

PDF Is Not Evil! Ignorance is.



PDF

- Portable Document Format



Lots of bad PDFs, no control



Gatekeeper approach



Reaction: Ban PDFs

ARTICLE

PDFs Are Evil, Lazy, Slothful and Sinful

by [Gerry McGovern](#)



phescreening.blog.gov.uk/2016/11/18/bye-bye-pdf-hello-html/

Bye bye PDF, hello HTML!

[Nick Johnstone-Waddell](#), 18 November 2016 - [General information](#)

Video and music tapes, analogue cameras, minidisks, dial-up internet access, the ZX Spectrum, mobile phones the size of a small dog... You can really start to feel your age when you think to all the technology that used to be everywhere but has gone the way of the dinosaurs.

A photograph showing a collection of obsolete digital and analog media. It includes several VHS tapes, a CD-ROM, a floppy disk, and a small digital camera. The items are scattered on a light-colored surface.

Obsolete media. From Flickr user [Wolfslawlibrary](#). Used under Creative Commons licence.

The [PDF file](#) is something we're similarly used to seeing all the time. It stands for Portable Document Format and was created in the early 1990s to provide a standard way for publishing documents.

Banning PDFs



Barking up the wrong tree



Myth: PDF is for print



PDF 1.0

Just print

1993

©I

Myth: for print, outdated format



PDF 1.0

Just print



PDF 1.4

Tagged PDF



PDF 1.7

Full ISO standard



PDF 2.0

Post-Adobe
ISO standard

1993

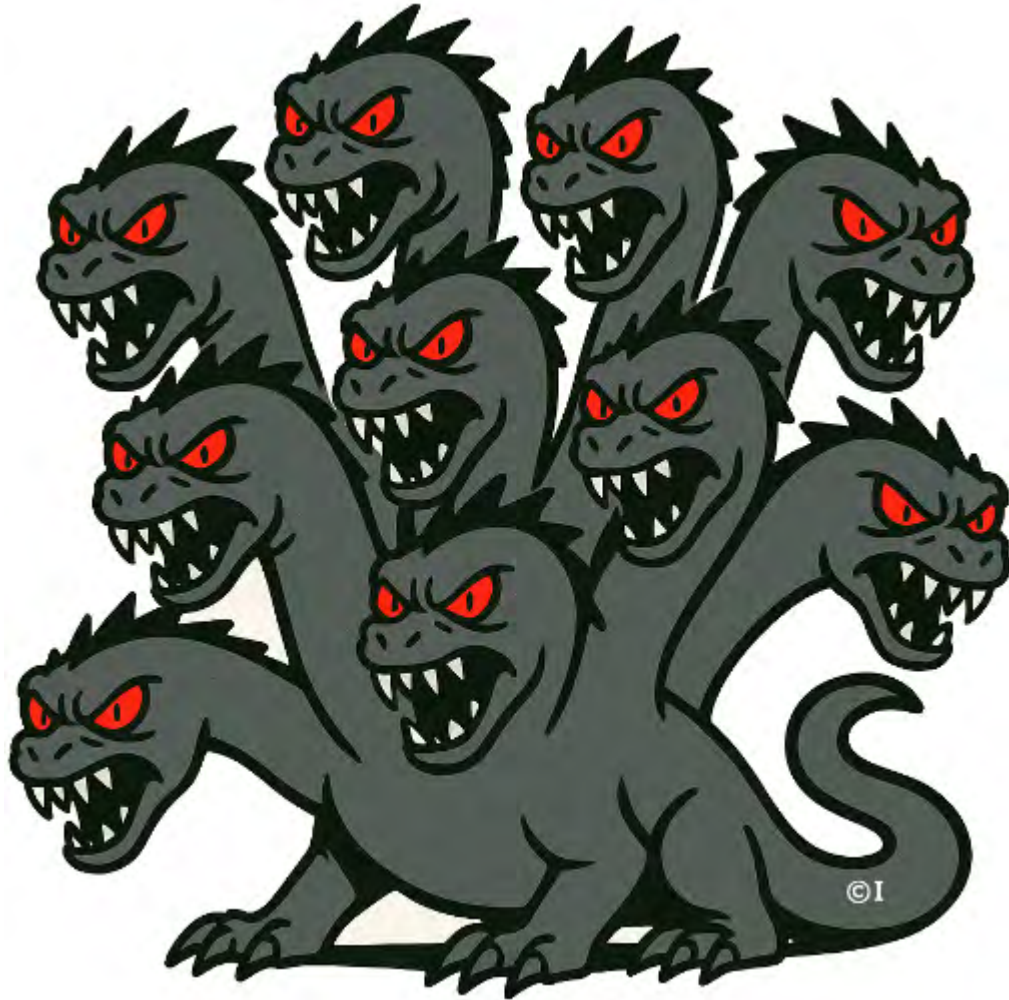
2001

2008

2017

©I

The actual problem



Well some of it...

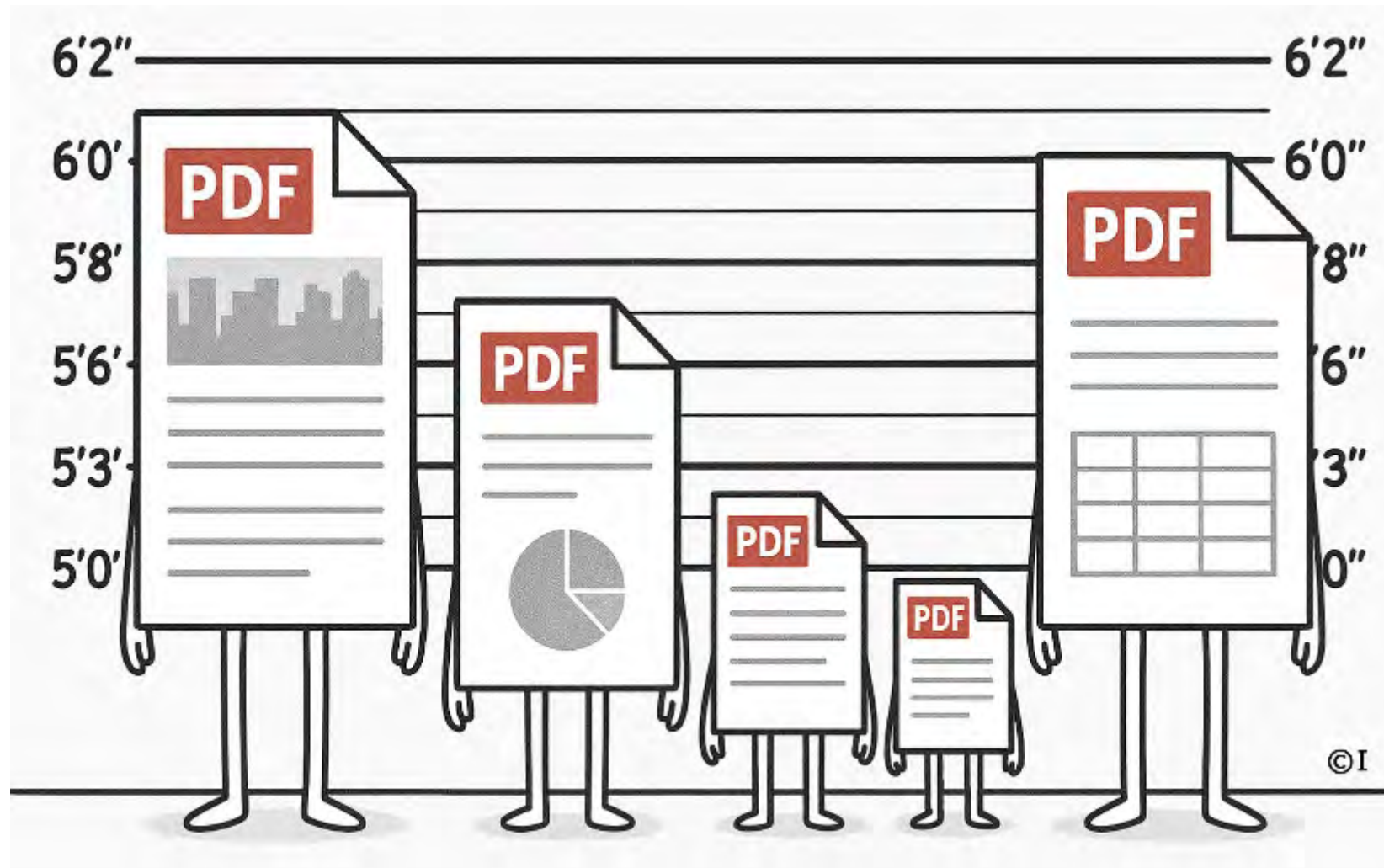
No control over the ecosystem



Lack of knowledge

- About file formats, requirements, software, standards, and users
 - At the management level
 - At a tactical level
- Alternative facts
- Organization / ICT does not enable employees
- No clear distinction between decisions made by management and SMEs

Not a good test process

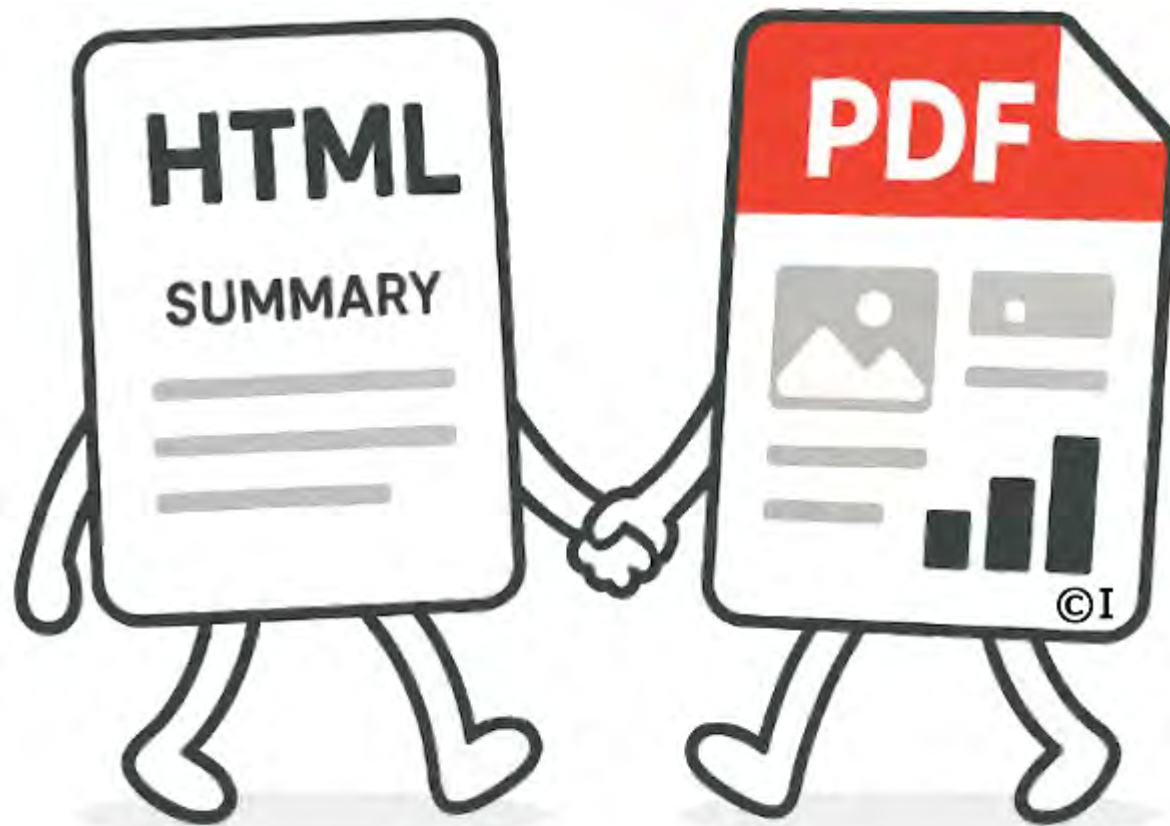


Most remediation is insufficient

- Often per file
- Since not all issues are identified, not all issues are fixed
- Strong focus on remediation instead of other solutions



`Solutions' that don't meet requirements and are not accessible



Default tools don't deliver

Problems with:

- Microsoft Office export to PDF
- Acrobat Pro

Situation 2025. No static products.



PDF readers and browsers

- Many features and possibilities are not supported
- Many readers, browsers, and platforms
- PDF/UA is not supported
- A problem for every user
- Need for a good PDF Reader



Big tech

- Big Tech tools fail us.
- Incentive is money, no shared values.
- We pay a lot of money for bad tools
- Creating an accessible PDF should not be this hard.
- There are alternatives.
- We should innovate and diminish dependence on big tech.
- Better PDF Readers are needed.



The Polder model





Tired of

- Bad content is bad content (whether HTML or PDF)
- Not enough time, too much content
- The wrong file format is being used
- Discussions, being part of Team No, being overruled
- Micro-level decisions (document level)
- No control
- Software is not doing what it is supposed to do

PDF or HTML?

- Do not use PDFs to present digital content that **could and should** otherwise be a webpage.
- Do not publish print PDFs
- Do not publish interactive PDFs (buttons on every page for navigation)
- Do not publish bad content



Tagged PDF!

- Accessible
- Machine readable



When PDF is useful

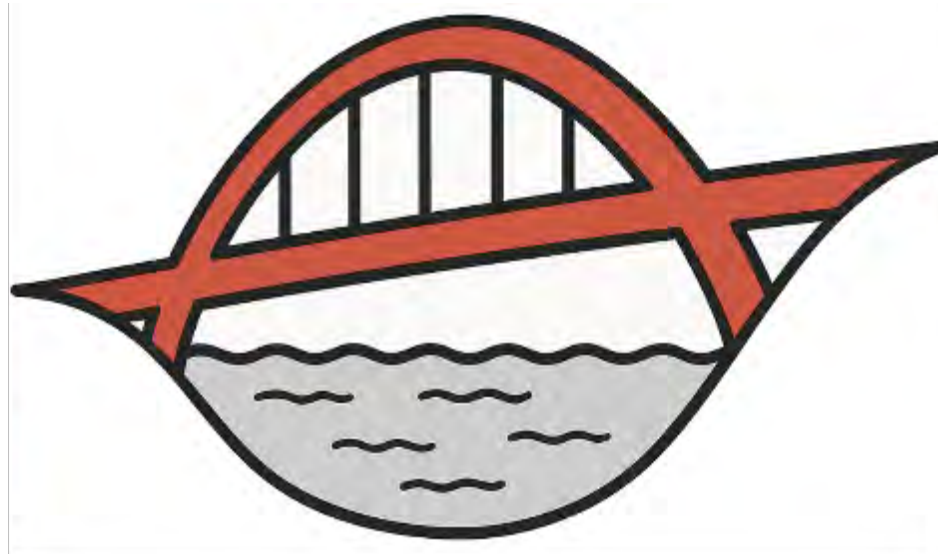
- Download, reference, offline use
 - User manuals
 - Invoices
 - (Tax) authority decisions
 - Contracts and signing contracts
- Data needs to be stored locally
- Sometimes reports
- Need for annotations
- Need to archive documents in personal administration or elsewhere
- Frozen in time: Authority, security, version management



Good use of standards



WCAG



PDF/UA



PDF/A

Your next steps

- 1. End ignorance:**
Inform decision makers and peers. It's not the file format.
- 2. Check your strategy:**
A content strategy gives guidance.
- 3. Use the appropriate file format for the job.**
Use PDF where it suits your users' needs better than HTML.
- 4. Embrace PDF/UA:**
It simplifies discussions and is necessary for technical accessibility.
- 5. Be prepared:**
WCAG is not enough for accessible documents. PDF/UA should be mandatory by law.
- 6. Diminish dependency on Big Tech.**
Use alternatives, plug-ins, and innovate.

Disclaimer

No PDFs were harmed in the making of this presentation.

Questions?

Iacobien Riezebosch

Later today, 2 parallel sessions:

- Q&A and new PDF Techniques
- 13:30 and 15:05
- both in 'Zaal Amethyst' on the Ground Floor

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Hand-out

Handout of the presentation by freelance senior accessibility expert Iacobien Riezebosch at 'het Nationaal Congres Digitale Toegankelijkheid' 2025.

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