

RISING STARS

WHY YOUR DOGS SHOULD BE WATCHING TV

By Zara Stone



10
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THE DAILY DOSE
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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because this might be a way to better love your best friend. Seriously.

We're on set, and Ron Levi is trying to persuade Brixton to finish his scene. He wants the golden retriever to loop in front of the camera and return to his owner. "Do it for a treat!" he beseeches, crouching in the grass.

Brixton bounds out of frame and straight into the bushes. "Squirrel," nods Levi.

For seven years, squirrels, squeaky balls and pooper scoopers have been Levi's everyday accoutrements. As the founder and chief content officer of DOGTV— which runs commercial-free [programming for dogs](#), 24 hours a day, seven days a week — the 42-year-old deeply comprehends the inner workings of canine minds. And why? Because dogs get bored too, research shows, and boredom when owners are at work or kids are at school can lead to destructive behavior, like chewing on furniture and tearing up rugs — all among the major reasons owners ship their pets off to shelters. Since launching in 2013, DOGTV has grown to reach 14 countries and 23 million American homes. Programming varies, with each video running about five minutes in length. Stimulation videos show dogs taking walks or a pair of corgis splashing in the sea; relaxation programs feature snoozing pups.

It relies on \$5 monthly subscriptions and streams through DirecTV, Apple TV, Roku and more. (Charges vary abroad.) Levi's work is coming at [a fortunate time](#): Dogs are America's most popular pet, dwelling in 78 million homes. And Americans spent \$60.28 billion on their pets in 2015, in [increasingly wacky ways](#), a 56 percent rise since 2006, according to the American Pet Products Association.



People line up to get their dogs on television.

Levi, a Tel Aviv-born longtime radio host and TV writer, stumbled upon the idea in 2007 when he grew worried that his cat Charlie was bored while he logged long hours. He'd seen Charlie perk up when kittens played on TV, and wondered if feline-focused programming might allay dullness. But, as Levi discovered, separation distress occurs only in a few highly attached cats. Dogs are a different story. So in 2009, Levi left his radio role and began creating animal-only content for an on-demand channel. Orders were so promising that he reached out to fellow Israeli Gilad Neumann, now DOGTV's CEO and the former head of Tel Aviv-based Jasmine TV media group. As luck would have it, Neumann had been looking for a project with international scope. "He made me believe it," Neumann says.

When I meet Levi, he's dressed in all black, sporting skinny jeans. He's soft-spoken but grows animated when the dogs trot out, pursing his lips and tutting, making kissy sounds. He doesn't currently own a dog — he gets to spend enough time with them at work, he says — but he grew up around a beloved family pup. He recalls the early days of starting the company — and the mockery. "People said I was crazy."

On location in San Francisco's Bayview Park, I meet three pet owners who heard about the shoot through social media and word of mouth. None are DOGTV subscribers, but they are considering it. Fifty-year-old Jane Phillips, proud owner of Teddy, an immaculate white-coated West Highland terrier, says that her pup likes watching regular TV, turning his head whenever dog food commercials come onscreen. Today is a display of one of Levi's greatest business assets in action: DOGTV enjoys extremely low production costs, with a crew of four people plus a single editor — because he doesn't pay the talent. People line up to get their dogs on television, he says. His release forms are covered with tiny paw prints.

"I was skeptical," says San Francisco-based dog trainer Beverly Ulbrich, also known as the Pooch Coach. What was the point of TV content for dogs? She'd rather they play outside and spend time with their owners. But after browsing DOGTV's video library and seeing dogs react positively, with wagging tails and soothed expressions, her views shifted. "Dogs do have separation anxiety," she says. "Sure, they can watch *Animal Planet*, but there's fire and crocodiles — scary stuff. DOGTV is peaceful and nice. And they've thought about the details." For example, dogs see color on a more limited spectrum, so every scene is color-corrected to blue and yellow; the video frame rate is adjusted to provide flicker-free viewing since dogs see movement at a higher rate than humans. Sound is also optimized for canine frequencies. It's soothing for human ears, too, all chill music and hyper-bright colors.

But can TV really help adapt doggy behavior? Yes and no, says animal behavior expert John Bradshaw. He writes us over email that the science supporting DOGTV's claim of dog enjoyment and benefit from television is "circumstantial" — its 60-plus list of studies includes one from Tufts University and one that Bradshaw co-authored. But Bradshaw's study focused on rehabilitating puppy-mill dogs with TV — not entertaining normal adult dogs. Yet the science may not matter when it comes down to the money. DOGTV is expanding into Asia with a focus on China, and in 2014, Discovery bought a minority stake. Copycat channel FidoTV launched on DISH last year with the tagline "All dogs. All day." It has not responded to a request for comment.

As we watch the dogs sniff each other's butts and tussle with a red ball, Lisa Kaiser, owner of Boogie and Tiger, a berger Picard and a German shepherd, tells me she spends as much as \$1,500 a year on her canine companions. Here we are, at DOGTV's primary audience. "My dogs have particular tastes," she says.

Zara Stone. OZY Author

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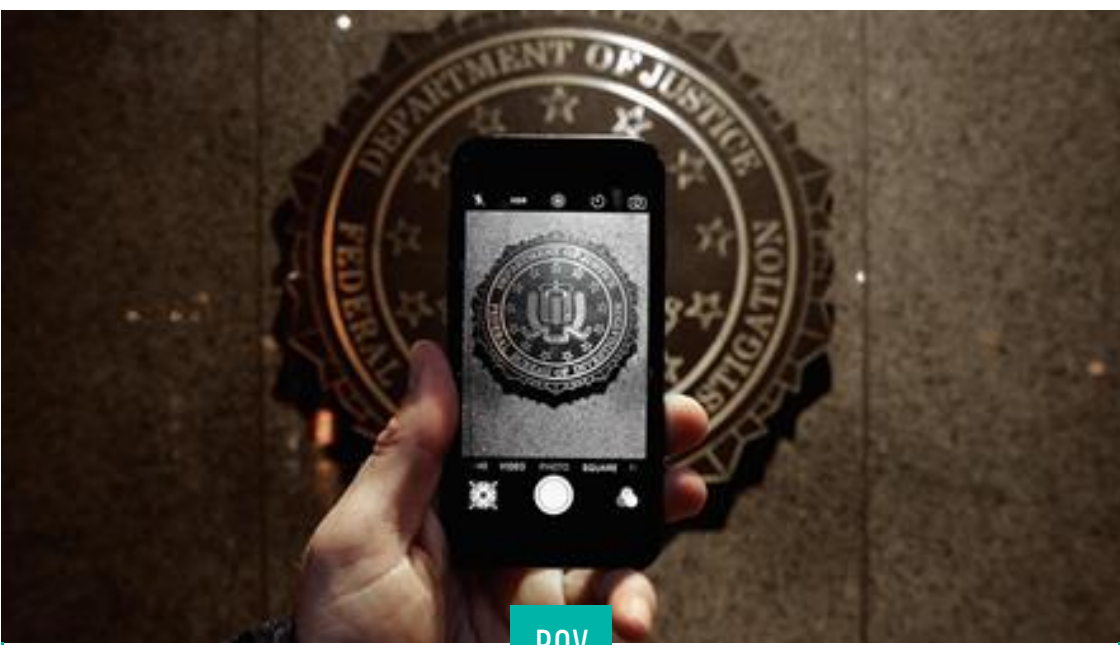
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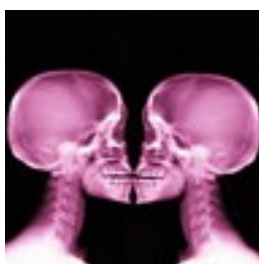
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