

Smartphones on aircraft – what access do we really want?

August 27 2014, by Michael Cowling



Watching video on your smartphone is fine during take off and landing - so long as your device is in flight mode. Credit: Flickr/colorblindPICASO, CC BY-NC

Australia is playing catch up by allowing plane passengers to keep their mobile phone switched on – albeit [in flight mode only](#) – during take off and landing.

But many have probably already done this. A [study in the United States](#) found almost a third of passengers admitted they "accidentally left" their portable electronic device switched on during a flight, and the majority of those devices were smartphones.

So do we really know what we're doing with this [mobile technology](#) anyway? And just how much connection to a phone network or the internet do passengers demand?

The answer in part could be generational and depends on how comfortable and competent you are with the technology in your hands.

Using technology in the information age

From the beginning of the 21st century, argument has been waged in academic circles about the digital capabilities of different individuals.

Back in 2001, innovator and technology expert [Marc Prensky](#) divided society into Digital Natives (those born after around 1985) and Digital Immigrants (those born before).

Since then the academic community has continued to argue about the competent use of technology by individuals, with Oxford University's David White coining the terms [Digital Visitor and Digital Resident](#).

Prensky himself refined his work from a generational aspect to one of [Digital Wisdom](#), and academics *ad infinitum* argue in particular about the [placement of different individuals](#) along the generational spectrum.

In 2006, the European Union recognised [digital competence](#) as one of the eight key competencies for lifelong learning.

Yet studies such as the [2014 Digital IQ Index](#) show a disturbing lack of digital competence among professionals. Perhaps airlines feel they are right to limit our technology use in certain situations?

Addicted to the internet

Despite this lack of competence, it's clear that a desire to remain connected exists. The current generation has no knowledge of a world that is [not connected](#), so it's no surprise that a [2013 Internet Trends report](#) suggested that "the average mobile consumer checks their device 150 times a day".

In a world such as this, with ubiquitous computing devices that provide the knowledge of the world in our pocket, is it any wonder that individuals want to continue to use their devices in the air, not being forced to "disconnect", even for the short period of take off and landing?

So, given this desire to remain connected, why don't airlines provide better connectivity options? Depending on the country you live in, the connectivity you can get on a plane actually varies considerably.

The [Economist reports](#) in 2013 that around half of the full service domestic flights in the US have Wi-Fi access through the airline. International flights are slowly incorporating satellite Wi-Fi for long-haul journeys, although "[pricing may vary](#)".

If you can connect to the internet then in theory you can connect with the world through emails, web browsing, instant messaging and even audio and video communication through Skype and other applications, bypassing the need for any [phone network](#) connection.

But the quality of Wi-Fi on flights remains a [common complaint for passengers](#), with high costs and slow speeds providing a sub-optimal experience.

In Australia in particular, the addition of Wi-Fi to flights has been ponderously slow, with Qantas [ditching its Wi-Fi trial](#) in 2012. Virgin Australia offers [in-flight entertainment system](#) over an in-plane "intranet", but no external Wi-Fi access to the internet.

This is despite a [Sydney Morning Herald poll](#) earlier this year identifying that 78% of passengers would trade in-flight service or bigger seats for a free Wi-Fi service.

An issue of control

So, if many American flights have Wi-Fi, and even Qantas and Virgin have both tried different variations on the service, then what's the hold up?

Well, perhaps the issue is one of control. A common theme among the offered Wi-Fi services overseas is that they are always offered by the airline, and usually at a substantial cost.

Interestingly, for domestic flights over land, what is offered is a Wi-Fi service that then connects to existing [mobile phone service towers](#) on the ground.

It should be possible to make a direct connection between cell phone towers and a mobile phone in the air, at least for domestic flights.

In fact, the technology has existed since at least 2004, [according to CNN](#), but hasn't yet appeared in planes. This is in direct contrast to other areas that are improving cell service on [public transport](#) or the ramping up of free Wi-Fi such as public malls, shopping centres, coffee shops and even [trains](#).

If Melbourne V/Line, Queensland Rail Rail and the Queen Street Mall, in Brisbane, can provide us with better mobile service and free Wi-Fi, then why can't the airlines?

Keeping plane passengers under wraps

Perhaps it's more that airlines don't trust our competency with the service. As [reported previously](#), about one in three people don't turn off their portable electronic devices on flights anyway.

The research suggests that our competency with [technology](#) is low, even if our desire is high. So maybe the airlines are afraid of what we will do if we are given access to our devices. Perhaps they think it will be like what happens when you do a conference call in real life.

Nevertheless, whether it's about control or about competency, it's clear that we are entering a connected world where many individuals expect to always be online.

In this world, the airlines have no choice to provide a service, at a reasonable price and with a reasonable speed, that satisfies our need to be connected – especially as their planes become full of [digital natives](#).

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Smartphones on aircraft – what access do we really want? (2014, August 27) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-smartphones-aircraft-access.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--