

WORT – 26 August 2016

Launch of two Intelsat satellites

Stephen Spengler: “I am confident!”

“It was a beautiful launch!” The night was short for the boss of Intelsat, whose headquarters are in Luxembourg. On Thursday afternoon in Europe, the day was only starting in Kourou, when Stephen Spengler shared, over the phone, his impressions on the launch of their two satellites and the challenges for Intelsat EpicNG.

Why was it so important to launch two satellites on the same rocket?

We always want to see what we build up in space as soon as possible! In this case, the two satellites (ordered to Boeing and SSL) were ready at the same time: a small satellite and a big satellite as Ariane launches them. Arianespace is very reliable. Actually, that’s not the first time that this happens.

This is the second of your high throughput EpicNG constellation. How many will there be? In 2012, you were talking about two.

We will see how things evolve. We currently have 7 satellites planned. Six are launched or in construction. The one that was launched in January is in operation. Intelsat 33 will enter service in the last quarter. Four more are being manufactured. The seventh is in design. We will then see how to innovate and bring further performance to the fleet.

How would you explain in a simple way the specificity of your constellation? Why do you think it is the best?

Intelsat is the first to have global coverage today, across 200 countries. Our platform enables to increase performance to our customers, deliver data more quickly, and at a lower cost. Our third objective is to simplify access on the ground. This enables our customers to install smaller antennas, this is easier and it is simpler to maintain. This is an important element. The network was designed for a large number of various applications. This opens new opportunities in many areas such as IoT or connected cars for example. Four billion people that are not connected will be able to get connected.

You didn’t mention that you are the only one on the market that offers three spectrums, C-, Ka-, Ku-band, which often correspond to different specific uses. Is this not a determining added value for you?

The architecture of our payload is digital. This is quite unique, as they are usually analogue. The advantage is that the payload enables an instant connection between the three spectrums. We wanted to be able to use as many spectrum as possible. For example, we have customers in Africa or in Latin America that use C-band for their mobile network. If they want to extend their services to larger areas, they will be able to switch to Ku-band, while keeping their existing architecture. This gives a lot of flexibility to grow. Governmental customers have other needs and are also very interested in the possibility to switch from one to another.

You took the risk to launch two satellites at the same time, while choosing a reliable launcher, Ariane. What do you think of new actors?

As all operators, we try to use various launchers. This is important for innovation, competition and to get prices lower. We work with Ariane but also with Proton or SpaceX. They have done a great job in terms of innovation! They also showed that this was realistic. This is very impressive. We used Proton last year, Ariane this year and we will use Space X early next year. This is very important for us to keep our launch schedule.

These new players show that they can do as well, much cheaper, whether that is Space X or lastly the Chinese...

That's the market! There is innovation. Competition. Whatever your activity in the satellite industry is, you must keep on innovating to stay competitive and bring added value to your customers. You mentioned Space X, but Ariane 6 is also coming on the market, Proton's boss is developing a new rocket. This is true, there are also Chinese and Japanese players. There are many new players. The most important for us is to be sure that the rocket will put our satellites into orbit, at an acceptable price and according to the agreed calendar.

Amongst new players, you invested into OneWeb, Greg Wyler's constellation of 70 satellites that should bring internet access across the planet from 2019. Why?

That's exciting! We invested 25 million dollars to develop a partnership with them. It's exactly the same as with the launchers. OneWeb is a great way to push innovation in the creation of a constellation, to touch the market on the ground. Intelsat wants to be involved in all these developments, as well as innovate ourselves! This complements our technologies, our networks. It is possible, for example, to reach the polar regions, which is very difficult today. With them, we develop an interoperable terminal for mobile or fixed applications. Users will be able to access the OneWeb network or the Intelsat network, depending on what is more appropriate for their business, according to geographical regions or applications.

This is a difficult time for the industry, stuck between investments and returns on investment still too low...

I am optimistic. There is no doubt that the industry is going through a transition. At the same time, I've never seen a time with more opportunities for satellite development than today. Satellite will play a more and more important role. Not against fibre or wireless, but in complement to these technologies. We have a large customer base, media, telecoms, governments. We must have solutions that meet their needs. Our investments are on 15 years. That's why the launch of this new generation of satellites is so important for us.