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## Are Voice Calls Coming to Airplanes?

By [Robert McGarvey](#)

NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) — The clock is ticking down toward the close of the comment period on the year's most divisive issue in aviation, and that is because March 17 is the final day of the Federal [Communications](#) Commission's open period for commenting on comments on permitting voice calls on commercial jets.

In Washington D.C., the Hill has already made its opposition known.

In the House of Representatives, Bill Shuster's (R-Penn) Transportation and Infrastructure Committee passed in February, in a voice vote, a ban on voice calls on airplanes.

A similar bill - sponsored by Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif) and Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) -- is wending its way through the Senate.

The trigger for the hubbub? Back in November the FCC floated the idea of possibly allowing voice calls on planes - and that spurred an avalanche of loud protests.

Chugging down the same path at the FCC - although this is receiving applause, not boos - is a proposal to let airlines decide to allow passengers to access [cellular data](#) on planes in-flight (in other words: no more mandatory announcement to put handhelds into airplane mode). Isn't that dangerous? Although the ban on cellular usage was put into place for safety reasons, there is no widely accepted evidence to prove there are dangers. Pretty much nobody opposes this.

Pretty much everybody opposes voice calls, and it isn't danger that fuels the opposition. It's abhorrence at the prospect of sitting in a jammed coach row and being forced to listen to personal chitchat.

"If voice calls are allowed on planes, not only are we going to be distracted by our own phones, but the transatlantic break up call, complete with tears and sobbing, will be a reality," said relationship expert April Masini, who blogs at AskApril. "And anyone hoping to catch up on some sleep, may not be able to when the business calls from the person in the next seat - seats? - not only disrupt REM sleep, but induce hives when you realize you're not working, and perhaps could be or should be."

It's hard to find proponents for voice calls, but a tough question needs asking: are we overreacting to the annoyance factor of inflight voice calls? Just maybe.

Roslyn Layton, a Ph.D. Fellow at the Center for [Communication](#), Media and Information Technologies at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, thinks we are. Voice calls have been allowed on planes flying in Europe for some time, and, she reported on recent usage findings, "fewer than 2% of customers used voice services in flight, phone calls were less than two minutes long, and...the amount of voice calls is extremely low."

Parse that [data](#) and, obviously, people are making voice calls over Europe in emergencies and/or to deliver crisp, terse news ("Flight delayed, I'll be home at midnight"). What's the big deal?

Tune into a flashback of U.S. aviation history. A company called Airfone installed phones on many domestic planes a generation ago, with the first call on the service said to have been made on a Delta flight in the mid 1980s.

Usage was anemic, and rates were high. In 2006, about as the service neared its end life, charges were \$3.99 to connect and \$4.99 per minute, meaning a five minute call set you back \$24, and that is big [money](#) for a call made with zero privacy.

The one undisputed fact: the technology is available to deliver good quality voice calls today. Said Paul Guidon, chief technology officer at Global Eagle Entertainment, which provides content to airlines: "We could support videoconferencing calls on commercial jets if there was demand. It's already happening on executive jets."

Is it going to happen on commercial jets? Nope, said Guidon. "In the U.S. we value our cone of silence," he said.

In other words, politics and etiquette are conspiring to undo any momentum to get voice calls working on commercial planes - even if the technology is robust.

But maybe one other force is conspiring to undo voice - maybe as a nation we just are so over it.

Travel expert Joe Brancatelli, who blogs at JoeSentMe, said that there's no future for voice calls on planes - it is just not happening here - but, said Brancatelli, it doesn't matter, because many people would much rather text or send emails anyway and cellular data on planes is, according to him, "inevitable."

Maybe we just won't call inflight, because we just don't call anymore anyway.

Have an opinion, pro or con? Get to the FCC website and be heard.

--Written by Robert McGarvey for MainStreet

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