Internet on Planes Takes Flight

By Reg P. Wydeven
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This year our family had an outstanding Christmas, and I hope you and your families enjoyed happy holidays as well. It was definitely an electronic Christmas: our kids got Kindle Fires; my wife got an Android tablet; my sister got an iPad; my nephew got an iPad mini; and my niece got an iPhone.

My 8-year-old son downloaded NFL Pro 2013 on his Kindle. The graphics are so realistic that the game looks like an actual NFL contest. When I was 8, I got a handheld Mattel Electronic Football game. The game was slightly less realistic, as I controlled a bright red dot that represented my quarterback, who was chased by defenders, depicted as slightly dimmer red dots.

It was a good thing we didn't have all these electronic devices when we flew to Disney World last summer. Airline flights are one of the few remaining places on the planet where Internet access is still restricted. But that may be changing soon.

Last week, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission approved the application process for airlines to obtain broadband Internet licenses aboard their planes. Until now, permission for Internet use was only granted on an ad hoc basis.

Not only do airlines require the FCC's blessing to access satellites while in flight to enable passengers to access the Internet, they must also obtain the permission of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, which oversees the safety of in-flight Internet systems.

The use of electronic devices on flights is restricted because they can interfere with pilots' radio communications and navigational equipment. Therefore, the FAA requires that airlines test Internet systems and devices to prove they will not disrupt plane operations.

In August, the FAA conducted a study on the use of new devices such as e-readers, tablets and game consoles on flights, but the study did not include the use of cell phones. The study comes as a result of years of speculation that electronic devices are not as disruptive as first believed.

For example, while my kids can download books, games and apps on their Kindles from the Internet, they can also go offline and read those books or play those games. While disconnected from the Internet, their Kindles should pose little threat to the plane's functions. Under current rules, however, their e-readers must be turned off during takeoffs and landings.

Others suspect that airlines fear passengers complaining about being surrounded by people using electronic devices, like in restaurants, coffee shops and practically everywhere else on Earth.

FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski explains that, "Whether traveling for work or leisure, Americans increasingly expect broadband access everywhere they go." He also claims that the new rules will cut the time for the aircraft Internet application process in half. Early last month, Genachowski asked FAA acting administrator Michael P. Huerta to increase the use of electronic devices during flights.

Just in case, I'm hanging on to my Sony Walkman cassette player. Have a blessed and happy 2013.