

Out of Print

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If you were born before 1980 or worked in almost any library before about 2010, you probably remember print encyclopedias. They were staples of the library reference desk and a proud fixture of most middle-class American homes. Each encyclopedia consisted of a set of handsomely bound volumes that filled most of a shelf and promised to provide answers to virtually any question. Among the most popular were *Encyclopedia Americana*, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and *Collier's*, the three generally regarded as “adult encyclopedias” and sometimes collectively referred to as “the ABC’s.” Another staple of the reference desk, and long the best-selling encyclopedia in the United States, was *World Book*.¹

Today, print encyclopedias are nearly extinct, gone the way of the 3-cent postage stamp and the eight-team baseball league. *Collier's* ended its print edition in 1997. *Americana* stopped the presses for good in 2006, and *Britannica* announced in 2012 that the 2010 edition would be the last published on paper.² Today, only *World Book* continues to publish a new edition of its print encyclopedia each year. But many people think that the 2017 edition of *World Book*, its centennial edition, may well be its last.

Print encyclopedias died a natural death, for numerous practical reasons. As technology writer John Paul Titow explained in 2012:

So many things about printed encyclopedias seem insane now. The space that dozens of volumes takes up. How much an entire set weighs (well over 100 pounds). The fact that many middle class families used to have to pay for them in regular installments. How slowly they are updated with new information.³

Yet readers, libraries, and even our society as a whole were richer for having print encyclopedias, and we should mourn their passing.

A Product of the Enlightenment

The first encyclopedias that we would recognize as such appeared in the 1700s, during a period of intense intellectual activity called the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment emphasized reason and scientific inquiry, and encyclopedias were a logical outcome

of such thinking. Early encyclopedists wanted to gather knowledge from the foremost thinkers of the day and put it into a set of books small enough to be owned and read by individuals, enabling people to find answers for themselves.

Ephraim Chambers, an English mapmaker, published his two-volume *Cyclopaedia, or the Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, in 1728. It resembled a dictionary more than an encyclopedia, but it included articles written by experts, was arranged in alphabetical order, and had cross-references to aid the search for information.⁴

In France, author Denis Diderot and mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert began to translate Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* into French but soon decided to produce a much more ambitious work of their own. In 1751, they brought out the first volume of their *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Encyclopedia or rational dictionary of sciences, arts and trades). The *Encyclopédie* aimed, Diderot explained, to change the way people thought. It advocated tolerance, opposed religious fanaticism, and promoted rational inquiry. Such leading intellectuals as the mathematician Condorcet, the physicist Leonhard Euler, and the philosophers Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire all contributed articles to the *Encyclopédie*, which was published in 35 huge folio volumes between 1751 and 1780.⁵

The *Encyclopédie* had enormous impact. Through its attempt to classify learning and convey the sum of human knowledge to its readers, it helped spread some of the most important intellectual and social developments of its time. It became the model for nearly all future encyclopedias.

Publishers in other countries soon brought out their own encyclopedias. "A Society of Gentlemen in Scotland" published the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in three volumes from 1768 to 1771.⁶ Two German publishers, Gotthelf Renatus Löbel and Christian Wilhelm Francke, brought out the *Conversations-Lexikon mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die gegenwärtigen Zeiten* (Conversational encyclopedia with particular consideration of the present times) in five volumes from 1796 to 1808. In 1809, the bookseller Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus acquired the *Conversations-Lexikon* and expanded it into *Der Große Brockhaus*, later renamed the *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*.⁷ Pierre Larousse, a French educator, published *Le Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX^e siècle* (The great universal dictionary of the nineteenth century) in 15 volumes from 1865 to 1876.⁸

The first multi-volume encyclopedia in the United States was *Encyclopedia Americana*, which came out in 13 volumes from 1829 to 1833. Francis Lieber, a German-American political scientist, translated much of it from *Der Große Brockhaus*.⁹ *Collier's New Encyclopedia* was first published in 16 volumes in 1902.¹⁰ The first seven volumes of *World Book* appeared in 1917, with an eighth volume published in 1918.¹¹

The Golden Age

The golden age of encyclopedias was arguably the 1950s through the 1980s. Many libraries and schools had four or five sets, which they replaced on a revolving basis, typically every three years. An army of door-to-door salesmen—they were almost always men—peddled the books to homes, schools, and libraries. Most families bought their encyclopedia on the installment plan, after smooth-talking salesmen convinced the parents that their children's education would benefit. But here's the thing: the salesmen

were not wrong. I spent many happy childhood hours browsing aimlessly through my family's set of *World Book*, letting serendipity carry me from "Paige, Satchel" to "Painting" to "Palestine." Among my favorite articles were those on Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology, and the entries on diseases (the more disgusting, the better). When later I became an editor for *World Book*, the scholars we invited to write articles often told us that they had loved *World Book* as a child and were honored to be asked to contribute. Many said they were repaying a debt of gratitude.

The End of "Dead-Tree" Encyclopedias

With the advent of the Internet and the emergence of the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, print encyclopedias fell on hard times. Encyclopedias on paper are large, heavy, and expensive. Finding information in a print encyclopedia is slower than searching by keyword in its digital counterpart. Editors cannot update a "dead-tree" encyclopedia as easily or often as they can an online encyclopedia, and the number of articles they can include is far more limited. The 2010 *Britannica*, for example, had 65,000 articles, cost \$1,395, and weighed 129 pounds.¹² *Wikipedia* has more than 5 million articles, is free, and weighs only as much as the smartphone or computer used to access it.¹³

Wikipedia is an open, crowd-sourced publication; its main page says, "Welcome to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit."¹⁴ Its use of amateur volunteer authors makes it vulnerable to certain flaws. For example, its choice of topics can seem quirky. Some categories of articles, such as those on computer science or statistics, are hard to understand for anyone without an advanced degree in those fields. Technology editor Harry McCracken described *Wikipedia*'s dominance as "the triumph of an often amateurish, sometimes inaccurate, occasionally incomprehensible home-made encyclopedia over a reliable research work crafted by experts." Nevertheless, many librarians and educators regard *Wikipedia* as a comprehensive, mostly accurate source of information and a worthy replacement for print encyclopedias. "If I were forced to choose between them," McCracken concluded, "I'd opt for the more exhaustive, ambitious, accessible, continuously-updated, no-cost Wikipedia in a heartbeat. In fact, I already have."¹⁵

Yet, we have lost something with the vanishing of "dead-tree" encyclopedias besides the pleasure of flipping through the pages and reading whatever strikes our fancy. Students who read print encyclopedias learned how to find information in reference books by using alphabetical order, running heads, headwords, cross-references, and—usually as a last resort—the index. These information-seeking skills would stand them in good stead throughout their lives. Starting with an authoritative reference work such as an encyclopedia at the beginning of a research project could give students a good foundation, help them sort through the vast amounts of material they would encounter, and provide a point of comparison when they moved on to other resources. In addition, reading an article in print enabled students to absorb more information, to read more deeply, and to better remember what they read. As science reporter Maia Szalavitz observed in *Time* magazine:

Some studies suggest that there may be significant advantages in printed books if your goal is to remember what you read long-term . . . Different media have different



strengths—and it may be that physical books are best when you want to study complex ideas and concepts that you wish to integrate deeply into your memory.¹⁶

“Organized Knowledge”

Perhaps the major shortcoming of *Wikipedia* is that it has been produced under no plan, with no system to guide what topics it covers. Not long ago, for example, it had some 400 separate articles on individual characters and creatures in the Japanese video game *Pokémon*.¹⁷ When its extensive coverage of the game drew criticism, *Wikipedia* merged most of the short articles into the lengthy entry “Pokémon,” and only the most notable creatures and characters kept their own articles. Somewhat after the fact, *Wikipedia* also added an entry called “Portal: Contents/Overviews” that divides its database into 12 sections, “each providing an overview of a major subject area, presenting key articles in the respective subject.”¹⁸

The creators of print encyclopedias, on the other hand, strove from the beginning to organize their articles in a well-thought-out fashion and to produce correlations of all areas of knowledge instead of collections of miscellaneous information. As David Bell, a historian at Princeton University, explained:

The great paper encyclopedias of the past had other, grander ambitions: They aspired to provide an overview of all human knowledge, and, still more boldly, to put that knowledge into a coherent, logical order. Even if they mostly organized their articles alphabetically, they also sought ways to link the material together thematically—all of it.¹⁹

Bell added:

It might be argued that mapping out human knowledge has always, necessarily, been a quixotic project . . . But the ambition mattered. It mattered that one could look at a stack of volumes and say: Here are vast libraries, distilled down into an essence of human knowledge, and organized in a logical order.²⁰

The title page of the first edition of *Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1771 said it was “COMPILED UPON A NEW PLAN. IN WHICH the different SCIENCES and ARTS are digested into Distinct Treatises or Systems.”²¹ *World Book* was first published with the subtitle *Organized Knowledge in Story and Picture*. Print encyclopedias, concludes David Bell,

testified to the hope that, ultimately, human beings had at least a measure of control over the overpowering torrents of facts and ideas that they collectively produce . . . The disappearance of these grand printed volumes, while inevitable, is yet another depressing sign of just how much we are now adrift in the limitless oceans of information.²²

A Fond Farewell

With the vanishing of print encyclopedias, we must bid farewell to those handsome volumes that brought us so much information and pleasure. Business consultants Philip Evans and Thomas Wurster said, “It is not clear that anybody will ever again write works of scholarship comparable to the greatest editions of *Britannica*.”²³ Culture writer



Cassie Murdoch lamented, "Until they find a way to recreate the experience of holding the weighty tome in one's hand and inhaling the almost ancient smell of Encyclopaedia Britannica through your electronic device, we can still rightly sulk about the death of these classic books."²⁴

David Bell concluded, "With the disappearance of paper encyclopedias, a part of the Western intellectual tradition is disappearing as well."²⁵ Let us observe a moment of silence, then, for print encyclopedias. We will miss them.

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Notes

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