Christian Science Monitor to discontinue daily print edition

The century-old publication will move almost exclusively to online publication, becoming the first major national newspaper to abandon a daily paper-and-ink format. The move, which had been expected by industry professionals and the Monitor staff, will cut annual costs by millions of dollars for the money-losing newspaper, which is subsidized by the Christian Science Church. The publication's management and some staff members also contend that the online format will make the report more timely to subscribers, most of whom receive the Monitor by mail a day or two after the paper goes to print.

But the change will present considerable risks. Unlike most daily newspapers, the five-day-a-week Monitor receives the bulk of its revenue from subscriptions, not advertising.

The Monitor plans a new weekly magazine to maintain its print presence, but that is expected to bring in only a fraction of the $9.7-million circulation revenue it receives annually. To compensate, the publication will have to increase online advertising dramatically.

The Monitor may also face a delicate balancing act in presenting itself almost exclusively via a new technology.
The Boston-based newspaper's management said Tuesday that the transition was unavoidable -- not only for the Monitor but also possibly the entire newspaper industry.

"I'm not sure that the rest of the industry will follow us, but I think they'll be watching," said Monitor Editor John Yemma.

"The Christian Science Monitor is a highly specialized product," with national and international reportage but no local content, noted Alan Mutter, a Bay Area media executive who writes a blog on newspaper economics. "What's good for them may not be good for any other publication."

One unique feature of the Monitor's economics is its subsidy from the church, whose founder, Mary Baker Eddy, launched the publication in 1908. In the fiscal year ending April 30, 2009, the church will contribute $13.3 million to cover the gap between the publication's $25.8 million in expenses and $12.5 million in revenue, Yemma said.

Of that revenue, roughly $800,000 came from advertising, he said. For the newspaper industry generally, by contrast, up to 80% of revenue comes from advertising, which provides almost all of its profits. Subscription fees generally cover only the cost of printing and distribution, industry analyst John Morton said.

Because only about 8% of revenue is generated by newspapers' websites, converting to web-only operation is not yet an option for most, Morton said. "The newspaper economic model is still firmly rooted in print," he said.

Web publication may suit the Monitor well because it faces unusual obstacles in serving its readership by print. Its audience of about 50,000 subscribers is geographically dispersed, making them costly to reach with a physical product.

Yemma said the conversion to online publication would be part of a broader program of cost containment aimed at sharply reducing the church subsidy to $6.5 million by 2013. He said the newspaper's budget would be reduced by about $1.5 million in the next fiscal year, leading to cutbacks among the 95-member editorial staff of 10% to 15%.

One uncertainty is how the change in format will affect the Monitor's distinctive style of journalism, which has won seven Pulitzer Prizes. The newspaper traditionally is heavy on analysis, partially as a consequence of its delivery method: Articles filed by journalists around noon each day don't reach readers until the following afternoon at the earliest.

With such a delay, "you can't be competitive on the news," said Cameron W. Barr, deputy foreign editor at the Washington Post and a former Mideast correspondent for the Monitor.

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