

Crossing the Digital Divide Volume 21

“Roaming”

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for the Observer

Complacency can be expensive. It's all too easy to ignore your credit card bills, your Hughes/Exede/Cellular data use, or that leaky faucet in the laundry room. Little things, annoyances, mostly, except for one important factor: your wallet.

The abundance of social media, the volumes of “pushed” data contribute substantially to your quota utilization. Facebook alerts, NFL updates, Tweets and Instagrams all take up precious “bandwidth”, a techno-term rural users need to respect. Using Skype to communicate with friends and relatives is fun and often gratifying, but it's another big user of bandwidth. We have all these tools and toys, a wealth of information (of value and questionable), within our grasp, or gasp, should you get a surprise bill from one provider or another.

When I travel outside Northern California, I'm painfully aware that phone calls, email delivery, and Google interaction are slower, my phone gets hot trying to find its home base. Roaming alerts are constant unless I'm visiting Chicago, New York, or Boston. I will often turn OFF mobile data, and seek out wifi hotspots.

When travels takes me beyond borders, and the trip is pleasure not business, I'll take my Smartphone and leave the laptop. I use it exclusively when I can access a wireless hotspot, cellular voice/data disabled. Once a day, or every third day, a half hour in a coffee shop, I can catch up on urgent mail and review missed phone calls. While away, if longer than a week, I might call Exede and put my satellite on vacation hold – save a few dollars where/when I can. I use the same tactic with my Verizon data plan – I may increase data when traveling in the US, and reduce it if heading off-shore. Time your billing cycle right, and save \$50 or so.

I've been using my Smartphone as a spectrum analyzer often the past few weeks. Wireless deployments can be fun, being able to stream Pandora to the greenhouse or barn makes the chores so much easier. My Smartphone has great battery life, under normal conditions, I can go two days without charging, but when I use my device as a spectrum analyzer, the wifi radio is working hard, the phone gets hot. If I'm traveling outside my cellular base zone, my phone gets hot as it constantly handshakes, “roaming” from tower to tower, remaining connected, but anxious to get home. Remember, the average iPhone or Android based Smartphone is as capable as the computer you likely had a few years ago.

If your phone is warmer than normal, turn off your wifi and turn off your GPS. If you're at a music event, turn off all radios, your phone will be working overtime contending with all the other phones looking for wifi or a cellular signal, or better yet, turn it off entirely and enjoy the show!