

Spotlight

Fast networks: We need them now – and countrywide!

**Dr. Bernd Scherer**

Photo: Varnhorn

“A hundred times faster – with real-time guarantee!” The telecommunications industry advertises in such promising terms for 5G, the brave new world of mobile Internet. If only there wasn’t a critical catch: outside towns and cities network availability so far doesn’t really live up to the great promises of unlimited network coverage and access. Quite the contrary. In fact, there are countless white spots on the digital map that could well remain ignored, even in future expansion plans. This is because the three network giants Telekom, Vodafone and Telefónica have stayed with their decision that 98 percent of households connected to the Internet of tomorrow is sufficient. Even more astounding is that the sector actually regards its proclaimed expansion target as a generous good deed. At second glance, however, the claimed comprehensive supply agreement does not look so good after all because 98 percent of households actually represents only 75 percent of Germany’s area.

Faults in network politics

In the recently readjusted federal network agency (Bundesnetzagentur) conditions of supply, the clear duty to supply an expansion giving countrywide 5G network access has been written out, representing a fundamental error in network politics. After all, as studies by the German Economic Institute (IW) indicate, the regions are the location of a good 58 percent of national economic performance. Meaningful for industrial Germany is that the network white spots are especially gaping in the economically strong states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. The situation already nears dramatic proportions in the Southwest. Nowhere else in Germany are there more communication dead spots. Mobile telephone connection is insufficient in 240 German communities. Of those, 63 lie in Baden-Württemberg and 52 in Bavaria.

Regional frequencies as expansion accelerator

So what can be done to turn the page here? Time is getting short. Before the frequency auction in March, only a few days remain for plotting the way ahead towards a robust infrastructure. A latest development is very helpful for agribusiness: in a move surprising even telecommunication branch experts, the roaming service supplier United Internet decided to climb on as a further player in the bidding process.

Because roaming, in other words the possibility of other service suppliers utilising existing communication lines, is an important building block in achieving coverage with speedy mobile Internet across the country, this represents a positive signal for rural areas. Also positive is at last agreement by the federal network agency to distribute price-efficient regional frequencies without any limitation to area covered, whereby agriculture is explicitly mentioned as field of application. In the sense of a genuine comprehensive service, the initiative of regional network suppliers must be encouraged! Local roaming will turn out to be indispensable, especially in so far undersupplied areas.

In the final analysis, everything depends on a combination of several sensible approaches. The instrument of negative auction, whereby willingness to supply outlying areas would be financially compensated, has recently been brought into the discussion and could prove fruitful in the effective closing of network gaps.

Making telecommunication concerns undertake responsibility

Through intensive dialogue with the responsible federal ministries, members of parliament and specialist politicians within representative working groups, the VDMA hopes to encourage rapid expansion. In our view there's no question that the telecommunications industry must be made to accept responsibility, under binding political requirements, for factors accessibility and time horizon. Our political activities are accompanied by a factually qualified committee comprising industry representatives that, since 2017, has faced all the challenges connected with agribusiness digitization and production of a practically acceptable mobile network structure.

Digital networking as main innovation factor

5G is hereby literally in every conversation – as technical label, as political buzz word, above all however, as promise of innovation. Daily newspaper columns are filled with it. However, nothing much has happened so far. The time is now right for action, then the future network expansion touches one of the decisive infrastructure questions of the coming decades, if not the most decisive one. This especially applies to the agricultural engineering sector. After all, digital networking solutions have long become one of the most important innovation factors of the industry and an important competitive factor in agriculture.

In just under three weeks we will know how things are progressing. With that, however, the theme will certainly not have disappeared from the agenda. The interests involved make the situations complicated. We would therefore be badly advised to run down our lobbying activities right away. In fact, it appears to me that the flag must continue to be clearly shown in order to keep up the communications pressure!



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