

Article by Martin Bouygues in *Le Figaro* of 23 May 2020

“France has no immediate need for 5G – we should delay the frequencies auction”

ARTICLE – It would be better to postpone the auction of 5G frequencies until the end of this year or even the beginning of next says Martin Bouygues, Chairman and CEO of the Bouygues group.



Photo: Jean-Christophe MARMARA/Le Figaro

The Covid-19 epidemic has forced the authorities to suspend the 5G frequencies auction process that should have taken place this spring until July or September. I believe that we need to be realistic. Given the country's situation as it pulls itself out of a terrible health and economic crisis, we should postpone the 5G frequencies auction by a few months more. I ask the government and the regulator to take the following factors into account to arrive at this common sense decision.

Firstly, 5G is a promising but far from mature technology. As a result, holding the auction a few months later than scheduled would not penalise the French economy or risk seeing it fall behind others. 5G will admittedly provide faster speeds and lower lag for mobile data traffic, but the smartphones that will fully exploit all the potential of 5G will only be launched on the market very gradually. The consumer will not really benefit from its innovations until 2023 or 2024.

Wariness and scepticism

Secondly, the public debate about 5G up to now has clearly conjured up a lot more wariness and scepticism than excitement and enthusiasm. It's a shame but that's the way it is. Some believe, with absolutely no scientific basis, that 5G is dangerous, and there has even been a worrying proliferation of conspiracy theories claiming that 5G is partly responsible for the spread of coronavirus! This has led to an increasing number of mobile masts being vandalised all over Europe and particularly in France. As a result, I think we need to take the time to explain this new technology and win people's hearts and minds. We could spend a few months doing this instead of carrying on regardless.

Similar concerns have arisen concerning the amount of power consumed by 5G. Some have claimed that the increase in the number of sites to host the data, the more intense mobile traffic and the more powerful masts related to 5G will boost consumption of energy significantly. Clearly, it's not as simple as that because telecoms operators have been making considerable efforts to improve the energy efficiency of their activities. However, it would be a serious mistake to avoid public debate on this issue because many people, especially the young, are very concerned about it – and you can't

build tomorrow's technology without having young people on side. Let's have a serious look at the subject, involve the experts and have a frank exchange of views.

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Finally, I believe that the 5G frequencies auction should be postponed until the end of this year or to the beginning of 2021 quite simply because the current global economy is no longer the same one that existed at the beginning of March when the conditions of the auction were set. Everyone must be given the time to take stock of this upheaval. For example, this serious crisis has prompted consumers to save on a massive scale. How quickly will they want to start consuming again, particularly in terms of 5G services? This crisis has also shown the authorities that an internet connection is now an essential service for the vast majority of the population. Never before has there been such a strong roll-out of mobile masts in the less densely populated areas of France since 2017, but this is still not enough. And those people who have suffered from lack of internet coverage during this crisis care little about the availability of 5G in our major towns and cities. They want 4G in their areas first! This dissatisfaction is bound to be reflected in the results of the municipal elections. Lastly, many say that the telecoms operators have been relatively unscathed by the crisis. That much is true. But can they reasonably be expected to buy frequencies whose starting prices were set at the beginning of the year in the midst of an economic upturn, whereas growth for 2020 is now expected to decline by 8% and the recession is set to last?

The more complex a situation, the more one should resort to clear ideas and common sense. In the current economic climate, 5G is no longer a priority for the country. What will people who risk losing their jobs, businesses and artisans who have been hit hard by this crisis and all those still suffering from poor mobile coverage where they live think when, in September, they see four French telecoms operators spend billions of euros fighting each other to get their hands on 5G frequencies? They will think it's obscene.

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Don't misunderstand me – I am no fan of degrowth or a technophobe. Anyone who knows me can tell you that. The Bouygues group will take part in the 5G frequencies auction whatever the date chosen. However, I would just like to call for a more reasonable attitude. We cannot carry on as if nothing has happened in the last two months. What's the point of enthusing at length about 'the post-Covid world' if, at the first opportunity and without giving pause for thought, we behave the same way as before.