5G development key to Europe's future digital competitiveness

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Opinion

Europe should grasp the chance to once again take the lead in mobile technology, writes Lambert van Nistelrooij.

GSM showed the world that having common standards in the field of mobile communications counts.

During the 1990s, Europe was at the heart of innovation in the mobile space. Cooperation on GSM standards brought us a leading position - with Nokia, Siemens, Ericsson, Alcatel and Philips to name just a few - Europe had the world's technology leaders.

They invested their economic success in shaping the technologies of the future at that time: 3G and 4G.

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Their North American and Asian competitors lagged behind because they lacked both scale and a common approach.

However Europe's mistakes in rolling out 3G, (spectrum auctions that focussed mainly on delivering maximum revenue for governments, not on providing a healthy mobile ecosystem) weakened the position of mobile network operators, limiting their ability to compete worldwide.

By 2016, these European companies ceased being consumer brands. They merged and managed to hold on as mobile infrastructure providers, and they now compete with the new kids on the block, like China's Huawei and ZTE, Apple and Samsung.

We have learned from our mistakes. Most 4G spectrum auctions in Europe did not exclusively aim at maximum revenue, but also on delivering coverage and creating a healthy ecosystem.

As a result, the position of European mobile network providers has improved. Now, while developing the new 5G standard and deploying it by 2020, Europe can once again take the driver's seat.

5G will be at the heart of the Internet of Things (IoT), enabling both start-ups and industry 4.0. It will be a key enabler to Europe's future competitiveness.

According to General Electric, McKinsey and Cisco, the Internet of Things has the potential to add between $10 and £20 trillion to the world economy over the next decade.

Europe is now investing heavily in the global 5G consortium, both with public and private money.

To once again grasp the leadership position in mobile, we need to continue rethinking our policy and learn from our GSM success.

About the author

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