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“Technology is never unpolitical”

The hostility to 5G in Switzerland comes as no surprise to historian Daniela Zetti. In her view, it is about much more than just mobile technology.

INTERVIEW: SUSANNE WENGER

Daniela Zetti, are you surprised at the fierce opposition to 5G in Switzerland?

No, not at all. I am more surprised at how long it took for people to voice their dissent. Switzerland's digital mobile network was set up in 1993. Technology has a very important place in the national psyche. Take feats of civil engineering such as the Gotthard Tunnel or the Verzasca Dam, These man-made technological achievements have become unique natural landmarks that people want to visit. And it is precisely because of Switzerland's wealth of technology and technological infrastructure that such matters have always been the subject of intense debate and even controversy. This has always been an integral part of our Swiss DNA.

Does 5G have any parallels to previous technology-related controversies in Switzerland?

Trifling in comparison but a great analogy: the short-wave radio transmitter near the Bernese village of Schwarzenburg, which the old Postal,

Telegraph and Telephone (PTT) service began operating in 1939. Swiss Radio International used the transmitter to broadcast to the world, but the local population started to object. You could hear music through the drain pipes, and there was a permanent hum in the air. People reported health complications. Here we have another reason why opposition can arise in a high-tech country like Switzerland. When technology becomes a living, breathing, visible part of the landscape, the background 'noise' can have a negative effect on our bodies.

Opponents of 5G have also cited health concerns.

This is true. But whereas the PTT monopoly wielded enough natural authority to insist that the Schwarzenburg transmitter was vital for Switzerland, the mobile phone operators of today's deregulated market are under more pressure to justify themselves. They are also in competition with each other. You could earn a lot of money in the 1990s by harnessing the latest telecommunication infrastructure. Those days are gone.

For their part, proponents of 5G say that Switzerland needs the technology to avoid falling behind.

This argument has followed digitalisation around since the 1970s. Innovation is the constant buzzword used to paint over the impact on the world around us. In reality, lots of low-range antennas are necessary for blanket 5G coverage. Furthermore, what purpose will this wireless technology serve? Who will be able to access it? And who will benefit from it? I get the impression that 5G lacks a united front that can explain all the benefits to the Swiss people.

But most of us use smartphones and want good network coverage, don't we?

We already have pretty good network coverage in Switzerland. Alternatively, we can highlight self-driving cars and other innovations as examples of how 5G will enhance our lives. Yet this vision of the future elicits fascination and fear in equal measure. It is also highly unlikely to inspire broad swathes of society.

How have previous technology-related controversies been resolved in the past?

By following the democratic process. Technology is never unpolitical. It always has a societal dimension. Mobile network operators are now trying to counter the scepticism by making assurances on safety. They point out that there is no scientific evidence of possible harm to human health. It reminds me of Switzerland's nuclear power plant operators. Caught off guard by hostile opposition, experts resorted to studies and statistics in an attempt to show how very minor the fallout from any accident would be. This strategy failed. It was a purely technical form of risk appraisal that could never cover the many different areas and concerns flagged up by opponents of nuclear power – from water pollution to federalism.



Daniela Zetti graduated from ETH Zurich with a PhD on the History of Technology. She currently works as a lecturer and researcher at the University of Lübeck.