The spread of the mobile telephone and of the internet into the general population have taken place over roughly the same period of time; the late 1990s and the early 2000s. From a health perspective, it is not the use of the phones themselves which has given the most cause for public concern during this period but the erection of masts or ‘base stations’ in particular locations to improve the network coverage. People living in the vicinity of phone masts, or facing the prospect of doing so, quarrel with the companies for choosing their neighbourhood, and with the local authorities for allowing them to do so. Once erected, the masts are permanent fixtures, constantly in use, and may, it is feared, inflict health damage as well as interfering with other domestic equipment and creating an unwanted visual presence. Whereas individuals can choose whether or not to buy themselves a mobile phone, how much to use it, and whether to employ a hands-free attachment, they have no such personal control over the operation of the base stations. This aspect of the masts issue gives it a political edge that is much more muted in relation to the phones themselves. Meanwhile, the personal choice element in relation to the actual cellphones introduces an important component of reflexivity. ‘I must decide what is best for me, knowing what I know/believe not just about the technology, but also about myself.’

Although this chapter is mainly about phones not masts, it is not always possible to separate these in practice when the issue comes up for discussion.

The internet has offered opportunities for people and institutions with an interest in this topic to ‘have their say’ online. Some have chosen to do so via websites; some have chosen to do so in more interactive ways, including via Usenet newsgroups; some have done both. Views ‘for’ and ‘against’ mobile phones have been put into circulation,
for the benefit of the ‘don’t knows’; the ‘don’t knows’ too have left traces of their online quest for information.

This chapter begins with a review of wireless telephony, with particular reference to the ways in which this technology has been constructed as a health risk issue over the last ten years or so. It is followed by a discussion of the forms that this debate has taken on the internet, or at least in those areas of the net which are primarily for public communication purposes – websites and Usenet newsgroups.

My discussion of websites compares two sites designed with public information in mind, one produced by an active research scientist and one by a journalist with a particular interest in this area. It shows that each of these has appropriated the medium in different ways, as well as taking a different position on the issue. In relation to newsgroups, I have tried to find pattern in the ‘noise’ of this material by concentrating upon a few specific aspects of the discourse: the balance between confidence and scepticism, recurrent themes of argument, recurrent motifs of expression, relevant comparisons and forms of intertextuality.

The story of mobile telephones

The technological principles which enabled the development of mobile phones are based upon the science of microwave radiation and the technology of the cellular principle, whereby the radio transmission can make use of short wave frequencies because the distance of transmission, to the nearest base station, is very low. Around 45 million Britons now own a mobile phone – Jeremy Clarkson, in a British TV documentary, Inventions that Changed the World: the Telephone in February 2004 said that this amounted to almost everyone in the country capable of using one.

Domestic uses of microwave radiation are many, and they are increasing thanks to the steady development of practical applications for wireless communication in the home, in connection with security devices such as burglar alarms, entertainment technologies such as television, and of course computers. The term ‘microwave’ itself is obviously associated with one domestic technology above all others, and that is the ubiquitous microwave oven. Microwave radiation affects living tissue by heating it. Microwave cookery makes deliberate use of this effect but in relation to communication devices, heating is just a side effect. Biomedical science is also interested in the possibility of other side effects, besides that of heating, as the basis of any possible health problems.