It's time to pay for newspapers and here's how says New York Times boss (guest blog)

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Other quality newspapers like The Guardian could choose to adopt a digital subscription plan similar to The New York Times for two reasons, according to Arthur Sulzberger chairman and publisher of the Times, speaking at Polis/LSE. This report by Polis Intern April Simpson.

Core customers are used to paying for the product. And the Ipad has changed the industry — so much so that users willingly pay for engaging "experiences" on their tablets.

"This idea that everything on the web yearns to be free, we know that's a fallacy now," said Sulzberger, who touted the success of the Times company's digital subscription plan,which went into effect in March.

But not all the LSE audience members agreed, and there were some uncomfortable moments when Sulzberger addressed questions on the plan's long-term sustainability.

Sulzberger's hour long talk, focused on the digital "transformation" of the Times. The paper's metered paywall is being watched as what could be the definitive move that marks a transition for newspapers to charge users for their content online. It's already happening among some U.S. newspapers, Sulzberger said.

In September, The Boston Globe, which is owned by The New York Times Company, released an online version of its newspaper available only to paid subscribers. On Tuesday, the Minneapolis Star Tribune announced that, like The New York Times, it will allow users up to 20 free articles per month.

Still, the Times move doesn't come without skepticism. A graduate student, who introduced herself as a former reporter for the New Jersey Star-Ledger, admitted that she's savvy enough to manipulate links, effectively work around the Times paywall and access its content for free. What's going to happen when your subscriber base is being replaced by a more Internet-savvy generation?, she asked.

Sulzberger quipped that his subscriber base isn't aging all that rapidly, and equated her behavior with theft: "You can walk down the street, and you can grab a copy of the paper, or off of the newsstand, and run," he said. "You can steal, even in print, and I just want you to recognize that."

"You can't build a system to support journalism on free," he continued,

adding, "Think of the free tabloids and how good they are."

This isn't the first time the Gray Lady has charged online readers. In 2007, the Times ended "TimesSelect," which for two years charged subscribers $7.95 a month or $49.95 a year to access the work of its columnists. The company saw interest increase, sharply, before it just went flat, Sulzberger said. With digital advertising booming at the time, at 200% growth every month, TimesSelect represented a failed attempt to innovate.

The Times learned a valuable lesson: Yes, people will pay for online

content, but they need to grow into it. The latest digital subscription

plan offers packages that vary by device, and range from $15 to $35 per four

weeks. A great deal of content remains free: Online readers can view up to

20 articles each month. Readers who land on Times articles through links from search, blogs and social media can also read those articles without penalty — even if they have reached their monthly limit.

Home newspaper delivery customers enjoy free and unlimited access to online content. In fact, Sulzberger's LSE appearance coincided with the Times company announcing its first newspaper circulation increase in Sunday home delivery in five years because the subscription includes digital editions.

Still, digital subscriptions launched just seven months ago. And the Times's earlier experience charging readers for online content failed.

Perhaps it is too soon to call this latest effort a certain success?

This article by Polis Intern April Simpson

Read the full transcript of Mr Sulzberger's talk here

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