

Opinion: Free online news era fading away

By Howard Kurtz

It's time to pay up, America.

The era of free news is rapidly coming to a close.

The *Washington Post*, one of the last holdouts among major newspapers, will probably begin charging for online access next year. And the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News* announced this month that they will launch separate paywall sites early next year.

We're all spoiled by the illusion that we can get whatever we want on the interwebs without having to pay a dime. Fire up the Google, troll the Twitter, see who's got the most tantalizing links. We all do it, and we all take it for granted.

But you can't have a media ecosystem in which everyone is aggregating, summarizing and retweeting content from everyone else. At some point there have to be actual human beings making phone calls and attending events and pawing through public documents.

And these people – known as “reporters” – need to put food on the table. Newspapers and magazines are partially to blame for this state of affairs. For many years they gave away their wares to anyone with a modem, anxious to avoid being left out of the burgeoning world of online commerce. Readers thought nothing of subscribing to a paper that landed on their doorstep but balked at paying for news on their computer screens and mobile phones.

The result, as we all know, has been widespread carnage in

American newsrooms. Some papers, such as the *Rocky Mountain News* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, have folded. Others, such as the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, have cut back to three times a week. The Cleveland Plain Dealer just announced it is slashing a third of its newsroom. Even the *New York Times*, which has made fewer cuts than most papers, said last week that 30 jobs will be lost to buyouts.

There were several rounds of buyouts when I worked at the *Washington Post*, where the newsroom has shrunk significantly and the new editor, Marty Baron, warns that more cuts are in store. In an overdue move, the paper now says it will likely move to a metered paywall, charging readers after they get a certain number of free articles each month. The *Times* was among the pioneers of this movement in March 2011 and now has nearly 600,000 digital subscribers. It also helps to have an affluent expense-account crowd, which is why the *Wall Street Journal's* pay site has always thrived.

The *Post* has a unique problem in that it is a national brand online, but a local newspaper in terms of circulation. So the out-of-towners who might want to read political analysis by Dan Balz and Chris Cillizza don't have the option of subscribing to the ink-on-paper version. Yet the lucrative print ads that reach consumers in D.C., Maryland and Virginia are worth far more than the modest rates that can be charged for digital ads. So the paper badly needs another source of revenue.

The *Daily Beast*, where I work, is also considering a metered paywall, now that the parent company is folding the print edition of *Newsweek*, which led to substantial layoffs.

Of course, readers have no august responsibility to pay for anything. And Big Media got too fat and happy in the days of easy money. The Google era is all about disaggregation – that is, you can search for only the information you want about Medicare or Meryl Streep or Miami without the packaging of a

publication. You can get your fix from Facebook friends. With new apps you can be your own editor, selecting the stories that suit your needs.

So this is not a plea for charitable support. Increasingly, the name of the game online is providing something that is so unique or compelling that readers feel it's worth reaching for their credit card.

But it is a reminder that we are hollowing out the business of newsgathering. This is a particular problem at the local level, where no one else is going to investigate decaying schools or the mayor steering contracts to his cronies. Sadly, the shriveled staffs of many local papers are less able to do this kind of distinctive reporting, and will have a hard time persuading readers to pay for meager coverage with an overlay of local sports.

It's also true that there is less original reporting nationally on the environment, health care, criminal justice, finance and other vital areas. The *Washington Post*, where I was once New York bureau chief, has shut down its bureaus around the country.

The slow stampede toward paywalls will prompt a shakeout in which some publications survive by proving their worth and others head for the graveyard. Some early signs are discouraging: Rupert Murdoch's iPad magazine the *Daily*, which never had a clear identity, folded this month, and Arianna Huffington's hugely successful site couldn't get people to pay a modest fee for a monthly digital magazine.

Hey, if folks don't think a paper or magazine or online venture is worth the weekly equivalent of a frappuccino, that's their choice. But man does not live by buzz alone. In the end, we get the journalism we deserve.

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