Text in on smarter phones

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Alternative input methods for smart phones, such as Swype and SwiftKey, offer substantial benefits to users and are comparable with common typing speeds found on computer keyboards, according to a report published by researchers at Loughborough University. Writing in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Design Research*, Tom Page, a lecturer in electronic product design, has assessed a number of different text input technologies available to smart phone users.

Page reports how interaction design has become central to the development of small touch screen devices, particularly since the launch of the Apple iPhone in 2007. Moreover, many users now have a smart phone mindset and treat their device in much the same way previous users worked with a laptop but with much greater portability. As such, rapid text input methods has become essential for making smart phone users as efficient as they once were with typing on a laptop keyboard.

"In essence, smart phone interfaces today have been designed in completely different ways as users are starting or seeking to replace laptops and computers with small screen highly portable devices," Page says, Indeed, more people are becoming more proficient at creating, engaging, communicating and interacting via the smart phone screen.

There are various text input methods on smart phones, including adaptation of the QWERTY layout that has been familiar to typists since the 19th century. Other more ergonomic soft keyboard layouts such as DVORAK and ABCDE apparently improve typing comfort and speed, but many users and developers believes that these ought to be consigned

to history in this era of small screens and broadband communications. Other text input methods such as: OPTI, 8pen, Swiftkey, Swype, Keypurr and thick buttons exist and are gently nudging QWERTY and its derivatives off-screen and giving users much faster and more accurate text input methods.

"Fundamentally, the success or failure of any new interactive technology or text input method such as soft keyboards is determined by its usability," says Page. "The ergonomic aspects of soft keyboard typing on a smart phone differ greatly from their physical counterpart," he adds. This is why alternatives more suited to the mall screen than QWERTY or ABCDE are needed. Page laments the fact that smart phones have been rapidly advancing technologically over the last few years but their approach to text input has lagged behind. Even the apps that claim to accelerate input and sidestep the traditional keyboard often rely on user familiarity with QWERTY nevertheless.

There is much research and development yet to be done with touch screens themselves and the text and other input technologies need to make smart phones even more ubiquitous and useful.

More information: "Usability of text input interfaces in smartphones" in *J. Design Research*, 2013, 11, 39-56

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