Web-based tablet apps challenging app-store offerings

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An app war is brewing. Pressure to break the grip of app stores and the need for multiple versions of applications to run on the slew of devices out there are driving some companies, notably media outlets, to test tablet apps that essentially are websites.

These apps include new ones for NPR, Huffington Post, and, this week, the Financial Times and could help these companies avoid paying the likes of Apple Inc. and Google Inc. an outsize cut of tablet-derived revenue. Free-press advocates are saying they also are more conducive to journalism than apps whose look and content are subject to review by non-journalists.

The alternative tablet apps use the latest Web programming code, called HTML5, which integrates new features for working off-line, dragging-and-dropping into the browser, and playing video and audio without "plug-ins" such as Flash, which Apple has banned from the iPad.

But how is it all working out?

News/gossip/commentary site Huffington Post has both a Web-based tablet app and a dedicated iPad app. Both are called Huff Post NewsGlide, and each is labeled a beta, or test, version. They look very much the same when first opened.

However, in my experiments over two wireless connections on a first-generation iPad, the Web app proved to be much more of a work in

progress than its savvy iPad-specific cousin. The smooth movement of sliding menu bars in response to finger swipes, and quick screen changes between articles and pictures on the iPad app stood in stark contrast to jerky, delayed screen responses and, ultimately, freeze-ups of the Web tablet app.

If you want to test the Web-based version on your tablet, go to www.huffingtonpost.com/NewsGlide. And, of course, visit the App Store for the free iPad-specific app.

NPR's app for iPad has the same sort of horizontal gliding menu bars that appear on the Huffington Post apps, but the radio network's Web-based tablet app - also a "beta" version - resembles a more typical Web page.

Aside magazine is mostly in German but boasts on its home screen at www.asidemag.com that it is the "World's first magazine just made with HTML5." It's a clean example of the range of things a good tablet app will do well.

From the icon on my home screen, I got the magazine cover, and a tap at the lower left corner peeled back to a table of contents including articles on sushi, kite surfing, and "5 Crazy Facts & Laws ... you should know before visiting the Iran." As I said, most of the text is German.

Other content options let you try the app's ability to play a video clip, play music, and spin an animated flying squirrel in circles with finger swipes.

Is it the new big thing? Doesn't feel like it, but companies looking to cut loose of the app stores appear intent on giving it a go.

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