

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 47 (2020)
Heft: 5

Artikel: The divisive issue of mobile 5G
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1033035>

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The divisive issue of mobile 5G

The federal government and Swiss telecommunication companies have ambitious plans to roll out the new standard in wireless connectivity. Not everyone in Switzerland is happy. Opposition is building in a country normally known for its tech credentials.

SUSANNE WENGER

5G stands for the fifth and latest generation of mobile technology. It can transmit even greater volumes of data than the 4G technology currently used in Switzerland. Each new wireless generation creates additional possibilities – something that has always gone down well with consumers. Relative to other populations, the Swiss spend a lot of money on digital devices that offer the mobile internet connectivity required to stream music and films, conduct video calls, and use apps. Switzerland was also an international front-runner when the government began auctioning 5G frequencies in early 2019.

According to the regulatory authority that issued the relevant licences, 5G is “vitally important” in driving digitalisation across the country. Three companies were awarded licences: Sunrise, Salt and the semi-public market leader Swisscom. Together, they paid the government a total of 380 million Swiss francs for the privilege. For Swisscom CEO Urs Schaeppi this technological upgrade is necessary due to the growing use of wireless networks (a twofold increase every 18 months). “We need to expand the network now before data bottlenecks become an issue,” he says.

Switzerland – a tech pioneer

5G is also seen as key to boosting innovation in Switzerland. Those who champion 5G laud its ultra-high-speed and over-the-air data transmission capabilities that enable real-time connectivity between remote



By Max Spring, the “Swiss Review” cartoonist

machinery and devices. This ‘internet of things’ will make our homes smart and serve industry. Self-driving cars, telemedicine, virtual realities, and the interconnected, climate-friendly smart cities of the future will also rely on it. By allocating 5G frequencies before other countries, Switzerland has readily assumed the role of technology pioneer.

Yet the 5G offensive has met resistance. It is already available in some parts of Switzerland, albeit mostly in narrowband mode. This is because operators are unable to progress as quickly as planned. Opposition to 5G has been mounting within civil society. Grassroots movements are trying to block planning applications for 5G antennas. Anti-5G pressure groups mobilised thousands of people to attend a national protest rally last year in Berne. Parliamentary motions have been submitted at municipal and cantonal level. 5G antennas in church towers have been rejected. And French-speaking cantons have enacted their own 5G-related moratoriums, despite responsibility lying with the federal government. Some 5G masts have even been damaged in apparent acts of vandalism by the machine-breakers of the digital age.

“Public health is paramount”

Opponents want a 5G moratorium for the whole of Switzerland. They warn of the “potential health risks” of electromagnetic fields and are worried about the visual impact of 5G masts as well as rising energy consumption and the environmental consequences. In



addition, they point to the security risk associated with installing technical infrastructure made in China. “Public health is paramount,” says the Grenchen-based watchmaker Rebekka Meier, who fronts the Schutz vor Strahlung (Protection from radiation) pressure group. Meier is concerned that the transmission power of 5G will accentuate the negative effects of mobile radiation “to an unprecedented extent”.

She sees the promises of the telecom sector as marketing, pure and simple. “They are making things up as they go along,” she maintains. In her view, our “appetite for high-definition, on-demand streaming” should not come at the cost of dotting the entire country with 5G masts. She believes that effective low-radiation solutions are a viable alternative, as seen in medicine for example.

A wide spectrum of opponents

Opposition to 5G in Switzerland is broad-based. On the one hand we have the conspiracy theorists, then a large contingent who explicitly differentiate themselves from the conspiracy theorists. Some are anxious about the visual and environmental impact of 5G. Others criticise con-

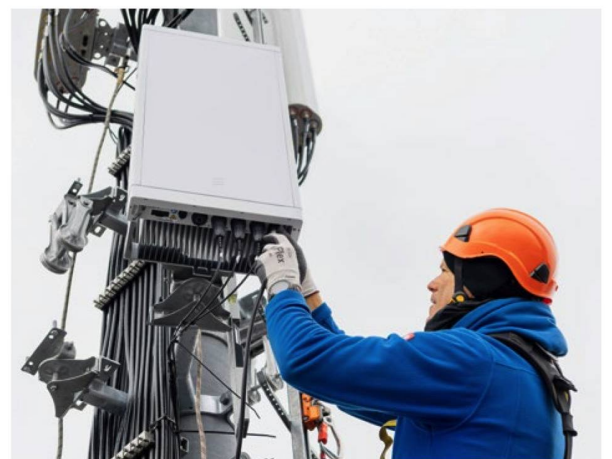
Many people joined a demonstration against 5G in Geneva last January.

Photo: Keystone

New phone masts are necessary to expand 5G coverage across Switzerland. Opponents are up in arms.

Photo: Keystone

sumerism. Some are digital-averse or electrosensitive. Members of the Doctors for the Environment pressure group have their own misgivings, as have both left-green and staunchly conservative politicians. SP National Councillor Martina Munz (canton of Schaffhausen) has vocalised these collective concerns in parliament. Munz insists she is no technophobe. However, she believes that the electromagnetic emissions from 5G need to be kept to the absolute minimum. “Eight per cent of our population say that they are electrosensitive,” she says. Instead of enabling 5G signals to penetrate every nook and cranny, Switzerland should focus on establishing an effective fibre-optic network. This would protect peo-



ple from unwanted radio waves in their own home.

In Switzerland, statutory guidelines quantify how much electromagnetic radiation is still regarded as 'safe'. The Federal Council decided in spring to maintain the existing limits on mobile emissions – a move that pleased 5G critics more than the telecommunication sector. Telecom providers would prefer to instal fewer antennas and therefore wanted these limits to be eased.

5G proponents highlight the opportunities

Objections to phone masts have been a recurrent theme for Switzerland's mobile companies for the past 20 years. However, the advent of 5G has taken resistance to a whole new level. The influential liberal think tank Ave-



Proponents of 5G say that the technology is key to developing self-drive motor vehicles. Pictured above: a driverless Swiss Post bus in Sion.

Photo: Keystone

nir Suisse called this "irrational", while the conservative "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" referred to an "axis against progress". The telecom sector itself warns that the operational performance of communication networks could be seriously compromised. It is calling for greater support from politicians. Voices in favour of 5G are now making themselves heard in the federal parliament, with the Green Liberals and the Liberals (FDP) saying that 5G offers opportunities both of an economic nature and in terms of sustainability in areas such as agriculture.

FDP National Councillor Christian Wasserfallen (canton of Berne) says of the health-related concerns: "Ninety per cent of the emissions that we absorb come from our own mobile devices, not from phone masts." Wasserfallen wants a government information campaign to promote 5G. Whether this is enough remains to be seen. Clearly, many Swiss want a say on this cutting-edge technology. The ballot box will likely decide whether 5G proponents or 5G opponents get their way. As many as five popular initiatives against 5G have been launched.

"It's a popular uprising!" exclaimed one activist live on television.

Martina Munz (SP): "Eight per cent of our population say that they are electro-sensitive."

Photo: parlament.ch

Christian Wasserfallen (FDP): "Ninety per cent of the emissions we absorb come from our own mobile devices."

Photo: parlament.ch

Opponent of 5G, Rebekka Meier: "Supporters of 5G are making things up as they go along."

Photo: schutz-vor-strahlung.ch

"Selling its soul"

Churches in Switzerland tend to be right in the middle of villages. Their central location and the height of their towers make them a preferred place for mounting mobile phone antennas. Hidden within the belfry, these masts barely have any visual impact. Contracts with telecom companies also provide parishes with income. However, pressure from the congregation has already resulted in many such parishes refusing to instal new 5G antennas or convert existing masts to 5G. Examples include Oberburg (Berne), Alpnach (Obwalden), Kriegstetten (Solothurn) and Belfaux (Fribourg). Besides the fear of electromagnetic smog, parishioners also cited ethical concerns. The church in Kriegstetten should not be "selling its soul", a member of the public told his local newspaper. Someone at a parish meeting in Alpnach reminded his fellow church-goers that "our church towers have transmitted information since time immemorial". His remained a minority view.

(SWE)

