

A quest to conquer space and die on Mars: an interview with Vlad Sitnikov, founder of StartRocket

Vlad Sitnikov is on a space mission. He wants to put satellites into low-orbit to broadcast corporate logos or emergency messages to the citizens of cities, across the globe, each dawn and dusk. But first he needs to find the money.

Who owns the skies? In Ancient Greece it was Zeus, the God of Sky and Weather. In Norse Mythology it was Tyr, the Sky God. In our age of engineering, could it be the Wright Brothers? Or has their invention been surpassed by military development.

Environmentalists want the skies to remain the preserve of winged creatures; but Vlad Sitnikov has other ideas.

Vlad, whose embracing handshake helps to disarm an imposing presence, wants to own the skies. Or, more specifically, he wants an army of satellites controlled by his company, StartRocket, to dominate metropolitan airspace the world over.

Vlad has a novel idea. He wants to use the skies above cities to broadcast corporate slogans and advertisements for a short period of time each dawn and

dusk. These satellites, or “headlights”, could spell a word or slogan “when turned on”.

The future or the present?

I told Vlad that, *alongside vertical farming*, this was the most futuristic concept I had come across. But he sees it differently. “For me, it is not so futuristic,” he says. “Because we can do it. We have assembled the first satellite.”

Assembling the satellite is one thing; however, sending it into low orbit is another. And this is where Vlad currently stands: attempting to convince investors that these satellites can be put into low orbit, be held in place, controlled from earth, and illuminate a readable message.

“We need money to do it,” he explains. The investors like the idea, but they’re unwilling to put up their own money. Vlad says that they often tell him to call national space agencies for funding, instead of private investors. “I think they are afraid of space,” he suggests. “It’s not an app, it’s not a new social network, it’s not AI. It is very ... far,” he says, gesturing to the sky.

But Vlad is a man with a plan. “I have a cashout from my English language school business next March. Maybe I will take my money and use it to send my satellite into low orbit, to prove it is real.”

The Orbital Display

Vlad first had the idea for “*The Orbital Display*” 6-7 years ago. This is the name he has given to the network of satellites that would stand at 400-500 km altitude. If successfully deployed, it could display corporate logos, entertainment messages, and emergency warnings.

The inspiration came from seeing US space startup RocketLab launch a *three-foot wide disco-ball*, smugly named the “Humanity Star”, into low-orbit. “It was amazing,” Vlad laughs. Before clarifying that the founders were “really crazy guys.”

The disco-ball got Vlad thinking: “How can I create a big billboard in the sky?”. He enlisted the help of family, friends, and academics – Vlad is a marketer, not a scientist – and the end-result is the orbital display. “The solution is satellites that use solar panels as reflectors.” Each satellite would be an individual pixel that would, alongside many other satellites, spell the desired word or phrase.

More advertising?

It is a controversial vision. One that triggers an immediate response. But Vlad, drawing on his marketing background, sees it differently. “It has a WOW factor,” he explains. “We can cover the whole city for six minutes. If you want to be a brand that is cutting edge, we are here.”

I start to protest in defence of the stars. What if people want to see them? The city is caught by private corporations and artificial light, let the night sky be free of distractions. “I have so many points on this,” Vlad responds. “We will only use the Orbital Display at dusk and dawn, not at nighttime. People will see the display when they go to and from work.”

“Also, the display will be turned on for only six minutes and is visible for only three because of the rotation of the earth. And we will only display them over cities, not natural reserves.”

These clarifications make the proposition less controversial. But controversy gets you an interview.

Reaching Mars

“I have many dreams,” Vlad intones. “One of those dreams is to die on Mars.” I ask Vlad what would happen to a dead body on Mars. Does it decompose? Is it buried? Vlad reminds me that there isn’t any oxygen on Mars, so cremation is out of the picture. “But it would be interesting,” he decides. I’m interested.

“The first travellers to Mars will have a one-way ticket,” Vlad comments. But he needs money to get there. Which is, I think, where StartRocket comes in. “If we can get the money, we can get the first satellite up. We would need £500K for one satellite. If we can do this we can prove our technology. We can prove that our idea is real.”

SpaceTech: a new frontier or a waste of resources?

SpaceTech is a trendy vertical that is not always taken seriously, often due to the talk around making humanity multiplanetary. And yet it is SpaceTech – or, more specifically, satellites – that allow us to predict the weather, use GPS, and access the internet.

The idea of using satellites for a less essential, more self-serving, reason can

strike the lay person as wasteful: cluttering the night sky by broadcasting unnecessary corporate slogans. But could it be a more innovative way to broadcast messages to a populace? If we can digitise the skies, could we re-naturalise Earth? If Vlad can raise the money, we may be able to find out.

Article by JAMIE WALKER