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OFF WORLDING AUTONOMY: PROVINCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE & ORBITAL SOVEREIGNTY IN THE FORD-STARLINK PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

Over 24 hours in early February, the leader of Canada's largest province rescinded and restored a \$100 million deal with the world's richest man. By June 2025, the prospective contract, which aimed to provide wireless internet service to isolated communities in Northern Ontario using Starlink satellites, was formally cancelled. These death blows, directly tied to American President Donald Trump's punitive tariffs on Canadian goods and services, were characterized by a highly mediatized political showdown between Elon Musk and Ontario Premier Doug Ford. However, the dramatized rhetoric of these politicians, coupled with sensationalizing press coverage, obscured a long history of provincial efforts to subvert federal authority through infrastructural policy and new modes of politics latent to the era of "crack-up capitalism" (Slobodian, 2023). In the shadow of an idealized neoliberal private-public partnership, this deal illustrated key features of an alliance between provincial authority and an increasingly post-planetary elite even in failure. Mobilizing discourses of connectivity and digital inclusion, the Ford-Starlink partnership shows how investment in non-terrestrial networks (NTNs) stands to enclose public resources and erode national sovereignty. Moreover, it illustrates that localized political power is adapting to a global technological hierarchy working to entrench its quasi-feudal privileges in orbit.

Significance

This paper presents the results of an ongoing research project exploring the negotiation and legitimation of the deal between Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Elon Musk's Starlink. Subject to a volatile political landscape, our analysis of the Ford-Starlink partnership is necessarily conjectural, but the deal provides an opportunity to consider the intersection of media, infrastructure, and capital accumulation in low-earth orbit amid

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an unprecedented attack on Canadian sovereignty. This project is uniquely suited to AOIR's 2025 theme, working at the ruptures of democratic governance and decolonial practice that the movement toward NTN infrastructure demands. While far from ubiquitous, NTNs pose profound challenges to national self-determination and infrastructural autonomy. Emerging alongside persistent efforts to send billionaires into space, the expansion of computational sovereignty off world redefines the limits of terrestrial capital accumulation (Bratton, 2015). Contingent on elite financing and constrained by historical access to space programmes, the evolution of broadband wireless infrastructure from terrestrial installations to constellations of interconnected satellites in low-earth orbit stands to further concentrate capital and control in the Global North. Though an acute problem for the Global South, the Canadian context offers an insightful example of how these trajectories converge to enclose national sovereignty through the promise of digital access and inclusion. Moreover, the failed Ford-Starlink partnership illustrates how provincial governance can potentially accommodate the technologically mediated hegemony with which this expansion off world coincides (Dean, 2025).

Widely promoted in November 2024, the Ford-Starlink partnership overcame scrutiny in the Canadian press by instrumentalizing ongoing campaigns to expand broadband access to Indigenous communities historically excluded from digital infrastructure. Announcing “high-speed satellite internet access to 15,000 eligible unserved and underserved homes and businesses, including in rural, remote and northern communities” alongside statements of support from Indigenous community leaders, provincial sources blended an ethos of civic inclusion with sustained demands for reparative economic development (Milton, 2024). Yet, even then, the province offered opaque justifications for the partnership's cost. With no publicly available accounting of the deal or record of its negotiation, outside observers were left with little sense of how the \$100 million investment would be allocated. Our provisional estimates suggest that equipment costs alone would have represented less than 15% of the deal.

Though the involvement of Musk drew attention, it was not until the incoming Trump administration threatened severe tariffs on Canadian goods that media demands for accountability exposed the rationale behind the deal. A statement by *The Globe and Mail* editorial board (2025) in mid-February cited unnamed provincial sources, confirming “that the majority of the cost of the deal is a payment to Starlink in exchange for it reserving capacity on its satellites” to ensure reliable access to Ontario customers over the deal's three-year duration, regardless of global demand. While Canada's paper of record called on Ford to permanently cancel the deal, *The Globe* did not question its neoliberal logic, affirming that “Starlink won the contract through a competitive bidding process” even as it recognized Starlink faces next to no competition in this market and that the deal obstructed efforts to develop parallel infrastructure through the Canadian owned firm TeleSat. This rupture reaffirms the necessity of our research.

Methods and theoretical framework

This paper presents our efforts to answer the following questions: how is the Ford-Starlink partnership situated within Canadian histories of provincial autonomy and Indigenous campaigns for political recognition and infrastructural inclusion? What can

the deal tell us about the relationship between local governance and technologically mediated transnational capital? When this project began, it was difficult to anticipate ONSAT's continued viability. Given Premier Ford's record of weathering public outcry and media condemnation, we thought it prudent to design our research methodology to anticipate continued media coverage as the deal was litigated. With the Ford-Starlink deal's cancellation, we had to adapt our methods. So rather than relying on corpus analysis of large journalistic datasets as originally intended, we fell back on assessing content produced by the provincial government. Scaffolding that approach, we drew from ATI or Access to Information research, using Canadian Freedom of Information legislation to broker access to the backend of the deal's cancellation (Walby & Larsen, 2011). Our research is supported by a robust theoretical framework, incorporating Indigenous studies of infrastructure and inclusion (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Duarte, 2017; Rosa, 2022), research on wireless media infrastructures (Easterling, 2014; Parks, 2018; Mukherjee, 2020) and critical theories of the evolution of neoliberal politics (Dean, 2023; Slobodian, 2023; Durand, 2024; Dean, 2025).

Contribution

From this perspective, we contextualize our findings within a unique Canadian history of provincial infrastructural autonomy, considering the failed Ford-Starlink partnership along the lines of past efforts to subvert federal oversight through the instrumentalization of existing demands for Indigenous inclusion. This three-way relationship echoes the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* (1975), in which the provincial government enclosed the terms of Indigenous participation in infrastructural development to assert claims of Quebecois sovereignty against federal governance (Sharp & Weizman, 2025). In the present, the terms of the Ford-Starlink partnership were indicative of a parallel effort to challenge federal authority, while using provincial infrastructure policy to curry favour within an entangling of state and corporate power structures. Though couched in the language of market competition, the deal represents the “encasement” of public funds within an under-regulated infrastructural monopoly (Slobodian, 2023). Using Musk's dominance in the provision of NTN infrastructure and evident sway inside the White House as its justification, the deal demonstrated how provincial authority was adjusting to a new calculus of political power that circumvents conventional models of national sovereignty. Pursuing this plan at the expense of autonomous infrastructure in low-earth orbit, the Ford-Starlink partnership paints a vivid picture of the political stakes embedded in NTN infrastructure, even in its disbandment. While the full contribution of this project is still developing, we conclude by sharing the outcome of our much delayed Access to Information request. Despite reports that Indigenous stakeholders were the focus of the deal, our request revealed that during the period of heightened scrutiny surrounding Trump's tariffs, Indigenous consultants and insurers Maawandoon and FSET received no communication about the deal's impending cancellation. While still developing, this project has benefitted from AOIR's extensive record of rigorous scholarly research and the 2025 conference's unique opportunity to cultivate critical alliances across the ruptures that divide the Global South and North.

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