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The cell phone industry: Big Tobacco 2.0?

By **Molly Wood**, senior editor, CNET.com
Tuesday, March 8, 2005

So, there's [this incredibly popular product](#) that has widespread consumer use and a massive marketing presence. Nearly everyone uses it, and it has very high social acceptance, even though some people find it [annoying when it's used in public](#). It's highly habit-forming; people who use the product on a regular basis find it almost impossible to live without.

Unfortunately, studies start to appear showing that the product might [be harmful](#) to its users--even cancer-causing. The product's manufacturers deny the presence of any danger and even spend millions of dollars trying to discredit the research that points to problems. Then, an insider emerges, [seemingly with proof](#) that the product could be dangerous. The industry agrees to [publish warning data](#) about the product, but continues to maintain that the product itself is safe for use. Lawsuits against the product's manufacturers are filed, but [all are dismissed](#). Industry analysts know that any case that does succeed could start a domino effect of future lawsuits, which keeps the industry determined to maintain that the product is harmless, despite [increasing evidence](#) to the contrary.

Sound familiar?

Well, put down your lighter, I'm talking about cell phones. I've already maintained that I don't like the cell phone industry's iron-clad control over phone releases and pricing, its ever-lengthening contracts, and the annoying habit it has of crippling Bluetooth phones so that I can't use them the way I want to. But it takes only a few minutes of looking into the cell phone radiation quagmire before I start to think, man, these guys have Big Tobacco 2.0 written all over

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What do you think? Is the cell phone radiation scare a conspiracy theory or worth using a headset for?

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| Monitors & projectors | |
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| Scanners | OK, I know the obvious differences: I'm sure cell phone manufacturers are not deliberately making their products more addictive, for example--although they are, of course, always offering new and improved services and ever-increasing buckets of minutes, which can't help but encourage us to use our phones more and more frequently. But, just as Big Tobacco did, the cell phone industry seems bound and determined to thwart and deny any suggestion that its product might be dangerous. |
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A history of bad news

For example, in 1994, University of Washington bioengineering professors Henry Lai and Narendra Singh found that the DNA in rats' brains was damaged after two hours of exposure to levels of microwave radiation considered safe by the government. When Lai and Singh published the research, a leaked memo from Motorola's head of global strategy, Norm Sandler, talked about ways to minimize damage by undermining their research, with Sandler writing, "I think that we have sufficiently war-gamed the Lai/Singh issue." Ouch. Worse, research biologist Jerry Phillips, who was paid by Motorola to conduct similar testing, says he was able to duplicate Lai and Singh's findings, but was then asked not to publish the research and was subsequently shunned by the company. Motorola says it told Phillips that his findings needed clarification, and the industry still maintains that Lai and Singh's results have never been duplicated and can't be considered legitimate.

The biggest Russell Crowe-style insider in this case, though, is Dr. George Carlo, who was hired by the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association to head up a \$28 million research program into possible health effects from cellular phones. Unfortunately, he now says his findings show an increased rate of brain cancer deaths, development of tumors, and genetic damage among heavy cell phone users. He wrote [this letter of concern](#) to the president of AT&T Corporation and later went public with his findings after what he considered to be neglect by the industry. He's since broken with the industry, become a vocal critic, and coauthored a book called [Cell Phones: Invisible Hazards in the Wireless Age](#)--so you can tell he's on the "cell phones could cause cancer" side of things.

Meanwhile, more studies keep coming, and they seem to be getting worse. A study funded by the European Union reported last December that radio waves from mobile phones do, definitively, damage DNA and other cells in the body--and that the damage extended to the next generation of cells. Even though mutated cells are considered a possible cause of cancer, the UK National Radiological Protection Board said that since the study didn't show that the damage definitely led to disease, consumers shouldn't worry too much about the findings.

Uh, right. In the meantime, the report recommended that children use mobile phones only in emergency situations. You know, just in case. How reassuring.

The cell phone industry hasn't commissioned another large-scale

study--at least not publicly--since its fateful encounter with Dr. Carlo--and why would they? They're in a catch-22. It's a multibillion dollar industry, and they simply can't afford to find out, definitively, that cell phones are dangerous. Worse, just like the tobacco companies, if they start issuing warnings and precautionary tales now, it'll look like they knew all along that the radio waves were dangerous, opening them up to major liability claims. They've already dodged one big, big bullet--an \$800 million lawsuit against Motorola and cell phone carriers was [thrown out in 2002](#), with the judge ruling that there wasn't sufficient evidence for trial. Since then, neurologist Dr. Christopher Newman, who filed the lawsuit, has died of brain cancer.

Listen, I use a cell phone, and I'm not trying to scare the bejesus out of everyone. But I *do* use a headset when I'm talking for any long period of time, and I carry that sucker in my purse, not my pocket. (I know you guys don't have that luxury, but reconsider the briefcase, OK?) And if you're shopping for a new phone, you might want to check our [cell phone radiation chart](#) to see which ones carry a low dose.

In a few more years, we'll either know for sure that cell phones can cause cancer, or we'll know they can't. I just hope we don't find out the hard way--through subpoenaed documents from cell phone makers and carriers who've been trying to minimize their damages and maximize their profits for more than a decade.

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