

Wi-Fi should fly high

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Airline travelers hardly can be blamed if they are reflexively hostile to the idea of in-flight, wireless Internet service becoming a feature of life in an airplane's cabin.

The specter of being trapped hours in a cramped seat next to a Web-based road warrior easily can be seen as just another high-altitude indignity — on a list that already includes delays and cancellations, aging equipment, lost luggage, thin staffing and balky computer reservation systems.

But at least two domestic carriers — Delta and American — have begun to offer Wi-Fi on an experimental basis. The airlines see the move both as a revenue generator (they charge \$10 for flights that are shorter than three hours) and an amenity to passengers who can't cope without continuous access to their e-mail accounts.

The Washington Post reports that the move has drawn skepticism from the Association of Flight Attendants, whose members worry that, inevitably, they will be asked to become laptop cops, adding another stressful component to a job that already has more than its share of burdens.

But managed well, airline Wi-Fi probably will be a boon to passengers and flight attendants alike, contributing to smoother air travel. Two rules would prevent most problems:

— No voice communications. The current prohibition of cell phone use should be extended to online counterparts, such as Skype and other forms of Internet-based calls. It's not about safety; it's about the potential for mutiny on a plane of yakkers.

— Mandatory headphones. Many passengers already are plugged into iPods or other digital media devices. They cause no problems, even in close quarters, and neither should YouTube watching, as long as headphones are in place.

Not every technological advance is a boon. Back in the 20th century, many airliners had "Airphones" attached to seat backs. They weren't used much (mainly because airtime was expensive), but they were used enough for everyone to realize the annoyance of someone on the phone in the seat next to you. Today, the annoyance starts when the plane lands and the guy next to you whips out his cell phone.

But laptop computers already are in wide use in air travel. And while streaming video hasn't been available, movie DVDs have been and have not been the source of problems. The common courtesy of

headphones goes a long way.

Wi-Fi could offer precious benefits to some:

Type-A business travelers could keep their blood pressure in check by tending to online routines, even getting ahead on e-mail correspondence. The less hard-charging folks on board also could be soothed with a wireless connections, preoccupying themselves with the Internet's seemingly endless offerings.

And everyone knows a preoccupied passenger is a happy, or at least docile, passenger — especially as a wait on the tarmac enters its third hour.

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