

Keeping in touch in transit

Wireless e-mail systems only offer limited coverage when you are on the road / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

ALBUQUERQUE - I AM writing this in a hotel room during an 18-hour rest stop on my family's 5,200-mile odyssey across the United States.

The journey started Dec. 2 on Martha's Vineyard and we've still got 1,500 miles to go before we reach Seattle on Christmas Eve.

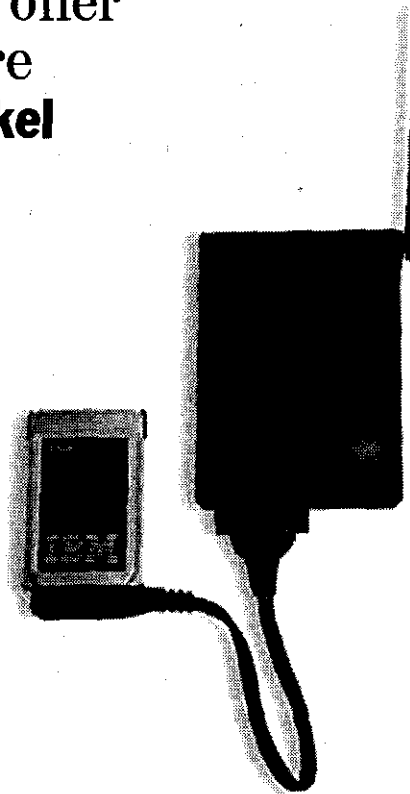
Keeping on the road but not out of touch has been one of the major goals for this sojourn. Although there's a cell phone in my Jeep Cherokee, roaming fees are 99 cents a minute throughout much of the country. So to cut costs I decided to try using RadioMail and WyndMail, two wireless systems that promise nationwide e-mail with no roaming fees.

Although RadioMail and WyndMail are arch competitors, I found them more similar than different. Both allow you to send and receive e-mail to the Internet, as well as send faxes or pages. Both systems offer varying service plans, from a low-cost monthly service that charges so much per message to a high-cost plan that gives you virtually unlimited e-mail. And both systems require you use their company's proprietary e-mail program, rather than one you might already be using.

Rather than build their own nationwide wireless networks,

both RadioMail and Wynd Communications base their systems on one of two existing wireless data networks. RadioMail works with both the ARDIS network, originally built by Motorola to help IBM representatives perform service calls in the field, and the RAM Mobile Data network, a younger system with somewhat less coverage. WyndMail works only with RAM.

To use the radio system, you need a wireless modem. The modem is a small PC card that slides into your laptop. Protruding is a big wart, which holds a 9-volt battery and a small antenna. Power up and your laptop starts sending out a signal, looking for one of the wireless networks' base stations. When the connection is made, the mail server starts sending you your stored e-mail messages packet-by-packet. Any e-mail you've previously written gets sent out as well. When the transfer is done you can terminate your connection and save your modem's battery, or you can leave yourself connected and get your e-mail instantly. As a compromise, you can set the software to check



Even the IBM Wireless Modem for ARDIS can't always keep you connected on the road.

for new mail every 15 minutes.

RAM claims to cover more than 93 percent of the urban business population. ARDIS, meanwhile, claims coverage of 90 percent of the business activity and 80 percent of the population.

I didn't learn what these statistics actually meant until I was in the car between Allentown, Pa., and Niagara Falls, Ontario, trying to pick up my e-mail. All of a sudden my WyndMail account, which had worked pretty well at my

mother's apartment in Philadelphia, suddenly stopped. The program said it couldn't contact the network. I tried RadioMail and got the same result. Apparently the Pennsylvania Turnpike isn't a center of business activity.

I've since been educated in the ways of wireless by Todd Petry, customer support manager at ARDIS. While one might think the primary use of a wireless e-mail system would be for people on long-distance trips, the real demand for connectivity is within the metropolitan areas, says Petry.

The wireless networks are for business folk on the go who want to download their e-mail at customer sites. They're for executives who want to pick up their mail in airports and hotels and don't want to fuss with hooking their laptops up to a telephone. They're specifically not for people who find themselves on long car trips.

These executives appreciate another nice feature of the wireless e-mail systems: the ability to read mail from an HP palmtop computer that weighs less than a pound. I saw three people using these systems at a computer security conference I attended recently. I found that surprising, since the e-mail sent by these systems is not encrypted (although it is difficult to intercept). The people seemed so engrossed by reading their mail and trying to tap out replies on the palmtops' tiny keyboards that I wondered why they had bothered coming to the conference in the first place.

While there may be real honest-to-goodness reasons to use wireless e-mail systems, I've found that the limited coverage the ARDIS and RAM networks provide has really prevented me

from using either RadioMail or WyndMail on this trip. And even when it works it's like communicating with a 2400 baud modem.

I also haven't been too pleased with the proprietary e-mail programs that come with RadioMail and Wynd. Although they do the job, they haven't been tuned for ease-of-use the way Eudora and Netscape Mail have been.

So I have been picking up my e-mail every night and reading it in the car during the day. My outgoing mail gets saved until I'm connected again the following evening. Eudora, Netscape Mail and even America Online let you read your mail in this fashion. And I've saved the cost of long-distance calls by using Netcom Communications as my nationwide Internet dial-up provider. Netcom's toll-free number has saved me long-distance charges in the few cities where local dial-up numbers are not available.

I would really rather be using a wireless system. After all, I'd really rather have the e-mail sent from the car instead of from the hotel room at night.

Unfortunately, neither of these systems solves my problems. But they might solve yours.

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For more information on wireless communication visit these World Wide Web sites:

WyndMail: <http://www.wynd.com/>

RadioMail: <http://www.radio@mail.com/>

ARDIS: <http://www.ardis.com/>

RAM Mobile Data: <http://www.ram.com/>