Seattle Paper Shifts Entirely to the Web

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The Seattle Post-Intelligencer newspaper will produce its last printed edition on Tuesday and become an Internet-only news source, the Hearst Corporation said on Monday, making it by far the largest American newspaper to take that leap.

But the P-I, as it is called, will resemble a local Huffington Post more than a traditional newspaper, with a news staff of about 20 people rather than the 165 it has had, and a site consisting mostly of commentary, advice and links to other news sites, along with some original reporting.

The site has recruited some current and former government officials to write columns, and it will keep some of the popular columnists and bloggers who already work there, in addition to the large number of unpaid local bloggers whose work appears on the site. Hearst also plans to repackaging material from its large stable of magazines for the site.

The site described by executives might compete less directly with the P-I's traditional rival, The Seattle Times, than with another local news and commentary site, Crosscut. Hearst hopes to capitalize on the healthy Web traffic The P-I already has, about 1.8 million unique visitors a month, according to Nielsen Online. It usually outranks the online readership of its traditional rival, The Seattle Times, despite having much smaller print circulation, 118,000 on weekdays last year, compared with 199,000 for The Times.

The P-I lost $14 million last year, according to Hearst, and its transition to an all-digital product will be closely watched in an industry that is fast losing revenue, is casting around for a new economic model and still relies on print for about 90 percent of its revenue. The company recently instructed all of its newspapers to look for ways to charge for digital content.

“We clearly believe we are in a period of innovation and experimentation, and that’s what this new SeattlePI.com represents,” said Steven R. Swartz, president of Hearst’s newspaper division. “We think we’ll learn a lot, and we think the Seattle market, being so digitally focused, is a great place to try this.”
As for what will happen to The P-I’s Web traffic, he said, “We don’t know what to expect.”

The Times and The P-I have had a joint operating agreement for decades, under which The Times handles all non-newsroom operations for both, like printing, delivery, advertising and marketing. Hearst executives said they were dissolving the agreement, but it was not clear how that would affect the precarious finances of The Times. It will no longer have to share profits with Hearst, but it will also be unable to share expenses. The new P-I will be led by Michelle Nicolosi, executive producer of the site since 2005, who has been an editor and prize-winning reporter.

David McCumber, the managing editor, and Roger Oglesby, the publisher, will not stay with The P-I, but will remain with Hearst in some capacity, executives said.

Hearst broke the news to P-I staffers in a newsroom meeting Monday at 10 a.m. local time, and said it would offer severance packages to about 145 employees. Because the newspaper has had no business staff of its own, the new operation plans to hire more than 20 people in areas like ad sales.

Among the new columnists, Hearst said, will be Norm Rice, a former Seattle mayor, and his wife, Constance Rice; a congressman, Jim McDermott; Maria Goodloe-Johnson, who heads the city’s public schools; and a former police chief, a former United States attorney, and two former governors.