University of Washington testing sign language video phones

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A new tool for communicating using American Sign Language over video phones is being field tested in the Seattle this summer by University of Washington researchers, who plan to expand the program this winter.

The "MobileASL" system compresses the video signal so it uses an estimated 10 times less bandwith than video chat programs like Apple's FaceTime.

By using less bandwidth, the tool may be more accessible than video chat services that require expensive plans and devices. It may also work in areas that don't have ultrafast mobile broadband service.

"We want to deliver affordable, reliable ASL on as many devices as possible. It's a question of equal access to mobile communication technology," said Eve Riskin, a professor of electrical engineering who led the project.

Riskin said it's the first study of how deaf people in the U.S. use mobile video phones. A more extensive study will be done this winter.

MobileASL was developed by the UW's Summer Academy for Advancing Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Computing, a nine-week program for academically gifted deaf and hard-of-hearing students planning careers in computing, the school said in its release.

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