-November/001283.html> Accessed March 13, 2006.

⁷⁹ Government of South Australia Media Release, Australian Science Media Centre seeks a CEO, April 3, 2005.

⁸⁰ R&D Info Headlines, 9 August 2005, http://news.researchcentre.com.au/rndinfo/newsletter_.php?issue=2005-08-09, Accessed March 27, 2005.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² http://www.aussmc.org/about_sponsors.htm Accessed March 15, 2006.

⁸³ Government of South Australia Media Release, "Science – A subject South Australia can 'Bragg' about", November 5, 2005.

⁸⁴ http://news.researchcentre.com.au/rndinfo/newsletter_.php?issue=2005-08-09#1597, Accessed March 15, 2006

AusSMC Board thereby influencing AusSMC's list of experts who will give advice to the media on issues affecting said corporation.

Conclusion

The revisionist ideology of risk management as seen in the organizations mentioned in this article, SIRC, SMC, SAS, LM, and *Spiked!* online can be seen as a 'retro-Marxist' ideology considering the origins of many of the players with the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). This ideology was aptly described in the words of Frank Furedi, the founder of the RCP and LM in the U.K. As he explains on *Spiked!*, one of the key points in his book *Culture of Fear*, is that "perceptions of risk, ideas about safety and controversies over health, the environment and technology have little to do with science or empirical evidence. Rather, they are shaped by cultural assumptions about human vulnerability.⁸⁵" In managing risks, Furedi saw the problem for modern society was the existence of a culture of safety that sees vulnerability as its defining condition, resulting in risk management having to continually engage with all kinds of theoretical risks. It would appear from Furedi's writings, as well as other related articles on *Spiked!* online that there are apparently no real environmental or health risks from technology whatsoever, other than social perceptions. This is a point of view expressed by Susan Greenfield in *Tomorrow's People* and very much to the liking of Tony Blair according to his statements in Parliament in March 2004.

As for public concerns over mobile phones and masts Furedi quoted Professor Ivan Beale's (New Zealand) claim that phone masts constitute a health risk even if there is no health risks because "the mere possibility of exposure is threat enough to produce fear, and fear leads to illness."⁸⁶ Although it is true that unfounded fears can lead to illness, the reality of which is explored in detail in *The Sickening Mind: Brain, Behaviour, Immunity & Disease* by Paul Martin⁸⁷ Furedi, Greenfield and their network of UK science communication experts take a giant leap of faith by arbitrarily dismissing the very existence of any justifiable fears from unintended consequences from new technology.

It is apparent that the agenda of SIRC, SMC and allied organisations is to support the UK government's economic policy to promote Biotec and telecommunications technology. This may explain why people with no real qualifications in science communication were able to reach positions that essentially became the public face of the British scientific establishment. It also explains why the UK scientific and medical establishment, aware that a large part of scientific funding comes from industry sources, are willing partners in allowing PR organizations with a pre-determined agenda to speak for them and champion government economic policy over the public interest.

How all this plays out in Australia remains to be seen at this time [2006], especially when it comes to telecommunications. However, it is obvious that the funding arrangements do conveniently give vested interests a direct line in influencing whom the SMC selects as experts in their sector.

Time will tell.....

⁸⁵ *Epidemic of Fear* by Frank Furedi, *Spiked!* online, March 15, 2002.

<http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000002D46C.htm> Accessed March 19, 2006.

⁸⁶ *ibid*, quoting Ivan Beale.

⁸⁷ *The Sickening Mind: Brain, Behaviour, Immunity & Disease* by Paul Martin, Harper Collins 1998. See pages 29, 193, 194 and 302