

Press release

## THE ENVIRONMENT

### **“Mobile device replacement, and the impact of distribution practices”: Arcep publishes its report to the Government**

Paris, 12 July 2021

Barbara Pompili, France’s Minister for the Ecological Transition, and Cédric O, Secretary of State for the Digital Transition and Electronic Communications, assigned Arcep the task of producing a report to assess the impact of smartphone sales and distribution practices, and handset subsidies in particular, on the rate of mobile device replacement – and so deliver an initial analysis of the different factors that explain mobile devices’ lifespan and duration of use.

#### **Available data do not suggest a significant link between mobile devices’ distribution method and lifespan**

The information gathered as part of the Digital Market Barometer<sup>1</sup> do not reveal a sizeable difference between how long users keep a subsidised handset and a non-subsidised one: 69% of subsidised smartphone owners have owned their phone for less than two years, compared to 63% of total smartphone owners. This finding is confirmed by data that Arcep obtained from operators: total active smartphones connected to their networks are 32 months old, on average, compared to 29 months for subsidised phones. These results do not, however, make it possible to draw a conclusion on smartphones’ total length of use, as they can change owners over the course of their lifespan.

#### **In addition to handset subsidy practices, the issue of smartphone replacement in its entirety needs to be examined**

Of the 16 million new smartphones sold in France in 2020, half (49%) were sold by telephone operators, a percentage that has been decreasing steadily over the past several years<sup>2</sup>. The handsets marketed by operators are tied to the supply of an electronic communications plan that cannot be qualified as a bundle, although the percentage of subscription plans tied to a handset subsidy continues to decline, and represented only 21% of the consumer plans subscribed to in 2020<sup>3</sup>. Taking action against a single type of undertaking or distribution model is therefore not enough to obtain a complete picture of the handset replacement issue.

#### **Slowing the rate of mobile handset replacement: the refurbishment challenge**

Depending on the source, the individual length of use of smartphones in France is evaluated at between 23 and 37 months. These durations, which increased by 6 to 12 months between 2013 and 2019, are still far from mobile phones’ five and even 10-year potential lifespans. To better understand the reasons why users replace their phones, more information needs to be gathered on mobile devices’ complete lifecycle (use, storage, repair, resale...). Better understanding the parties and issues involved in refurbishment, improving mobile handset collection with a view to their reuse, and encouraging the development of this channel, would all contribute to extending smartphones’ total duration of use.

**Arcep will keep a close eye on the consultation work on this topic being led by the Government. Through the Digital Market Barometer, its data collection exercises with operators and, should the legislative provisions that are currently under debate be adopted, through an expanded barometer of the digital environmental footprint, Arcep will continue to observe how devices’ lifespan evolves.**

**Arcep’s analysis provides an opportunity to highlight the sizeable environmental impact wrought by the production and replacement of digital devices, and mobile phones in particular.**

<sup>1</sup> Digital Market Barometer – 2021 Edition – Credoc on behalf of Arcep, CGE and ANCT

<sup>2</sup> According to data from market research firm, GfK

<sup>3</sup> Arcep – Observatory, *Fixed and mobile services price index*, June 2020

All digital devices combined account for 81% of digital industry greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in France, according to a Senate information report on the digital environmental footprint<sup>4</sup>. Among those devices, smartphones represented 13% of digital devices' GHG emissions in 2019 (or 11% of the total digital environmental footprint). They nevertheless come in third place, after televisions (23%) and laptop computers (14%).

#### **Associated documents:**

- [The full report](#)
- [Report summary](#)

#### **Arcep at a glance**

The Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications, Postal Affairs and Print Media Distribution (Arcep), a neutral and expert arbitrator with the status of independent administrative authority (IAA), is the architect and guardian of internet, fixed and mobile telecoms and postal networks in France.

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<sup>4</sup> Senate Task Force report – *Achieving a green digital transition*, June 2020.

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