

Google's parent sends Internet balloons to reconnect Puerto Rico cell phones

25 October 2017, by Jessica Guynn, Usa Today

Google's parent company Alphabet has dispatched its stratospheric Project Loon balloons to deliver Internet service to remote areas of Puerto Rico where cellphone towers were knocked out by Hurricane Maria.

Two balloons from Project Loon are hovering over Puerto Rico, giving AT&T customers with phones that use its 4G LTE network the ability to send texts and emails and get limited access to the Web.

Project Loon, which is part of X, a secretive experimental lab within Alphabet, says several more balloons are on their way from Nevada and it has been cleared to send as many as 30 balloons to the hurricane-ravaged island. Each Loon [balloon](#) is able to provide Internet service to an area of roughly 5,000 square kilometers.

The technology is still experimental and has never before been deployed from scratch at such a rapid pace, according to Project Loon head Alastair Westgarth. Project Loon sent balloons to flood-ravaged Peru in May.

Project Loon beams the Internet from balloons circling the earth at altitudes twice as high as commercial aircraft, helping mobile operators extend wireless networks into more sparsely populated or remote terrains without running [fiber optic cable](#) or building cell towers.

The balloons are solar powered and have batteries on board but service at night is limited.

"This is the first time we have used our new machine learning powered algorithms to keep balloons clustered over Puerto Rico, so we're still learning how best to do this. As we get more familiar with the constantly shifting winds in this region, we hope to keep the balloons over areas where connectivity is needed for as long as possible," Westgarth said in a blog post.

AT&T says it has made progress in reconnecting service in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It says more than 60% of the population in Puerto Rico and 90% of the population in the U.S. Virgin Islands is connected again.

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APA citation: Google's parent sends Internet balloons to reconnect Puerto Rico cell phones (2017, October 25) retrieved 24 June 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-google-parent-internet-balloons-reconnect.html>

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