

Apple launches new macbook pro with updated magic keyboard



Apple launched an updated version of its MacBook Pro with modified keyboards, as the laptop line had faced criticism for typing-related problems while boosting performance and adding storage.

"We are adding the new Magic Keyboard, doubling the standard storage, and boosting performance, making the 13-inch MacBook Pro an even better value for our customers," said Tom Boger, Apple's senior director of Mac and iPad Product Marketing. Global smartphone market suffers worst contraction in history due to coronavirus "With these updates, our entire notebook lineup features the Magic Keyboard for the best typing experience ever on a Mac notebook, offers twice the standard storage than before, and delivers even more performance," said Boger. Apple said its new lineup of MacBook Pro, priced at \$1,299 and at \$1,199 for the education-focused model, was available online. MacBooks account for 9% of the company's total revenue. The new keyboard follows the "scissor" mechanism more commonly found in the industry. TikTok surpasses 2 billion downloads, records best quarter for any app ever. The iPhone maker switched back to the mechanism, discarding the "butterfly" keyboards after it received complaints of sticky, unresponsive keys and keystrokes that failed to register when tiny amounts of dust or debris accumulated under or near keys. The updated version will provide double the storage of its predecessor starting at 256GB all the way up to 1TB, so customers can store even more photos, videos, and files. The company also said the new MacBook Pro will be available in select stores later this week. —Reuters



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Webinars the new 'in thing' during lockdown

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KARACHI: It is the age of sitting at home and working from home, which has opened the doors to new areas of discovery such as video conferences, web conferences and webinars.

In the early days of the lockdown, many events such as conferences and seminars were postponed by their organisers in the hope of coming back to them later. But when 'later' kept moving ahead to even later and things didn't seem to be returning to normal, there was no other way but to opt for advanced telecommunications and embrace streaming media technology. Alas, as they say necessity is the mother of invention. Of course, virtual events had been taking place even before social distancing and lockdowns, but not as many as they are today. First started the Learning Management System (LMS) tools for students to be able to attend online classes. But much has been written about that already.

Suddenly, you are receiving invitations to join video conferences. No one needs to go to the venue, no one drives, no fuel is wasted. No expensive hall bookings are required as well. And everyone can join in, in their pyjamas while wearing something more respectable on top because usually when you are sitting in front of your webcam or laptop only the upper part of your body is visible. Another thing that's changing is not to expect anyone who may be home to be able to meet you when you visit them. Because they may be video conferencing with someone, that's why. Even television talk shows are taking place on Google Hangouts or by using the Zoom app and the like. Suddenly people from all over the world are meeting and discussing ideas sitting face to face, even if it's only on the computer or smartphone screen.

Is this something we should get used to? Jehan Ara, president of P@SHA's technology incubator, says that webinars will continue for some time, even after the lockdown has been lifted. "People have become used to them and the outreach is much wider," she told private news paper.

She continued: "People will hesitate to have in-person events for quite a while due to fear. Even when events do begin to happen, I see a blended approach moving forward with a combination of physical and online events." Of late, the trend is also gearing towards the airing of online concerts, especially after some of the biggest names in the world of music such as Lady Gaga and Paul McCartney recently played before their webcams with 100 other well-known artists performing in isolation from their living rooms. They came together online for a great cause, an eight-hour show to celebrate the services of healthcare workers during this global pandemic, and to raise money to go towards vaccine development and charities.

Pandemic gives fresh momentum to digital voice technology



In a world suddenly fearful of touch, voice technology is getting a fresh look. Voice-activated systems such as Google Assistant, Amazon Alexa and Apple's Siri have seen strong growth in recent years, and the virus pandemic could accelerate that, analysts say.

Voice assistants are not only answering queries and shopping, but also being used for smart home control and for a range of business and medical applications which could see increased interest as people seek to limit personal contact. "Voice has already made significant inroads into the smart home space and voice control can mean avoiding commonly touched surfaces around the home from smartphones, to TV

remotes, light switches, thermostats, door handles and more," said analyst Jonathan Collins of ABI Research.

The pandemic is likely to provide "additional motivation and incentive for voice control in the home that will help drive awareness and adoption for a range of additional smart home devices and applications," Collins said. ABI estimates that voice control device shipments for smart home devices hit 141 million last year, and in 2020 will grow globally by close to 30 per cent.

For the broader market of voice assistants, Juniper Research estimates 4.2 billion devices in use this year, growing to 8.4bn by 2024, with much of the interactions on

smartphones. Collins said he expected to see growing interest in smart locks and doorbells, along with other smart home systems, to eliminate the need for personal contact and face-to-face interaction as a result of the pandemic. Avi Greengart, a technology analyst and consultant with Techspontential, said data is not yet available but that "anecdotally, voice assistant usage is way up" as a result of lockdowns.

Greengart said he expects a wider range of business applications for voice technologies in response to health and safety concerns. "Looking forward, office spaces will need more towards more touch-free controls; voice can be a solution, although motion triggers for lighting is often easier and

more friction-free," he said. "However, I do expect smart speakers — along with an emailed list of commands — to be a common feature at hotels and other rental properties. The fewer touch points, the better."

Julian Issa of Futuresource Consulting said there appears to be "an uptick in the use of voice assistants since the virus outbreak" during the pandemic. "Whilst avoiding touching surfaces may play a small part in this, it is mainly due to consumers spending far more time at home with their devices," Issa said. Chris Pennell, another Futuresource analyst, said he expects adoption of digital assistants is likely to accelerate, "especially in client facing areas such as healthcare, retail and entertainment". —AFP

New coronavirus adapts to populations; vaccine works in monkeys

NEW YORK: The following is a brief roundup of the latest scientific studies on the novel coronavirus and efforts to find treatments and vaccines for COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. New coronavirus is adapting to different populations

A genetic analysis of samples from more than 7,500 people infected with COVID-19 suggests that as the new coronavirus spreads quickly around the world, it is adapting to its human hosts, researchers reported on Tuesday in the medical journal *Infection, Genetics and Evolution*. They found almost 200 recurrent genetic mutations of the new coronavirus - SARS-CoV-2 - that show how it may be evolving as it spreads in people. "All viruses naturally mutate," Francois Balloux of University College London, who co-led the research, told Reuters. "Mutations in themselves are not a bad thing and there is nothing to suggest SARS-CoV-2 is mutating faster or slower than expected. So far, we cannot say whether SARS-CoV-2 is becoming more or less lethal and contagious."

Experimental vaccine protects macaques from SARS-CoV-2 infection. In macaque monkeys, an experimental vaccine for the novel coronavirus safely induced antibodies that blocked several different SARS-CoV-2 strains, Chinese researchers reported on Wednesday in the journal *Science*. The researchers say tests of their vaccine candidate, "PiCoVacc," in humans will likely

begin later this year.

Blood thinners may improve survival of hospitalized COVID-19 patients. Blood thinners may improve survival odds for hospitalized COVID-19 patients, a study from New York City suggests. Researchers looked back at 2,773 patients, about one in four of whom had received a high dose of blood clot preventers. Patients who got this treatment were more likely to survive, the researchers reported on Wednesday in the *Journal of the*

American College of Cardiology. The difference was most pronounced among the 395 patients who needed mechanical ventilation. In this group, the death rate was 63% without anticoagulants and 29% when patients did get blood thinners.

The researchers note that because the study was not randomized, it cannot prove the drugs directly led to better survival. Large randomized trials are needed to confirm a benefit, researchers said, and any potential benefit needs to be weighed against

the increased risk of bleeding with these drugs. COVID-19 antibodies may not predict speed of recovery

The immune system does not always respond to SARS-CoV-2 infection the way doctors might expect, unpublished data suggest. Researchers at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston found that having antibodies to two important structures on the surface of the virus does not necessarily mean patients' recovery will be faster or smoother. Dr. Raghuram Kalluri, who coauthored the study, told Reuters that patients with severe COVID-19 disease being treated in intensive care units had varying levels of antibodies. In fact, some recovered patients did not have these antibodies at all, which, he said, suggests that their immune systems fought off the virus in some unknown way. The study, posted on Tuesday on the preprint server medRxiv, has not yet been peer reviewed or published in a medical journal. (bit.ly/3b53NEM) Coronavirus link to loss of smell and taste may be underestimated. The true prevalence of problems with smell and taste among patients infected with the novel coronavirus may be higher than doctors realize, according to researchers who reviewed 10 studies published earlier this year. Among a total of more than 1,600 infected patients in North America, Asia and Europe, nearly 53% had diminished or loss of sense of smell, and nearly 44% had problems with taste. In the subset of stud-

ies that used particularly reliable tests to evaluate patients' ability to smell and taste, rates of dysfunction were even higher, suggesting "that the true prevalence of dysfunction in COVID-19 patients may remain underestimated," the research team wrote on Tuesday in the journal *Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery*. Increased awareness "may encourage earlier diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19, as well as heighten vigilance for viral spread." (bit.ly/2L22Br8) There are many well documented methods hospitals could use to help ease frontline caregivers' emotional stress, according to researchers who reviewed dozens of studies of healthcare staff working during outbreaks of emerging viruses. Broadly, they say, interventions fall into the categories of clear communication, access to adequate personal protection, adequate rest, and practical and psychological support. Among their specific recommendations are changes to practice, such as screening stations to funnel infected patients to specific areas, redesigning of procedures that pose high risks for spread of infection, and reducing the density of patients on wards. They wrote on Tuesday in *The BMJ* that interventions shown to be helpful in the earlier studies "were similar despite the wide range of settings and types of outbreaks ... and thus could be applicable to the current COVID-19 outbreak." —Reuters

Australia backs BP's study to produce hydrogen from wind, solar

MELBOURNE: BP Plc has won Australian government backing for a feasibility study into producing hydrogen using wind and solar power to split water and converting the hydrogen to ammonia in Western Australia. The Australian Renewable Energy Agency said on Friday it would provide A\$1.7 million (\$1.1 million) toward the A\$4.4 million feasibility study, part of a push by the government to make the country a major producer of hydrogen by 2030. BP expects to complete the feasibility study in early 2021 on whether to build a pilot plant in the town of Geraldton to produce 20,000 tonnes a year of ammonia and later a commercial-scale facility capable of 1 million tonnes. The company did not give a time line on the scale up. At commercial scale, BP would produce green ammonia for domestic and export markets and the plant would require around 1.5 gigawatts of power capacity, the company said. "Western Australia is the study location due, in part, to its vast solar and wind resources, existing port infrastructure and proximity to large, long-term markets for green hydrogen," BP's Chief Operating Officer for Asia Pacific Frédéric Baudry said in a statement. Western Australia is already a big producer of ammonia, but made from natural gas. Producing ammonia instead from hydrogen made from electrolysis water would cut carbon emissions sharply and help BP meet its new goal of becoming a net zero carbon emitter by 2050. "Utilising renewable hydrogen provides a fantastic opportunity for this industry to reduce emissions and sell a clean, in-demand product to global buyers," Australian Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor said in a

