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TIMESSELECT CONTENT FREED

By HOLLY M. SANDERS

August 7, 2007 -- The New York Times is poised to stop charging readers for online access to its Op-Ed columnists and other content, The Post has learned.

After much internal debate, Times executives - including publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. - made the decision to end the subscription-only TimesSelect service but have yet to make an official announcement, according to a source briefed on the matter.

The timing of when TimesSelect will shut down hinges on resolving software issues associated with making the switch to a free service, the source said.

Times spokeswoman Catherine Mathis would only say in an e-mailed statement, "We continue to evaluate the best approach for NYTimes.com."

While other online publications were abandoning subscriptions, the Times took the opposite approach in 2005 and began charging for access to well-known writers, including Maureen Dowd, Frank Rich and Thomas L. Friedman.

The decision, which also walled off access to archives and other content, was controversial almost from the start, with some of the paper's own columnists complaining that it limited their Web readership.

In July, The Post reported that insiders were lobbying to shut down the service. After two years, however, the move to do away with TimesSelect may have more to do with growth than grumbling inside the paper.

The number of Web-only subscribers who pay \$7.95 a month or \$49.95 a year fell to just over 221,000 in June, down from more than 224,000 in April.

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