

Review: Amazon Echo Dot offers greatest hits in slimmer package

April 25 2016, by Jim Rossman, The Dallas Morning News



When I reviewed the Amazon Echo last July, I said I believed we were all going to have something like this in our homes in the future. After a few months of owning my own Echo, I'm convinced I'm right.

The \$180 Echo is a wireless speaker combined with a virtual assistant called Alexa.

The Echo is finally getting everyday use in our house, but I found we don't really need all the Echo's functionality.

One of the Echo's main features is as a wireless music player, but in our house, a Sonos wireless speaker system pipes music to several rooms.

I'm sure a good chunk of the Echo's \$180 cost is for a decent-sounding speaker system that gets no use from me. I love the Echo's virtual assistant capabilities, but I don't really need another way to play music in my house, especially if I can't sync it up in every room like I can with Sonos.

Luckily for me, Amazon read my mind and introduced a new Echo product, the \$89 Echo Dot, which is exactly what I wanted - it's Alexa without the big speaker.

The Dot has a tiny speaker so you can interact with Alexa, but it really shines when you connect it to speakers you already own through an aux-out port or Bluetooth.

In my house, I'm connecting the Dot to my Sonos Connect's auxiliary input port.

Now I can say, "Alexa, play my James Taylor station from Pandora," and the music is funneled through my Sonos system all over the house.

Many better clock radios also have an aux-in jack, and I see the Dot as the perfect bedside companion.

In fact, since our Echo sits on one side of the house in the living room,

we placed the Dot in the bedroom so we can use Alexa from both ends of the house.

The Dot looks exactly like an Echo with the top 2 inches chopped off. It has the same array of microphones around its top edge, which rotates to adjust the volume.

Like the Echo, the Dot is always listening for its trigger word, which is Alexa by default, but it can also be changed to Echo or Amazon. When the trigger word is spoken, the top of the Dot lights up with blue LEDs. Whatever you say next is transmitted instantly to Amazon's server for translation, and your command is transmitted back.

There is an Alexa companion app for your smartphone or tablet that lets you configure the Echo or Dot. In the app, you will list all the commands you've spoken, complete with an audio snippet of your voice. The app lists what it thinks you said and asks if it heard you correctly. You can submit feedback to Amazon if Alexa didn't understand or didn't do what you asked.

You can also help the Dot's voice recognition by using the voice training portion of the app. You'll be asked to read aloud 25 different phrases that will help Alexa understand your commands.

HOME AUTOMATION

In my previous review, I said, "I can see the Echo being a great way to control complex home automations."

Amazon's been busy adding features to the Echo, including compatibility with many home automation hubs and products.

I've only had the Echo for a few months, and my wife and I are using it

several times per day to turn on and off our connected lights.

We have a Wink hub with a variety of connected light bulbs and an Emerson Sensi Wi-Fi thermostat.

I can control the lights, individually or in groups, and raise or lower the thermostat setting without getting out of bed.

Amazon has added support for Nest, Insteon, Lutron, SmartThings, Wink, LIFX, TP-Link, Ecobee and Philips Hue and some others.

I'm using an app called Yonomi that can connect to the Echo and to my Sonos system and act as a bridge between them.

The Dot shares all of the original Echo's features, including music streaming, audio books, shopping and to-do lists, timers and alarms, news and sports briefings and skills.

Echo skills are third-party integrations you can add as you like.

Skills include ordering a pizza from Domino's, calling an Uber, finding out what movies are playing nearby, paying your Capital One credit card bill and a few hundred more.

ONE MORE THING

Alongside the Echo Dot, Amazon also introduced the Echo Tap, a battery-powered version of the Echo designed to be used wherever it's convenient for you, like out by the pool.

The Tap is a tallish cylinder, like the original Echo, but it's shorter, and to conserve the battery, the microphones are not constantly listening for a wake word. To get Alexa's attention on the Tap, you press a button on

top.

But be aware, while the Tap is portable, you still have to be within range of a Wi-Fi network for any of Alexa's features to work.

WHICH ONE?

So now there are three Echo products - but which is right for you? All three feature Alexa.

The original Echo is a good choice for most households. Its speaker is perfect for bringing music to any room of the house. Many of my friends have one in their kitchen.

The Dot is for Echo users who have their own sound systems they'd like to use, and the Tap is suited for use in the backyard.

Frankly, I'm looking to sell my Echo and pick up another Dot, but the Dots are back-ordered until July.

By the way, the Tap (\$130) is available now on Amazon for all customers, but the Dot is restricted to Amazon Prime subscribers. It must be ordered through Amazon voice shopping on an Echo or a Fire TV's voice remote.

There is a limit of one Dot per order and two per customer.

So if you don't already have a Dot, it'll be a few months before you'll get one. But if you ask me, it's worth the wait.

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Pros: Small size fits anywhere, Alexa, audio out port, Bluetooth.

Cons: Not many. The built-in speaker is too small for quality music enjoyment.

Bottom line: This is the Echo I've been waiting for.

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Citation: Review: Amazon Echo Dot offers greatest hits in slimmer package (2016, April 25) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-04-amazon-echo-dot-greatest-slimmer.html>

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