

Facebook says Portal device not for snooping

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Portal, Facebook's talking speaker, is not a snooping device—that's a message the social network says has gotten lost in the coverage leading up to the device's launch.

Portal will be hitting store shelves Thursday.

Facebook's recent issues with foreign interference and hacking (some 30 million accounts were broken into in the fall) and issues with a rogue app developer taking Facebook users' personal information and selling it to third parties have produced much soul searching at Facebook, whose top execs have said it would take at least a year, if not longer, to fix these issues.

"The timing of the launch is a challenge, in terms of the brand and trust, and we're committed to improving on it," says Facebook vice-president Andrew Bosworth. "But this is the product you want. It's exclusively focused on connecting you with the people you care about the most. This is dedicated to having you stay close to them."

The \$199 Portal, basically like an Amazon Echo speaker but with a 10-inch video screen, competes with the recently released Google Home Hub (\$149, 7-inch screen) and the redesigned Amazon Echo Show (\$229), which also has a 10-inch screen.

A larger edition, Portal +, with a 15-inch screen, sells for \$349. The units will be available from Amazon, Facebook's Portal store and Best Buy retail and online. The Portal was originally scheduled for Nov. 15 delivery, according to the Facebook website.

Unlike the other devices, while you can use Portal for trivia and having questions answered, the primary focus is as a tool to make video calls. Portal has a built-in camera that can follow you around the room, allowing you to move freely and fit more members of the family in the video chat. It uses Facebook's Messenger platform, which boasts of over 1 billion members. Here's where the controversy comes in.

Facebook freely admits that it tracks the frequency and length of calls

and that "some of this information may be used for advertising purposes. For example, we may use the fact that you make lots of video calls to inform some of the ads you see."

Additionally, Facebook admits that it monitors how often you logged into your account and how often you used Portal, and that "may be used to inform the ads you see across Facebook."

Facebook insists that users won't see ads on the display screen of Portal, but that if you listen to music from partners Pandora, iHeartRadio or Spotify, you might see ads from those companies.

Asked why Facebook needs this information, Bosworth says it's primarily to help improve the network. "Understanding how long or frequent calls are helps us improve the service." As for the ad element, Boswell says, Facebook could target you as a frequent video caller and, thus, serve up ads targeting [video](#) services on other Facebook platforms.

Facebook, like Amazon and Google, records every query you make to the speaker—to learn how to answer correctly—and stores the audio of the requests. Bosworth says users will be able to find them in Facebook settings and delete the audio copies, if needed.

Bosworth says the unit is a "game changer" that helps people feel closer to families by making better group [video calls](#). So how's that different from Apple FaceTime, Google's Hangouts, Skype or any of the other [video chat](#) tools?

Being hands-free and not tying you up with holding a phone or computer in your hand, Bosworth says. "It's surprising how much power people have when they go hands-free," he says. "It's a different experience."

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