

Less of the same.

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## Mobile phones on planes

### Would you fly in chattering class?

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### The use of mobile phones on planes moves another step closer

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LIKE it or not, the prospect of being able to use mobile phones on aeroplanes is inching ever closer. Last week Ryanair, a European low-cost carrier, announced that it would equip its entire fleet of Boeing 737s with small base stations, called picocells, provided by OnAir, a technology company backed by Airbus, Europe's aviation giant. The picocells will use satellite links to allow mobile phones to be used during flight without interfering with ground-based networks. (Such interference, rather than safety concerns, is the primary reason that in-flight use of mobile phones is banned at the moment.) Taking a cut of the resulting revenues will help Ryanair to keep its ticket prices down, according to Michael O'Leary, the firm's boss.

But it is uncertain just how popular, and hence how lucrative, in-flight calling will be. The technical obstacles have been overcome and regulatory approval is expected soon—at least in Europe. Regulators are expected to issue guidelines in the next few weeks defining which frequencies can be used and national aviation authorities will start certifying airlines' installations early next year. OnAir says it expects its technology to be approved in time for Air France to launch in-air calling on an Airbus A318 in the first quarter of 2007.

Mobile phones must still surmount social obstacles, however. Will people flock to airlines that offer in-flight calling, or avoid them? And how much will callers be prepared to pay? OnAir, its rival AeroMobile and other firms have conducted a series of surveys in an attempt to find out.

According to the latest survey, released by OnAir this week, 80% of airline passengers approve of the idea of being able to use telephones on aircraft, even if they do not plan to do so themselves. Indeed, only 54% of business travellers and 41% of leisure travellers said they would switch their phones on during a flight. One reason is cost: George Cooper, the boss of OnAir, says that at prices above \$3 per minute, "demand drops off considerably", according to the firm's research. He expects \$2.50 per minute to be the norm when services based on his firm's technology are launched by Air France, Ryanair, bmi and TAP Portugal. But OnAir will then cut its prices by 10% a year for five years, he says.

Previous surveys have painted a less rosy picture. One survey of young mobile-phone users, carried out last year by IDC and [SMS.ac](#), a mobile portal, found that 64% of young people favoured in-flight texting, and only

11% liked the idea of making calls. And 82% of respondents agreed with the statement "I don't want people talking on their phones during flights."

Another, more rigorous survey, carried out in America for the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, a flight attendants' union, found that 63% of those polled thought the ban on in-flight calling should be maintained. Concern over noisy passengers shouting into their phones, cited by 68% of people, topped the list of objections; only 2% worried that the use of phones might somehow help terrorists. (The AFA-CWA's objection to in-flight calling seems to be that it will make it harder for flight attendants to keep order.)

And when America's telecoms regulator, the Federal Communications Commission, requested public comments on in-flight calling, it received thousands of mostly negative responses. "Please no. No," read one response. "I object to this in the strongest terms. I can't believe you are even considering it." America's airlines seem to share this lack of enthusiasm for the idea. Both United and Delta say their customers do not want it.

But in-flight calling is coming to Asia. AeroMobile, a joint venture between Telenor, a Norwegian mobile operator, and ARINC, a technology firm, says it plans to launch in-air services with Qantas and a second, unnamed Asian airline. "We're exploiting the fact that any flights over the ocean do not require regulatory approval," says Peter Tuggey of AeroMobile.

So the availability of in-flight communications seems likely to vary widely. Offering such a service, or not offering it, could enable airlines to differentiate themselves on particular routes. They could also impose quiet periods or mobile-free cabins. On long-haul flights, texting and Wi-Fi access might prove more attractive than voice-calling, provided the price is right—though Boeing recently axed Connexion, its impressive but little used satellite-based in-flight broadband service.

In-flight calling may in fact prove best suited to short-haul, low-cost flights. After all, people choose Ryanair and other low-cost carriers because of their low prices—not because they enjoy the flight. So the prospect of other passengers shouting into their phones may not put people off. Quite the opposite, in fact, if it can help to subsidise low ticket prices.

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