

Review: Facebook's Portal TV is video chat at its best. Too bad it's from Facebook

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I don't like the idea of granting my TVs access to Facebook and allowing the social network to install a video camera and microphone in my living room.

But I've got to admit that its new Portal TV is, hands down, the best video chat device I've ever come across. And to communicate with my relatives, I could let down my guard and let Facebook in.

There are some concerns, and they are big ones. More on that below.

I've tried the vertical phone thing with friends and family on FaceTime and Google Hangouts, I've done laptop-to-laptop chat, Periscope'd, Facebook Live'd—you name it.

But with Portal TV in the living room—hanging out on the couch, without having to hold a phone in front of my face or sitting statically by a laptop or desktop—it just seemed so natural.

I won't go as far as to say it was like having the other person in the room with me. But it was closer to natural than anything else out there.

What is Portal TV?

Portal TV is the next step for Facebook, which in 2018 introduced the Portal video display unit for chats, playing music and games. The initial units were 15 inches and 10 inches and sold poorly the first year, according to a sales survey by Voicebot.ai. This year, Facebook upgraded the Portal with 8-inch (\$129) and (a revamped) 10-inch (\$179) models, adding the ability to do WhatsApp chats as well.

For \$149, you can buy Portal TV, if you can get over the social network's various privacy breaches and its tendency to track every living being of your personal data to sell to marketers. If you're considering any of the Portal units, this is the one to get.

Why buy a little box for video chatting that does little beyond video chat—yeah, it plays music and shows a handful of videos, but you get

that with TV as well, and the bigger screen is way prettier to look at. On a large, flat-screen, in 4K resolution, whatever size TV you have is going to look way better than 10 inches.

How Portal TV worked

My [video chat](#) with colleague Ed Baig, on my Portal TV test unit to his, looked fabulous. I was in his basement, he was in my [living room](#), and the Facebook Portal camera easily panned and zoomed along with us as we moved, to follow us around the room. Not in a creepy way, but as a tool to make the visuals way more interesting.

My other video chats were good, but nowhere near as impressive as Portal to Portal, which is the optimum experience.

I called my brother, who held up his phone vertically cropping out half of the image, which is what happens when the camera isn't held horizontally. When I called U.S. TODAY colleague Trevor Hughes. He was in front of his laptop, in horizontal, thank you, and that was great. But he was stuck behind a desk, while I was free to roam around.

If you're considering Portal TV, you'll really want two of them. (Facebook offers a \$50 discount if you buy two, so the total bill would be \$250 plus tax.)

Setup is easy, although—spoiler alert—you'll need to also spring for an accessory HDMI cable if you don't already have one, as the unit doesn't come with it. Once Portal is plugged into electricity, and the HDMI connects you to the TV, you're most of the way there. Just log into your Facebook account, connect Portal to Alexa as well if you'd like to use it, and you'll be good to go.

But, still, there are concerns

Facebook knows it has privacy issues to contend with. The unit is "private by design," Facebook says on its website. To appease concerns about that always-on [video camera](#), the Portal has a cover that can slide over the camera when not in use—if you remember to do that.

Don't think for a minute, though, that Facebook isn't monitoring you at home. When you connect on a [video call](#), "we collect information in a similar way to other Facebook products," the social network notes. For instance, it notes that you've made a call, who you called and where, and which other Portal apps (which include Pandora and CBS All-Access) have been opened and used. That "may be used to inform the ads you see across Facebook," the company admits.

Facebook says it does not listen to, view or keep the contents of your [video](#) or audio calls on Portal, "so nothing you say on a Portal call is used for advertising."

However, it also says that when you use the "Hey, Portal" wake words, it records and transcribes your commands and invites users to go to their Portal settings to delete them.

But in typical Facebook fashion, it makes it nearly impossible to opt-out, by sending you to a computer or mobile device to type in a code that's such a hassle, you give up on the spot.

And if you think Facebook isn't tracking who you call, just check out this screenshot below, which spells out in pretty graphic terms Facebook's intentions. Hello, Trevor!

Oh, if only Apple, without all this privacy baggage, had created the product instead.

Portal TV is available at Facebook's online store, Best Buy, Bed, Bath & Beyond and Amazon.

More information: portal.facebook.com/products/portal-tv/

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