Delivering the news without the paper

The Christian Science Monitor will drop its daily print edition to focus on the Web

By Jenifer B. McKim
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The Christian Science Monitor yesterday said it will become the first national newspaper to stop its daily print edition and shift coverage online in an attempt to reinvent the crumbling newspaper business model.

Starting in April, the century-old, Boston-based publication that is known for its international and analytical news coverage said it will push daily stories onto a revamped website and roll out a magazine-style weekly.

Monitor editor John Yemma said the moves, which could result in a reduction of 10 to 15 percent of its business and editorial staff of 123, are aimed at cutting the company's $25.7 million budget. He said the new model of shutting down the daily newspaper and focusing reporters' efforts on the website could be a blueprint for other newspapers.

"By freeing people from the print production ball and chain, we make a much more competitive website and we will help the journalists be much more competitive," he said. "Everybody seems to recognize that print is on its way out."

The move comes as US newspapers struggle with sharp drops in circulation and advertising dollars and more readers turn to the Web for their news, classified
ads, and other information. Newspapers nationwide suffered an average circulation drop of nearly 5 percent, according to data released Monday by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. The Monitor’s circulation fell from a peak of 230,000 in the early 1970s to about 52,000 today.

In an effort to hold on to readers, many newspapers have been investing more time, money, and staff to make their websites better, while some smaller, local publications have stopped printing a daily paper altogether to focus on their online operations.

"I think we are going to hear of this happening a lot more. I know there are a lot of newspapers teetering on the brink of instability," said Kelly McBride, ethics group leader for the Florida-based Poynter Institute, a nonprofit resource for journalists. "We don't know whether this will be a last dying gasp or whether it will be the first steps of transformation."

Many newspapers struggle with how to make money online, where the advertising revenue generated is only a fraction of ad revenue from their print editions. Newspapers also must compete for ad dollars with many online services that provide news and other information.

"Nobody has figured out a way to make online do much more than pay itself," McBride said.

The Monitor, which has eight foreign bureaus and eight national bureaus, differs from many daily newspapers because it lacks a local core readership that receives the paper at home and buys products nearby.

The nonprofit newspaper, which has won seven Pulitzer Prizes, produces a daily paper Monday through Friday that is distributed through the mail with an annual subscription rate of $210 a year.

The Monitor’s changes include a jazzed-up free website and an estimated 44-page weekend magazine that will sell at newsstands for $2. The magazine will be dated for Sunday, but go out to readers on Fridays and Saturdays. The Monitor also will produce a daily e-mail that will include news and a column about the news of the day written by an editor.

Yemma said the decisions were made partly to reduce the Monitor’s financial dependence on the First Church of Christ, Scientist, which has been subsidizing the paper since its inception in 1908. The church, which has 1,800 churches worldwide in about 70 countries, currently contributes an annual subsidy of $13.3 million to the Monitor from its general fund and another $6.5 million from an endowment.

Yemma said the Monitor hopes to accomplish its goal by reducing costs and increasing its revenue through expanding its Web audience from 5 million page views today to 25 to 30 million in five years. By 2013, he said, the Monitor should need only $3.8 million from the church’s general fund as well as the ongoing endowment money.

"Our aim is to be ultimately profitable," said Yemma, a former deputy managing editor for multimedia at The Boston Globe who was named editor of the Monitor earlier this year. "There is no magic formula for growing traffic on a website. The only formula is to do high quality work and update very frequently."

Church spokesman Phil Davis praised the Monitor's news. "This moves us to
the cutting edge of journalism today," he said.

Rick Edmonds, a media business analyst at the Poynter Institute, said with newspapers' circulation continuing to drop, it's still unclear what the final outcome will be. "I think there will be a market for print newspapers in five to 10 years," he said. "I would have to concede that the business conditions have gotten worse and gotten worse and gotten worse again. Hard to say where it will go."

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