

South Korea launches first national 5G networks—two days early

April 4 2019, by Sunghee Hwang



Three leading South Korean providers kicked their 5G networks into gear early in order to get a jump on their US counterparts

South Korea launched the world's first nationwide 5G mobile networks two days early, its top mobile carriers said Thursday, giving a handful of

users access in a late-night scramble to provide the super-fast wireless technology.

Three top telecom providers—SK Telecom, KT and LG Uplus—began their 5G services at 11 pm local time Wednesday, despite previously announcing the launch date would be April 5.

Hyper-wired South Korea has long had a reputation for technical prowess, and Seoul had made the 5G rollout a priority as it seeks to stimulate stuttering economic growth.

Along with the United States, China and Japan, South Korea had been racing to claim the title as the first to provide the ultra-fast network nationwide.

But speculation that US mobile carrier Verizon might start its 5G services early forced South Korean providers to hastily organise a late-night launch, Yonhap news agency reported.

Verizon began rolling out its 5G services in Chicago and Minneapolis on Wednesday in the US, a week ahead of schedule.

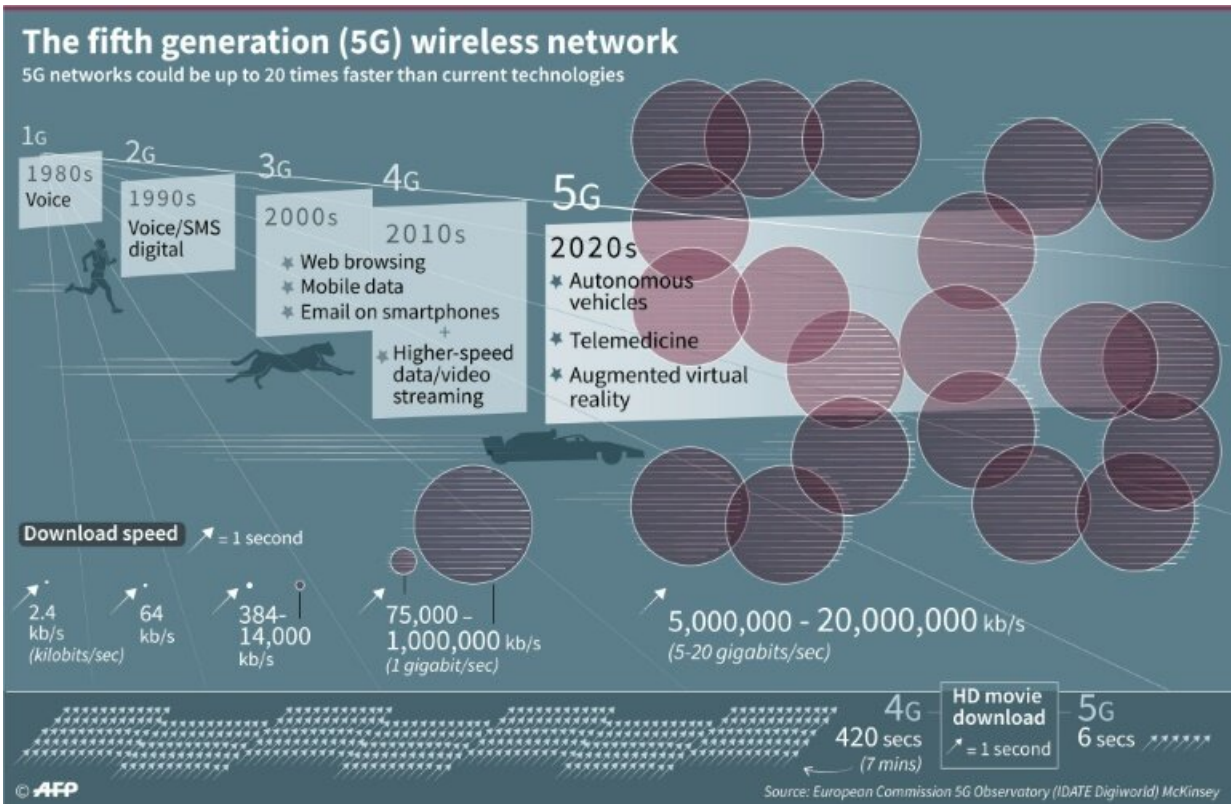
But according to Yonhap, the South Korean launches came two hours earlier.

"SK Telecom today announced that it has activated 5G services for six celebrities representing Korea as of 11 pm April 3, 2019," the country's biggest mobile operator said in a news release.

The celebrities—including two members of K-pop band EXO and Olympic ice-skating heroine Kim Yu-na—were "the world's first 5G smartphone subscribers", it said.

Both KT and LG Uplus said they also went live at the same time, with a total of three specially-selected users: KT offered it to the wife of a technician setting up its network on the disputed island of Dokdo, while LG Uplus provided it to a television personality and her racing-driver husband.

For general customers, the services will be available from Friday—the original launch date—when Samsung Electronics rolls out the Galaxy S10 5G, the world's first available smartphone with the technology built in.



The development of wireless mobile networks from the 1980s to the introduction of 5G communications

Verizon's network will work with Lenovo's Moto Z3 smartphone.

Rival US carrier AT&T began making its "standards-based" 5G network available to users in a dozen cities late last year.

Qatari firm Ooredoo said it offers 5G services in and around Doha—but does not have devices available to use them—while Japan is also expected to roll out a limited deployment in 2019 before full services start in time for next year's Tokyo Olympics.

Bitter standoff

Experts say 5G will bring smartphones near-instantaneous connectivity—20 times faster than 4G—allowing users to download entire movies in less than a second.

The technology is crucial for the future development of devices such as self-driving vehicles and is expected to bring about \$565 billion in global economic benefits by 2034, according to the London-based Global System for Mobile Communications, an industry alliance.

The implications of the new network have pitted Washington against Beijing—whose firms dominate 5G technology—in an increasingly bitter standoff.

The US has pressed its allies and major economies to avoid 5G solutions from Chinese-owned telecom giant Huawei, citing security risks that technological backdoors could give Beijing access to 5G-connected utilities and other components.

Chinese entities, including 1,529 5G patents registered by Huawei, own a total of 3,400 patents—more than a third of the total, according to data analysis firm IPLYtics.

South Korea comes next, with its companies holding 2,051 patents, while US firms have 1,368 together.

Neither KT nor SK Telecom use Huawei technology in their 5G networks, but it is a supplier to LG UPlus, the companies told AFP.

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