

Time To Pay For Quality News Online – New York Times’ Arthur Sulzberger at Polis (Guest blog)

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Quality newspapers like [The Guardian](#) could choose to adopt a digital subscription plan similar to [The New York Times](#), says [Arthur Sulzberger](#), chairman and publisher of the Times. Polis Intern [April Simpson](#) reports on the latest [Polis Media Agenda Talk](#). (Full text of Sulzberger’s talk [here](#))

Now is the time to get people to pay for their quality news, according to Sulzberger, for two reasons. 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 audience members agreed, and there were some uncomfortable moments when Sulzberger addressed questions on the plan’s long-term sustainability.

Sulzberger’s hourlong talk, before mostly graduate students in the [Media and Communications Department](#), 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 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. Isn't it too soon to call this latest effort a success?

This article by Polis Intern [April Simpson](#).

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