
ANALYSIS

Juncker's unrealistic promise of free wifi

By **PETER TEFFER**  

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It was one of the more bold statements in EU commission president Jean-Claude Juncker's state of the EU speech on Wednesday (14 September).

“Everyone benefiting from connectivity means that it should not matter where you live or how much you earn. So we propose today to equip every European village and every city with free wireless internet access around the main centres of public life by 2020,” he said.

Free wireless internet in public places all over Europe, to be established in the next four years.

Can it be done? How? And should it be done?

“That's a good question,” said Aurelie Bladocha, a lobbyist for the European Competitive Telecommunications Association.

She noted that it was difficult to make an assessment of the feasibility of Juncker's statement, although in principle “it makes sense to have involvement of the public sector” in certain rural areas where the commercial incentives for improving internet connectivity are low.

It is “rather ambitious”, another Brussels-based telecommunications expert said.

That may be an understatement.

According to Eurostat data this website combined, there are around 129,000 municipalities in the European Union, or about 119,000 if you no longer count those in the United Kingdom.

The operation to equip 120,000 villages and cities with public wireless internet is gargantuan.

It is unclear how the commission will carry out the work: it does not have the power to force municipalities to install free wireless internet in public places.

Also, did Juncker mean free wifi, or a different technology like the upcoming 5G network? The latter is highly unlikely, since that would mean the EU would be competing with telecommunications operators. Let us assume that he meant wifi.

The commission did on Wednesday publish [a proposal for a regulation](#) which would set up a wifi investment fund.

The EU “should support the provision of free local wireless connectivity in the centres of local public life”, the legal text said.

€100 per village or city

The fund consists of €120 million.

That would translate to roughly €100 per municipality, which does not sound like an awful lot.

“Oh no, that is definitely not enough,” Ilse Marien of the Free University of Brussels told EUobserver. Marien researches digital inclusion policies.

She could not give an estimate average of how much the establishment of free wifi costs, but some ad hoc figures do exist.

A 2006 plan to cover the Czech capital of Prague with wifi budgeted around €12.2 million for a five-year period, while the Finnish city of Oulu spent €2.5 million for a project of two and a half years.

The €120 million budget, reallocated from other parts of the EU budget, will be “allocated in a geographically balanced manner” to projects “in principle, on a 'first come, first served' basis”.

According to [a promotional factsheet](#) published by the commission, the fund would benefit “at least 6,000 to 8,000 local communities”.

Even then, money alone is not enough.

“You also need people who take up the role of pioneers and convince the rest of the municipal office”, said Marien.

Dublin's wifi: can't connect

Sometimes businesses step in to provide the service.

Last month, the British city Newcastle and nearby town Gateshead announced a free wifi programme that they said did not cost the municipalities anything.

But such deals are not always a success.

The Irish capital Dublin had, like several other cities, signed a contract with the Spanish company Gowex to provide free wireless internet.

“Gowex filed for bankruptcy in July 2014, and under the terms of the agreement the company continued to provide the service until May 2015,” said a spokesman for the Dublin City Council, adding that there is currently “no public free wifi available” in Dublin's public places.

“Having assessed the effectiveness of the wifi arrangement and its uptake by the public, Dublin City Council is currently investigating the business case for a replacement service,” the spokesman added.

Moreover, when relying on commercial companies, there is a risk of “cherry-picking”, said researcher Marien. She noted that businesses may require certain conditions, and refuse to roll out wifi in less populated areas.

Is it necessary?

Another question worth raising is whether by 2020 the European Union needs free wifi anymore.

Smartphones have become a familiar sight in the smallest of villages and more and more telecom operators offer subscription plans that cover average consumers' needs for internet access. Moreover, newer technologies may make wifi superfluous.

With the rise of connected cars and the internet of things, a much more advanced mobile network called 5G is required, Paul Meller of DigitalEurope told EUobserver.

DigitalEurope is a Brussels-based lobby group representing IT, telecoms and consumer electronics companies.

Meller said the wifi plan is "not really a big deal" in terms of importance when compared to the development of 5G, which the EU Commission is also promoting.

"The speeds you will see on 5G by today's standards will be breath-taking," said Meller. "Wifi is important, but it's going to become a smaller part of the overall picture."

No legal target

Juncker's remark on free wireless internet by 2020 is not backed up by any legally set target.

The regulation does mention 2025 as a target year by which public places "such as public administrations, libraries and hospitals" are all "equipped with gigabit internet connections", referring probably to connections with speed of a gigabit per second.

Strangely, the new legislation also seems to discourage day-dreaming while waiting for other things.

“Free local wireless connectivity made accessible in busy places where many people gather and await the next step on their daily agenda can provide significant added value by allowing idle and transit time to be converted into productive, relaxing or more informed experiences,” the proposal said.