

Wi-Fi Woes Plague Amtrak on Northeast Corridor

Railroad is hoping to develop a new way to deliver faster Wi-Fi speeds

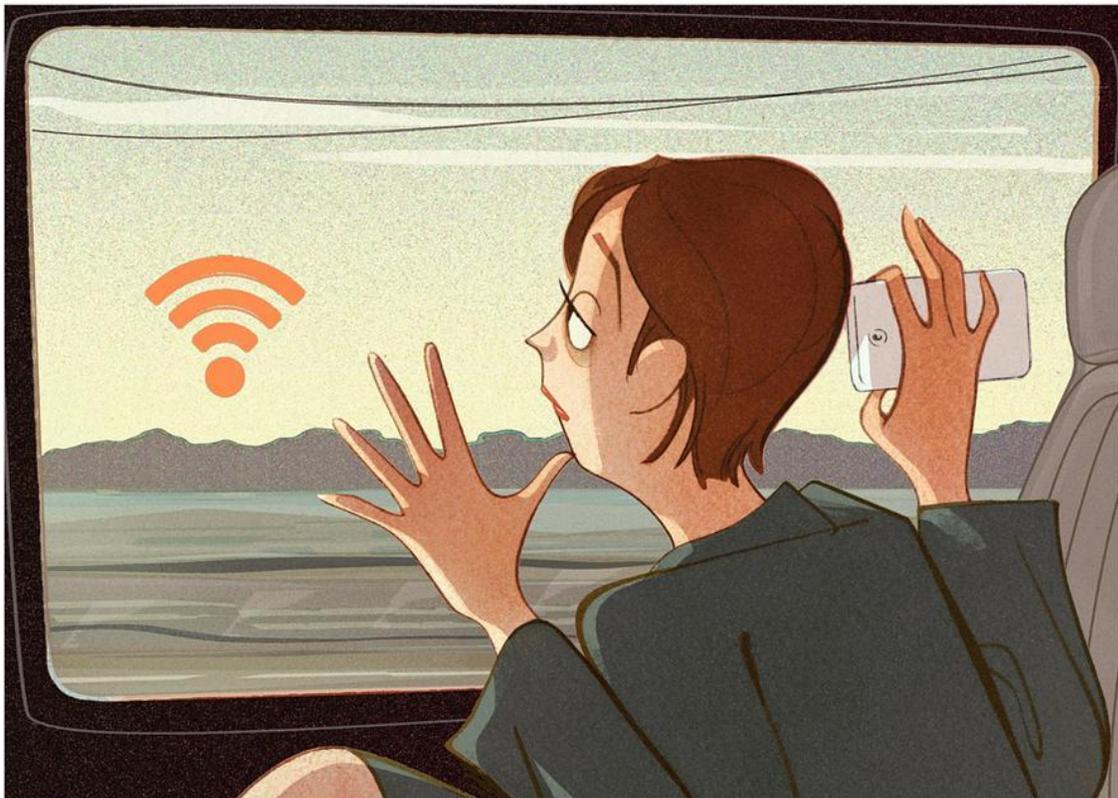


ILLUSTRATION: ERIC PALMA

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ABOARD THE ACELA—Hurling north toward Philadelphia on one of the fastest trains in the U.S., Shelly Coppola fretted about delays, and they had nothing to do with late trains.

She tried checking her work email, but messages wouldn't download. She wanted to buy a plane ticket for her next business trip, but couldn't access the airline's website. She refreshed the website, then refreshed again. Nothing.

“It’s always this bad,” said Ms. Coppola, 33 years old. “The Acela is such an expensive ticket that they should have better Wi-Fi.”

Ms. Coppola, who travels to Washington, D.C., at least once a week for her job at a medical-device company, isn’t alone in finding it difficult to work because Amtrak’s wireless Internet often doesn’t.

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Up and down the aisles on the Acela, the crown jewel and top moneymaker for America’s national passenger railroad, riders groan about its Wi-Fi as they travel the busy Northeast Corridor between Washington and Boston.

The gripes come as [airlines are racing to offer faster wireless](#) for Internet-hungry passengers, with some upgrading to faster satellite-based systems instead of those that rely on cellular networks.

“People expect it, and not only do they expect it, they expect it to be fast and reliable and free,” said Jamie Perry, vice president for brand and product development at [JetBlue Airways](#) Corp. The airline is rolling out faster satellite-based Wi-Fi.

Chicago-based [Gogo](#) Inc., which provides Wi-Fi services to airlines including [Delta Air Lines](#) Inc., also plans to introduce such a system. For now, Gogo’s non-satellite systems generally offer about 10 megabits per second, a measure of bandwidth known as Mbps, per plane, a spokesman said. The company uses its own network of cell towers, helping it avoid competition for bandwidth.

Amtrak’s current Wi-Fi has been generally able to offer 10 Mbps for each train, but railroad officials say increased demands have strained the service.

“It doesn’t work,” said Lauren Massey, 32, a consultant who instead uses her own hot spot to access the Internet during her commutes between Philadelphia and Baltimore.

“It’s only good for some basic browsing,” said Anirudh Bhalla as he prepared for a morning phone call, his papers and laptop sprawled out on a counter in the cafe car.

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The railroad’s Wi-Fi shortcomings aren’t lost on Amtrak officials, who routinely travel the Northeast Corridor themselves.

“I agree, it can be frustrating,” said Matt Hardison, the railroad’s chief marketing officer. “We don’t want it to be that way, which is why we are aggressively pursuing all options to try to improve it.”

Amtrak launched its Wi-Fi service, AmtrakConnect, on its Acela trains in 2010.

The system relies on cellular towers along the 457-mile corridor between Washington and Boston. Trains are equipped with eight air cards linking to as many as four cell towers at a time, Amtrak officials say.

But Acela trains can travel as fast as 150 miles an hour, making it difficult for so-called handoffs between towers that may already offer spotty reception. Bridges and buildings also can block signals.

And as cellphones, tablets and other devices have become increasingly central to modern life, demand for cellular bandwidth inside and outside the train has increased, further hobbling Amtrak’s Wi-Fi.

The railroad said bandwidth available to its trains has declined by 40% over the past year.

“Every cell tower can only accommodate just so many wireless users at any one time,” said Doug Woodbury, a vice president at the transportation consulting firm HNTB Corp. Railroads, he added, “are constrained by the quality and number of cell sites that are along the rail line.”

Amtrak has been developing a new way to deliver Wi-Fi to customers. A so-called trackside wireless broadband network would deliver Internet to trains along the Northeast Corridor, unshackling the railroad from cellular networks.

Railroad officials say the system under development promises to be competitive with satellite-based Wi-Fi speeds airlines have been rolling out. Amtrak has been analyzing results of a prototype of a new wireless system along a 10-mile stretch of track south of Wilmington, Del.

If Amtrak decides to take the next step, officials could expand the network by 30 miles next year, then perhaps 80 additional miles in 2017. But officials say they don't yet know when such a system might be completed, or how much it might cost.

On long-haul national routes, where there is often no cell reception at all, Amtrak is considering satellite Wi-Fi.

Amtrak, of course, has more pressing problems. The railroad is locked in perennial funding battles with Congress, which has been considering using the Northeast Corridor's operating surpluses to help finance a backlog of the railroad's major capital projects.

The railroad also has struggled to scrape together funding to help pay for two [new Hudson River rail tunnels](#) between Manhattan and New Jersey. A heavily used, 1960s-era [escalator at New York Penn Station](#) took the railroad months to repair earlier this year.

Jake Weinstock, 44-year-old frequent Amtrak rider who lives in Washington, thinks Amtrak should focus on quicker transportation. "I'd rather see a genuine high-speed train than high-speed Wi-Fi," he said.

Katrina Brison of Delaware had a generous take on Amtrak's Wi-Fi, even though it wasn't working for her one recent weekday morning.

"When it does work, it's great," said Ms. Brison, 39, as she enjoyed a breakfast sandwich and coffee instead of sending early-morning emails.

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