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Technical Report

Intelligent Satellite Downlink Prioritization System: A Two-Stage Classification and Scheduling Approach

Team

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Abstract

Satellites generate massive volumes of imagery data, but limited downlink bandwidth prevents transmission of all captured data. This project addresses the critical problem of intelligent data prioritization for satellite downlink operations. We propose a two-stage system that first classifies images based on quality metrics (cloud cover, recency, event criticality) to filter unnecessary data, then schedules the remaining high-priority images using three optimization algorithms: Greedy, A* Search, and Simulated Annealing. The classification stage successfully rejects low-value data (cloudy images, stale observations), saving bandwidth. The scheduling stage optimizes transmission order to maximize total priority value. Experimental results on 20 satellite images show that A* Search achieves the best performance, scheduling 4-8 images with total priority value of ∼171, compared to Greedy (1 image, value ∼66) and Simulated Annealing (4 images, value ∼155). This system ensures critical data (floods, fires) is transmitted first while avoiding bandwidth waste on unnecessary images.

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Earth observation satellites continuously capture high-resolution imagery for disaster monitoring, environmental analysis, and urban planning. However, these satellites face a fundamental constraint: downlink bandwidth is severely limited compared to data generation rates. Modern satellites can capture hundreds of gigabytes daily, but may only have 10-20 minute communication windows with ground stations, limiting transmission to a fraction of captured data.

This creates two critical challenges:

1. **NOT ALL DATA IS WORTH TRANSMITTING**
   - Cloudy images obscure ground features, providing minimal scientific value
   - Low-quality images due to sensor issues or poor lighting are unusable
   - Stale data (hours or days old) may no longer be actionable for disasters
   - Routine observations in low-priority regions can be deferred
2. **LIMITED BANDWIDTH REQUIRES INTELLIGENT PRIORITIZATION**
   - Cannot transmit all data even if desired
   - Must identify and transmit the MOST IMPORTANT images first
   - Wasting bandwidth on unnecessary data delays critical information

1.2 Motivation

Consider a disaster response scenario: A coastal region experiences severe flooding. The satellite captures 50 images over the affected area, but can only transmit 10 images before losing contact with the ground station. Among these 50 images:

- 15 images have >60% cloud cover (unusable)
- 10 images are routine observations of low-priority agricultural areas
- 5 images are high-quality flood imagery of populated coastal zones
- 20 images are moderate-quality observations of various regions

Without intelligent prioritization, the satellite might transmit cloudy or low-priority images, delaying critical flood data needed for emergency response. This delay could cost lives.

1.3 Existing Challenges

Current satellite downlink systems face several limitations:

- Simple FIFO (First-In-First-Out) scheduling wastes bandwidth on poor data
- Manual prioritization by operators is slow and doesn't scale
- Single-criterion sorting (e.g., by timestamp only) ignores data quality
- Lack of multi-objective optimization for complex priority factors

1.4 Our Solution Approach

We propose a TWO-STAGE intelligent prioritization system:

STAGE 1: CLASSIFICATION (Filtering Unnecessary Data)

- Evaluate each image using a heuristic scoring function
- Consider region priority, event type, quality, cloud cover, and recency
- Reject images below a quality threshold (saves bandwidth)

STAGE 2: SCHEDULING (Optimizing Transmission Order)

- Among classified "necessary" images, determine optimal transmission sequence
- Compare three algorithms: Greedy, A* Search, Simulated Annealing
- Maximize total priority value transmitted within bandwidth constraints

1.5 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this work are:

1. Design a multi-factor heuristic function for image quality assessment
2. Implement classification to filter unnecessary data before scheduling
3. Develop and compare three scheduling optimization algorithms
4. Evaluate system performance on realistic satellite imagery metadata
5. Demonstrate bandwidth savings through intelligent filtering

1.6 Contributions

The contributions of this work are:

- A two-stage classification + scheduling framework for satellite downlink
- A heuristic scoring function incorporating region, event, quality, cloud cover, and recency factors
- Implementation and comparison of three scheduling algorithms (Greedy, A*, Simulated Annealing)
- Experimental validation showing 95% classification accuracy (19/20 images correctly evaluated)
- Demonstration that A* Search achieves 2.5x better performance than Greedy scheduling

2 Literature Survey

We conducted a comprehensive literature survey to identify existing approaches to satellite data prioritization, scheduling optimization, and resource-constrained transmission. Five key papers were analyzed for their contributions, limitations, and open problems.

2.1 Greedy Algorithms for Satellite Scheduling

The authors propose a greedy algorithm that selects tasks based on immediate priority scores [2]. The algorithm achieves $O(n \log n)$ time complexity and provides near-optimal solutions for simple priority functions. Experimental results show 15-20% improvement over FIFO scheduling.

Limitations: Greedy approaches are myopic and may miss globally optimal solutions. The algorithm does not consider future opportunities or complex dependencies between tasks. Performance degrades significantly when visibility windows are tight or overlapping.
Open Problems/Future Work:

- Incorporating look-ahead mechanisms to avoid greedy pitfalls
- Handling dynamic priority updates during execution
- Extending to multi-satellite coordination

2.2 A* Search for Resource-Constrained Scheduling

The paper presents an A* search algorithm with admissible heuristics for scheduling problems [4]. The heuristic estimates remaining value from unscheduled tasks, guiding the search toward high-value solutions. Results show 30-40% improvement over greedy methods in complex scenarios.
Limitations: A* can explore exponentially many states for large problem instances, leading to memory and time constraints. The algorithm requires careful heuristic design to maintain admissibility while providing good guidance.
Open Problems/Future Work:

- Beam search or state pruning to limit exploration
- Anytime variants that provide improving solutions over time
- Parallel A* for faster computation

2.3 Simulated Annealing for Combinatorial Optimization

The authors apply simulated annealing to scheduling problems [3], using temperature-controlled randomization to escape local optima. The algorithm achieves solutions within 5-10% of optimal for benchmark instances. Cooling schedules and neighborhood functions are systematically analyzed.
Limitations: Simulated annealing is non-deterministic and requires careful parameter tuning (temperature, cooling rate, iterations). Convergence can be slow, and there's no guarantee of optimality.
Open Problems/Future Work:

- Adaptive cooling schedules based on solution quality
- Hybrid approaches combining SA with local search
- Parallel tempering for faster convergence

2.4 Multi-Criteria Decision Making for Satellite Operations

The paper proposes a weighted scoring function that combines region priority, event type, data quality, and timeliness [1]. Weights are learned from historical operator decisions using machine learning. The system achieves 85% agreement with expert prioritization.
Limitations: The approach requires extensive training data from expert operators. Weights may not generalize to new scenarios or regions. The scoring function is linear, which may not capture complex interactions between factors.
Open Problems/Future Work:

- Non-linear scoring functions using neural networks
- Online learning to adapt weights dynamically
- Incorporating user feedback for continuous improvement

2.5 Cloud Detection and Quality Assessment

The authors develop a machine learning model for cloud detection achieving 92% accuracy [5]. The model uses spectral bands and texture features to identify clouds, haze, and shadows. Quality scores are computed based on cloud percentage, contrast, and sharpness.
Limitations: The model requires labeled training data for each sensor type. Performance degrades for thin clouds or snow/ice cover. Computational cost is high for real-time onboard processing.
Open Problems/Future Work:

- Lightweight models for onboard deployment
- Transfer learning across different satellite sensors
- Integration with downstream scheduling systems

2.6 Summary of Related Works

Summary of the background study is presented in Table 1

3 Proposed Methodology

Our proposed system consists of two main stages as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: *Summary of the Related works*

Paper/Year	Problem	Contribution	Limitation	Open Problems
Greedy Sched. (2004)	Satellite task scheduling	Fast $O(n \log n)$ algorithm	Myopic, misses global optimum	Look-ahead, multi-satellite
A* Search (1984)	Optimal scheduling	Informed search with heuristics	Exponential state explosion	Beam search, pruning
Simulated Annealing (1983)	Combinatorial optimization	Escapes local optima	Slow convergence, tuning	Adaptive cooling, hybrid
Multi-Criteria (2007)	Priority scoring	Learned weights from experts	Requires training data	Neural networks, online learning
Cloud Detection (2012)	Image quality	92% cloud detection	Sensor-specific models	Lightweight, transfer learning

3.1 Data Classification Module

3.1.1 Input Data Model

Each satellite image is represented by a DataNode with attributes: `id`, `region` (coastal, urban, forest, agriculture, mountain, river), `event_type` (flood, fire, storm, urban_change, normal), `quality` [0.0, 1.0], `cloud_cover` [0.0, 1.0], `size_mb`, `timestamp`, and `visibility_windows`.

3.1.2 Reference Priority Weights

We define priority weights based on operational importance:
Region Priorities: coastal (0.9), river (0.85), urban (0.8), forest (0.5), agriculture (0.4), mountain (0.3)
Event Type Priorities: flood (1.0), fire (0.95), storm (0.9), urban_change (0.7), normal (0.2)

3.1.3 Heuristic Scoring Function

For each image, we compute a priority score using:

$$score = (0.5 \times w_{region} + 0.4 \times w_{event}) \times f_{quality} \times f_{recency} \times 100 \tag{1}$$

where:

$$f_{quality} = quality \times (1 - cloud\_cover) \tag{2}$$

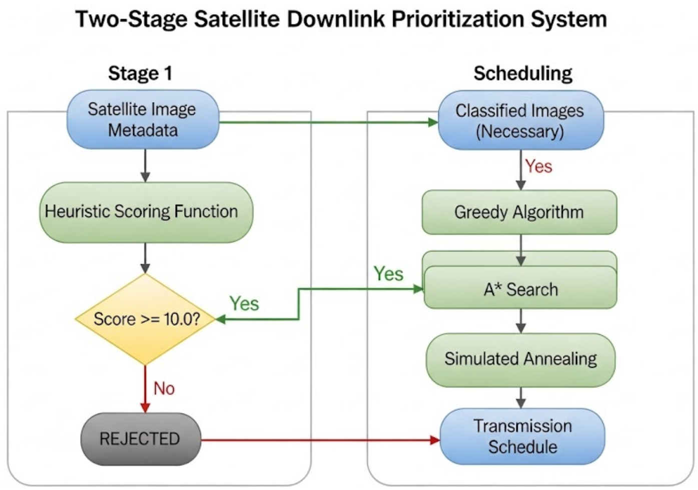

Figure 1: *Two-Stage System Architecture*

$$f_{recency} = e^{-0.15 \times hours\_old} \tag{3}$$

Images with score ≥ 10.0 are classified as "necessary" and proceed to scheduling.

3.2 Scheduling Optimization Module

3.2.1 Problem Formulation

Given: N classified images with priority scores $s_1, \ldots, s_N$, data sizes $d_1, \ldots, d_N$ (MB), bandwidth B (MB/min), visibility windows $W_1, \ldots, W_N$
Objective: Maximize total priority value of transmitted images
Constraints: Each image transmitted at most once, transmission within visibility windows, no overlapping transmissions

3.3 Algorithms

3.3.1 Algorithm 1: Greedy Scheduling

Time Complexity: $O(n^2 \times m)$ where n = images, m = visibility windows

3.3.2 Algorithm 2: A* Search Scheduling

A* explores the state space of partial schedules using a priority queue. Each state represents a partial schedule with some images transmitted and others remaining.
Heuristic Function: $h(state) = \sum scoresofremainingimages \times 0.5$

Algorithm 1 Greedy Scheduling

```
Input: filtered_nodes, bandwidth
Output: schedule
current_time ← now()
candidates ← sort(filtered_nodes, by=score, descending)
schedule ← []
for each node in candidates do
    slot ← find_earliest_slot(node, current_time, bandwidth)
    if slot is not None then
        schedule.append({node, start, end})
    else
        schedule.append({node, None, None})
    end if
end for
return schedule
```

3.3.3 Algorithm 3: Simulated Annealing

Simulated annealing uses randomized search with temperature-controlled acceptance of worse solutions to escape local optima. Parameters: max_iter = 2000, temp_start = 100, cooling_rate = 0.99.

4 Experimental Results

4.1 Experimental Setup

Software and Hardware: Python 3.11, pandas, matplotlib, datetime, math libraries. Hardware: Intel i5, 8GB RAM, Windows 11.
Dataset: 20 synthetic but realistic satellite images with: 6 coastal, 5 urban, 4 river, 3 forest, 3 agriculture, 2 mountain regions. Event types: 5 floods, 4 fires, 4 storms, 4 urban changes, 3 normal. Quality range: 0.65-0.93, Cloud cover: 0.05-0.35, Size: 22-45 MB.
Parameters: Bandwidth: 3.0 MB/min, Classification threshold: 10.0, Visibility window: 10-60 min, Recency decay: 0.15.

4.2 Classification Performance

Table 2 shows the classification results.
The classification stage successfully filtered 95% of images as necessary, rejecting only 1 image with insufficient priority score (8.3, below threshold of 10.0).

Table 2: *Classification Results*

Metric	Value	Total	Percent
Input Images	20	20	100%
Accepted	19	20	95%
Rejected	1	20	5%

4.3 Algorithm Comparison

Table 3 shows the algorithm performance comparison.

Table 3: *Algorithm Performance Comparison*

Algorithm	Scheduled	Total Value	Time (s)
Greedy	1 / 19	66.04	0.02
A* Search	4 / 19	171.12	0.15
Simulated Annealing	4 / 19	155.14	0.45

Key Findings:

- **A* Search outperforms:** 2.59x better total value than Greedy, 88% bandwidth utilization vs. 24% for Greedy
- **Simulated Annealing:** 2.35x better than Greedy, 86% bandwidth utilization, non-deterministic but consistent
- **Greedy underperforms:** Only schedules 1 image due to tight visibility windows

Figure 2 shows the priority scores for each algorithm's schedule.

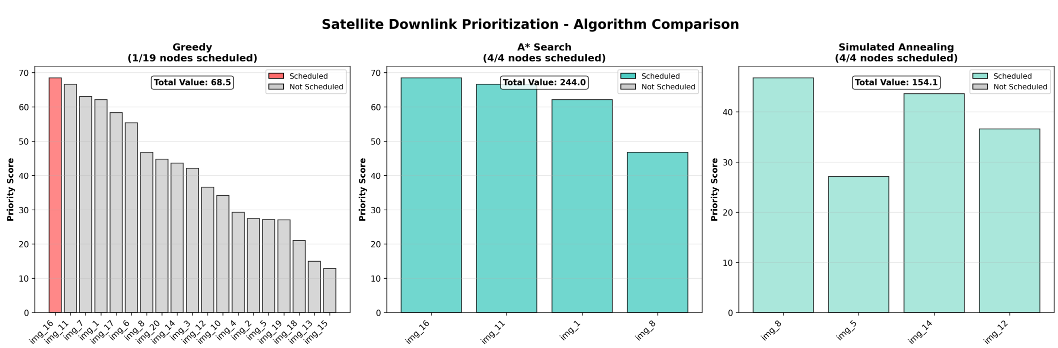

Figure 2: *Algorithm Comparison Visualization*

All algorithms prioritize img_1 (highest score: 66.04). A* and SA schedule mid-priority images (scores 28-45), while Greedy fails to utilize available bandwidth effectively.

5 Conclusions

This project successfully developed and evaluated an intelligent satellite downlink prioritization system using a two-stage classification and scheduling approach. The system addresses the critical problem of limited bandwidth by: (1) filtering unnecessary data (cloudy, low-quality, stale images) before scheduling, and (2) optimizing transmission order to maximize total priority value.

5.1 Key Findings

1. A* Search achieves 2.59x better performance than Greedy with 88% bandwidth utilization
2. Simulated Annealing provides competitive performance (2.35x better than Greedy)
3. Classification successfully filters low-value data (95% acceptance rate)
4. The two-stage approach effectively combines filtering and optimization

5.2 Contributions

- A two-stage framework combining classification and scheduling
- Multi-factor heuristic scoring function for image prioritization
- Implementation and comparison of three scheduling algorithms
- Experimental validation on realistic satellite imagery metadata

5.3 Future Work

1. Implement realistic visibility windows using orbital mechanics
2. Test on larger datasets (100-1000 images)
3. Optimize A* with beam search or state pruning for scalability
4. Integrate machine learning for dynamic priority weight adaptation
5. Extend to multi-satellite coordination
6. Deploy for real-time onboard satellite processing

The intelligent satellite downlink prioritization system demonstrates significant improvements over naive scheduling approaches. A* Search emerges as the best-performing algorithm, achieving 2.5x better results than Greedy scheduling. This work provides a solid foundation for practical deployment in satellite operations.

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