

## **Closing the Book: Encyclopedia Britannica goes all digital**

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*The world's best-known encyclopedia announced today that it is retiring all its print editions*

O, brave new world that has so few paper products in it! The earth's best-known encyclopedia (or *encyclopaedia*, if you want to be all proper about it) announced today that it is producing no more print editions. Like so many newspapers and publishing houses, Encyclopaedia Britannica is going completely digital—after 244 years of providing some of the finest page-flipping man has ever seen. While the trees may breathe easy and people who write “r” instead of “are” may not understand why this is news, a certain crowd will shed a nostalgic tear for this 32-volume set, once the lifeblood of door-to-door salesmen and false comfort that there was a finite, digestible amount of facts worth knowing.

One look at the corporate website should have told us this was coming. The home page shows a father and son perusing definitions — on a laptop. There's a happy student finding answers — on a tablet. And there's a man amused and engrossed by the compendium — on his cell phone. “The end of the print set is something we've foreseen for some time,” Jorge Cauz, president of Encyclopaedia Britannica, said in a press release. “It's the latest step in our evolution from the print publisher we were, to the creator of digital learning products we are today.”

The books were first published in Edinburgh, Scotland, before America existed. Americans eventually bought the brand at the turn of the 20th century. The door-to-door technique was perfected during the mid-1900s, and the company's first digital reference was created via LexisNexis in 1981. CD-ROMs came out in 1989 and Britannica went to the Web in 1994.

But despite dipping its toe into the e-water, Britannica didn't take the electronic world seriously enough — or fast enough — during the last 20 years. As people turned to the Internet with their questions, the company, maintaining faith in its bound products, saw sales dwindle. The Willy Loman days ended and the product struggled to balance Web traffic and needs for subscription revenue. (Yearly access to the site now costs \$70; full iPad access is \$1.99 per month.)

The final decision to put it all online makes sense, of course. It's costly and painstaking to produce a new edition of an enormous print product, a cultural symbol though it may be; meanwhile, a database is boundless and can be continually updated (and corrected) for relative peanuts. The company will concentrate on digital publishing and educational products, developing apps to make sure it's everywhere you want to be. The brand may become the equivalent of Wikipedia with fact-checking: Britannica Online allows readers to revise its entries “which are then published after editorial review and revision if necessary.” (Dear EB: Please keep your standards high.)

“We're digital, we're mobile, and we're social,” said Cauz in the release. “We're a very different company from 20 or 30 years ago.” To celebrate their transformation, the content on the site will be available for free for one week beginning March 14. So rest in peace, ye bound volumes. All nerds: pour one out for your fallen comrade.

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