# **Adaptive Coding and Modulation for Phase 4 Ground**

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**An Introduction to Coding and Modulation**

In analog wireless communications, continuously varying signals are sent from transmitter to receiver. Voice, for example, is directly encoded in an analog transmission by a proportional relationship between baseband and carrier. The changes in audio that make speech intelligible to the ear are proportional to changes in either the frequency (FM), amplitude (AM), or phase (PM) of a transmitted carrier signal.

In digital wireless communications, data such as voice is represented by the digital symbols 1 and 0. Coding is the process of removing unnecessary redundancy in a signal and adding the right type of redundancy. Removing unnecessary redundancy is compression. Adding useful redundancy is channel coding. The type of channel coding we’re most interested in is forward error correction coding. This is a way of coding the data where we can recover corrupted parts of the signal.   
  
When we talk about **code rate**, we are talking about the ratio of how many bits go in to the forward error correction coder, or **encoder**, over how many go out. A rate 2/3 code takes in two bits and produces three. The extra bit is produced with mathematics especially designed to make the signal more durable as it travels from transmitter to receiver. The more bits you add, the smaller the ratio. Rates up to 1/9 are common. For a rate 1/9 code, for every bit that goes into the encoder, nine come out. As you’d expect, the more coding, the more durable the transmitted bits are against noise and interference. However, there’s a cost. If you compare two signals that are transmitted at the same rate, the one with more extra bits to protect it needs more time to get through. The data rate is lower. It takes longer to transmit the same amount of data.

After the data is channel coded, the resulting bits are transmitted. The simplest type of digital waveform has two distinct states. One state corresponds to a 1, and the other state corresponds to a 0. Each of these ready-to-transmit-values is called a **symbol**. When we send one bit at a time, we have two symbols to choose from. An example of this type of modulation is Binary Phase Shift Keying (BPSK). The **modulation order** is the number of symbols we have to choose from. For BPSK it’s two.

This simple BPSK modulation scheme can be dramatically improved. Sending one bit at a time is a great start, but we can do a lot better. If we use four distinct states in our transmitted waveform, then we can send binary data two bits at a time. We now have four symbols instead of two. An example of this type of modulation is Quadrature Phase Shift Keying (QPSK). The modulation order has doubled to four.

How about 8? 16? 32? Yes, to all, and more, all the way up to 256, 512, and even 1024! Sending 1024 bits in a single sample sounds amazing. So, why don’t we just send 1024 bits in a single sample all the time?

Engineering is all about trade-offs, and there’s another one right here in front of us. The higher the modulation order the more power required. This means that the signal carrier power for transmitting two bits at a time must be twice that of transmitting one bit at a time, assuming that we are transmitting at the same **symbol rate**. We pay for the doubling in information capacity by having to provide double the power. As long as you have enough power, you can use more powerful modulations. If you have too much noise or not enough power, then you have to drop down to a lower modulation order.

**Coding and Modulation Techniques in DVB**

Traditional communications design assigns a fixed **mod**ulation and forward error correction **cod**ing (MODCOD) to a link. The MODCOD is selected to provide reliable communications under worst case conditions. For example, a microwave link that points down off a mountain is often designed to be good enough to work through rain fade and summer foliage. During clear conditions in the fall with no leaves, plenty of excess link margin is available, but a fixed system designed to work through summer thunderstorms cannot take advantage of this margin. In the Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB) world, this technique is called Constant Coding and Modulation (CCM). Phase 4 Ground uses many DVB protocols and techniques due to their high quality and widespread use in industry. Adapting these protocols to amateur radio is part of our mission.

Since it makes sense to adjust our link to better match observed conditions, one can design a system that uses a variety of MODCODs. An operator can then observe the link and then adjust the MODCOD to take advantage of better conditions. This technique is called Variable Coding and Modulation (VCM). VCM requires intervention of some sort to accomplish. In general, there is no feedback path from the receiver to the transmitter and a human is involved. But what if there was a feedback path from the receiver to the transmitter?

Adaptive Coding and Modulation (ACM) is a technique where the modulation and forward error correction are automatically changed in response to link conditions. As the link improves, higher order modulations and less coding allows increased throughput. Throughput can increase to take better advantage of available link margin. Challenging link conditions are responded to by lower order modulation and more coding. The throughput will decrease, but the link is maintained. The adaptation is enabled by establishing the set of MODCODs to be used, listing the metrics that control the decision to change MODCODs, and defining the algorithm that produces the decision. These three ingredients make up ACM.

With a CCM systems, severe fades can cause total loss of the link and zero throughput. VCM can address some of the challenges of severe fades, but ACM automatically turns fade margin directly into capacity. Maximizing throughput is highest with ACM.

**Adaptive Coding and Modulation in Phase 4 Ground**

The central challenge to an amateur-radio-centric version of ACM is that all existing implementations of ACM are proprietary. ACM is very common in terrestrial and satellite commercial links. When you are making money with subscribers, leaving margin on the table is not ideal. More efficient links mean more capacity, and more capacity means more subscribers, and more subscribers means more profit.   
  
Most commercial ACM links generally only connect amongst themselves. There is no reason to create and maintain an open standard. Therefore, outside of the limited advice given in the implementation guidelines for DVB and a few white papers from a few companies, there is no open standard for ACM that we can simply adopt. For Phase 4 Ground we have to develop our own implementation of ACM, document it fully, and adjust it as we learn more in the field.

This is a great opportunity for amateur radio. Documenting the engineering trade-offs made in an advanced digital wireless system provides enormous educational opportunity for a wide variety of people, from interested amateurs to engineering students to satellite startups to people interested in machine learning and cognitive radio. Providing a working open-source implementation of ACM that other projects can consider for adoption is a valuable engineering service.

The particular radio problem that has to be solved for Phase 4B Payload is relatively straightforward. The geostationary radio environment is well-characterized. The available modulation schemes and coding rates are drawn from an established set described in the DVB standards (freely available from https://www.dvb.org). Advice from commercial and academic sources exist.

The particular radio problem that has to be solved for terrestrial Groundsats is also relatively straightforward. Groundsats are terrestrial versions of space-based payloads. They provide all the functions of an orbiting platform, but are on the ground. The control loop for terrestrial ACM has to respond faster than for space. This is still well-characterized and advice exists from commercial and academic sources.

DVB allows an extreme resolution of MODCODs. Each and every frame can have a different MODCOD. This enables a link to respond very rapidly. For payloads in space, rapidly changing links are not the norm. The primary challenge is weather and rain fade or dishes not quite pointed right. For terrestrial links, changes in link quality can be more rapid, especially if the station is mobile. Terrestrial links have multipath, obstacles, noise, signal interference, and can also have rain fade and pointing problems.