

Internet in the air

>> **Wi-fi connectivity could be a dream or a nightmare**

by [KRISTIAN GRAVENOR](#)

You can't see them, feel them or smell them, but radio waves bombard us all the time. So you might not have noticed that our air is increasingly full of a contentious frequency known as Wireless Fidelity, mainly used to connect computers to each other and to the Internet.



Wake up to Wi-Fi, Montreal: Rodriguez

Wi-Fi waves get techies excited because they could - potentially at least - bring an idyllic era of free, fast Internet connectivity for anybody almost anywhere. On the other hand, they could also conceivably usher in an evil world where mobile hackers and spammers defraud and abuse the gullible who send out the waves unprotected.

The Wi-Fi technology is not unlike cordless phones for computers, and it's become the consumer choice for any home sharing Internet access with more than one computer. With its growth in popularity, Wi-Fi waves have started leaking out of increasing numbers of local houses and companies. The waves drift 300 feet from their bases, a distance that can reportedly be amplified by using such primitive devices as cans of Pringles potato chips.

To find out where these waves are, tech-savvy devotees equip their vehicles with special equipment that detect the Wi-Fi waves. These wardrivers, as they're dubbed, then map the areas where the waves are present, a sport known as warchalking.

Although increasing amounts of Wi-Fi waves have been floating around Montreal, our awareness of the issues involved in the technology has lagged. "In terms of technology I'd say we're ahead of other cities," says Fabián Rodriguez, an ISP techie with Toxik Technologies. "But we're very much behind other cities in terms of awareness."

Not long ago, Rodriguez rolled out in his vehicle with high-tech gizmos in tow that would alert him whenever he was in the presence of Wi-Fi

signals flying around. His wardriving ritual rapidly uncovered 45 points of access. Rodriguez says it would be easy work to access most of these networks.

Wide-open networks

The blessing of Internet access flying free and fast throughout our air can also be a curse. According to some estimates, up to three-quarters of those using the wireless technology haven't gone to the trouble of securing their network. That means that a hacker could do terrible things. Not to give you any ideas, but a mean person could pull up in front of such a place with a laptop and send out reams of spam, download kiddie porn, steal passwords - all misdeeds that would be blamed upon the owner of the network.

Rodriguez hosts a Web site (<http://quebec.sansfil.org/>) and regular meetings with less than a dozen invitees to discuss how the little guy can benefit from Internet-in-the-air. The effort is still relatively nascent and indeed nobody has even publicly mapped out where the Wi-Fi waves are floating in this city.

Even officials who would presumably be up on such issues appeared fuzzy about the central questions. For example, press agents at the CRTC were stumped when asked to explain the rules and legal implications of the Wi-Fi Internet waves.

One of those grey zones is the increasingly popular use of the Wi-Fi network to share connections with neighbours. For the price of a \$100 router, Rodriguez says, anybody could share a fast Internet connection with a number of neighbours. Rodriguez figures that neighbours sharing a fast connection could be legal... or not. "I don't know whether legally one could simply say, 'I'm giving it away for free.' A person could say he wasn't aware his neighbour was taking the connection, the neighbour could then deny it and it could go on it forever," says Rodriguez.

Bell Canada, which offers high-speed Internet services, discourages such sharing of its connections. "Bell doesn't support individuals or companies taking advantage or defrauding other people's networks," says Ottawa-based Kerry Eberwein, Bell's general manager of Cabling and Wireless LAN. But Eberwein bubbles with enthusiasm about the Wi-Fi waves, and reports that Bell has already begun with a wireless service for those travelling through parts of Dorval airport.

And although the Wi-Fi craze has led many cafés in the States to serve up the waves to laptop-toting visitors, several local chains appeared unfamiliar of the concept. But Rodriguez believes that Montrealers' unfamiliarity with Internet-in-the-air will change fast. "As soon as one place starts offering it, they'll all have to do it," says Rodriguez. :

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