

Can 5G technology cause COVID-19 disease: what is real, what is false

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is the first epidemic in human history where information technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to help cope with the disease. In early February 2020, a number of social media platforms and big tech companies, including Google, Amazon, YouTube and Twitter, attended a meeting hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO) at Facebook's offices to unite efforts against rumours, myths and misinformation related to COVID-19. After the meeting, Google triggered an SOS Alert system that makes WHO coronavirus resources more easily accessible when “COVID-19” or “coronavirus” is searched for using Google. YouTube added a banner redirecting users to the WHO web portal on all videos that discuss COVID-19. Facebook encouraged users to look at the WHO website for the latest information through the first results while searching. In addition, Facebook launched a “Community Help” feature where people could volunteer to run errands for others or donate to fundraisers. Facebook made another step by banning ads and listings for medical-grade face masks and giving WHO unlimited free ad space.

However, if technology has helped keep people safe and connected during this unprecedented crisis, it has also been deployed to spread the virus of fear and confusion. Social platforms have conveyed open threats and unproven information about the 5G technology unleashing unpredictable aggression. This made the UN Secretary-General António Guterres to openly join the fight against disinformation by urging platforms to promote scientific facts over “despair and division”.

Verbal and physical attacks against the roll-out of 5G networks represented one of the most destructive campaigns that expanded during the COVID pandemic. This campaign combined persistent disinformation with open violent acts. Since the beginning of the disease, 5G phone masts have reportedly been damaged or destroyed in several European countries, including Ireland, Cyprus and Belgium. In Britain violence and destruction were the most perilous. According to media reports, dozens of towers were targeted, and engineers abused on the job. Celebrities, including the singer Anne-Marie, circulated the conspiracy theory about 5G technology being a reason for COVID -19 on social media. Amanda Holden, a judge on Britain’s Got Talent, shared a link to an online petition claiming the symptoms of the virus were caused by residing near a 5G mast (later the petition has been removed). Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove branded the conspiracy theories “dangerous nonsense”. Joining in his harsh criticism, the NHS director, Stephen Powis, added: “The 5G story is complete and utter rubbish. It is nonsense – the worst kind of fake news.” Oliver Dowden, the culture secretary, was determined to hold talks with platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Twitter “to hammer this message home”.

Realising that claims linking 5G technology and the spread of COVID-19 are mounting, ITU, the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies emphasised on many occasions that such claims had no scientific basis. In the current complicated situation the agency expressed its opinion that bringing trusted news and facts about COVID-19 is paramount. 5G can carry a huge amount of data much faster and allow future users to access a wide variety of services, including industrial and professional applications. During the pandemic, communications technology is playing an essential role in ensuring efficient health services, many of which are facing unprecedented demand due to the large number of affected persons. We can rely on networks to counteract effectively ungrounded information, too. “Now, more than ever, information technology is vital to our economy, health, and safety”, according to ITU Secretary-General Houlin Zhao, “ITU, as the UN specialized agency for information and communication technologies, will continue to leverage these technologies to help defeat COVID-19 and make us safer, stronger, and more connected.”

The scale of the problem prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to add the 5G conspiracy to its COVID-19 myth busters article. In this publication the world leading healthcare organisation notes that “viruses cannot travel on radio waves/mobile networks. COVID-19 is spreading in many countries that do not have 5G mobile networks.” This view is supported by scientists as well. Fabien Heliot, a researcher who specialises in electromagnetic exposure in wireless communication at the University of Surrey, explains 5G radiations are not as severe as “CT scan or x-ray technologies” used in medical care.

In another statement WHO underlined that, “to date, and after much research performed, no adverse health effect has been causally linked with exposure to wireless technologies”. If the overall exposure remains below international guidelines, no negative consequences for public health are anticipated.

The EU Council Recommendation of 12 July 1999 regulates the exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields (0 Hz to 300 GHz). The recommendation states in particular: “Measures with regard to electromagnetic fields should afford all Community citizens a high level of protection; provisions by Member States in this area should be based on a commonly agreed framework, so as to contribute to ensuring consistency of protection throughout the Community.” The EU has the highest consumer standards in the world.

In early 2020, the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) updated the radiofrequency EMF part of the 1998 Guidelines. The main objective of this publication was to establish rules for limiting exposure to EMFs that could provide a high level of protection for all people against substantiated adverse health effects from exposures to both short- and long-term, continuous and discontinuous radiofrequency EMFs. An important conclusion in the guidelines that answers one of the most widespread human fears is that “no

effects of radiofrequency EMFs on the induction or development of cancer have been substantiated”.

While discussing the “mystical” role of 5G in COVID-19 spread, it is also pertinent to look at the technology from another angle. We have to consider whether COVID-19 could influence 5G deployments significantly. According to the Deloitte Predictions Report, published in December 2019, more than 100 companies worldwide would have begun testing private 5G deployments by the end of the year, collectively investing a few hundred million dollars in labor and equipment. The revised prediction found that the original prediction had been low. The number of companies testing private 5G deployments could be well over 1,000 at the end of 2020. According to Deloitte’s tracking of tests, the number of companies testing private 5G networks was far ahead of forecast. The unexpected boost was obviously due to a combination of factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, work and learn from home, supply chain interruptions, and economic contraction in consumer spending.

Despite the disease, the Deloitte report predicts that in subsequent years spend on private 5G installations will climb sharply. An overall outcome of this process will be that 5G deployment will enable wireless connectivity to be a key catalyst for growth.

Compiled by Media 21 Foundation from

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