

Samsung LE40A856S1W television

Information is king

by Jamie Carter published on 25 November 2008

Having once lived solely in beer cans, widgets are now taking over the world. This 40-inch screen can display widgets for shares, weather and news headlines as part of something called InfoLive. It's something that Samsung is hoping will give its new Series 8 LCD TVs a leg-up on the competition.

A tie-up between Samsung and Yahoo!, InfoLive depends on the TV's Ethernet port. Link that up to a broadband router and RSS feeds will instantly create those widgets, which can be set to your nearest big city. Although those widgets are easy enough to customise, or remove, in practice they're of limited appeal. The news headlines (entertainment, politics, sport etc) are far too brief and can only be expanded to a paragraph or so. The weather widget could appeal to some, but share price tracking? Not an especially entertaining pastime, especially at the moment.

Besides, the digital Teletext service that can also be called-up using this telly's built-in digital tuner does a far better job. The InfoLive portal is internet connectivity for the sake of it, and presumably designed largely for consumers in countries lacking Teletext-like TV services.

What is genuinely innovative on the LE40A856S1W is another information-driven feature descriptively called the Content Library. Stored on the TV's unique internal memory, this is a library of recipes, step-by-step fitness routines, simple games, picture montages and music; it's weakness is that it's all rather bland. The system is quite slow to operate, but once you're in you can even play a spot of ten-pin bowling using your remote. The blessing is that this flash memory content can be refreshed by installing updates from Samsung's website using a USB memory stick. Here's hoping Samsung does this regularly - it needs some work to make it a genuinely attractive feature.



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Away from such frivolousness, the LE40A856S1W is pretty good as a simple HDTV. Inside its attractive 44mm-slim "black rose" frame - in itself a better reason for buying than either InfoLive or Contents Library - the Full HD LCD screen is capable of some high-def antics at least in line with most TVs of this price.

That £1100 price tag certainly buys a lot of HDMI inputs: four to be precise, plus two remote controls. The main remote is an appallingly crowded and complex affair, stuffed with abbreviations for complex features and dominated by a sticky clickwheel that doesn't live up to its name.

Its Anynet+ feature lets you control other Samsung kit you may have that also uses the latest version of HDMI, but even that unlikely scenario isn't coped with: only one of the HDMI inputs works with this feature, and there's a deal of "searching" and "activating" messages that makes it less than convenient. The second remote is circular and smaller than a phone, and concentrates solely on changing channels and adjusting volume. A nice extra, but it's likely to get lost or go unused.

Other nifty features include Wiselink PRO, which plays some video, MP3 music and digital photos stored on a USB stick. It also offers to do a similar job by connecting to any PC or Mac on a home network, but this proves to be yet another cumbersome process that often stalls the entire TV itself. If internet TVs are coming, don't mistake this for a first-generation attempt: it's nothing of the sort.

The real attraction of the LE40A856S1W is its picture quality, though we're not convinced Samsung has taken things much further since the last LCD TVs in our test rooms. Using Samsung's own DNLe Pro image processing, the LE40A856S1W makes the best of its Full HD resolution screen. Incredible detail is obvious in close-ups, and its effective Movie Plus 100Hz anti

At a glance

What is it?

40-inch LCD TV

Good

High-def detail, four HDMI inputs, stunning slim design

Bad

Cheap remote control, lacklustre built-in content, inconsistent picture quality

Verdict

InfoLive and Contents Library features prove mere distractions to what is a respectable HDTV. But when compared to the competition, the LE40A856S1W proves a decent value telly

Price £1100

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10

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-blur mode helps keep things moving and pictures more precise.

Though black areas of an image do lack detail, the LE40A856S1W does actually manage to produce near-jet black. That's no mean feat for a LCD TV and it does help boost all-round colour, but differing black parts of any given picture do tend to merge into one. It significantly lessens the appeal of most movies, though this is not unusual - most LCD TVs have a similar issue.

Freeview pictures from its digital tuner are very watchable, as are DVDs, but high-def TV channels do lack precision, with picture noise blighting backgrounds.

VERDICT

In practice the InfoLive and Contents Library features prove mere distractions to what is a respectable HDTV. The "less is more" cliché certainly applies, but when compared to the competition, the LE40A856S1W proves a decent value telly prime for a spot of blur-free and detailed high-def gaming and Blu-ray.