

So many new opportunities

From war zones to rainforest classrooms to the Antarctic, Starlink is connecting the people the internet left behind.

One side of the argument. This article deliberately presents only the case for, to stimulate debate. Its companion piece, “Is Starlink a Trojan horse?”, makes the case against. A balanced assessment, with full references, is set out in the investigation on which both are based.

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In 2023, a barge left Manaus carrying a hundred satellite dishes. It travelled up the Amazon, and then the dishes went on by small boat to schools so remote that they can only be reached by river or air. Some served Indigenous and *quilombola* communities, communities founded by people who escaped slavery. None of the schools had broadband before. More than 6,000 children were suddenly connected to the rest of the world.

That is what Starlink does. For decades, the internet followed the money: cables went where there were enough paying customers to justify digging trenches and building masts. Billions of people were left behind. Starlink doesn't dig trenches. It puts the internet in the sky and lets anyone, anywhere, look up.

A network built for everyone, everywhere

The scale of what SpaceX has built is hard to grasp. About 11,100 satellites circle the Earth at around 550 km, linked by more than 13,000 laser beams. More than 12 million customers in over 160 countries use it, from remote farms to fishing boats in the Pacific. Because the satellites are so close, the connection is fast enough for video calls, online classes and medical consultations at a distance.

And it keeps getting better. Each satellite is replaced after about five years, so the network is constantly renewed. The newest generation, launched on SpaceX's giant Starship rocket in September 2026, carries about ten times the capacity of the one before. No national telecoms company upgrades its network at that speed.

A lifeline in disaster

When disaster strikes, the first thing to fail is usually communication. Phone masts lose power, cables snap, and rescuers and families are left in the dark. Starlink can be set up quickly by anyone with a dish and a power supply.

- **Germany, 2021.** When floods devastated western Germany, 100 dishes were in place within 48 hours, half for rescuers and hospitals, half as public hotspots. Families could finally find out who was safe.
- **Tonga, 2022.** A volcanic eruption severed the island nation's only undersea cable, cutting off more than 100,000 people. Starlink dishes reconnected the government, schools and communities while the cable was repaired.

- **North Carolina, 2024.** Hurricane Helene knocked out nearly three-quarters of the state's mobile masts. SpaceX offered free service to people in affected areas, and its satellites began sending emergency alerts directly to ordinary phones on every network.

Now that lifeline is in people's pockets. Starlink's "direct-to-cell" satellites act as phone masts in space and work with ordinary, unmodified phones. About 650 of them serve around 7.4 million devices a month. In the United States, anyone with a compatible phone, on any network, can now text the emergency number 911 by satellite across half a million square miles with no mobile signal. In Ukraine, millions of phone users can send an "I'm safe" text even when the local network is down.

Classrooms without walls

In Kenya, Starlink has connected schools across 30 districts, reaching more than 32,000 students and about 1,000 teachers. An early study by the country's education ministry centre found that three-quarters of respondents now have dependable internet. About 70% of schools improved their access to digital learning materials, and teachers reported being better prepared to plan and teach. The study also found that many schools simply need more devices, a reminder that connectivity is only the first step. But it is the step that was missing.

The same story is repeated from the Amazon to the Arctic. At McMurdo Station in Antarctica, scientists began using Starlink in 2022 to ease the pressure on their limited links and send their research home. The internet has reached all seven continents.

Keeping the economy running

Connectivity is not a luxury; it is how people work and earn. In Ukraine, where Russian missiles regularly knock out the power grid, Starlink dishes in office buildings and business centres keep companies online through the blackouts. That matters: Ukraine's technology sector exports nearly \$7 billion of services a year, much of it to clients who expect them to be available whatever the war throws at them. On the mobile side, more than 5 million Ukrainians had connected to satellite texting through the operator Kyivstar by March 2026, sending more than 7 million messages by satellite.

The same logic applies to any small business in a place the cables never reached: a guesthouse in the mountains, a clinic on an island, a cooperative selling crops directly to buyers in the city. For them, a fast connection is the difference between being part of the modern economy and being shut out of it.

Safer at sea and in the air

For most of history, a ship at sea or an aircraft over the ocean was cut off. Today Starlink brings broadband to ships and airliners, and major airlines, including American Airlines, are installing it. For crews who spend months at sea, it means calls home and help when they need it. For passengers, it means the end of the in-flight Wi-Fi joke. And for safety, it means ships and aircraft that stay connected wherever they are.

Defending a democracy

No one should be naive about Starlink's role in war, but no one should forget it either. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, its forces targeted cables, masts and power stations. Hours before the tanks

rolled, Russian hackers knocked out another satellite network. Starlink kept Ukraine talking. Within two days of a request from Kyiv, the service was switched on.

Since then it has kept soldiers in contact, hospitals and energy companies running, and civilians connected in “Points of Invincibility”, heated shelters set up during Russian attacks on the power grid. A Stanford study found that Starlink access significantly improved Ukraine’s ability to hold territory. When Russian forces began using smuggled dishes, SpaceX and Ukraine introduced an approved list in February 2026 and cut them off. Russian advances slowed noticeably.

When Russia tried to jam the signal, SpaceX beat it with a software update, impressing a Pentagon electronic-warfare chief who said the military needed “that ability” too. And when Iran shut down its internet during mass protests in January 2026, Starlink was free to anyone inside the country with a dish, so that Iranians could still tell the world what was happening.

Who really switches off the internet?

Critics warn that one company could switch Starlink off. It is worth remembering who usually switches the internet off: governments. When protests swept Iran in January 2026, the regime imposed a nationwide internet blackout, cutting off some 90 million people, and then jammed satellite signals, seized dishes and made using Starlink punishable by death. Russia has banned it. China has banned it. Regimes that fear their own citizens do not like a connection they cannot control.

For people living under such governments, Starlink is not a threat to their freedom but a way to protect it. A dish on a balcony can do what no diplomat or sanction can: let people speak to the world, and hear the world speak back. The power to keep someone connected, against the wishes of their own government, is new in history. On balance, it is a power for good.

Putting the rules to work

Critics worry about the power to switch Starlink off. But that power cuts both ways. In October 2025, SpaceX disabled more than 2,500 dishes being used at criminal “scam compounds” in Myanmar, where trafficked workers are forced to defraud people around the world. It has blocked service to Russian forces. A network that can be controlled can also be kept out of the wrong hands.

More choice, not less

Starlink has also shaken up a sleepy industry. Amazon is racing to build a rival network, and Europe is accelerating its own, IRIS². Competition is arriving because Starlink proved what was possible. Customers, and governments, will have more choice as a result, not less.

The next steps are already in view: satellites with ten times the capacity, phones that never lose signal, and perhaps one day computing in orbit, powered by the sun. Some of these ideas will prove too ambitious. But a decade ago, a network of 11,000 satellites serving 12 million people sounded impossible too.

Look up

The internet has transformed the lives of those lucky enough to have it. For the first time, the place you happen to live no longer decides whether you are part of that world. A child in the Amazon, a farmer in Kenya, a rescuer in a flood, a soldier in a trench, a protester in Tehran: all can look up and connect.

There are real questions to answer about who controls it. But the opportunity is enormous, and it is already here.

The case for the defence, in brief

- More than 12 million customers in over 160 countries, including places no cable reaches.
- Proven in disasters, from German floods to Pacific tsunamis and American hurricanes.
- Emergency texts by satellite from ordinary phones.
- Schools connected from Kenya to the Amazon.
- A lifeline for Ukraine, and a tool to cut off aggressors and criminals.
- Constant upgrades, and a spur to competition.