Lecture 17
Satellite Communication

CS433 – Wireless Protocols for IoT

Branden Ghena – Spring 2026

Materials in collaboration with
Pat Pannuto (UCSD) and Brad Campbell (UVA)

Administrivia

- Hw: Cellular
  - Due tonight (can use slip days if necessary)
  - Need to fill out Spreadsheet AND submit on Gradescope

- Return hardware
  - When you're done with the lab, I need your hardware back
  - Options:
    - Give it to me before or after lecture
    - Leave it with me or the PMs at office hours
    - Return it to my office (Tech L368)

Today's Goals

- Understand the capabilities and restrictions of satellite communication
- Explore real-world satellite communication
- Discuss directions for cellular-to-satellite communication

Outline

- **Overview**
- Satellite Communication
  - Voyager
- Satellite Communications Providers
- Cellular-to-Satellite Communication

Why use satellite communication?

- True global connectivity

- Cellular is dependent on someone actually building a cell tower near the area you want to communicate in
  - Remote areas are out-of-luck (mountain, forest, ocean)

- Satellites act as moving cell towers
  - With enough of them, you could cover the globe

Satellite communication challenges

1. Distances involved
   - Path loss
   - Latency

2. Large deployment areas
   - Shared bandwidth
   - Handoffs

3. Deployment considerations
   - Cost
   - Coordination

- Ignoring the difficulty of making the satellite itself

Satellite communication challenges

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Satellite orbits - LEO

- Low Earth Orbit (LEO)
  - 160-2000 km
  - Includes *most* current human spaceflight (ISS at 400 km)
  - Roughly 90 minutes per complete orbit of Earth

- Polar orbit will eventually cover all of Earth
- Group of satellites (constellation) can cover all of earth simultaneously if using enough satellites

https://aerospace.csis.org/aerospace101/earth-orbit-101/

Satellite orbits

- Geostationary Orbit (GEO) (a.k.a. geosynchronous orbit)
  - 35768 km
  - Exactly 24 hours per complete orbit

- Result: fixed location in the sky over a position on Earth
  - All of Earth can be covered with only a few satellites
  - Or an operator can choose to only service a specific region

https://aerospace.csis.org/aerospace101/earth-orbit-101/

Satellite orbits

- Medium-Earth Orbit (MEO)
  - Between LEO and GEO
  - Roughly 12 hours per complete orbit

- GNSS satellites (GPS, Galileo, etc.) are here
  - Smaller constellation and longer lifetime than LEO orbit

- Radiation belts make this area more difficult to use

https://aerospace.csis.org/aerospace101/earth-orbit-101/

Path loss to orbit

- Distance contributes significantly to signal strength loss. Frequency can hurt too
  - Increased frequency leads to smaller antenna leads to less energy collected leads to weaker signal (somewhat)

- Being at an angle on the horizon increases the total distance and the path loss

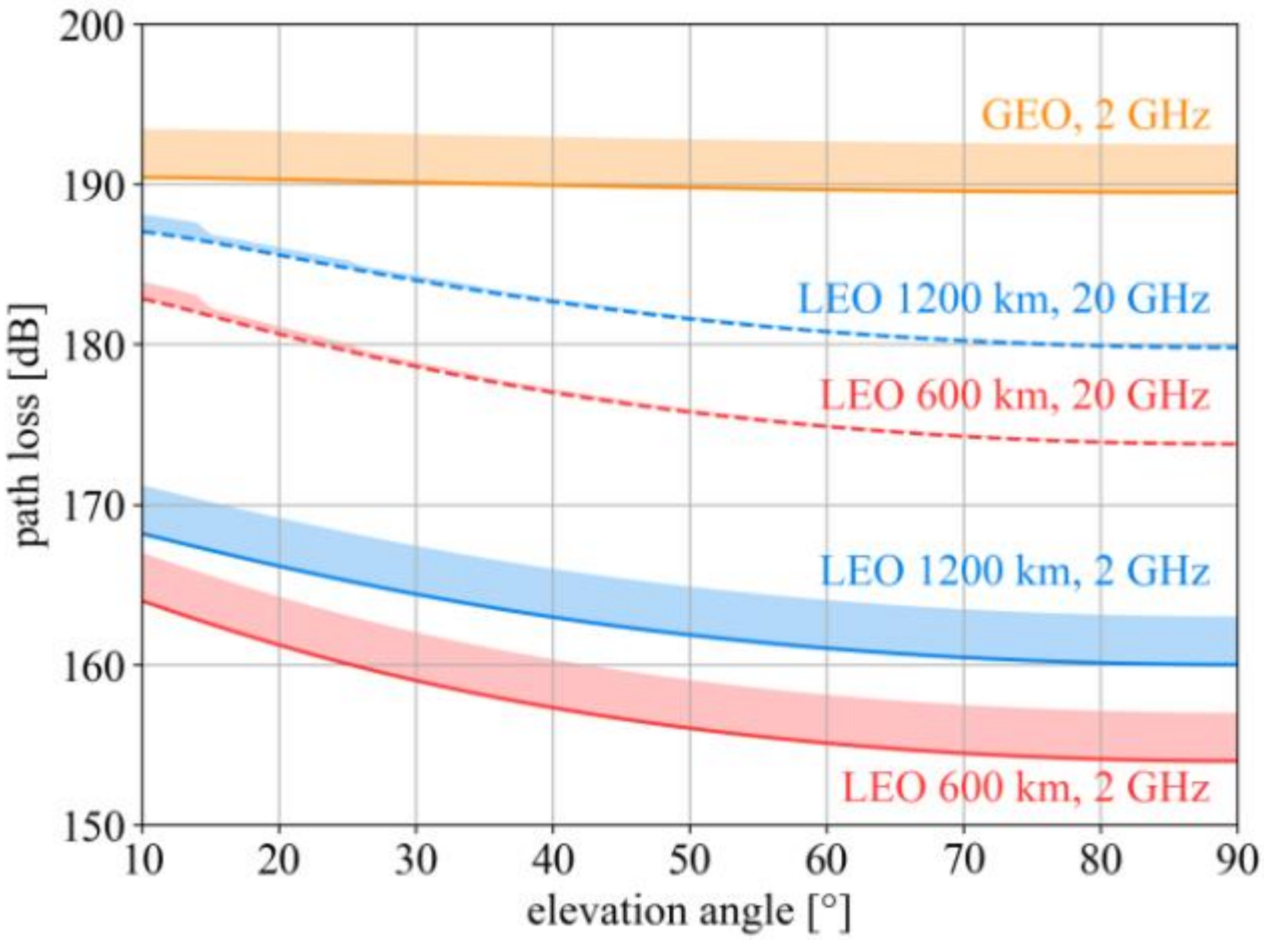


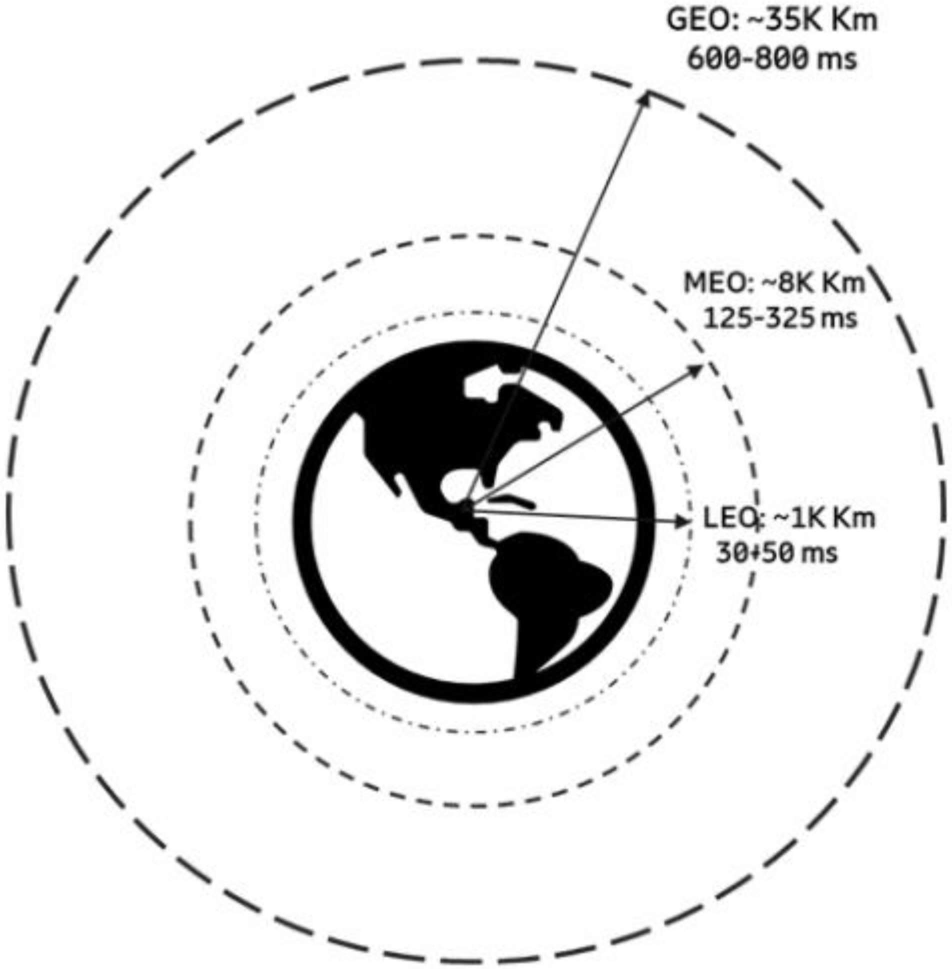
Figure 2: Path loss as a function of elevation angle

https://arxiv.org/pdf/2103.09156

Latency to orbit

- Even at speed of light, orbit distances contribute to communication delay

- 3GPP figures shown here include round-trip-time AND real-world delays through network



https://www.5gamericas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/5G-Non-Terrestrial-Networks-2022-WP-Id.pdf

Satellite communication challenges

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    - **Shared bandwidth**
    - **Handoffs**

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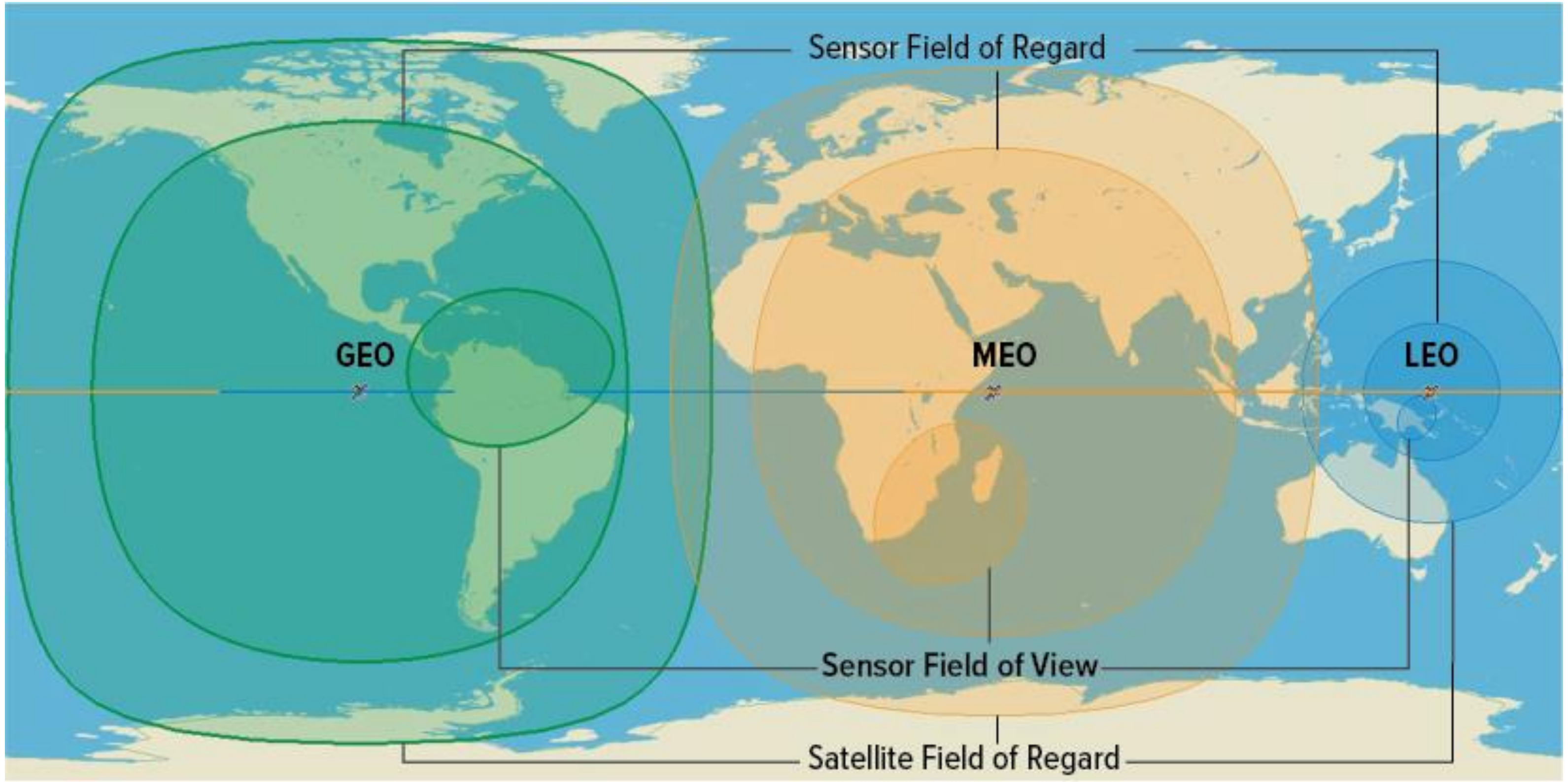
- Ignoring the difficulty of making the satellite itself

A single satellite provides considerable deployment area

- Coverage areas can get VERY wide here
  - Biggest: all possible line-of-sight to satellite
  - Middle: limited to ≥20º above horizon
  - Smallest: example image sensing region

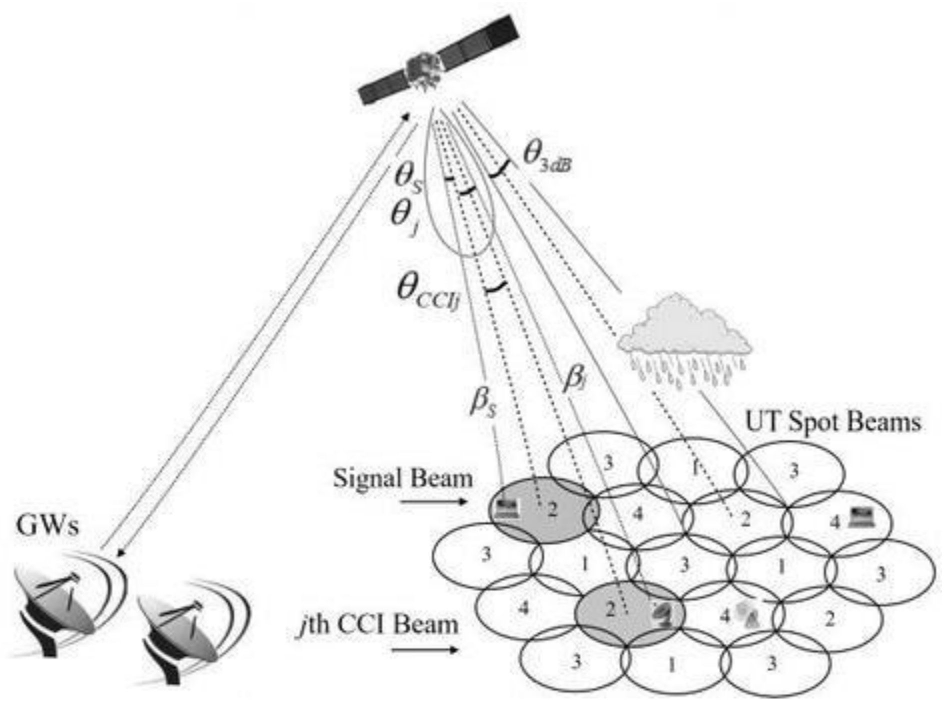


Huge coverage areas share bandwidth among many users

- Same problem as LPWANs:
  data throughput is shared across entire coverage area

- Cellular solution can apply here
  - Reduce coverage area and provide overlapping cells of coverage
  - One satellite could support many cells

- Limitations:
  - Needs many channels to support cells
  - Backhaul to downstation needs enough throughput for sum of *all* cells



Moving satellites lead to many handoffs

- In LEO, satellites are moving around 7 km/s (25,000 km/h)
  - Comparatively, mobility of the user equipment is irrelevant

- Depending on cell size, the device might leave the cell within seconds
  - Smaller cells exacerbate this problem

Cell Diameter Size (km)	UE Speed (km/hr)	Satellite Speed (km/s)	Time UE remains in the cell (s)
50 (lower bound)	+500	7.56	6.49
	-500		6.74
	+1200		6.33
	- 1200		6.92
	Neglected		6.61
1000 (upper bound)	+500		129.89
	-500		134.75
	+1200		126.69
	- 1200		138.38
	Neglected		132.28

Satellite communication challenges

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3. **Deployment considerations**
   - **Cost**
   - **Coordination**

- Ignoring the difficulty of making the satellite itself

Getting hardware in orbit isn't cheap

Launch vehicle estimated payload cost per kg

Launch Vehicle	Payload cost per kg
Vanguard	$1,000,000 [20]
Space Shuttle	$54,500 [20]
Electron	$19,039 [21][22]
Ariane 5G	$9,167 [20]
Long March 3B	$4,412 [20]
Proton	$4,320 [20]
Falcon 9	$2,720 [23]
Falcon Heavy	$1,500 [24]

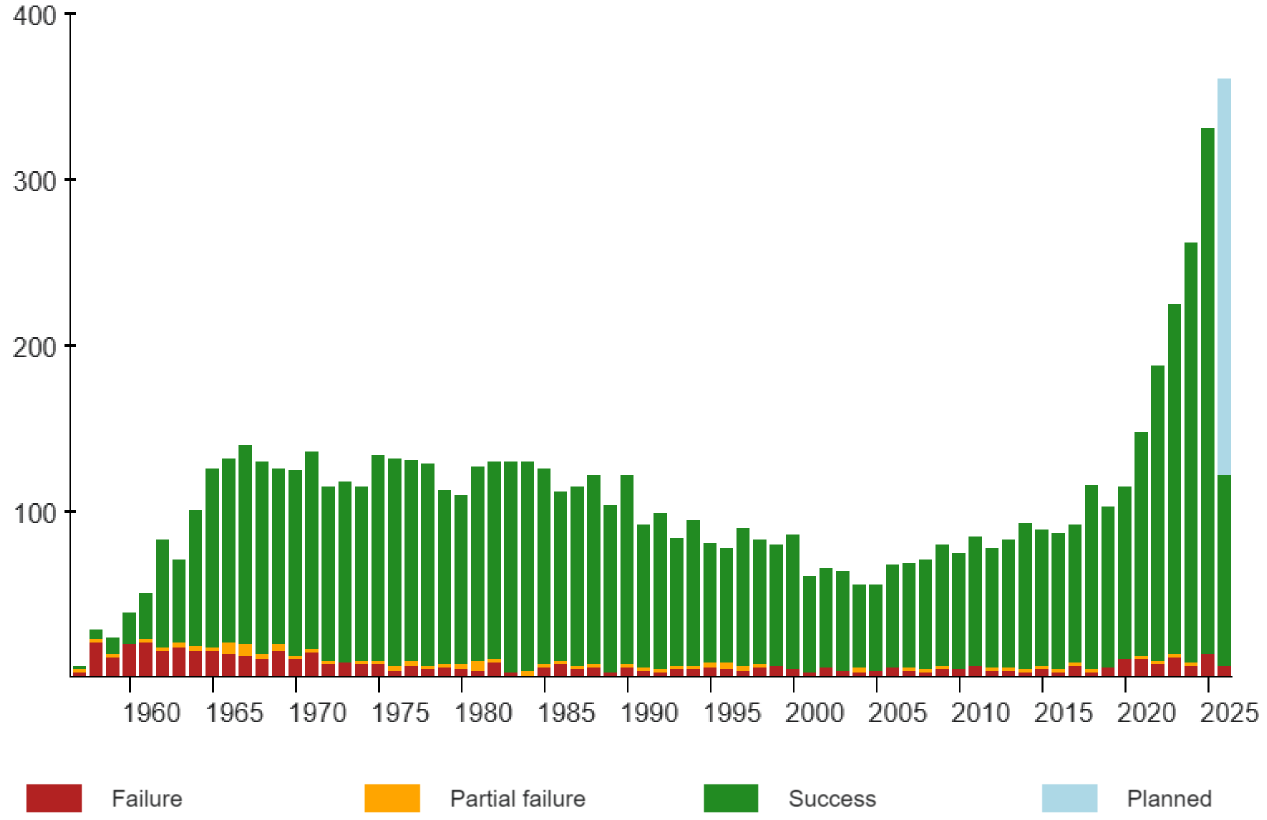
- Costs have dropped significantly in recent years, but are still $1000 per kg
- Satellite total mass for reference:
  - Starlink v1.0: 260 kg
  - Starlink v2.0: 1250 kg
  - GPS: 1000-2000 kg

Actually finding a rocket to launch with has become easier

- SpaceX (and other commercial rockets) have led a recent renaissance in number of rocket launches per year
  - SpaceX alone responsible for 87% of all mass sent to space in 2023

- 2019: 104 launches
- 2025: 330 launches
- 2026: 350+ planned

- This availability is generating new interest in satellite communications



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_spaceflight#Orbital_launches_by_year

Frequency allocations often must be world-wide

- GEO satellites can focus on a region and provide a channel for that region
- LEO constellations aiming for world-wide coverage must have a world-wide frequency allocation
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU) helps coordinate frequency allocations
  - UN agency

Break + Question

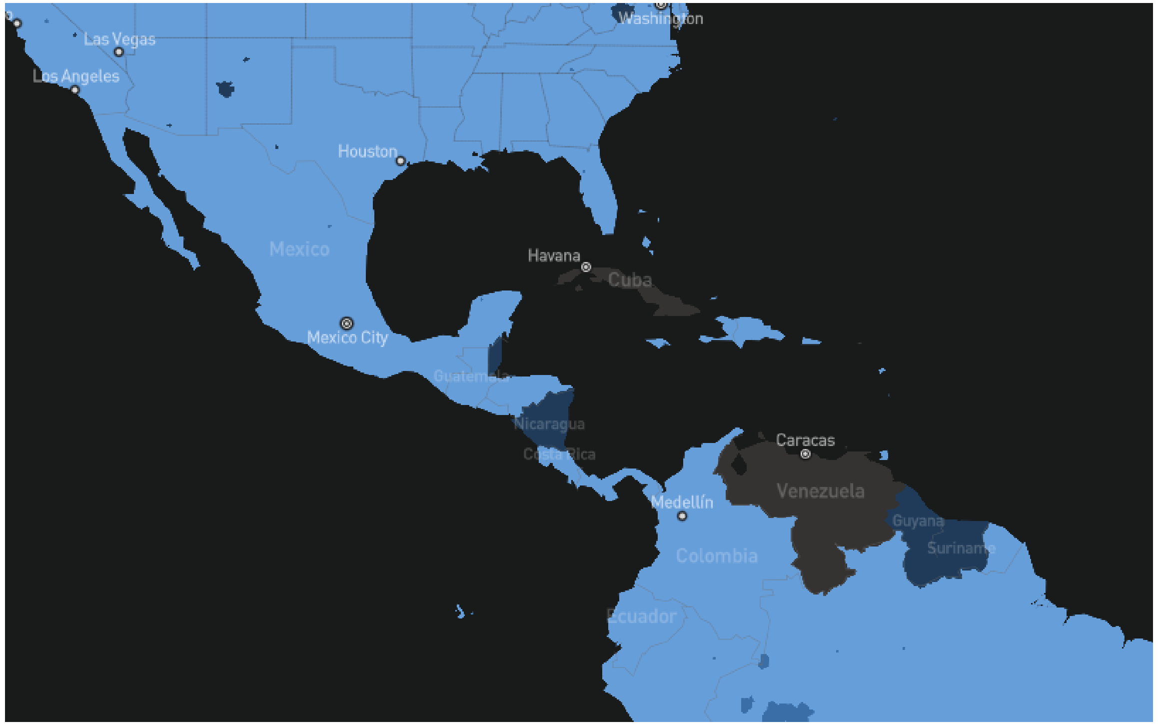
- What do you do if a country *doesn't* agree to let your satellite transmit on a certain frequency?

Break + Question

- What do you do if a country *doesn't* agree to let your satellite transmit on a certain frequency?

  - Blackout over specific regions

  - Satellites must already know their own locations to high accuracy, so this is possible



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  - **Voyager**
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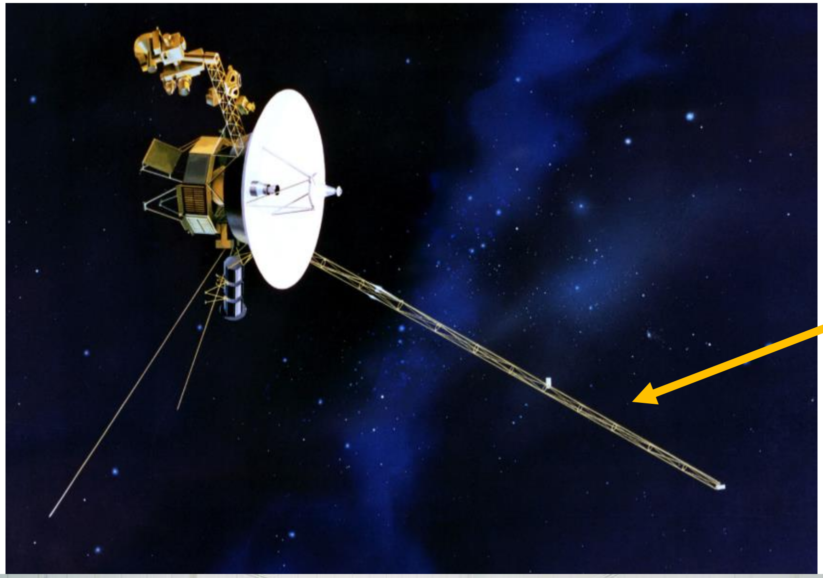
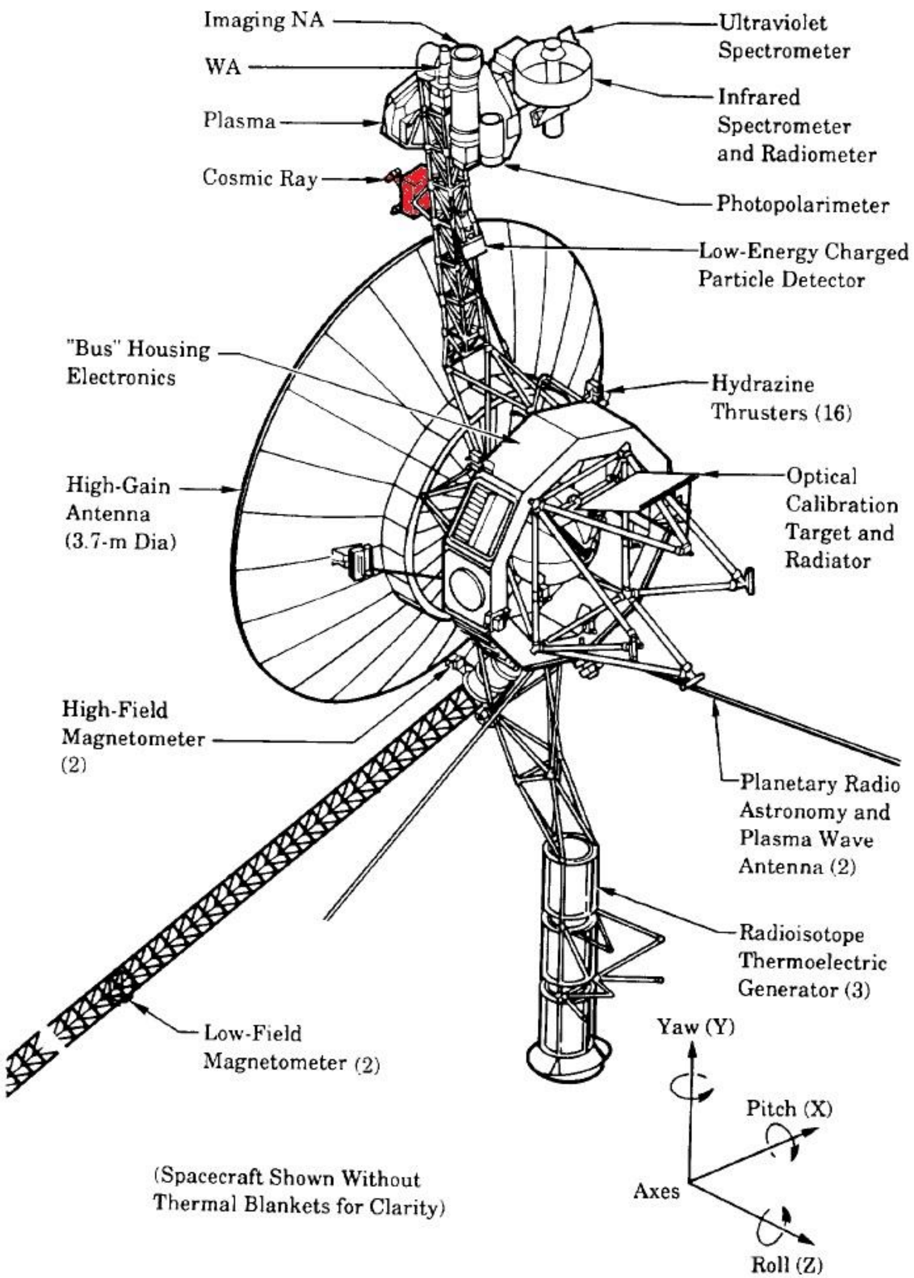
Voyager 1 and 2 (1977)



Boom arm is 43 feet

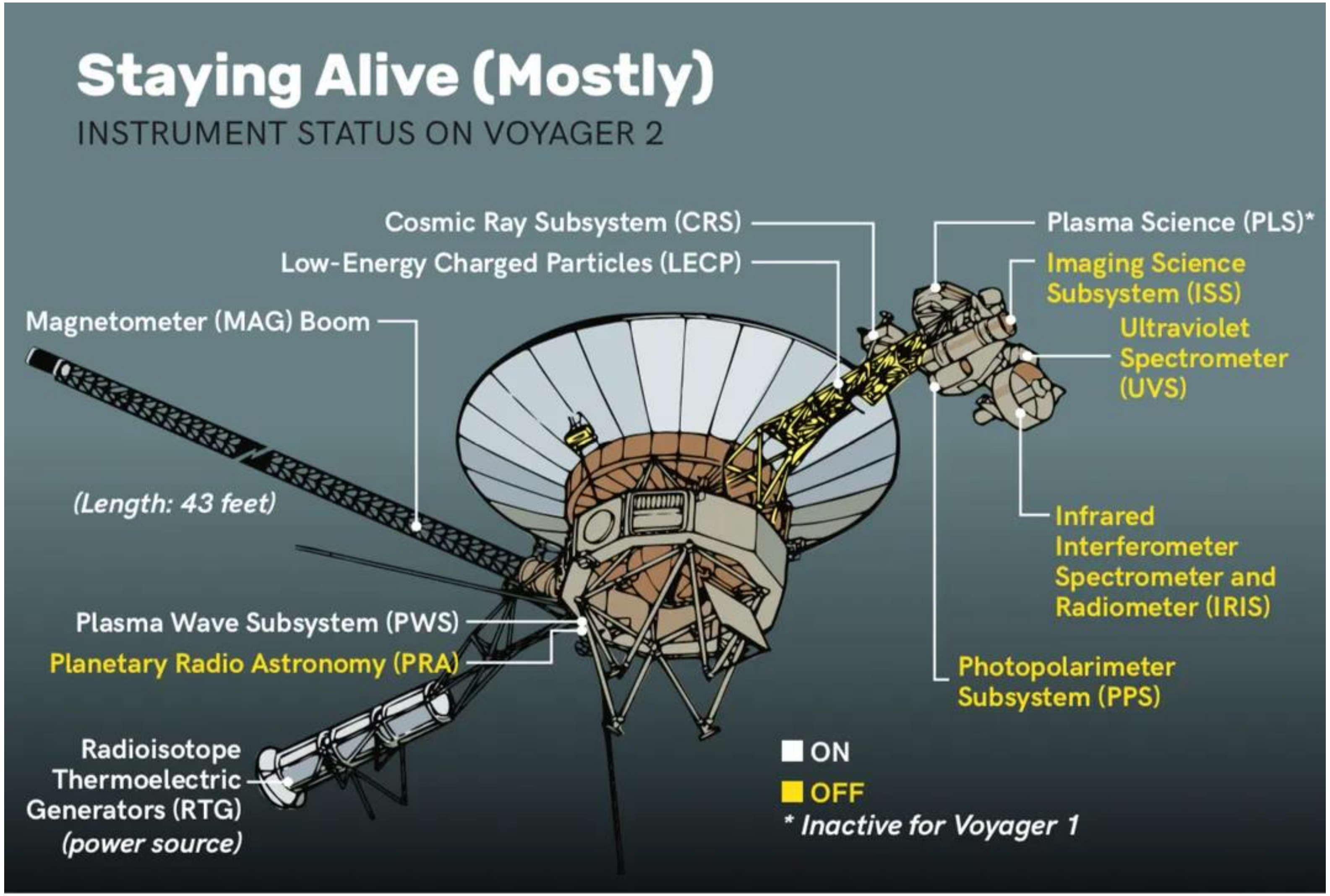


Voyager still functional

Voyager 2

- Jupiter: 1979
- Saturn: 1981
- Uranus: 1985
- Neptune: 1989
- Edge of solar system: 2018

- Still sending data!
  - So is Voyager 1



Voyager still (mostly) functional

Voyager 2

- Jupiter: 1979
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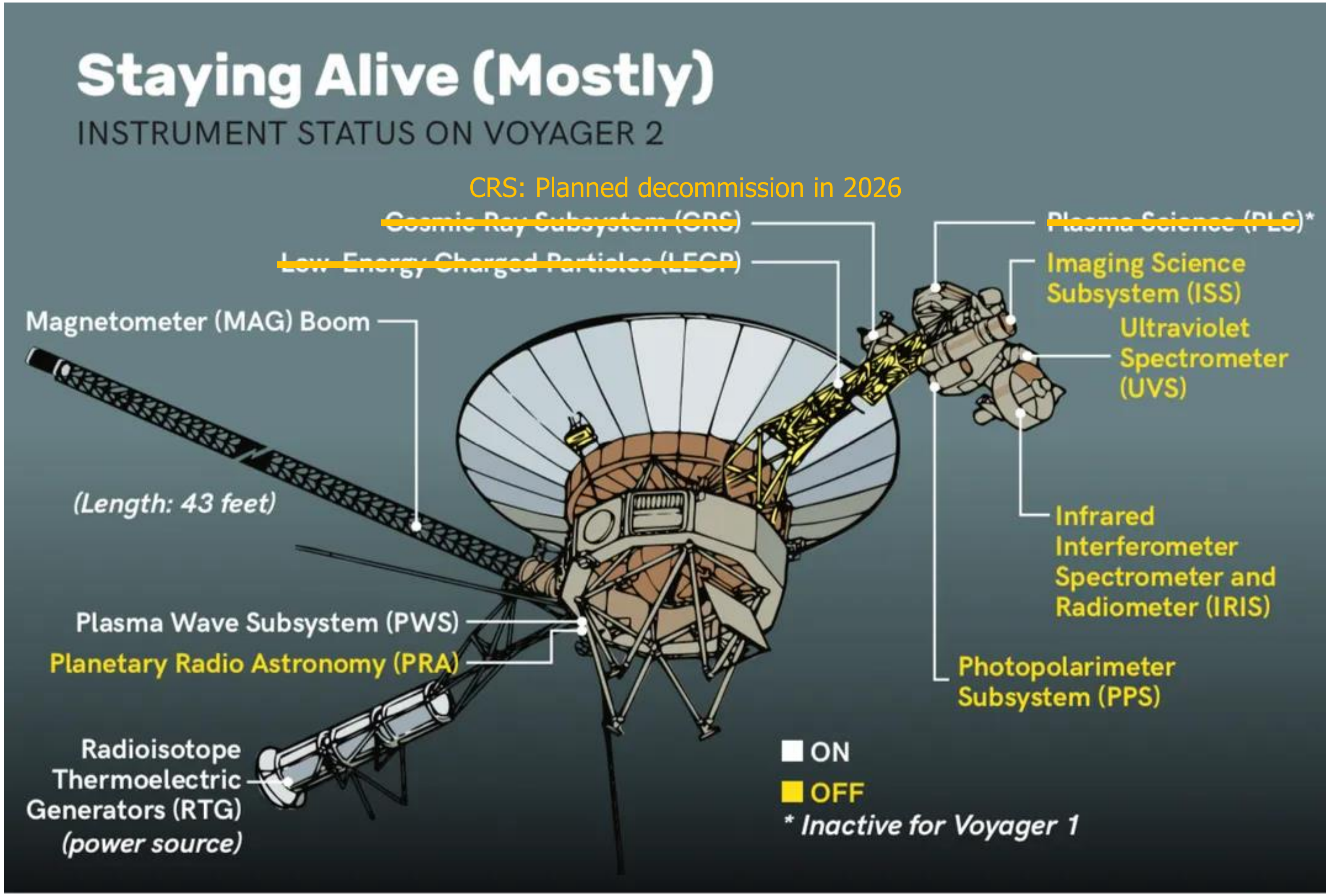
- Uranus: 1985
- Neptune: 1989
- Edge of solar system: 2018

- Still sending data!
  - So is Voyager 1



How do we communicate with satellites so far away?

Deep Space Network Canberra complex

Three of these:

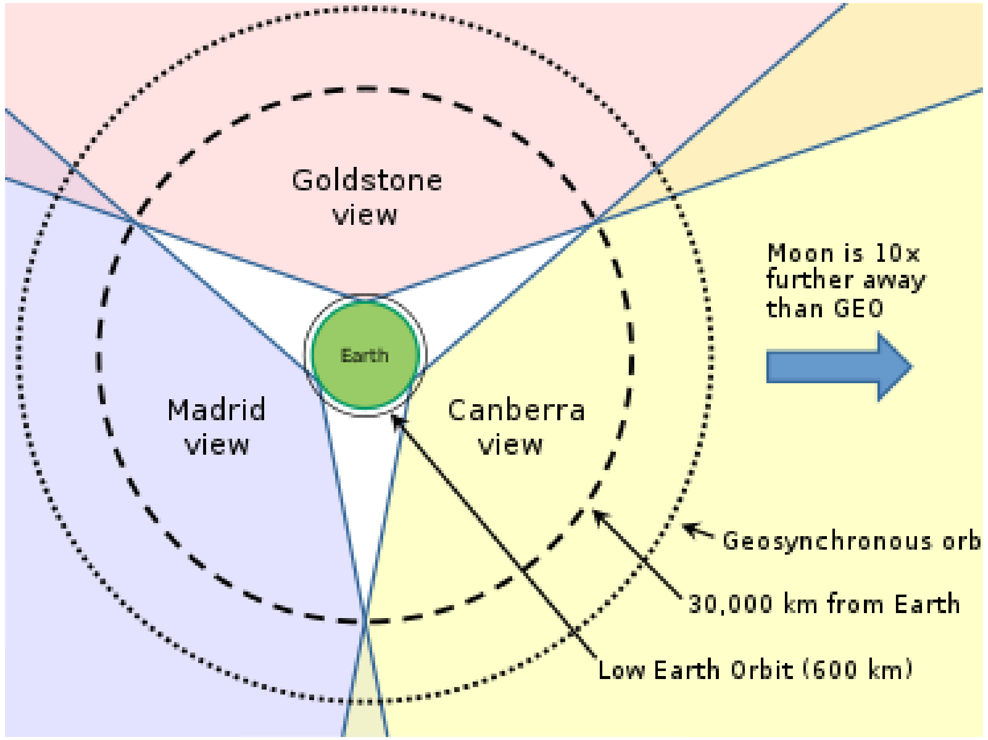
Goldstone, CA, USA

Madrid, Spain

Canberra, Australia

Deep Space Network

- Receives data from NASA deep space missions
- 70-meter antenna (~70 dB gain)
- Array of four 34-meter antennas



Voyager 2 path loss calculation

- Frequency: 8.415 GHz communication (100 kHz bandwidth)
- Distance: 21,300,000,000 km (May 2026)

- Free Space Path Loss: 317.5 dB
  Voyager 1 is further out: 319 dB of Path Loss

- In 2002, FSPL was 308 dB (see source below)
  - So ~10 dB loss per 25 years

https://descanso.jpl.nasa.gov/DPSummary/Descanso4--Voyager_ed.pdf

Other factors

- Voyager 2 Transmit:
  - Transmission power: 41 dBm (12 Watts)
  - Antenna gain: 48 dB

- DSN Receiver:
  - Antenna gain: 74 dB

- Other factors:
  - Pointing error: -0.3 dB
  - Atmospheric loss: -0.04 dB
  - Polarization loss: -0.08 dB

https://descanso.jpl.nasa.gov/DPSummary/Descanso4--Voyager_ed.pdf

Total received power from Voyager

- Received power: 41 + 48 + 74 - ~1 -317.5 = -155.5 dBm

- Compare to minimum receive sensitivity for IoT protocols:
  - -95 dBm for BLE
  - -119 dBm for LoRa
  - -141 dBm for NB-IoT

- Voyager transmits at 160 bps

https://descanso.jpl.nasa.gov/DPSummary/Descanso4--Voyager_ed.pdf

Voyager uplink math

- Biggest difference: transmission power 72.55 dBm (18 kW)

- Antennas and frequency are slightly different too
  - DSN 62 dB gain, Voyager 34.6 dB gain
  - FSPL (at 2.113 GHz): 305.5 dB

- Received power: 72.55 + 62 + 34.6 - ~1 -305.5 = -137.5 dBm
  - Almost 20 dB better than downlink

https://descanso.jpl.nasa.gov/DPSummary/Descanso4--Voyager_ed.pdf

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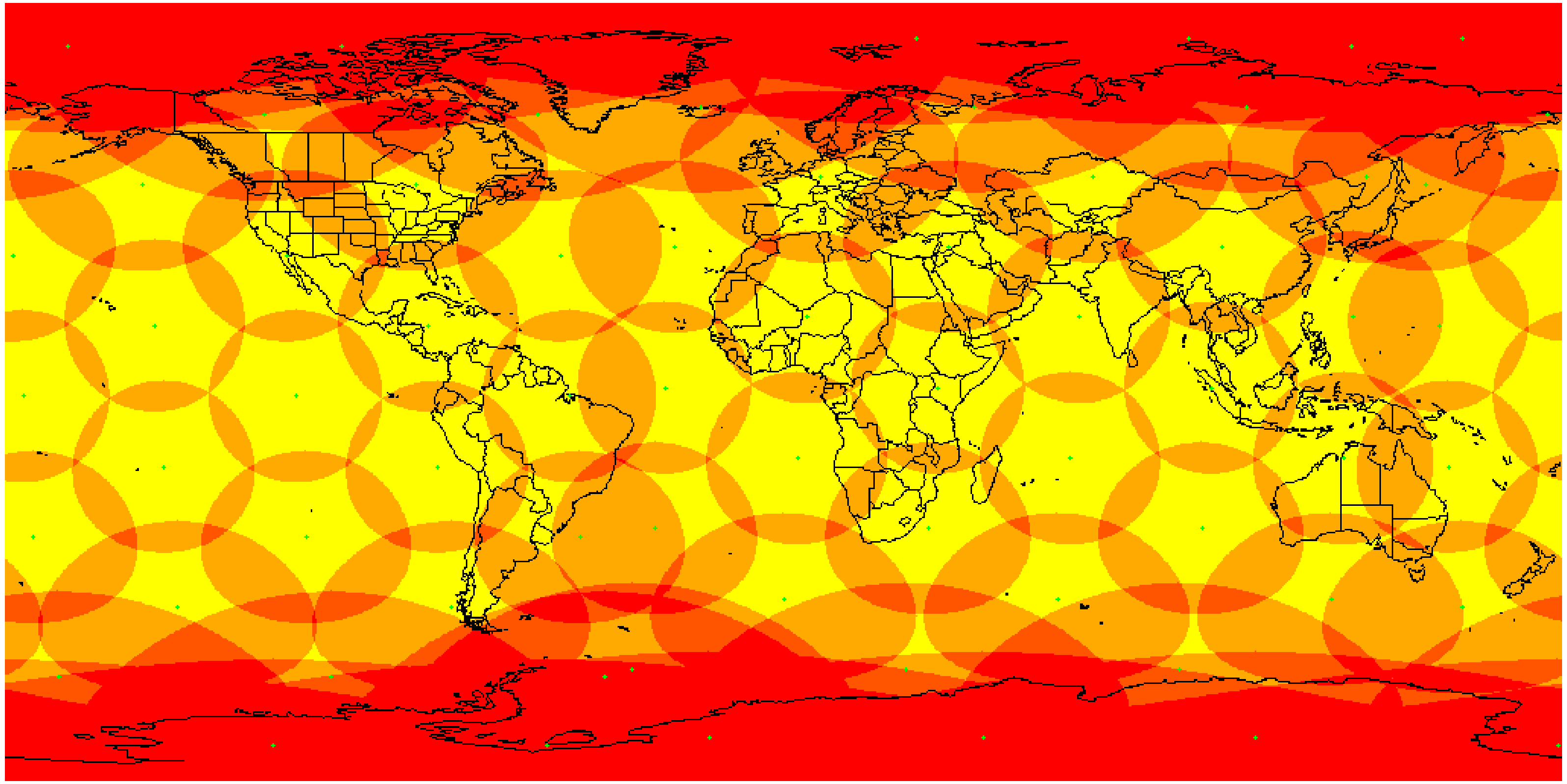
Iridium Constellation

- Active since 1997
- 82 active satellites in LEO for global coverage



- Each green dot is a satellite
- Yellow is coverage
- Red is overlapping coverage

Iridium satellite phones

- Initially marketed as general consumer phones
  - Total failure leading to bankruptcy
- Modern focus: highly reliable global niche
  - Journalists, explorers, military
- SMS and Voice service
  - Up to 4 hours of talk time
- Costs
  - $1800 for phone
  - Roughly $1 per minute for global voice coverage
  - $400 gets you 3000 text messages

Using Iridium from a device

- RockBLOCK radio module
  - $300
  - 5V at 500 mA (max)
    - Comparable to cellular modems

- Communication
  - 340 byte uplink packets
  - 270 byte downlink packets

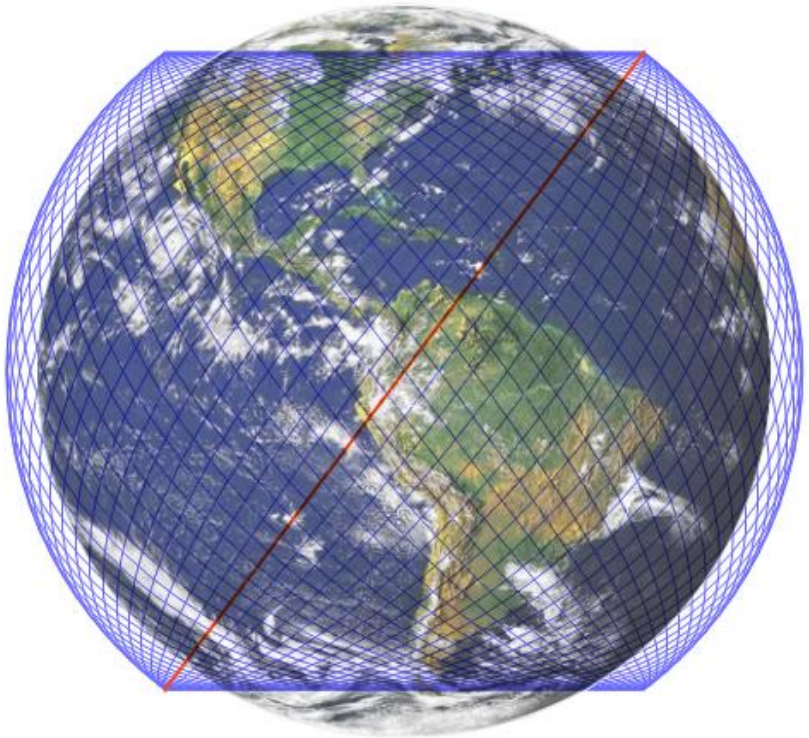
- $15 per month active plus ~$0.003 per byte

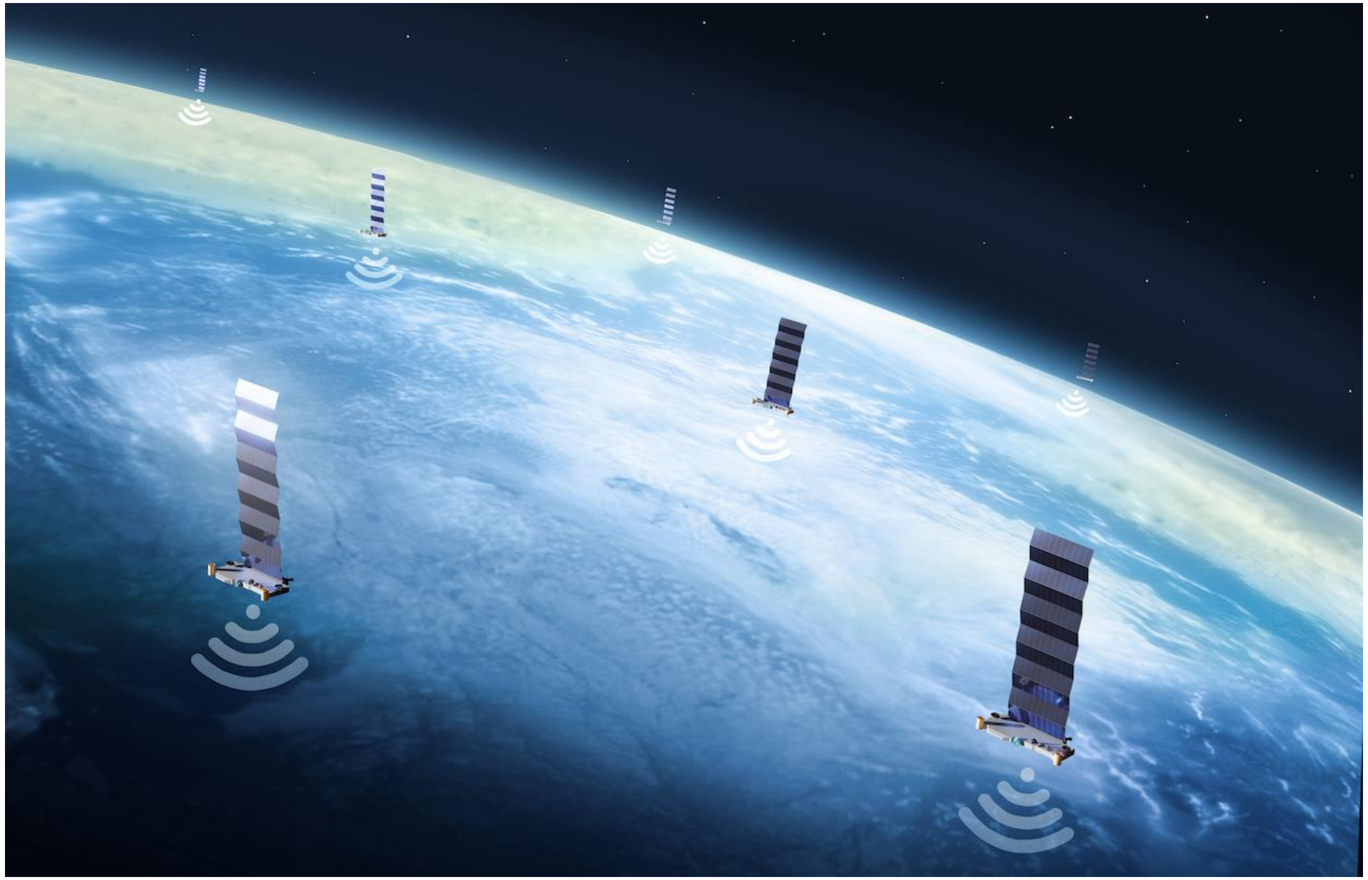
https://www.sparkfun.com/products/14498

Starlink constellation

- Over 10,000 satellites (as of March 2026)
  - 12000-34000 planned
- Service began in 2021

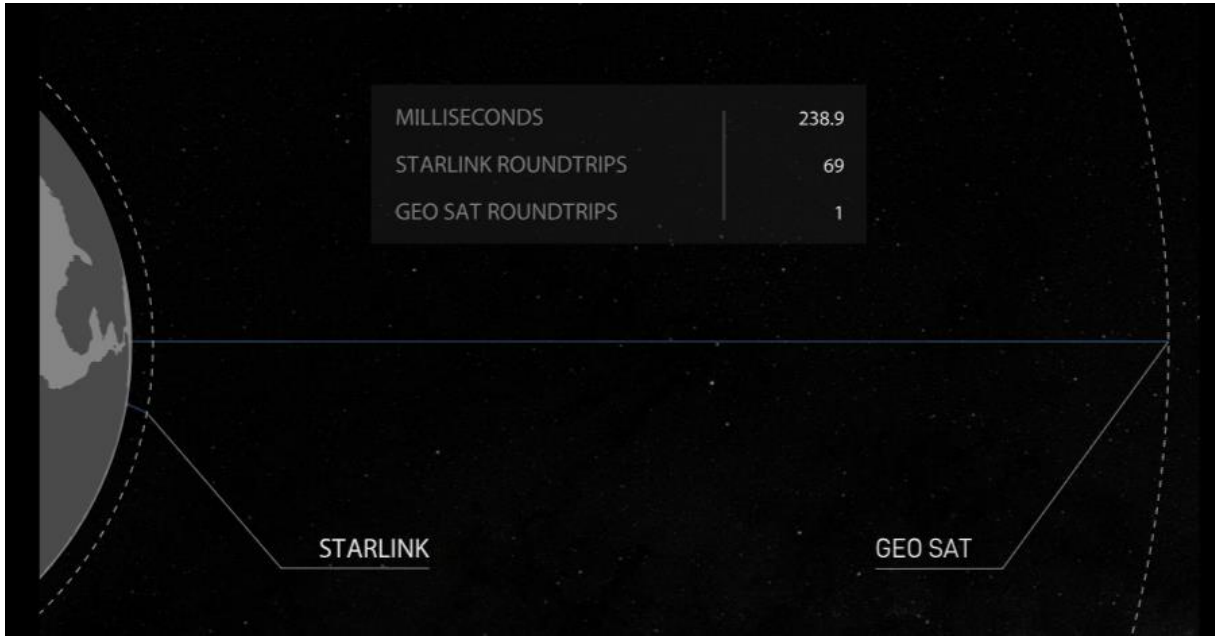
STARLINK





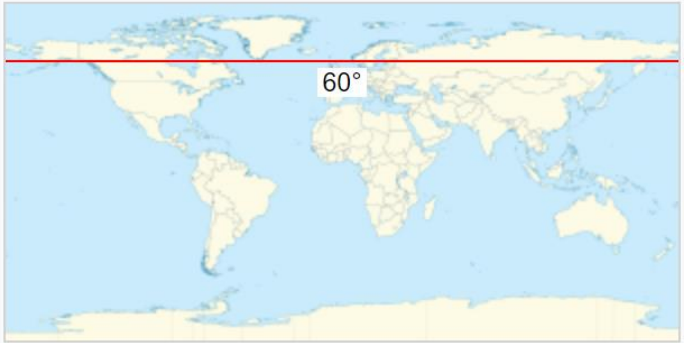
Starlink is deployed in LEO

- LEO orbit allows much lower latency for communication than GEO
  - ~60-70x faster
  - Which enables voice/video operation
- Downside is more frequent replacement of satellites
  - Which is necessary for technology improvements anyways



Starlink targets consumer connectivity

- Broadband via satellite
  - 45-280 Mbps down, 10-30 Mbps up
  - 25-60 ms latency
- Anywhere on Earth below 60° latitude
  - But communications must be approved by individual countries (160+ per SpaceX)
- Costs
  - $350 for a hardware kit
  - $55/month for continuous service



60th parallel north

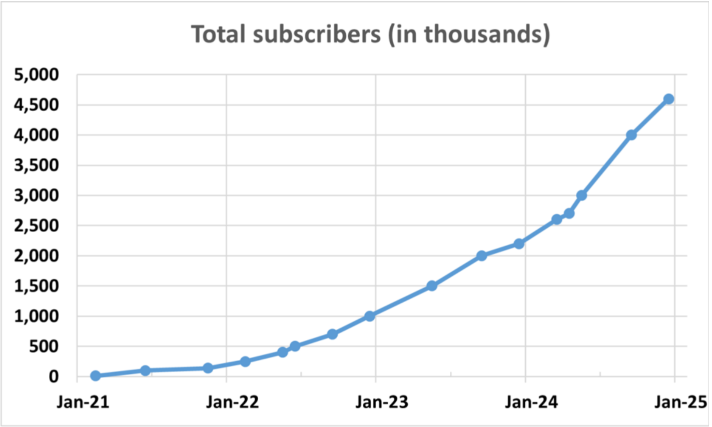
Starlink growth over two-year period

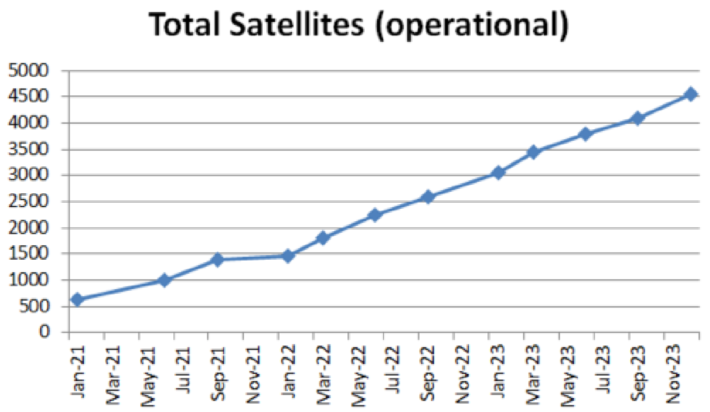
- Growth in subscribers has been sustained by growth in satellite deployments

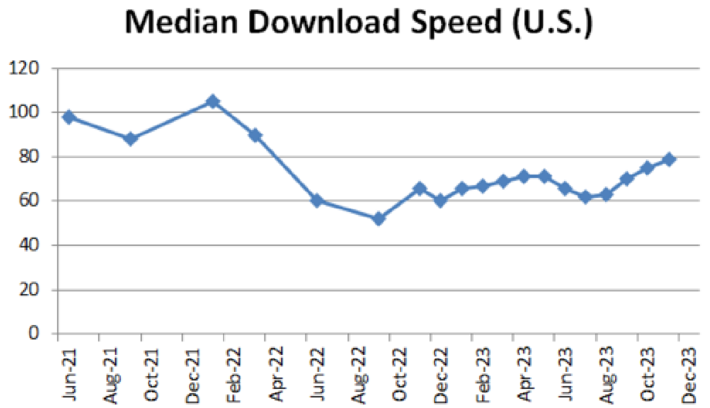
- Roughly 1 satellite per 1000 users (May 2026)
  - 10,000 satellites and 10 million users
  - At $55 per month and five years life: $3.3 million revenue per satellite (<$2 million for cost + launch)

- Note: download speed chart cuts off in 2023

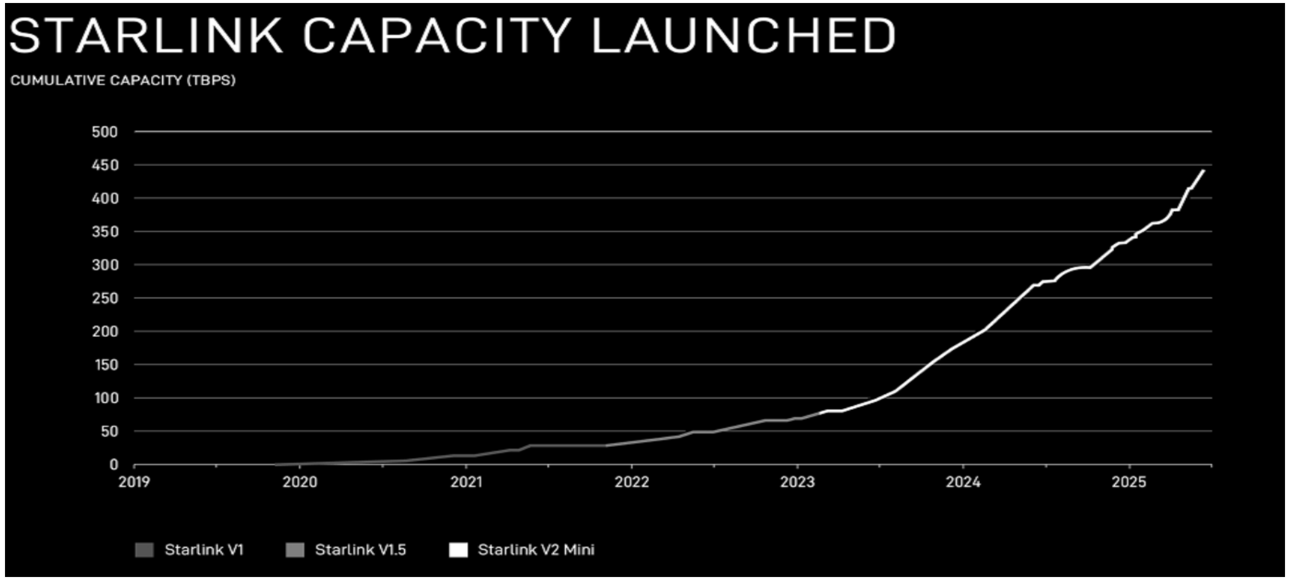
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starlink

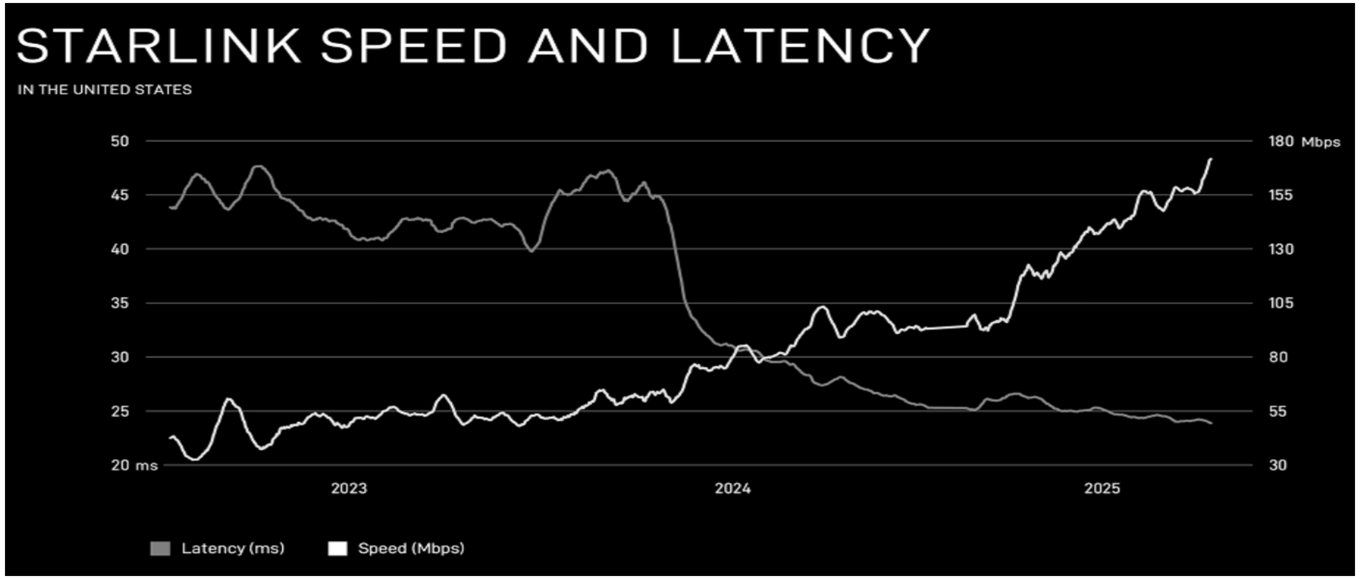




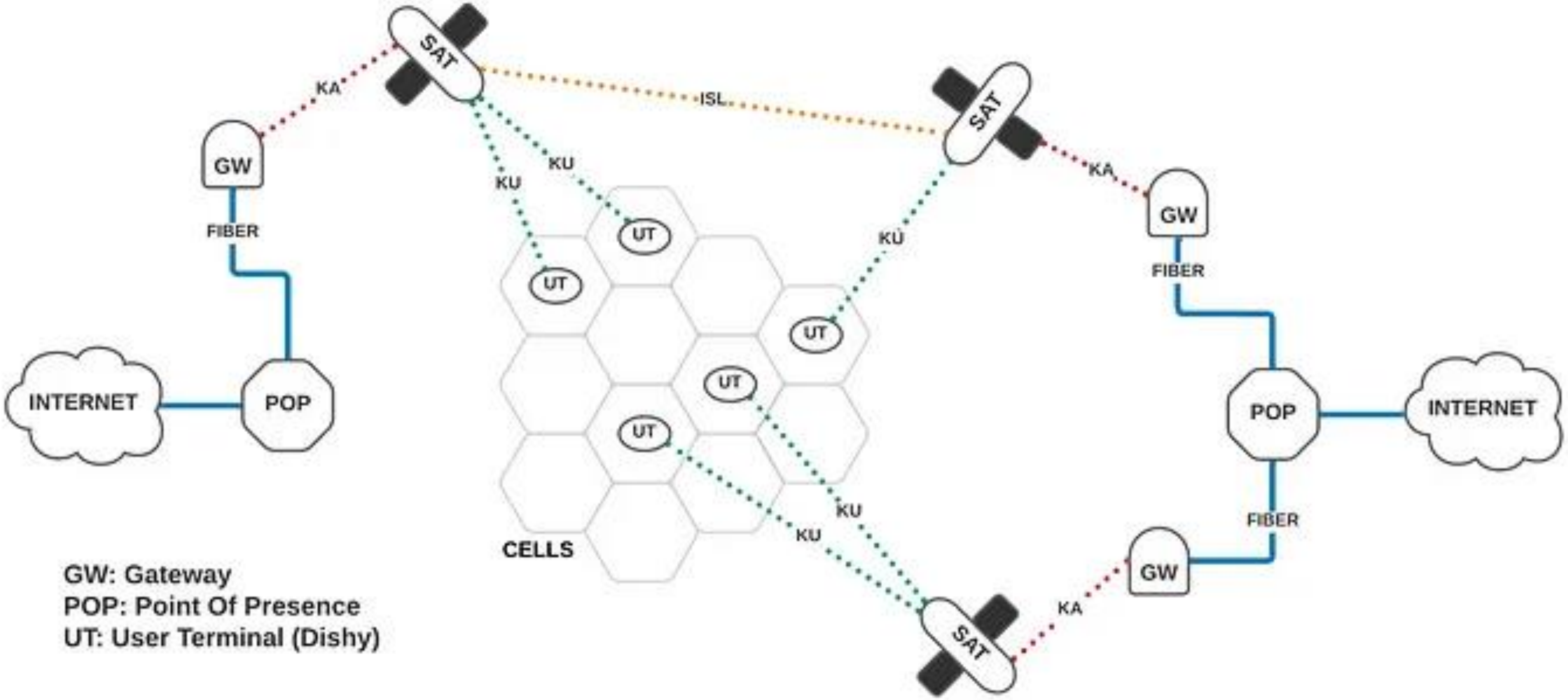


Data from Starlink





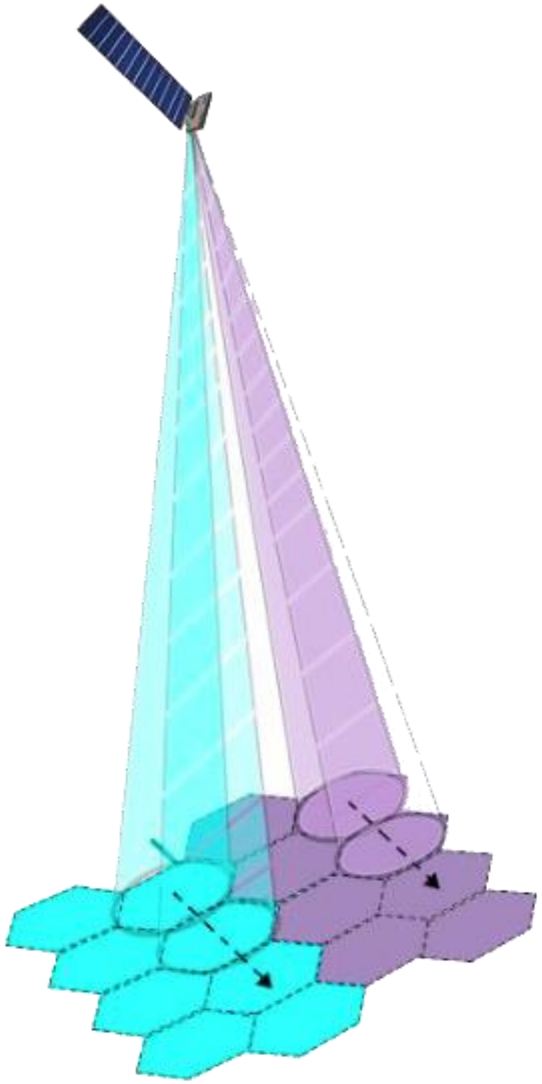
Starlink operation model



https://mikepuchol.com/modeling-starlink-capacity-843b2387f501

Starlink user communication

- Starlink cells are 15 miles in diameter
- Each satellite can communicate with 16 cells simultaneously (16 beams)
  - Cells can be directed at any location in view of the satellite
  - Can redirect cell locations quickly to time divide one beam into many cells per second



http://www.satmagazine.com/story.php?number=1026762698

Starlink ground stations

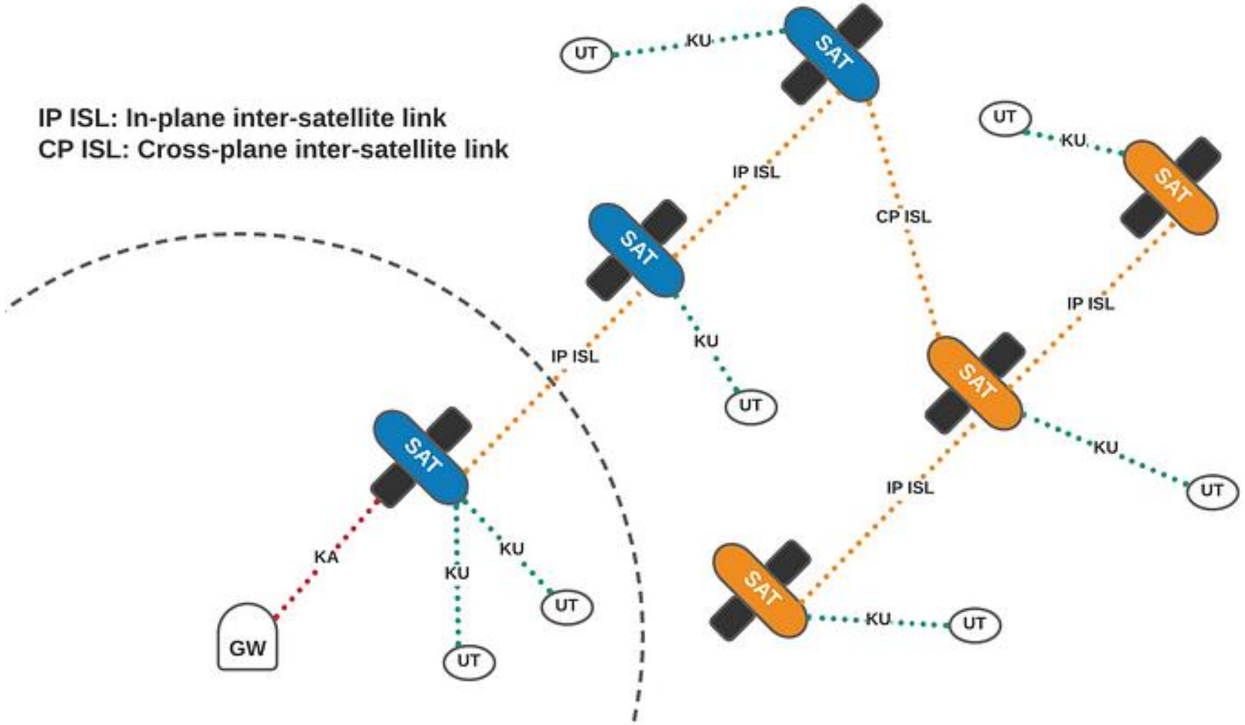
- Ground stations deployed worldwide
  - Not entirely clear how many? 150+
- 20 Gbps throughput from satellite to ground station (shared among all its cells)
- Some regions (including eastern US) have a limitation on the band Starlink is using for downlink
  - Starlink only gets to use 50% of it

https://www.pcmag.com/news/what-is-a-starlink-pop-how-ground-stations-improve-latency-capacity
https://starlinkinstallationpros.com/starlink-ground-station-backbone-of-satellite-internet/

Starlink inter-satellite links

- What if a ground station isn't in view?
  - Use mesh networks!!

- Uses lasers to communicate with nearby satellites
  - Position of each satellite is well-known



Satellite broadband providers (2023)

Operator	Satellite system (deployed)	Spectrum	Technology	Operational	Services
Space X (Starlink)	12000+ (3580)	Ku-band	Proprietary	Yes	Broadband
OneWeb	648 (542)	Ku-band	Proprietary	TBD	Broadband
Kuiper	3236 (0)	Ka band	Proprietary	Estimated 2024	Broadband
Galaxy Space	1000 (7)	Q/V spetrum	Proprietary	TBD	Broadband
Boeing	147 NGSO (1)	V band	Proprietary	TBD	TBD
Inmarsat	14 GEO (14)	TBD	Proprietary	TBD	Broadband to IoT
Telesat	188 (2)	C, Ku, Ka bands	Proprietary	TBD	Broadband
Echostar	10 GEO (10)	Ku, Ka, S bands	Proprietary	Yes	Broadband
HughesNet	3 GEO (2)	Ka band	Proprietary	Yes	Broadband
Viasat	4 GEO (4)	Ka band	Proprietary	Yes	Broadband

https://www.5gamericas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Update-on-5G-Non-terrestrial-Networks-Id.pdf

Break + Question

- Is there a limit to how much stuff we can have in orbit? What about old, defunct satellites?

Break + Question

- Is there a limit to how much stuff we can have in orbit? What about old, defunct satellites?

  - Space Junk!! Major concern

  - 2022: FCC requires all satellites launched after 2024 to deorbit within five years of ending their mission

  - For GEO, graveyard orbit: location to move your satellite to that no one wants to use anyways
    - Need to move there *before* you run out of propellant

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Goals of "Non-Terrestrial Networks"

- Support connectivity in "remote, unserved, and underserved areas"

- Target is remote regions: cities already have good cell coverage
  - Supplemental Coverage from Space (SCS)
  - Not intended to replace primary coverage

- In the US:
  - 57 million people live in "rural" areas
  - 4 million km^2 results in ~10000 15-mile-diameter (24 km) cells

https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-391794A1.pdf
http://www.satmagazine.com/story.php?number=1026762698

Apple Emergency SOS (2022)

- Allows for calling emergency services over satellite communication
  - Messages emergency contacts with your location as well
  - Possibly additional functionality: call AAA for roadside assistance

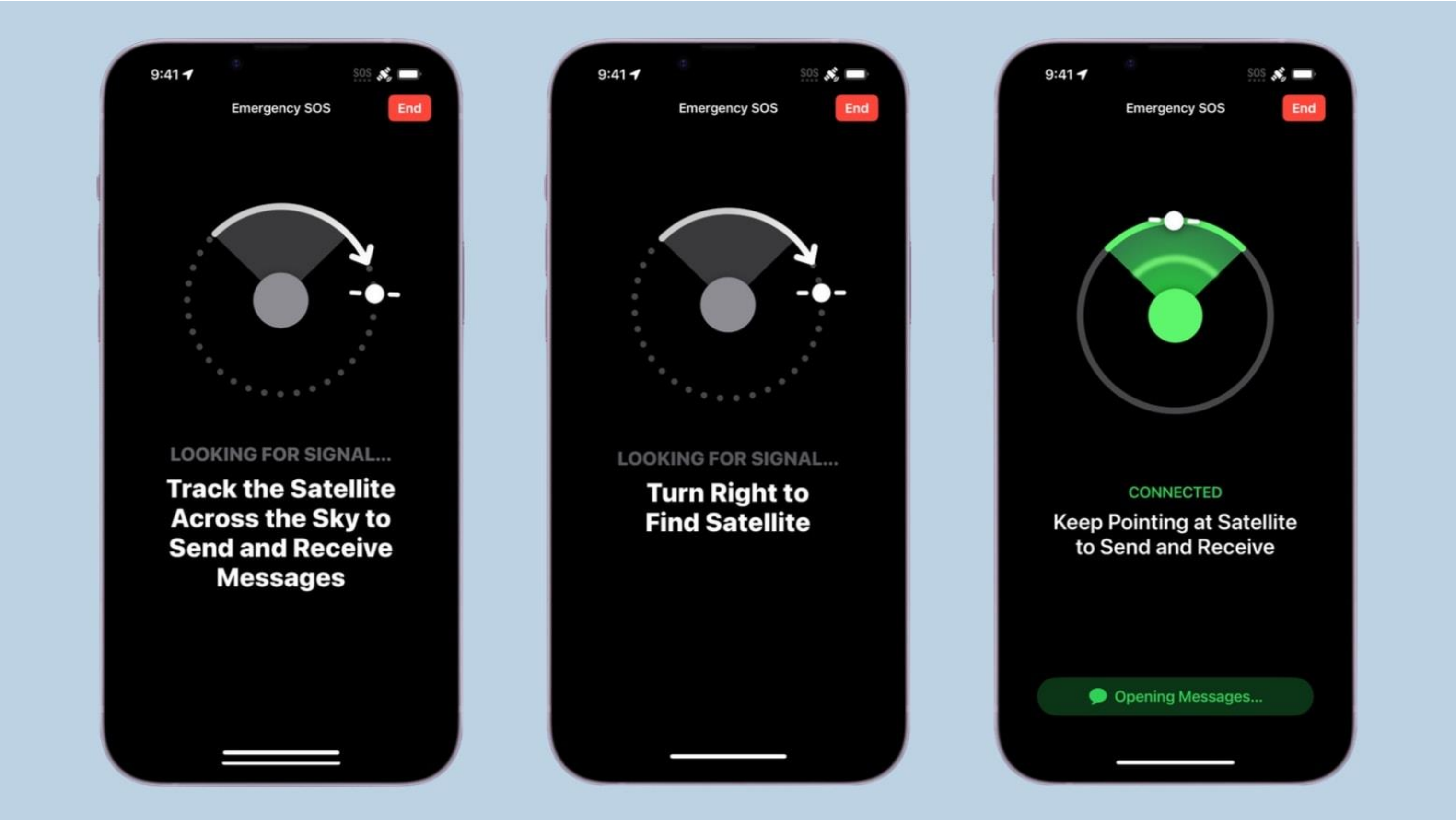
- Globalstar constellation
  - 24-satellite deployment in LEO (~1400 km)
  - Frequencies: 1.6 GHz uplink, 2.4 GHz downlink (doesn't overlap with WiFi)

- Apple is guaranteed up to 85% of Globalstar bandwidth
  - April 2026: Amazon acquiring Globalstar

- Free for first few years (until ~~Nov 2025?~~ Nov 2026?)
  - No sense of how they'll charge for it after that

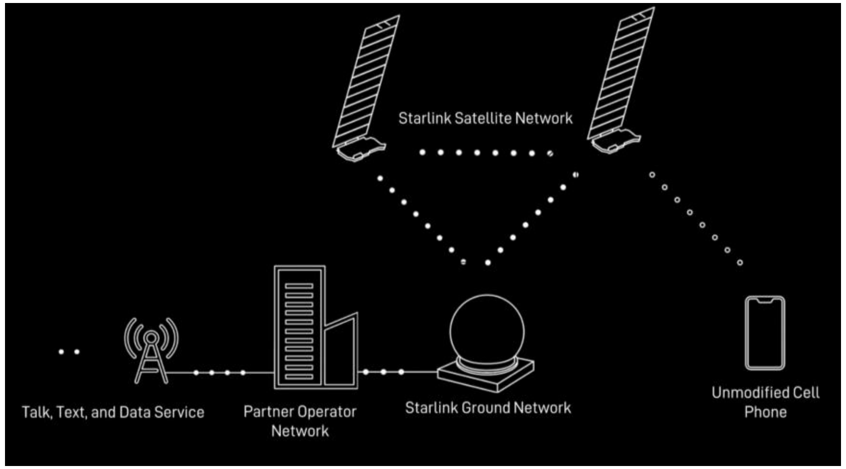
Emergency SOS pointing requirement

- How do we handle distance?
  - Have users accurately point directional antenna at satellite
  - Combine with very slow data rates for better connectivity



Pointing requirements are going away as technology in phones improves

Satellite to cellular suddenly seems viable



- T-Mobile and SpaceX: T-Satellite
  - Announced in 2022
  - Available now!
    - Apple, Samsung, and Google support
- Qualcomm and Iridium partnership
  - 2023: Announced in January, ended in November
    - Qualcomm: going to focus on standards-based approaches
  - 2025: Qualcomm radio chips for Iridium communications
- AST SpaceMobile partners with AT&T and Verizon (2024)
- “77 publicly announced partnerships over 43 countries” (March 2024)
- May 2026: AT&T, T-Mobile, and Verizon joint venture on satellite technologies to address coverage gaps

https://insidetowers.com/partnerships-show-potential-of-satellite-to-cell-phone-market/

T-Mobile + SpaceX collaboration

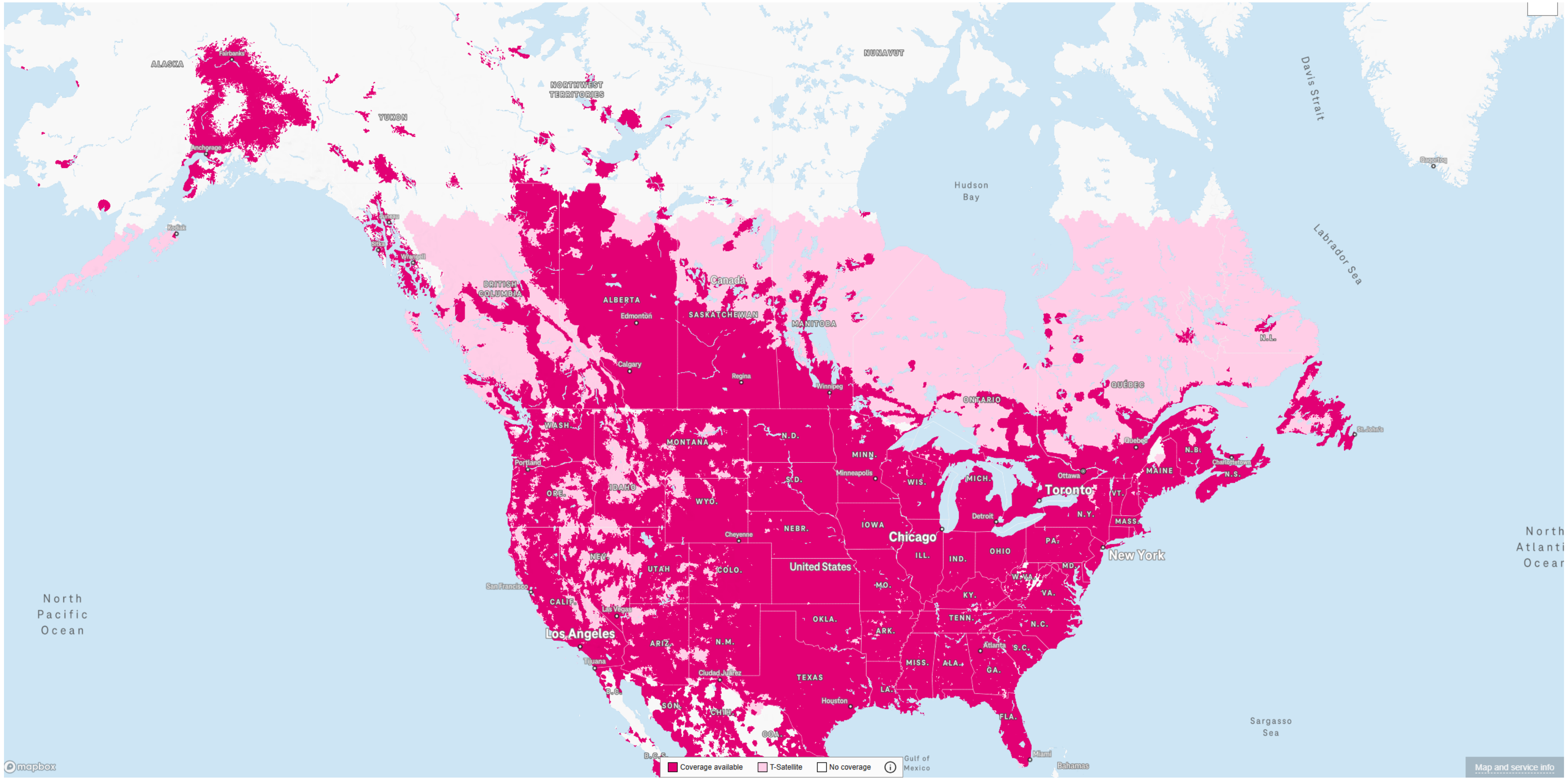
- T-Mobile and SpaceX: T-Satellite
  - Announced in 2022
  - Available starting July 2025
    - Included in some existing T-Mobile plans
    - $10 per month for first standalone plans
  - Text and Data
    - Data is limited: select apps only
    - No voice calling yet
  - Limited locations initially
    - US, Canada, New Zealand, Japan
  - IoT support planned

Satellite

	Feature availability
Texting	iOS and Android
Picture Messaging	iOS and Android
Voice and Video Memos	iOS and Android
Voice and Video Chats	Only on WhatsApp for iOS and Android, not for emergency services
Location Sharing	iOS and Android
Text-to-911	iMessage & Google Messages
Mapping	iOS and Android

T-Mobile "new" coverage map

- Light-pink is satellite communication
  - Cutting off at ~60 degrees north in latitude



3GPP 5G satellite requirements

- Release 17 (2022) included requirements for NTN. Shall support:
  - Service continuity between terrestrial and satellite networks
  - Mobility across various access network types
  - **Low power IoT type of communication**
    - LTE-M and NB-IoT are rolled into general LTE support

- Additional IoT focus
  - Network can broadcast satellite parameters so devices understand coverage and timing for communication
  - Assumes GNSS capability in IoT devices for timing and location

https://www.3gpp.org/technologies/ntn-overview
https://www.5gamericas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/5G-Non-Terrestrial-Networks-2022-WP-Id.pdf

FCC gets involved (2023-2024)

- Approves regulatory framework for "Supplemental Coverage from Space" (March 2024)

- FCC attempting to fast-track new deployments
  - But also restricting them from interfering with existing stuff
  - Allocates some frequencies for SCS use, new ideas on a case-by-case basis

- Communication classes
  - Primary: existing "Mobile Satellite Services" like Globalstar and Iridium
  - Secondary: new SCS services
    - Must not disrupt existing MSS communications

https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-23-22A1_Rcd.pdf
https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-24-28A1.pdf
https://spacenews.com/taking-the-next-steps-for-satellite-to-smartphone-services/

Reality of satellite cellular coverage

- Low throughput communication per device
  - Needs to share bandwidth over a wide area
  - Path loss involved means reducing bitrate to keep acceptable error rate
- Targets rural areas without existing coverage
  - Somewhat mitigates need to share bandwidth
  - Some connectivity is better than none, right?
- User-focused applications: text, low-rate data, maybe voice
  - Specialized rather than general-purpose networking
  - Initial focus on emergency services makes sense

IoT and space coverage could be mutually beneficial

- Resulting non-terrestrial networks:
  - Global coverage (including remote regions)
  - Throughput too limited for primary human use
    - But is going to exist for backup use
    - Which means it might often go unused

- Pretty great scenario for IoT communication
  - Secondary quality-of-service (below emergency communications)
  - Infrequent data uplink of relatively small packets
  - Secondary monetary stream for service providers

Outline

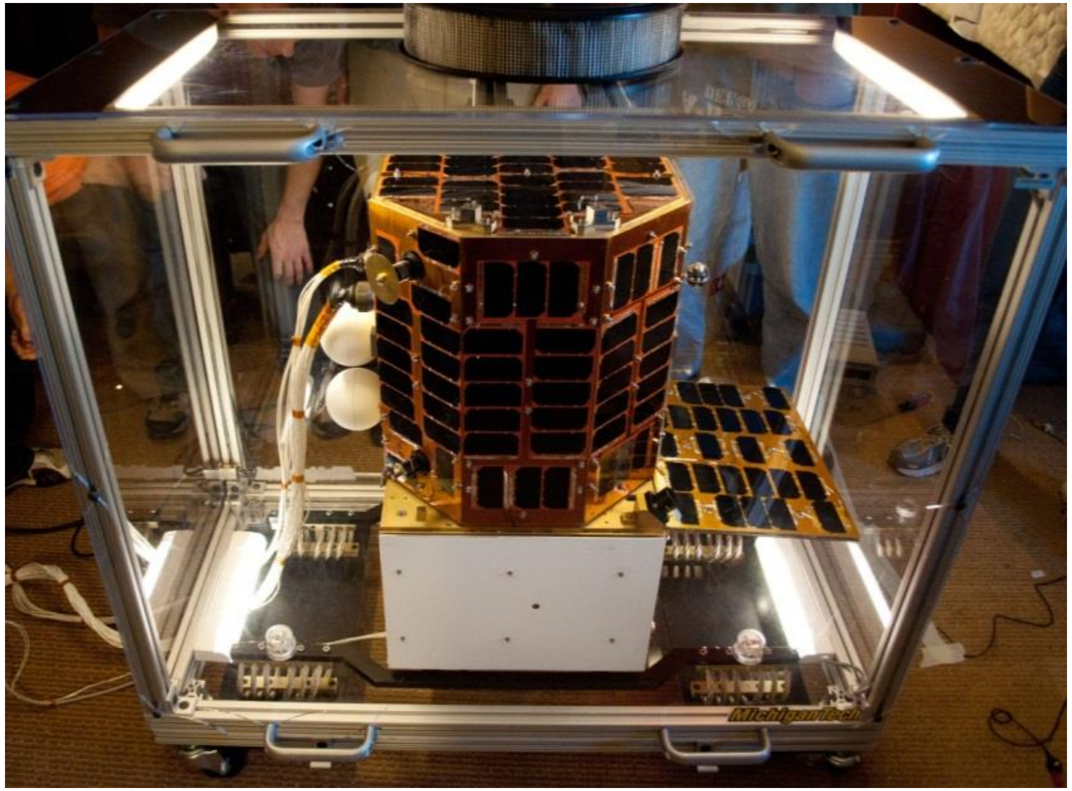
- Overview
- Satellite Communication
    - Voyager
- Satellite Communications Providers
- Cellular-to-Satellite Communication

Outline

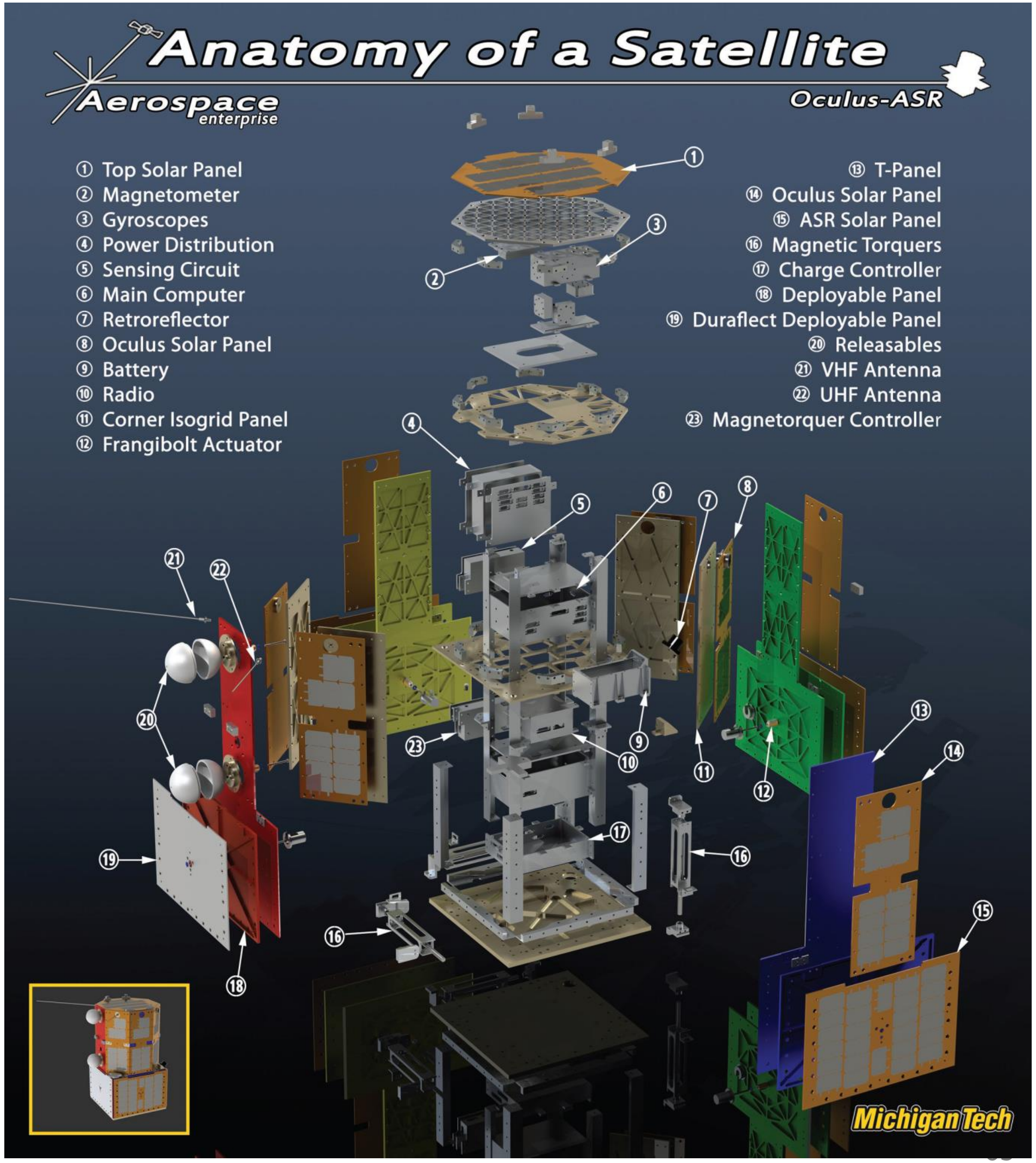
- Bonus: **Oculus-ASR**

Oculus-ASR

- Satellite I worked on from 2009-2013

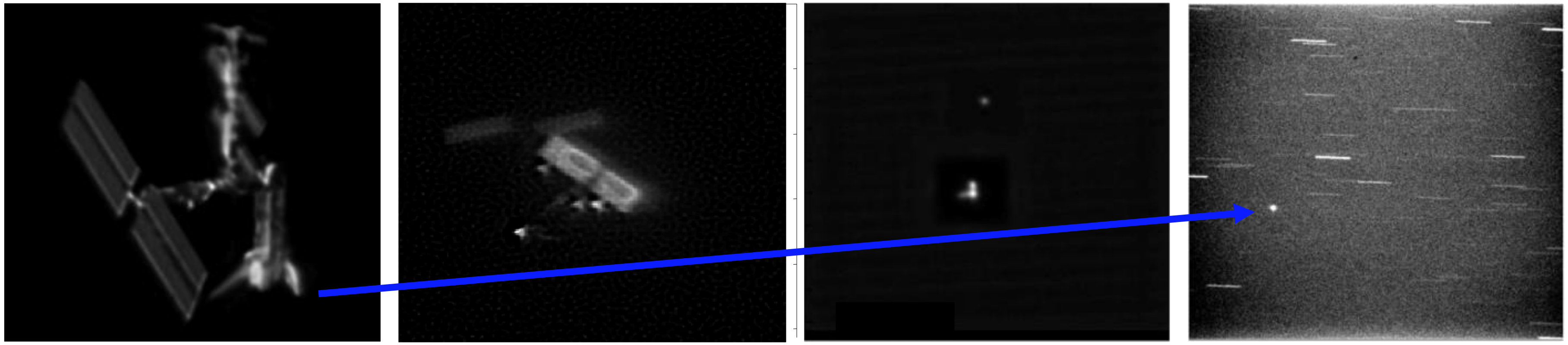


Michigan Tech
Michigan Technological University



Oculus-ASR mission

Can we determine a satellite's attitude and detect shape changes from the ground using only information gained from unresolved optical images?



- Goal: Space Situational Awareness calibration
    - In coordination with Air Force Research Lab (AFRL) and Air Force Maui Optical and Supercomputing Observatory (AMOS)

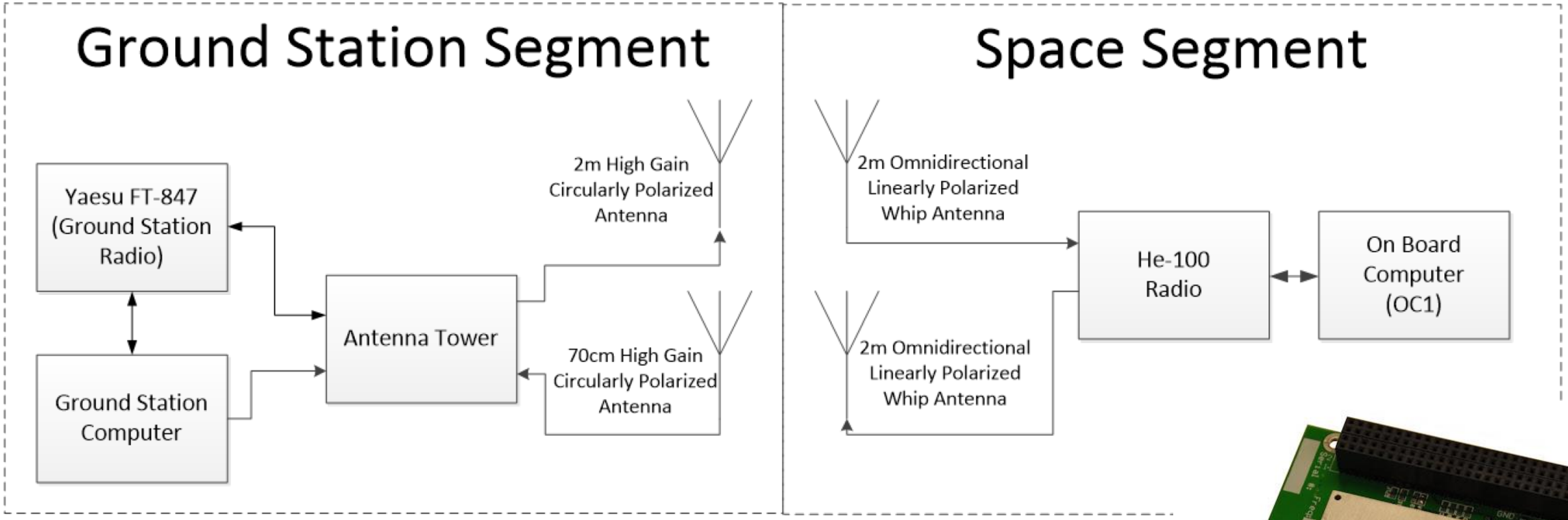
Winner of Nanosat-6: 2011

- Winner gets funding to complete satellite plus a launch to space!

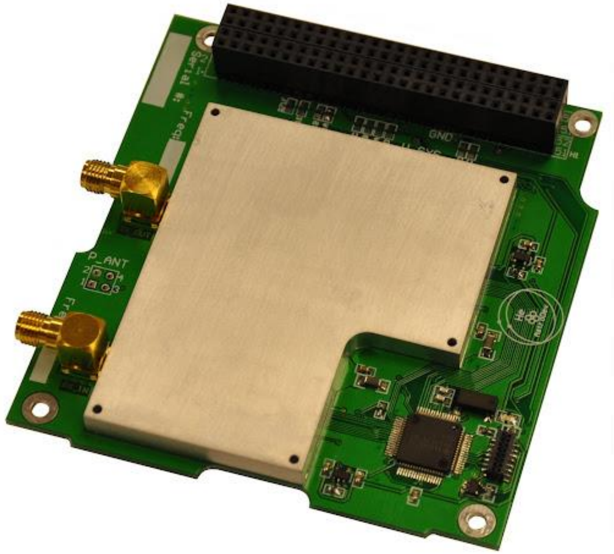
Launched in 2019

- STP-2 mission
    - Second Falcon Heavy launch

Oculus communication design



- 440 MHz downlink and 145 MHz uplink
  - Amateur bands, coordinated with IARU and AMSAT
- 9600 bps GMSK modulation (type of FSK)
- Beacons data every 30 seconds



Oculus link budget

- Transmit power: 34 dBm (3 W)
- Path loss: 151 dB (at ~600 km)
- Receiver antenna gain: 14 dB

- Received power: -103 dB

Oculus packet data

- 108 byte beacon packets

RESPONSE PACKET STRUCTURE

	Header					
Byte Index	0	1	2	3	4-7	8-EOP
Field Name	Sync	Opcode	Payload Length	Response Type	CRC	Payload

PAYLOAD STRUCTURE

Byte Index	8-17	18-21	22-25	26	27	28-31
Field Name	Satellite Name	Uptime	Current Time	Current Mode	Current Profile	State of Charge

Byte Index	32-37	38-108
Field Name	Deployables State	Attitude Data

FIELDS

Satellite Name	The name of the Satellite in a character string (ASCII).
Uptime	The amount of time that has elapsed since the satellite was last booted.
Current Time	The current time reported by the satellite's main computer.
Current Mode	The satellite's current mode of operation.
Current Profile	The satellite's current attitude profile.
State of Charge	The satellite's current state of charge.
Deployables State	The current state of the satellite's deployables, one byte each.
Attitude Data	The satellite's current attitude data structure.

Source: Command document I wrote as a junior undergraduate