

Safety first

Radio spectrum is a scarce and expensive resource, writes Lambert van Nistelrooij

The switchover from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Europe is a great opportunity. It frees up scarce radio spectrum that is much needed to accommodate the ever increasing demand for more and faster wireless connections, according to European digital agenda commissioner Neelie Kroes. Much is at stake: 4.3 per cent of our yearly European economic growth depends on it. Coordinating spectrum allocation on the European level brings €80bn extra. It is important though to find a balance between commercial and public interests. Emergency services for example should always have enough bandwidth to communicate.

The ether is increasingly congested. More and more people and applications make use of wireless connections. In particular 'machine to machine' communication shows a steep increase. If the current year on year growth of 32 per cent persists, there will be 50 billion in 2020. Think of for example the refrigerator that monitors its stock and automatically orders products from the local supermarket when needed, or radio frequency identification (RFID) chips that keep track of the location and quality of products in realtime. At the same time, in 2015 mobile data traffic will be 26 times higher compared to 2010, according to network provider Cisco Systems, mainly caused by the use of mobile video services.

The current growth cannot be maintained if no additional spectrum will be released. Compare it with a motorway: if too many cars want to make use of it at the same time, a traffic jam will occur. You will need to expand it to deal with the increasing demand, or restrict access to it. We have seen this happening in the Netherlands: some big telco's that used to offer unlimited mobile internet plans, don't do so anymore. This illustrates the need for more spectrum and at the same time its efficient use. The Netherlands will auction, apart from the current GSM frequencies, 2x30 Mhz in the 800 Mhz band. 2x10 Mhz is foreseen for new entrants. This will stimulate innovation, competition and lower prices.

Coordinating spectrum allocation on the European level will bring the single market forward, which will result in savings worth €80bn and practical advantages. Of course, thanks to prior European coordination, your mobile phone will work in Greece. But at present, this is not the case with many other wireless devices, because they use different frequencies across the EU. More EU coordination on spectrum allocation can help to solve this problem.

Radio spectrum is a scarce and because of that expensive resource. Some governments like to take profit from that. However, our security and our health are not for sale and may not be compromised. Therefore I have tabled an amendment to the radio spectrum policy programme that aims at guaranteeing that there will always be enough spectrum available for the communication of public services like police, ambulance, customs and the army. Safety first. ★

“Coordinating spectrum allocation on the European level will bring the single market forward”

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