

TECH NEWS

Balloon hunt nets \$40,000 for MIT-led team

A team led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology spread the wealth far and wide to locate 10 red balloons in undisclosed locations across the country on Saturday and win a \$40,000 cash prize from the Pentagon's think tank.



— Ten balloons get a tryout during preparations for the weekend's DARPA Network Challenge. The MIT Red Balloon Challenge Team won Saturday's \$40,000 nationwide hunt, which the defense agency organized to mark the 40th anniversary of the Internet's birth as well as to study how social networking works. DARPA

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By Alan Boyle

A team led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology spread the wealth far and wide to locate 10 red balloons in undisclosed

locations across the country on Saturday and win a \$40,000 cash prize from the Pentagon's think tank.

The DARPA Network Challenge was designed to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the creation of ARPANet, the precursor to today's Internet, and to study how social networking could help solve big problems in a small amount of time.

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Each 8-foot-wide balloon was raised over a publicly viewable location only during daylight hours on Saturday. More than 4,000 teams registered to participate in the hunt, and hundreds of reports were received. Many of those reports were incorrect because networkers created elaborate spoofs to mislead competitors – or simply play their own brand of mind

game.

Less than two hours after the last of the balloons was taken down, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency announced that the MIT Red Balloon Challenge Team won the challenge by being the first to identify the locations of all 10 balloons.

DARPA said the balloons were raised in Atlanta; Charlottesville, Va.; Christiana, Del.; Katy, Texas; Memphis, Tenn.; Miami; Portland, Ore.; San Francisco and Santa Barbara, Calif.; and Scottsdale, Ariz.

“The challenge has captured the imagination of people around the world, is rich with scientific intrigue, and, we hope, is part of a growing 'renaissance of wonder' throughout the nation,” DARPA's director, Regina Dugan, said in [Saturday's announcement](#) revealing the winner.

“DARPA salutes the MIT team for successfully completing this complex task less than nine hours after balloon launch.”

DARPA said it planned to meet with the leading teams in the competition to review the approaches they used to build networks, collect information and participate in the challenge. Two factors of particular interest for DARPA researchers were to see how competitors created a nationwide network on the fly, and how

they distinguished between trusted information and bum steers.

Many teams recruited participants by offering shares of the prize money for verified reports of the balloons' locations. Others declared that the \$40,000 would go to charity, in hopes that supporters of that charity would join the hunt. Still others sifted through information disseminated via the Web and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, hoping to find an edge.

The MIT team created a recursive schedule of payouts that capitalized on the depth of social networks. "The MIT Red Balloon Challenge Team is interested in studying information flow in social networks, so if we win, we're giving *all* the money away to the people who help us find the balloons!" the team said on its [Web site](#).

A formal online invitation system was created for recruiting volunteers. The participant who contributed the first confirmed sighting of a balloon was promised \$2,000. The participant who recruited that finder would get \$1,000. That person's recruiter would get \$500, and so on down the chain.

The result was an adaptation of the classic multilevel-marketing arrangement. Any money left over after the payouts to

volunteers would be donated to charity, the team said.

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