This short chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section discusses the significance of this research for the study of computer-mediated communication, drawing out the implications of approaching CMC as public discourse. Four aspects of communicational ‘publicness’ have been touched upon in this research: communication in the public domain; communication for the public; communication by the public; and communication which is in the public interest. It is the last of these which is the focus of discussion here. The second section discusses the implications of the research for the study of the social construction of health risk.

Computer-mediated communication as public discourse

The research presented above has shown that there are advantages in linking the study of online communication to the study of offline communication in some circumstances. In the present case, with the focus on the internet as a forum for public communication, it was important to draw out these connections, distinguishing websites and newsgroups from email and other kinds of restricted communication managed over the net, while linking it with the study of the mass media, which used to have more of a monopoly in the public communication field. This does not mean that within a new field of ‘public communication studies’ the differences between broadcasting, print media and internet-based forms of communication should be elided. On the contrary; the focus should be very much on comparisons between the affordances, the semiotic potentials, of different media for similar purposes. Audiovisual media are able to achieve things which primarily text-based media cannot, and vice versa. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of ‘conver-
gence’, at the time of writing, the TV screen is still the best place outside the cinema to encounter ‘moving image’ audiovisual text, not the computer or telephone screen, and print newspaper sales have not collapsed despite the availability at no cost of the same text online.

At the same time the public communication perspective is also one within which the migration of particular kinds of content from their traditional forums in print and over the airwaves to the net can be subjected to analysis. In this research a large number of messages gave the web addresses of the sources that they referred to and a high proportion of these were to news websites. What is also interesting in the age of the internet is that individuals are able in some cases to refer one another ‘past’ the news media, back to a deeper level of the discourse, in the form of the source texts which the journalists themselves have used in compiling their reports. There is some evidence of this as a practice in the research presented here. For example, the WHO website was extensively referenced by newsgroup participants during the SARS outbreak. If the underlying question is whether the coming of the internet is a good thing or a bad thing for the state of public communication then trends like this weigh in on the ‘good’ side.

A primary concern in research concerned with the public character of computer-mediated communication has to do with the extent to which it is possible/desirable to protect all or part of the ‘electronic commons’ (Goggin 2000; Starr 2000; Dyer-Witheford 2002; Murphy 2002) from the encroachment of private (that is, commercial) interests or market forces.

To the extent that the internet does offer such a virtual commons, in whole or in part, other researchers have addressed themselves to what this offers, potentially and actually, to democracies concerned for the quality (for example, rationality) of public debate (Spears and Lea 1994; Schneider 1996; Dahlberg 2001; Slevin 2000). In this context, the question of regulation is an issue, not just at the ‘macro’ level but also in research concerned with the self-government of online forums, by which attempts are made to restrict individual behaviour for the good of the group as a whole (Kollock and Smith 1996; MacKinnnon 1997). The general theme here is that of whether the coming of the internet is or is not likely to make a positive contribution to democracy (Arterton 1987; Golding 1998; Oblak 2003).

Seen from a different angle the publicness of CMC is not so much a question of access, regulation or privatization, but a question of the interactive profiles of the communicative forms on offer. From this angle, one-to-one communication is ‘private’ whereas any mass