

iPod Touch Tip #6: RSS Readers Still Missing The Mark

Having quick and easy access to information is one of the strong points of the iPhone and the iPod Touch. With their online capabilities, the Internet is at your fingertips, and just about any piece of information is just a few taps away. One group of applications that provides news information is the â??RSS Readerâ?• category. These programs provide news feeds in a (typically) organized and concise manner, allowing you to catch up news from your favorite sites wherever you are. But what if you are not online? What if an iPhone user is on a subway or in an area that has marginal or no coverage. What about an iPod Touch user who is not within range of a WiFi connection? Providing offline access to RSS feeds is a worthy endeavor, and AppStore has a dozen or so RSS readers that may fit your needs, however they all currently miss the mark in providing a complete offline reading experience. Read on to find out whyâ?¦.

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All of the RSS Reader apps in AppStore provide pretty much the same content, however their method of presentation and execution spans a wide spectrum. Some apps require a network connection to display anything. With these apps, news feeds are loaded in real-time so you are always up-to-date, however if you are offline, you simply will not see any content. (I personally question this approach as I may as well just use a decent WebApp.) Others provide excellent offline reading capabilities with articles organized by feed, folders, date, etc.

The feature set is growing in this line of apps. Some have lots of eye candy (at least one uses the CoverFlow concept in presenting the feed list) and some provide synchronization to online accounts such as Google Reader and NewsGator ensuring that regardless of how you access these accounts, they will always be up-to-date. But despite the host of features and ease-of-use, thereâ??s still one key feature that is missing from every application in this category: The ability to pre-fetch and cache embedded images within articles.

As an iPod Touch user, I donâ??t always have network connectivity, so offline functionality is essential. AppStore applications like WeDict, Acro Bible, and Bookshelf, and Jailbreak applications like Wiki2Touch provide incredible acces to amazing content that is always available online or offline. As of this writing, every RSS reader in AppStore lacks the ability to provide full offline contentâ??both article text and associated embedded images. There are excellent applications that provide an intuitive, fast, and comprehensive reading experience, but if you want to see embeded images in articles, you must be online,

or you must have at least viewed the article once while online. Omitting the images removes a significant part of the reading experience.

Now I do realize that syncing dozens, if not hundreds of images could amount to a much longer sync session, but thatâ??s a tradeoff I would welcome if I could have offline access to all of the content. So here is my plea to all developers of RSS Reader applications for the iPhone/iPod Touch: Please add the option to pre-fetch and cache embeded images for offline reading. And to stand out ahead of the competition, provide more granular control so that the user can really tailor what gets updated. For example, let the user toggle pre-fetching on a feed-by-feed basis. Have a setting to only pre-fetch images for the n-number of articles or articles received within the last n-days, etc.

Most of the current AppStore RSS Readers are very well thought-out, well executed, and provide great information both online and offline. Just donâ??t stop short when the user goes offline.

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Date
11/08/2026
Date Created
08/28/2008