Double-screen ‘free’ TV will show you ads, even when not in use



Enlarge / The free Telly 4K TV has a second screen for showing ads.

reader comments

191 with

What would you be willing to do for a free TV? If the answer is hand over information about what you watch, search for, and listen to on that TV and for how long, how much money your household makes, what food and brands you like, and your race and be subject to on-screen ads at any time, then Telly’s got the deal for you.

The Telly TV announced today (and rumored to be en route since earlier this month) is a 55-inch 4K HDR TV with a five-driver soundbar connecting a second screen called the Smart Screen.

The smaller Smart Screen is dedicated to showing ads and can also show relevant content, like news feeds from selected publications, weather, or scores from favorite sports teams. The TV has three HDMI and two USB ports (versions not specified) and a TV tuner and comes with a 4K Android TV streaming stick (you can use your own streaming device or service, but Telly doesn't come with support for third-party streaming apps, such as Hulu, The Verge reports).

Specs-wise, that's nearly all we know about Telly so far because the main thing the company, founded by free TV-streaming service Pluto co-founder Ilya Pozin in May 2021, wants you to focus on is shoppers' favorite four-letter word: free.

But in this case, "free" is a lousy deal when the trade-off for that $0 TV is a massive loss of privacy in service to marketing.

The cost of "free"

To be clear, Telly is upfront about its approach, with today's press release stating that the TV aims to "revolutionize the industry's business model by enabling advertisers to fully subsidize the cost of the TV itself for the consumer and deliver it completely for free."

"Companies are making billions of dollars from ads served on televisions, yet consumers have historically had to pay for both the TV and the content they watch," Pozin said in a statement.

But the type of information you have to provide Telly—from the responses to the survey you must take on their mobile app you must download to reserve one of the 500,000 Tellys expected to ship this summer, to viewing and activity-tracking once you have the TV—are the type of data sets a company ought to pay you for. A TV that's generously said to be worth about $500

and includes a secondary, if not distracting, screen directly south of it doesn't feel sufficient.

Advertisement

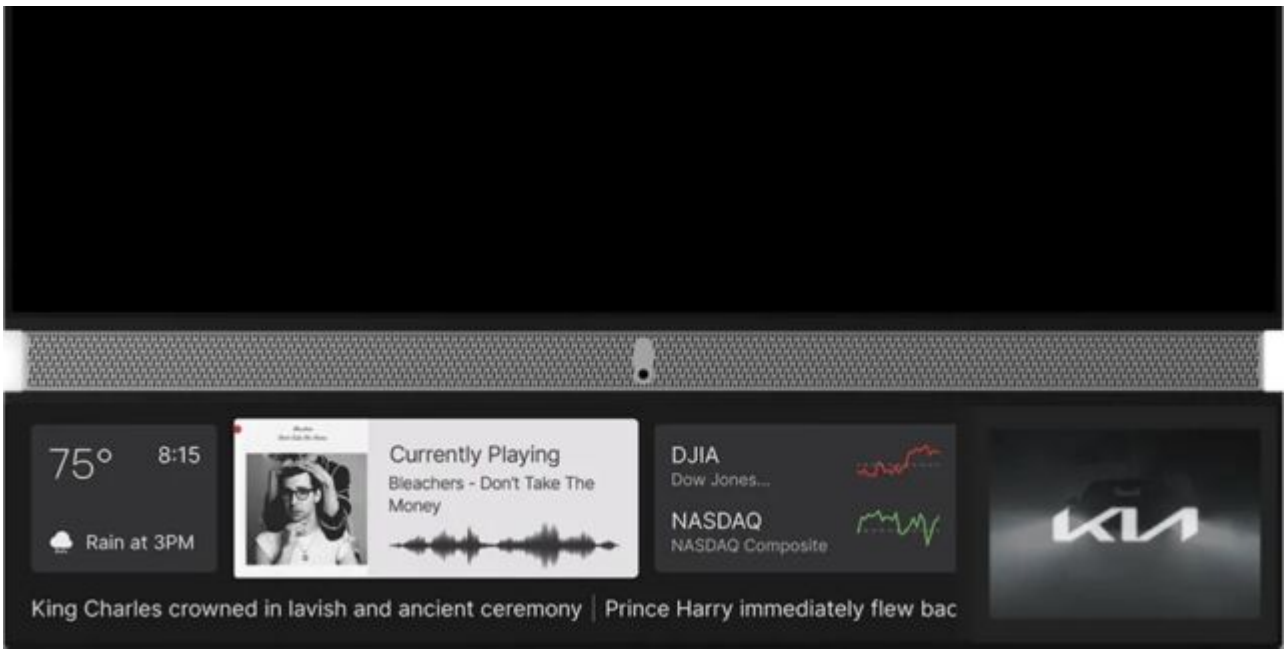
Telly's Smart Screen can show ads on its right side or "in the form of a sponsored news feed on the left side of the screen," The Verge reported.

Even worse, Telly can show ads on *both* screens at any time, even if you're not using the TV, basically turning the heart of your living room into a billboard.

Dallas Lawrence, Telly's chief strategy officer, told The Verge:

> *When the Theatre display (top screen) is not in use, the ad unit could come to life in a fun way connecting both. There are literally hundreds of things we are thinking about to create the most engaging ad experience ever.*

For example, the executive said the company is developing a rewards system where Telly TV owners can earn gift cards to places like Starbucks and Netflix for taking surveys on their TVs.



Enlarge / A close-up of what Telly's Smart Screen will look

like.
In the meantime, Telly is happy to serve you a nondescript television, so long as you're okay with its viewing and activity data policy. It states that Telly "may" collect information about the video and audio content enjoyed on the free TV, including channels viewed and the duration of viewing sessions.

Here's more from Telly's viewing and activity data policy page, which includes an unusual number of typos, which doesn't help build trust in the company:

> *Viewing Data is associated with the IP address for the television unityou are provided and a unique device number we assign. However, Telly willcombine and associate your Viewing Data with your Telly account name if youcreate such an account or link to it to provide you with a more personalizedexperience on your TV.*
>
> *The Viewing Data software also periodically collects otherinformation about the TV or display, including IP address and the media accesscontrol ("MAC") addresses of available access points. Viewing Data ismaintained and used in an unidentified format, and to the extent that Telly orits authorized data partners attempt to re-identify the data to associate itwith individual customers, all personal information remains anonymous.*

At this point, it's worth noting that Telly has an HD camera, microphone, and motion sensors. Those components' marketed purposes are for features like Zoom video calls, integrated games, and fitness tracking. But Telly hasn't detailed those use cases much. Meanwhile, a camera, microphone, and motion sensors sure do sound like excellent ways to track people.

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