

How Dogs Use Skype

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Dogs can't get enough of Skype. Humans, apparently, can't get enough of watching dogs using Skype on YouTube. A video uploaded to YouTube on January 11 of a dog using Skype to talk with other dogs has gone viral with over 700,000 views as of press time. The video, called "My Dog Can Skype!," shows a wire-haired fox terrier "using" Skype and barking wildly at another dog.

Wasel told Fast Company that the idea for the video came from her dog Gaytor howling at her family's answering machine in high school when he heard familiar voices. "We figured that if it worked through the phone, maybe we could try something on the computer. He reacts to other noises, and he when he see's other dogs he sometimes does it. He reacted to (the other dog) howling like he usually does," Wasel said.

Humanity love novelty. Dogs are adorable, and dogs performing the same tasks as human beings has always been a source of humor and fascination—after all, there's a reason why paintings of dogs playing poker have persisted for more than 100 years. The idea that canines could adapt to the latest trends in technology is attractive to viewers, and it's something viewers love.

However, dogs don't experience technology in the same way that humans do. For the past few years, there has been a cottage industry in iPad apps for pets. Both dogs and cats have very different sensory toolkits than humans. Apart from obvious differences in paws and hearing, dogs experience the world in an entirely different way. Compared to humans, canines rely on their sense of smell for communication and interaction far, far more—and their sense of vision means they see a computer monitor or tablet screen far differently.

One special challenge for dogs is that the compressed audio of Skype makes it especially hard for them to hear the person or the animal on the other end of the line. There is also anecdotal evidence of the high-pitched connection noises on Skype making dogs uncomfortable, but this has not been verified by any academic literature. Scientists have, however, conducted research into the ways dogs use Skype. An upcoming paper which will be presented at the 2013 Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing conference investigated the feasibility of creating Skype-like video systems for pet owners to communicate with their pets.

Researchers Carman Neustaedter of Simon Fraser University and Jennifer Golbeck of the University of Maryland found that a majority of pet owners surveyed felt Skype, or similar systems, would be a good way of either talking or watching their pets.

The logistical obstacles of dog owners or other dogs remotely interacting, however, are daunting. Canine psychology is different from human psychology, and there are issues of disembodiment to take into account. More importantly, the bulk of pet owners surveyed were interested in using video chat as a way of interacting with pets while they're away from home. Both Neustaedter and Golbeck pointed out a simple fact—if video chat is making a dog uncomfortable while alone at home, there's no way for the canine to actually turn the chat off.

In an interview, Neustaedter told Fast Company that collaborator Golbeck made a custom videoconferencing system for dogs last year that was shown at the ACM CHI conference. Golbeck's canine videoconferencing system combined a Skype connection with an interface that also combined custom sound and visual elements aimed at dogs. Sounds like squeaky toys were used to draw the dog's attention to the computer, and visual elements on the monitor such as an on-screen laser pointer and a swimming tadpole were integrated. According to Neustaedter, the researchers had "very good" results in having trained dogs follow commands over a Skype audio connection.

"As a second part of the research, we implemented a prototype system and tested it with ten dogs and their owners. We had a sound panel and a couple screens with moving targets. The dogs loved the sounds, but I was surprised that the motion on the screen was of almost no interest to the dogs. They seem to be uninterested in looking at the screen, but they really listen," Golbeck said.

For many pet owners, Skype and other video conferencing services essentially serve as an interactive form of pet cameras such as the Eyenimal and the Petcam, albeit at a lower price point. Until more research is done, we won't really know what dogs are thinking when they engage with Skype. However, it's also safe to say we'll keep on putting our pets on Skype—because, after all, we're only human.

Several weeks ago, Fast Company also reported on the international launch of DogTV, a television station airing content geared towards dogs.

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