

Touchscreen dashboards have finally taken over and ruined driving

Physical buttons are being consigned to history - but trying to prod a screen while navigating our famously poor road surfaces isn't easy



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Regarding how we interact with our cars, whether [petrol](#) or [electric](#), victory has gone to the touchscreen - at least as far as one premium manufacturer is concerned. Despite overwhelming safety evidence to the contrary, [BMW](#) has decided that selecting in-car functions using its intuitive rotary controller will be for used-car buyers only. On BMW's next-generation Neue Klasse cars, beginning with the iX3 SUV launching this summer, drivers will have no choice but to use touchscreens.

Its German rival Mercedes even offers a full-width dashboard consisting of three screens, called Hyperscreen (pictured above in the EQS, compared with the analogue, hewn-from-solid facia of the 1980s W123 Mercedes model).

They won't be alone. An S&P Global Mobility survey of car owners found that 97 per cent of new cars released after 2023 contain at least one touchscreen.



BMW's intuitive rotary controller will not feature in its next-generation Neue Klasse cars

Why is BMW doing away with the rotary controller?

BMW claims it is responding to customers, who are increasingly used to personalising their in-car experience using mobile phone apps.

The German firm's vice-president of user experience development, Jörn Freyer, said: "You have more and more third-party applications and these are absolutely not optimised for a rotary dial."

"Spotify and [Apple CarPlay](#) are also quite a hassle with the knob, because all of these apps are designed for a touch interface. People are increasingly using voice commands and touch. That's why we took the knob out." As a BMW driver myself, I nearly always use the rotary controller, simply because it's more accurate, less time-consuming and involves less swearing than trying to prod a screen while navigating our [famously poor road surfaces](#). Nor is using it with Apple CarPlay problematic, as Freyer suggests.

Why touchscreens took over

Chris Longmore, from the automotive design consultancy Drive, believes the touchscreen takeover is largely cost-driven. He said: "Tesla showed the way. By having everything on the screen, you can reduce the tooling needed to make switches and maybe going forwards do away with centre consoles altogether and [the cost of] making the panels you need for them."

Graeme Fudge, [Mazda's](#) PR director, agreed and added: "Some of it is because of suppliers. If most car makers are using touchscreens, then that's the direction suppliers will go in, and other systems will be difficult and expensive to source."

Car makers also cite the design benefits. Cars have an increasing number of functions for drivers to operate, which means evermore [knobs and buttons](#). Or they would do if they weren't replaced by virtual knobs and buttons on a screen.

In turn, that enables interior designers to make dashboards look sleek and clutter-free, as per the current Mini Countryman pictured here.



That contrasts with the original Mini, which only had one main instrument pod in the centre - although the one shown is a sporty Cooper S, which had a mind-boggling four instruments.

Why are they so distracting?

BMW says its new touchscreens will be within the natural arc of the driver's arm so they don't have to stretch to reach. Interacting with any touchscreen means that, as well as taking your hand off the steering wheel, you have to take your eyes off the road.

Researchers at independent British consultancy TRL did some work on the impact on drivers of using touchscreens. It found the biggest negative impact on drivers' reactions to hazards came when using Apple CarPlay by touch. Reactions 57 per cent slower than when not using a screen were nearly five times worse than when a driver was at the drink-drive limit, and nearly three times worse than when high on cannabis.

The report added: "Controlling the vehicle's position in the lane and keeping a consistent speed and headway to the vehicle in front suffered significantly when interacting with either Android Auto or Apple CarPlay, particularly when using touch control."

Longmore believes car makers think people are ready for touchscreens in cars because we're so used to tablets and smartphones. But he added: "People are used to scrolling and pinching on touchscreens, but they do so in a controlled environment, not while driving."

When screens go bad

One of the clumsiest technology launches in history - perhaps the clumsiest of all - was the Volkswagen Group's digital in-car platform with all major functions on a screen, launched on the Golf Mk8 in 2019. At its launch, VW described it as "digitalised", "intuitive to operate" and "progressive". Only the first is accurate.

We tried it on various Volkswagen ID models, along with the related Cupra Born and Skoda Enyaq Coupé. It was slow and as intuitive as sudoku for the numerically challenged (like me). Worse were unlit volume and temperature controls at the bottom of the screen; making adjustments at night was fraught, to say the least.



The digital in-car platform of the Volkswagen Cupra Born, which James Foxall was unimpressed with when he reviewed it last year.

My conclusion from spending months with the Cupra and Skoda was they were perfectly good cars spoilt by a touchscreen set-up that should never have been allowed to leave the drawing board.

Regarding how we interact with our cars, whether petrol or electric, victory has gone to the touchscreen - at least as far as one premium manufacturer is concerned. Despite overwhelming safety evidence to the contrary, BMW has decided that selecting in-car functions using its intuitive rotary controller will be for used-car buyers only.

Some car firms gave us knobs back (briefly)

Skoda was clearly listening, because it has replaced what were screen controls with dashboard-mounted rotary knobs for in-car functions such as ventilation and entertainment. "We moved to our smart dials on the Kodiaq and Superb due to customer feedback," Pietro Panarisi, Skoda's head of PR, said.

Mazda also abandoned touchscreens after research in the United States by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety that discovered they led drivers to take their hands off the wheel and eyes off the road for "potentially dangerous lengths of time".

The bad news is that both Skoda and Mazda are reverting to touchscreens in their new EVs.

What does the future look like?

If you don't like touchscreens, it's not bright. Longmore said: "I think going to all-touchscreen in cars is the wrong direction. We all like their functionality, but I don't know anyone who actually likes using them."

One glimmer on the horizon is that safety ratings body Euro Ncap has said that any car that doesn't have easy-to-use tactile controls such as stalks or buttons for controls such as wipers, indicators and hazard lights won't be able to achieve the top five stars.

William Porter, the policy manager for safety charity IAM Roadsmart, added: "While we welcome Euro Ncap's approach, we'll have to wait to see if the car makers take heed or if cost and aesthetics win out.

"We know distracted driving kills a lot of people, but there are no figures to say exactly how many and what the distraction was. Touchscreens are a relatively new technology and we'd like to see some more in-depth research into them and the effect they have on driving."

In the meantime, BMW killing the rotary controller makes for an ever-dwindling number of cars that don't require you to prod or poke a screen while trying to drive safely.