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## Paper is dead - has PDF followed suit?

By Tony Mobily

*Note: Tony will not address comments made to this editorial. Please refer to [his blog entry](#) for more information.*

When I was 14, I bought my first computer magazine. Yes, I was a late starter! What I found amazing was that, after buying my first issue, I understood pretty none of what I had read. There were terms like CPU, RAM, protected mode, driver... I had simply no idea. I was partially excused: we are talking almost 20 years ago, and back then many of those terms weren't as popular as they are now.

Six months (and six issues) later, I realised that I was finally able to read that first magazine cover to cover and actually understand (nearly) everything. I finally had the vocabulary and the information to "get it"—and it felt great!

A little while later, I started advising all of my friends that they should buy and read magazines about their interests, if they were serious about them (a lot of them, as it turned out, were!). When they asked me why, I would answer: because you need the vocabulary, you need to know what's going on in your field.

Magazines were really important. The world's magazine market was booming, and publishers were undoubtedly happy.

Then, the internet came.

The shift was significant. Everybody knew it, but nobody was able to predict where it would all end up. Would contents become a per-pay privilege even on the internet? Would individuals start competing against multimillionaire companies and eventually kill them?

The war between bloggers and established journalism is under everybody's eyes. What is clear, is that paper magazines—once the cultural centre and virtual community of many topics—have become more and more irrelevant.

The paper magazine market has been slowing down significantly. People are not buying magazines as much—they are browsing the web. People are not paying for ad-infested magazines—they are reading online articles and occasionally clicking on ads.

At the beginning of the revolution, the PDF format was considered the bridge between the paper and the online world. Adobe did something very smart when they released the full PDF specifications (and then, later on, did something very stupid when they tried to keep for themselves the "enhancements", but that's another story). With PDFs, you could publish something electronically, and be sure that it would look exactly the same as it would look on paper. Many people believed that most of the paper magazines would simply turn into PDF ones, sold on the net. That step obviously (luckily?) didn't happen. At the end of the revolution, very few PDF magazines actually existed.

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Why? Well, the world took an entirely different direction, in terms of contents and revenue—a direction that steered away from PDFs. Today:

- Most income with online information comes from online banners. Although it is possible to publish clickable banners in PDF files, it's not straightforward and it's not the "norm".
- Publishing in HTML format is very easy, and it doesn't require any composition efforts. Forget about Pagemaker, Quark XPress, and so on.
- Most of the time, it's actually easier to read information from a web site than a PDF file, since PDFs often require horizontal scrolling and are more awkward to read.
- Web sites end up in a person's bookmark or RSS feeds. PDF files end up in some obscure folder and forgotten about.
- PDFs are much better in terms of printing. However, not many people seem to be willing to print their PDFs.
- PDFs tend to be big, monolithic files, whereas web sites are made up of smaller pages. Big monolithic files are every web server's enemy.
- It's easy to point to a specific web page. It's not straightforward to do so with PDFs—and even if you do, you will have to download the full PDF document to read a specific page
- Google doesn't index PDF files very well. It's hard to get decent pageranking if your web site based on information stored in PDF files.
- PDF is fantastic for distributing application forms (for example for banks etc.). However, you can hardly make money by distributing application forms...
- Did I mention that composition is expensive?

Adobe could have addressed a lot of these problems very easily. For example, they could have offered a more straightforward, standard way of publishing banners in PDF files, allowing even Javascript (and therefore allowing Google banners). They could have offered templates for this, as well as published ways of making sure that there was no need for double scrolling while reading a document. Now, it's too late—and admittedly, even if they had done all of the right things, the web would have probably won anyway.

As you've probably already noticed, we have ourselves given up on releasing Free Software Magazine in PDF format. As far as we are concerned, PDF is gone—at least from our web site. We will probably still allow people to download the PDF files of the old issues. However, now we can focus more on the contents, and less on composition and distribution of big, clumsy files.

The world has changed significantly. Magazines used to be the cultural centre of every possible topic—and they used to sell well. Today, the internet is slowly but surely taking the place of magazines—and taking more and more advertising money away from paper publishing.

Paper—as well as PDF—is now a thing of the past. Web sites are gaining importance—at full throttle. Publishers need to adapt—and need to do it fast.

The alternative, is to painfully become irrelevant and fade away.

## Biography

[Tony Mobily](#) (/user/2" title="View user profile.): Tony is the founder and the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine

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