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1. The Better Regulation Commission (BRC)’s 2006 report “Risk, Responsibility and Regulation – Whose risk is it anyway?” was noted by SAGE. The BRC produced a follow-up report this year: “Public Risk – the Next Frontier for Better Regulation”. That refers to “the promise of a more engaged and trusting relationship with the public” indicating a welcome wider agenda. It aims to show, in 18 months, “a very viable route to accelerating culture change within Whitehall”.

2. Following the BRC reports, a new body has been formed in January 2008. This is the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council (RRAC), hosted in BERR although it is a “pan-governmental initiative” backed by the Prime Minister. There’s great rhetoric, about evidence-based process and getting the balance right between protecting citizens and maintaining freedom. There’s also “Working with external stakeholders to help foster a more considered approach to public risk and policy making”. For more, and the BRC reports, see http://www.berr.gov.uk/about/economics-statistics/rrac/index.html

3. This week’s announcement 19-3-08 of the National Security Strategy (trailed in last year’s statement) includes the intention to publish a National Risk Register (previously secret). That seems to concur with the above development of the RRAC but I’m not sure it really is “joined up”. The National Security Strategy is about things like terrorism, nuclear weapons, climate change and pandemics. Good risk management practice would require that all risks are identified and assessed in a risk register, so EMF risks might find their place at an appropriate lower priority. However, EMFs are not mentioned in the statement and it seems as if “security” is restricted to emergencies, which include civil emergencies like epidemics of infectious disease, but seem to exclude chronic hazardous exposures and even exclude market and financial collapse. There are many media reports; the official statement of 19-3-08 with links to the report is at: http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page15102.asp

4. The British Association for the Advancement of Science (the BA, www.the-ba.net) produces a magazine Science and Public Affairs. The March 2008 issue has some interesting articles and “arguments” in which opposite views are given a page each. It’s good to see the BA being even-handed in promoting public engagement with science (and vice versa).

5. One article in the BA magazine describes the charity Sense About Science (www.senseaboutscience.org) which, from its website, has impressive and eminently respectable trustees, advisors and funding donors. It was established in 2001 by Dick
Taverene MP, also its current chairman, in the wake of alarmist and irrational media scares. One such scare was “mobile phones frying your brain”. Fair enough, though I hope this charity will not lurch to the opposite extreme of suppressing legitimate scientific dissent. There are reassuring signs: I liked this quote from a well-balanced article on climate change “the idea of a point of no return, or tipping point, is a misleading way to think about climate and can be unnecessarily alarmist”.

6. Sense About Science seems not to have addressed EMF as such, though the article in the BA magazine gives this example of un-evidenced claims: “Clarins Magnetic Defence Complex protects against artificial electro-magnetic fields (EMF)”. Fair enough again, un-evidenced claims undermine legitimate scientific concern.

7. A planning application to Vale of White Horse District Council to build 150 homes near 400kV powerlines 74 metres away was opposed last year by local residents on grounds of health concerns. The local authority took advice from HPA and is minded to approve the application. In correspondence 12-3-08 the authority claims that it is safe to rely on advice from the HPA alone, with its statutory responsibility to give such advice, without seeking peer review or alternative advice. The meanings and definitions of “independence” may vary, while HPA may be independent of developer and objector, it may not necessarily be scientifically independent, and as a stakeholder within SAGE it is not independent but is expressly on one side, the “HPA-WHO” side as distinct from the “California” side identified in SAGE. The local authority letter did at least acknowledge that “there is a body of scientific opinion that does not agree with the approach taken by HPA”.

8. Seamer Hilton Windfarm Action Group (SHWAG) (news246, 247) report that they attended a planning meeting in Stockton at which the developers Broadview were seeking to erect a 60 metre test mast on the proposed wind farm site. Some members of SHWAG spoke along with representatives of both Parish Councils. The result was that erection of the mast was refused.