

Telly dual-screen TV first look: it's free and may be the future

You know what you're signing up for from the word go. That's the main gist behind Telly, a free-to-own 4K television that's "free" because of a secondary bottom display that will constantly rotate through advertising while also, in theory, providing unique second-screen functionality. Think widgets, news tickers, sports scores, and more. You answer some surveys and let Telly share your viewing habits with advertisers, and in exchange, you pay nothing for a 55-inch 4K TV.

On Thursday, Telly revealed it has surpassed 250,000 registrations since announcing its first product last month. So the concept is drawing legitimate interest, even if some people have given it a hard nope over privacy concerns. (Telly says its data and analytics collection will be on par with and no more invasive than other TV vendors, who are often less forward about their data scraping practices.) The company is eyeing consumer homes for now, but it's easy to see inroads to hotels, doctor's offices, and other corporate applications.

Telly is led by Ilya Pozin, who previously co-founded Pluto TV and knows a little something about ad-subsidized businesses. I met with Pozin on Wednesday at a Manhattan WeWork to hear more about his vision for Telly – and to see the hardware up close. The company had been operating under the radar for a couple of years before Janko Roettgers scooped some details in early May.

Pozin started off by downplaying recent technological advancements in consumer TVs and making it sound like

innovation is slumping. “It’s at a true commodity state,” he said of the market. “Every TV is pretty much the same. Consumers walk into Costco or Best Buy, and they see what’s on sale. From a feature perspective, there are marginal differences,” he said. “You’re seeing what’s on sale, and that’s what you buy.” If you’re at all familiar with premium TVs, it’s easy to push back on such thinking: this year, we’re seeing the brightest, most dazzling HDR TVs to date and flagship OLEDs that can genuinely stop you in your tracks.

a: hover]: shadow- highlight- franklin dark: [>a: hover]: shadow- highlight- franklin [>a]: shadow- underline- black dark: [>a]: shadow- underline- white”>How does this thing actually work?

The Telly TV runs a custom Android-based OS across its two displays, which are both controlled by the same processor. It ships preloaded with a healthy dose of apps and games, but the core software isn’t designed to be your streaming entertainment hub. For that purpose, Telly is including a Google TV dongle in the box that can plug into one of the TV’s three HDMI ports.

You’re also free to use an Apple TV, Roku box, or other external devices. There’s also an over-the-air TV tuner built in. In these scenarios, the bottom screen will use content recognition to identify what you’re watching and populate itself with relevant information or widgets – alongside the ads, of course.

“We believe that this format of a dual-screen TV will actually be the future and the next evolution of where TVs are going,” Pozin said. Throughout our chat, he tossed out numerous examples of how there might be interplay between both screens:

- Parents watching the news on the primary display while their children play *Flappy Bird* on the bottom one.
- A video call where the current speaker takes up the main

TV with other participants shown on the bottom display.

- Listening to music from your service of choice on the secondary screen while watching something (on mute) on the primary display.
- Co-watching movies or sports games together with your friends. The main content goes up top, and your friends would be visible on the second screen.

It's jammed with enough software features and second-screen promises to give you whiplash. I was left with *many* questions about whether any of this will be feasible without special attention from developers – and how the experience changes when you're using external devices powered by different platforms. How is a second screen with Android brains supposed to complement an Apple TV 4K? A *startup* expects to pull this off?

At least some answers should start trickling out soon: Telly already has beta testers using the TV, and the first shipments will make their way to customers in June. Media outlets will need to wait until the fall for review samples, which made me raise an eyebrow. But I have no doubt that some early Telly owners will be running traffic logs to see how often (and with whom) this device shares what it learns about the people bringing it into their homes. If ever there were a gadget that will have its network activity closely scrutinized, it's this thing.

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Some people have wondered what's to stop them from covering up the bottom screen or mounting the TV in such a way that it would be hidden. Yes, Telly thought of that possibility, too. It turns out the TV's software interface makes the idea impractical. TellyOS puts crucial elements down there, including HDMI inputs, volume info, other settings, and the

app tray.

Operating the TV would quickly get inconvenient in any scenario where the bottom display is obscured. “If you cover it, you really can’t navigate your main screen,” Pozin explained. He likens the secondary screen to a car’s dashboard and hopes that people will come to appreciate and personalize it instead of trying to somehow hide it.

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“This is an agreement, right? Unlike every other TV that you buy today that scrapes all your data without telling you, delivers you ads without compensating you for it, monitors your viewership habits, and sells that measurement without paying you for it... we’re changing that model,” Lawrence said. “In exchange for the change, we’re telling you what we’re doing up front, you’re answering survey questions up front to tell us what you want to share,

we're giving you a \$1,000 TV, and there are ongoing rewards every month that you'll be compensated for in some way."

Telly mandates that its free TV must be the primary one in your household

"As part of that arrangement, there are some things *you're* agreeing to. It has to be the primary TV in the home," he said. Telly partially assumes a 55-inch TV will be the primary set owing to its size alone, but it'll also keep an eye on hours used to verify that someone's actually watching on a regular basis. How much is too much or too little? No one mentioned any firm requirements during our meeting.

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physical shutter by default, and Telly says it's never used for anything related to the company's business.

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dark: [> a: hover]: shadow-highlight-franklin
[> a]: shadow-underline-black dark: [> a]: shadow-underline-white">A verdict on picture quality will have to wait**

During our conversation, I only got to see the Telly's 55-inch 4K display idly showing the Google TV homescreen. Without any video demos, I can't credibly speak to picture quality yet. If you want an immediate impression, it looked like any budget-tier panel you'd get from Vizio, TCL, or Hisense with vivid color and decent contrast. I'm more curious about brightness. Throwing in HDR isn't good for much if the panel can't crank high enough to showcase those highlights.

Telly is fond of saying this is “a \$1,000 TV,” but I’m not convinced that’s all in the display; the company has been mum on specifics like whether it offers full-array local dimming, for example. The integrated soundbar between the two screens is certainly part of that claimed value. The bottom screen was noticeably less dense in pixel count and looked slightly lower in quality in general. That said, it was running in a “demo mode” during the briefing, and Telly said it won’t be anywhere near that bright during normal usage. It has different modes and automatically dims when you’re watching content so as not to be distracting. In an ideal world, this would be an OLED screen, but that TV wouldn’t be a free one.

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the product, but you know that already

Telly views its product as a gold mine for advertisers since owners will be volunteering valuable and accurate details about who they are and what they like. (Note that all the ads you see in these images are just for demo purposes.) And so far, the company claims it's getting a lot of interest from the sought-after Gen Z and millennial demographics. "It's not that there's a gotcha," said Pozin. "You're paying for cable *and* you're getting ads. When you're buying a Samsung TV, you're buying a Samsung TV *and* you're getting ads. We're just disrupting the business model and, at the same time, creating the smartest TV on the planet."

The Telly's ads will be actionable – think ordering Uber Eats right from the TV – and, in some cases, localized. "Let's say this is a national Toyota spot running during Monday Night Football. We can show a local Toyota ad in 200 local markets, specifically in your area, with

a specific offer that actually exists that you can take action on. That's much better than seeing an ad for a Tundra. It's a better experience for both sides."

A presence detection sensor inside Telly can determine whether people are actually in front of the TV during ad spots. That sensor also puts Telly into low-power mode when you've left the room. "It's completely anonymous, doesn't record anything, doesn't see your face," said Lawrence. "It's simply a wave sensor – almost the exact same chip actually that's built into Nest."