Like most publishers, The Financial Times’ initial foray into tablets was a native iPad app, which the publication launched right after the iPad debuted in April 2010. “We were the first in Europe when the iPad came out to produce a truly dynamic digital edition that wasn’t just a facsimile of the newspaper but was literally updated throughout the day,” said Stephen Pinches, group product manager, emerging technologies at The Financial Times.

But a mere 14 months later, the London-based financial newspaper was the first major publisher to replace its native iPad app with one that’s browser-based. “We were out very early with the iPad app and wanted to replicate that with the Web application,” Pinches said. By the end of August, The Financial Times had created a new HTML5-based Web app and had removed its native application from Apple’s App Store.

Many publishers, including The Financial Times, a division of Pearson plc, have bristled at Apple’s terms of agreement: a 30% cut of sales of purchases made in the app and, in particular, ownership of valuable customer transaction data. Earlier this year, Apple said that by the end of June, companies had to remove links in their apps that sent customers to their external websites to purchase content. Now that it has left the App Store, The Financial Times doesn’t have to share revenues with Apple and has direct access to its subscriber information.

The Financial Times digital subscriptions took off after the newspaper launched its iPad app in April 2010.
ing app called How to Spend It, a luxury
publication that will carry advertising
but not a subscription button.

The Financial Times might be the
first major publisher to abandon the
iPad App Store, but it’s not alone and it
might not be the last. After Apple forced
Amazon to remove a button on the iPad
that launched the Kindle Store, Amazon
announced that, too, was introducing a
browser-based app built on HTML5.
The Kindle Cloud Reader “enables cus-
tomers to read Kindle books instantly
using only their Web browser—online
or offline—with no downloading or
installation required,” the company said
in early August. “The flexibility of HTML5
allows us to build one application that
automatically adapts to the platform
you’re using—from Chrome to iOS,”
said Dorothy Nicholls, director
of the Amazon Kindle. (This
fall, Amazon released its own
tablet, a 7-inch device called
Fire, which runs on the Android
operating system.)

Although the showdown
over Apple’s terms might have
been a catalyst for The Financial
Times’ decision to leave Apple’s
App Store, the company had been
working on a browser-based app for
the iPad for many months, mostly to
avoid the hassles of developing dif-
ferent native apps for every new plat-
form that comes down the pike. “We’re
not in the business of building apps.
That’s not our core competency, we’re
a news organization,” said Pinches. “We
want to focus our energy on the produc-
tion of news and investing in good jour-
nalism. The best way to do that is to have,
essentially, one code base and one appli-
cation framework that we can roll out to
multiple platforms because that massively
reduces the cost and complexity of deliver-

ing the content while not compromising
the user experience. You can do most of
the things in the browser that you can do
in a native application.”

The Financial Times Web app on an
iPhone or an iPad feels very much like a native
application because the publication has taken
advantage of some of the features and
aspects of HTML5 and CSS3, including local
storage for offline reading, Sencha touch for
touchscreen interactivity, such as swiping
and scrolling, and the ability to load the
app as a fullscreen
application in the
mobile browser, hid-
ing the Safari naviga-
tion controls.

**HTML:**
**INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY**
The Financial Times began experimenting
with HTML5 in November 2010, when it
launched an app in the
Android market for Sam-
sung’s tablet, the Galaxy
Tab. Although the app
appeared to be native to
the tablet, about 90% of it
was actually HTML,
Pinches said. “We found we could develop
much quicker than using native code and
we could use core skills we already knew
from the Web,” he said. Success with the
browser-based HTML app emboldened the
company to develop it further. “If we had got-
ten to something critical and couldn’t do it,
we’d think again. But we never got to that
point,” Pinches said. “Our attitude was that
HTML is innocent until proven guilty.”

The two big things about mobile,
Pinches said, are multitouch screens
...The Financial Times walked away from the App Store because maintaining its relationship with subscribers is critical to the publication’s future.

and size. “Often you’re dealing with multiple size screens from small to very large, all of which you expect the content to fit nicely,” said Pinches. The Financial Times designed small, medium and large templates to accommodate a variety of devices, and the content flows into the appropriate template depending on the screen resolution of the device in use. “It’s much more based on a templated design than having editorial teams squirreling away producing the iPad edition, the Android edition and whatever else comes along,” he said.

CUSTOMERS COULDN’T TELL THE DIFFERENCE
Customer response has been favorable, Pinches said, and most users haven’t been able to tell the difference between the native app and the Web app. Financial Times said that the Web app has attracted more than 370,000 visitors, with 52% saving it to their home screen (saving the browser app to the iPad’s home screen is the equivalent of installing a native app). The Web app has significantly boosted mobile traffic, said The Financial Times, and it is now its biggest channel for digital subscriptions. A fifth of total page views on FT.com are coming from mobile, and users arriving from these channels account for 15% of new B2C subscription acquisitions each week, the company said. FT.com mobile users are also more engaged, and readers who register on mobile devices are 2.5 times more likely to subscribe and are more active in giving feedback, according to the company.

One advantage for consumers is that they don’t have to constantly update the Web app on their iPad, since the Web app is updated automatically. “People have gotten to the point where they just don’t bother anymore,” Pinches said. And since a Web-based browser app is part of the Internet, it’s easier to connect with other services. A disadvantage is that consumers might not have access to some device-specific features, such as notifications that pop up on the screen. Native apps are also a little better integrated with the content, so it’s a bit easier to e-mail stories with apps specifically designed for the iPad, Pinches said.

A browser-based app obviously won’t be visible in the App Store, which could be a mixed blessing, considering that more than 100,000 apps are vying for people’s attention. On the other hand, a Web-based app might benefit from “drive-by traffic” from links from other sites, such as The Drudge Report. “I would argue that the Web apps give brands more exposure than the app stores do,” Pinches said. (Between June 6 and the end of August, The Financial Times was available in the App Store and the app directed people to sign up for the Web app. Since the end of August, only The Financial Times iPad Chinese Edition and Financial Times Deutschland were available for the iPad.)

Still, it seems that for the time being Web apps will have to fight for equal attention from users who have been conditioned to launch an App Store on their device or desktop computer and search for a particular company or application. There’s something to be said for the sense of comfort in downloading an application from the App Store, where you know that the application has been through an approval process and has been checked, tested and adheres to coding standards and guidelines. There are still a lot of unknowns with regards to security and privacy with the wild west of Web apps.

WAY BACK WHEN, IN THE DAYS OF WEB 2.0
A lot of people tend to forget that when the iPhone was launched, there was no iOS App Store. In June 2007, when Apple released its groundbreaking smartphone, there was no SDK or any way for developers to write native applications. Apple was pushing Web applications written in HTML with Ajax, explaining that designers and developers could develop applications that shared the look and feel of the iPhone interface and had access to many of the devices native functions, such as making phone calls, sending an e-mail or accessing the maps application. While the community produced some amazing examples of Web apps, Apple quickly caved in to the clamoring of developers and released the iOS SDK nine months later.

MULTICHANNEL PUBLISHING
Web apps seem to represent a step toward the multichannel publishing goal of write once, distribute many, but Pinches said it’s not quite “fire and forget. I wouldn’t
Web apps seem to represent a step toward the multichannel publishing goal of write once, distribute many.

Assume it’s going to work on every platform because a lot of platforms still don’t support HTML5 and there are big differences in support in each platform. But it’s certainly a lot easier than having to build a Symbian app, an Android app, an iOS app. With a small amount of tweaking, you can cover a lot of devices. It’s not a silver bullet, but it’s certainly easier than going down the native application route.”

Along with new smartphones and tablets, Internet televisions are also on the horizon. “Where does it stop?” Pinches said. “There’s so much change that you have to be in a position where you have to be able to turn on a six pence, and HTML5 gives you that opportunity because it’s a code base that can be adapted to work in any environment,” said Pinches. “If you build a big Objective C application for the iPhone, you’re going to have to completely re-code that to work on a different platform.”

The Financial Times is the first major publisher to commit to a 100% HTML5 Web browser, but other publishers are already coding with HTML. “The code sitting behind the native app is mostly HTML5. They just haven’t gone 100% of the way,” Pinches said. If you tap on the content and hold your finger on it, and you can copy and paste, it’s HTML, he said.

A host of HTML5 mobile application development frameworks allow you to package and compile your HTML5 application into a native application. PhoneGap is one such framework, promising one HTML5 codebase that can access native device features and can be compiled to run on multiple app platforms.

Pinches looks forward to the day when publishers can stop worrying about mobile development and instead focus on how their services will run in a number of different environments. “They’ll launch a website and it will adapt to all the different scenarios. There will only be one url or one way of getting to the content and it will automatically adapt to any given circumstance in the best way. A single code base is the next step in the evolution,” he said.

For a predominantly text and video publisher who doesn’t have to rely so much on complex layout like some magazines do, it would be very difficult to argue the case for doing a pure native app. Most apps will at least be a hybrid of HTML and native code. What people are wrestling with is how they accommodate that within the editorial function and how they make sure they are making the most of the touch screens and things like that,” Pinches said.

WHAT’S NEXT?
While some device features, such as push notifications, camera access and gyroscope detection, cannot be utilized in HTML5 based applications, Pinches suggested that publishers experiment and see how far they can take it. “The way in is your mobile website. Every publisher should have some sort of lightweight mobile website designed for every phone. Identify smartphones coming in on that URL, add some HTML features like caching, build out gradually for a particular device and only display those features for a particular device. Then you can build out your mobile website into an HTML5 application.”