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

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Phase 4 Ground provides digital radio solutions for any payload that complies with the Phase 4 Ground Air Interface document. These projects currently include but are not limited to Phase 4B Payload, Cube Quest Challenge (CQC), Phase 3E, and terrestrial Groundsats.

**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 used in landline modems, 802.11, terrestrial microwave communications, and satellite 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 space payloads is relatively straightforward. The geostationary and lunar and beyond radio environments are 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 be able 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.

There is a simple equation for ACM. In DVB, and for ACM in particular, the symbol rate is fixed. This greatly simplifies the communications system design. After a symbol rate is determined, a set of MODCODs is selected. The bit rate expression is therefore

Bit rate = symbol rate \* modulation order \* code rate

There are a lot of MODCODs to choose from in DVB. For space projects, the DVB-S family is the standard to reference. For terrestrial, we look to DVB-T. S stands for Space, and T stands for Terrestrial (think “television”).

Phase 4 Ground uses DVB-S2X and DVB-T2. The 2 in DVB-S2X and DVB-T2 stands for second generation. Second generation DVB-T2 and DVB-S2 is backwards compatible (with some effort) to the first generation DVB-S and DVB-T. Second generation standards provide substantial improvements over first generation.

DVB-S2X is an extension to DVB-S2 that provides additional MODCODS and some additional mechanisms. Of compelling interest to us is the additional MODCODs at the lower end of the spectrum that provide enhanced very low signal to noise (VL-SNR) operation. For CQC, VL-SNR operation will provide needed support. For Phase 4B Payload, VL-SNR allows for reasonably sized dishes and opens up the possibility of patch arrays.

Here’s the current MODCODs, metrics, and algorithm for ACM for Phase 4 Ground. This is the design going into prototyping and testing. The expectation is that it will be reviewed, refined, and retuned to maximize bitrate.

And that leads us to a very important distinction between analog and digital systems and guidance for best operating practices as set out in part 97.

In analog communications in amateur radio, there is a principle of conservation of power. The least amount of power should be used to ensure reliable communications in normal operations.

Part 97 : Sec. 97.313 Transmitter power standards

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| (a) An amateur station must use the minimum transmitter power necessary to carry out the desired communications. |

Obviously, emergencies may require a different practice. In digital communications, the spirit of this guidance is best achieved with maximizing the bit rate, or throughput. Maximum bit rate ensures that the communications are achieved in the most efficient manner by providing maximum capacity. If this means transmitting at a higher power than is necessary to simply maintain a communications link, then so be it. It’s better to transmit for 450 milliseconds and then almost immediately allow someone else to then use the channel than to transmit for 450 seconds on minimum power using maximum coding and the lowest modulation scheme before relinquishing that particular channel. We equate bit rate with power and assert that this complies with the spirit of part 97.

In order to get to maximum bit rate, though, the professional advice is to start out with a stable link. Here’s an example from Work Microwave’s website.

Start conservatively, approach the optimum: When setting up a link it is wise to start with very conservative settings to have a stable link running in the first place. Even if the “first shot” has not the desired bandwidth efficiency, an incremental approach will be the best way to optimize the link once it is up and stable. Due to numerous parameters and conditions affecting the Es/N0, the best settings will be reached by trial and error and can hardly be predicted beforehand.  
  
"ACM Dos and Don’ts." Work Microwave, 13 Mar. 2016, https://work-microwave.com/acm-dos-donts/

The Es/N0 value is a big clue. It’s a critical metric for ACM. It stands for energy per symbol divided by the noise power spectral density. We already know what symbols are. A symbol is the distinct states of the modulator. The simplest one transmits 0 and 1. Two symbols are able to be transmitted so the modulation order is 2. Next most complex is 00, 01, 11, and 10. Four symbols are able to be transmitted so the modulation order is four. Next most complex is 000, 001, 010, 011, 100, 101, 110, 111. Eight symbols are available to be transmitted so the modulation order is eight. An example of this type of modulation scheme is 8PSK.   
  
Es/N0 is commonly used in the analysis of digital modulation schemes, but we’re going to dig deeper and look at at a quantity called Eb/N0. This is the energy per bit divided by the noise power spectral density. Eb/N0 is the normalized signal to noise ratio of our link and this value is what drives the adaptation in ACM. Think of Eb/N0 as the SNR per bit. The energy per symbol and the energy per bit are related by the following expression.

Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* Log2(modulation order)

So for the modulations that we listed above, we have the following relationships.

Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* Log2(2) *two symbols to choose from*

Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* Log2(4) *four symbols to choose from*

Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* Log2(8) *eight symbols to choose from*

This gives us

For modulation order 2: Es/N0 = Eb/N0

The energy required to transmit a symbol of 0 or 1 is the same as required to transmit 0 or 1 bits. Makes sense!

For modulation order 4: Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* 2

The energy required to transmit a symbol of 00, 01, 10, or 11 is twice as much as required to transmit a 0 or 1. Still makes sense.

For modulation order 8: Es/N0 = Eb/N0 \* 3

It takes one third the amount of energy to transmit a one of the three bits involved in the symbols 000, 001, 010, 011, 100, 101, 110, 111. We are seeing the pattern.

In ACM, we have to be able to decide when we can afford to move on up to the higher order modulation schemes, which allows us to transmit more bits at once. If all the power we have available to us amounts to about as much power as required to transmit one bit, then we are stuck transmitting one bit at a time in BPSK. If our metrics tell us that we have more than three times the power required for a single bit available to us, then we can transmit a symbol that stands for three bits at once. We can go with 8PSK.

Within the modulation schemes are sets of coding rates. We’ve seen how spending power can increase the bit rate. How does coding fit in?

For ACM to work, the modulator must send identify which MODCOD is being used at the start of each functional block. Whether this is called a packet or a frame doesn’t matter as long as the receiver can figure it out. The receiver must be able to handle an arbitrary change in MODCOD without any advance knowledge. The receiver must be able to work fast enough to process the packet or frame without corrupting or dropping it. This puts a lot of pressure on the receiver. This pressure can be alleviated in several ways. One example is using standardized mechanisms in DVB such as time slicing. See Wally Ritchie’s paper “Using DVB-S2X and Annex M to implement low-cost Phase 4B Earth Station Terminals” for details on time slicing.

Another requirement is that the receiver needs to be able to measure or calculate an estimate of the link quality and then communicate this estimate to the payload. The payload must be able to process this reported metric and then adapt the data rate and change the MODCOD sent to the receiver. This maximizes the data rate, complies with the spirit of part 97, and is sparkling with efficiency and style.

Reacting to changes in channel quality makes sense. But can there be additional improvement? Yes, there can! There’s a large body of research that shows how throughput and bit error rate performance changes when using linear prediction to estimate the future state of the channel based on past measurements.

Is maximizing the bit rate enough? Not exactly. Another critical aspect of space communications through a geosynchronous satellite is latency. While ACM considered in the abstract doesn’t minimize or maximize latency, the use of DVB-S2X can offer some relief over DVB-S2. Latency will be one of the biggest challenges with the Phase 4B Payload. It is impossible to go faster than the speed of light, and the round-trip delay of at least 240mS is substantial.

Here’s the outline of ACM for Phase 4B Payload support in Phase 4 Ground radios. In building up an alphabet of MODCODs to use, we start from the advice given in the Work Microwave white paper. We start with the most stable link. This is the most coding and the lowest order modulation. For DVB-S2X, this is