

FT.com: the end of the free press?

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The [decision](#) by Pearson to keep charging for the Financial Times' online services is, I believe, a real sign of the changing internet economy. For just £75 a year you can access all the FT's excellent subscriber services (and for nearly £400 you get the deluxe service which includes the actual paper delivered ~~and a free continental breakfast~~). I was told by a senior FT insider a couple of months ago that they were planning to go free because the orthodox thinking at present is that open access pays. In the short term it was useful for the FT to have a subscriber income but in the longterm it is best to let people see your product online for free and so you make more money out of advertising or selling your paper product. The pink'un appears to have changed its mind.

Now the FT is saying that it will keep its subscriber structure. One reason given by Pearson CEO Margerie Scardino is that it keeps up the standard of debate on their online forums. By excluding the casual nutters who populate so many other newspapers forums they have created a privileged elite space for intelligent and unruffled discussion. So is this the journalistic equivalent of the gated community? Is this the News Media version of road tolls, depriving the poor the chance to drive the information highway?

I think it is – but only a bit. £75 isn't that much to pay to sustain some of the best journalism in the world and the FT always was aimed squarely at those who feel most comfortable in the board room. At a time when Pearson and the FT is making record profits I can't believe they are only doing this for financial reasons. It really does seem that they feel that the subscriber model with it's sense of creating an upmarket elite makes the product better valued by the reader and poster.

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