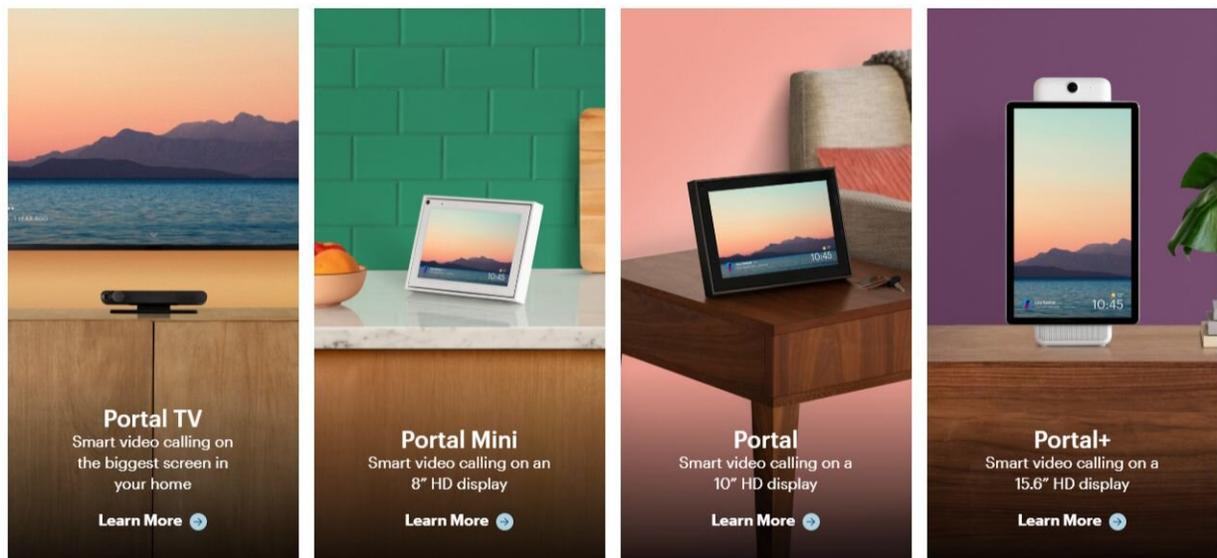


Facebook's new Portal makes good video calls but still has issues

October 15 2019, by Jefferson Graham and Edward C. Baig, Usa Today



A year ago, Facebook surprised a lot of people in tech (and elsewhere) by releasing a video chat device for the home.

Yes, the same company that had come under attack for so many security breaches, and was so good at tracking us that many people believed it was listening to our [phone calls](#) (which the company denies), wanted to put a video camera into the [living room](#).

The Portal product wasn't a huge seller, but Facebook didn't give up. This year, it has new models with lower prices (\$179.99 versus \$199 on the flagship 10.2-inch high-definition unit and a smaller, \$129 unit) and a new \$149 Portal for TV video chatting. Facebook is still selling last year's 15.6-inch Portal+ model, now down to \$279.

The TV version will be out in November, but we've got our hands on the 10-inch Portal, which will be in stores Tuesday.

Both U.S. TODAY's Jefferson Graham and Edward C. Baig had a chance to check it out and do video chats with each other as well as with Facebook execs.

Jeff's bottom line: Portal is a dynamite digital photo frame, showing your curated Facebook photos, which look fantastic. Video chat is good, but the rest of the unit shows little improvement from last year. It's still remarkably buggy from a company that should have its act together.

Ed's bottom line: I pretty much agree. Good-looking display. The frame blended nicely on a cabinet in my family room with other (non-digital) frames. For the most part, Portal does an excellent job of making you feel like you are in the same room with the people you are talking with, although the pan and zoom camera that is supposed to automatically let you follow a person or see other people in the room didn't seem to work as smoothly as last year's models.

What's more, you can't help coming back to the privacy issue, given how often Facebook is in the news for for all the wrong reasons. It's good that Facebook is addressing the privacy issue head on. It's helpful, for example, that you can disable the camera and microphone with a simple sliding switch and that Portal calls through WhatsApp are end-to-end encrypted and Messenger calls encrypted in transit.

Facebook also tells us that its "smart" camera and sound technologies use artificial intelligence that runs locally on Portal, and not on Facebook's servers. But we believe a lot of people are going to be wiggled out at the prospect of having this device in their homes.

Or put another way: Would you spend \$179 to place a Facebook microphone and [video camera](#) in your home?

Let's do a deep dive:

—Video calling: This is what the unit is designed for, and it does a masterful job. Connecting to your friends by [voice command](#) is drop dead simple. We say this after hours of struggle to set up the same processes on the Google Nest Hub Max (via the little used app Duo) and on the Echo Show, which is not an easy thing to do. Say "Call friend," and if that person is in your Facebook or WhatsApp contacts, the call immediately goes through. The static webcam image we're accustomed to is more dynamic because the camera moves around with you.

—Hey, Portal: Facebook's answer to Alexa is eons behind Amazon in simple things like hearing your commands. This is made more obvious because Facebook shows the query in text on the screen as you say it aloud. So when Jeff asked for "Thumbprint Radio" on Pandora, which shuffles all your stations, it offered instead a top 25 Praise the Lord playlist. But when he asked Alexa to perform the same command, it did so flawlessly.

The presence of Alexa on Portal is a mixed bag. For sure, Amazon's assistant brings a bevy of skills that Portal is incapable of, even something as simple as answering "why is the sky blue?" (though both voice assistants can deliver the weather).

But it isn't obvious when you should ask Portal something and when you

should ask Alexa. And the way you bark out commands differs. Case in point: When Ed said, "Hey, Portal, turn the volume to 40%, the unit complied. When he asked "Alexa, turn the volume to 40%" he was informed that only a volume level between 1 and 10 is recognized.

—Music: If you're a fan of Amazon apps, like Amazon Music, you'll be disappointed because Amazon Music isn't one of the services offered, just Spotify or Pandora. But wait a minute, when you ask Alexa to play music—from Amazon Music—it does. This is great. But it makes no sense.

—Apps: Facebook has a lot of work to do here. Yes, it has CNN and Fox News, along with Spotify, Pandora and iHeartRadio, but they don't all respond to voice. You can ask Portal to open the CNN app and you get a visual string of clips. You need to use your fingers to play them. The only voice command Jeff could get going was "Hey, Portal, play the latest news on CNN." This command was given at 9 a.m., and Portal played the evening briefing from the night before, all those hours ago.

—Video in general: Both the Google Nest Hub Max and Amazon Echo Show are \$229 with 10 inch screens, like the Portal, and both do video calls, display your photos and play videos. Comparatively, Portal has the best pricing and better calling. and a wide variety of photos to look at on the screen. But there's very little video to watch, beyond the programs commissioned by Facebook for its Watch series, and the aforementioned CNN and Fox News clips. (That is, unless you access the cumbersome browser.)

If these devices are going to take off, they're going to need a wider array of available [video](#) and either a massive improvement to the "Hey, Portal," responses or to just ditch it and stick with Alexa altogether.

More information: portal.facebook.com/

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Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Facebook's new Portal makes good video calls but still has issues (2019, October 15)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2019-10-facebook-portal-good-video-issues.html>

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