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Review: \$99 WikiReader Is a Pocket Encyclopedia

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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NEW YORK (AP) -- When I was a kid, my dad bought a copy of the Encyclopedia Britannica. It had 32 volumes and took up 4 feet in the book case. I loved to sit on the couch and flip through it, reading articles at random.

Now, I'm returning the favor, giving my father an encyclopedia that has the equivalent of 1,000 volumes. Yet it fits in his pocket, and it costs just \$99.

There are few better illustrations of the staggering advance of digital technology than the new WikiReader. It's the size of a thick table coaster, and contains nearly the entire text of the English-language [Wikipedia](#). That's 3.1 million articles, written and edited by volunteers around the globe.

The WikiReader is sold online and made by OpenMoko Inc., a Taiwanese company. The founder, Sean Moss-Pultz, says the inspiration for the gadget comes from the electronic translation dictionaries that are common in Asia.

Now, a lot of cell phones can access Wikipedia, so why would anyone want a WikiReader? Well, the fact that the WikiReader carries the text on a memory chip, rather than using an Internet connection, means you can use it anywhere: overseas, on a plane, in the subway. It's also faster and easier to use than most cell phones, and it has a bigger screen. The battery life is, to believe OpenMoko, outstanding. It says two AAA batteries will last in the WikiReader for a year, if you use it 15 minutes per day. I certainly wasn't able to exhaust it in a few weeks.

The face of the device is nearly filled by a monochrome LCD touch screen. To search the encyclopedia, you bring up an on-screen keyboard. To select links, you tap on them. To scroll, you move your finger across the glass.

There are four buttons: one for power, one for the search screen, one that lists the pages you just visited, and one that brings up a random article. I'm fond of that last one -- it brings back memories of my childhood reading habits.

Given the depth of Wikipedia, the Random button brings up the most obscure articles: An article about Caribbean vampire mythology is followed by the entry for a village in Poland, then a region of Antarctica, then the men's results from the 1967 Alpine Skiing World Cup, and so forth.

The simplicity of the device does come at a cost. It's hard to type search terms on the screen, and scrolling through long articles is tedious. There's no backlighting, so you can't read in weak light. Because the screen doesn't show color, the WikiReader doesn't even bother to show images.

Because the screen is narrow, the WikiReader doesn't show tabular material either. For

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instance, online, the "List of Battlestar Galactica episodes" is organized into a table, but it's missing from the device. OpenMoko says it plans to include tables once it figures out how to display them in a way that works on the screen.

The online Wikipedia changes every minute, but the WikiReader's content does not. It's a static snapshot. However, the manufacturer plans to provide free updates four times a year. To take advantage of that, you'd have to extract the chip from the WikiReader's battery compartment, stick it in a computer's card reader, and download the entire database.

OpenMoko also plans to provide a subscription service that mails new memory cards with updated content four times per year, for \$29.

Limitations aside, the WikiReader is a cool idea and comes at the right time of the year. It makes an interesting gift for people without "smart" phones, or are heading out to see the world. Bookish kids will be entertained -- there's no dinosaur you can't find in Wikipedia. And imagine what one of these could mean to a poor but literate teenager in a developing country.

Wikipedia doesn't encompass all of human knowledge, but it's certainly a delicious slice of it, and the fact that we can now pocket it is something to be amazed by and thankful for.

On the Net:

<http://thewikireader.com>

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