

5G : the long and winding road to the fourth industrial revolution

After years of poised expectation, 5G is finally being deployed. How deeply is it going to change the world? That is the issue addressed in the corpus - three news articles from the Guardian, the Economist and the Independent published in 2019 and 2020, and a cartoon from Newswatch.com. The rollout of 5G will trigger the next technological revolution, but is facing numerous obstacles that overshadow its huge economic stakes.

The 5G era is about to begin, and technically already has. As the latest technology standard for cellular networks with greater bandwidth and higher download speeds, it opens vast opportunities for the Internet of Things (IOT) and will be indispensable to future technology in AI, robotics, smart healthcare and education (doc1&3). With China in the forefront, the rollout has already started at a pace that some deem too slow, though. It will indeed take a while before users can enjoy high downloading speed, and companies all have 5G-compatible equipment (doc1).

However, fear and suspicion – rather than technicalities – are making the path to 5G bumpier than expected. First, 5G is at the heart of the acrimonious trade war between the US and China. The US has banned Chinese telecoms giant Huawei from American networks on suspicion of intellectual property theft, and urged its allies to do the same, causing a divide between those ready to trade with Huawei, and the others (doc1). Huawei is feared to be China's Trojan horse ready to take control over the world, as the fierce terminator robot suggests. (doc4). The deployment of 5G is also hampered by conspiracy theories claiming Electro Magnetic Field (EMF) radiations are a health hazard and linked to Covid-19, resulting in dozens of arson attacks on 5G masts across Europe (doc3).

And yet, those delaying the deployment of 5G are oblivious to its profound impact on our future. EU leaders are well aware that baseless conspiracy theories could seriously harm the economy and are taking action (doc3). Huawei's vice-president is urging the UK to reconsider the ban on their equipment to face up to the post-Covid, post-Brexit challenges ahead, or risk a £18bn loss (doc2). Whether the accusations against Huawei are founded or not, the West has no choice but to trade with China – or be reduced to rely on more expensive, less advanced 5G kits (doc1). If not, compatibility issues could entail a great global divide, a "Digital Berlin wall" and a giant step backwards.

5G is ushering in the fourth industrial revolution, and China is leading the bandwagon, whether the rest of the world like it or not. (440 words)