

Newspapers make move to online only

March 11 2009, By Eric Pryne

If the Seattle Post-Intelligencer stops publishing in print but stays alive in some form online - as now seems likely - it won't be the first daily newspaper to make the move.

Over the last 15 months, two failing Midwest papers have taken similar leaps.

On the last day of 2007, [media giant](#) E.W. Scripps shut down the shrinking Cincinnati Post and Kentucky Post, a zoned edition that served the city's Northern Kentucky suburbs.

A day later it launched KyPost.com, with a veteran Post editor as managing editor.

In Madison, Wis., the struggling afternoon Capital Times halted daily print publication last April and unveiled a beefed-up [Web news](#) operation. It also started two new weekly tabloid [print publications](#).

The P-I seems poised to make a similar break with the past. Owner Hearst Corp. put the money-losing paper up for sale in January, saying it would close it unless a buyer emerged in 60 days. A sale is considered highly unlikely. But Hearst also said the P-I might re-emerge an online-only publication. And last week, with the 60-day deadline nearing, it quietly began offering a few P-I staffers jobs with a new Web venture.

Hearst won't say anything about its plans.

The Cincinnati and Madison online newspapers emphasize what's local. Both contain familiar newspaper content, such as obituaries and high-school sports results. The Wisconsin site even has comics.

Both sites report significant increases in traffic. The Capital Times' owners say the move to digital should result in cost savings of \$3.5 million to \$4 million in 2009. A Scripps vice president says KyPost.com should break even this year.

But neither is a stand-alone venture. Both have relationships with [traditional media outlets](#) - a [television station](#) in Cincinnati, the remaining print daily in Madison - that effectively subsidize the fledgling [Web operations](#).

In Seattle, by contrast, seattlepi.com apparently would be flying solo.

CINCINNATI

The Cincinnati/Kentucky Post died when the joint-operating agreement that linked it to the dominant, morning Cincinnati Enquirer expired at the end of 2007. Under the JOA - similar to one that links the P-I with The Seattle Times - the two papers maintained competing newsrooms, but the Enquirer handled the business operations for both and the publishers split the combined profits.

The Post's weekday circulation had plummeted - from 188,000 in 1977 to just 27,000. Scripps concluded the Post couldn't be sustained outside the JOA.

But the Kentucky Post's brand was strong in Northern Kentucky, says Adam Symson, vice president of interactive for Scripps' television group. With the paper's demise the company saw a news and advertising niche an online product might fill.

Plus a Kentucky-focused online operation could piggyback on Scripps' Cincinnati television station, WCPO. "That was fundamental to the launch of KyPost.com," Symson says.

The Web site operates out of WCPO's offices. TV station employees sell its ads and run its servers. Stories from the TV station's Northern Kentucky reporter are posted on the site, which Symson says is promoted regularly on WCPO's newscasts.

Those synergies allow Scripps to keep KyPost.com's costs low.

Managing Editor Kerry Duke doesn't dispute that the news staff is bare-bones. Besides him, there's just one other full-time journalist, a Web producer/reporter, plus two interns and about five sports freelancers. Before it closed, the Cincinnati/Kentucky Post newsroom had 50 employees.

But Duke says he has a "very handsome freelance budget, and I've got the resources of a TV newsroom at my disposal."

KyPost.com emphasizes breaking news. During one week last month its sole reporter was blogging from a big murder trial. Most of the site's other featured stories were from wire services.

"Honestly, I don't pay much attention to KyPost.com," says Ben Kaufman, media critic with the Cincinnati alternative paper CityBeat. "They do so little original reporting."

But Symson says the site doesn't strive to do everything the Kentucky Post did: "I don't know if I would characterize what KyPost.com does as an online newspaper. I'd call it an online news and information resource."

KyPost.com is a startup business, says Duke. "As we grow revenue, we'll develop the site more."

MADISON

The Capital Times is a more ambitious enterprise.

The size of its news staff is down more than one-third from its print days. Still, it employs about 40 journalists - editors, columnists, beat reporters, photographers, sports writers, critics.

But editor Paul Fanlund says there's no way the online and remaining print ad revenues would support a staff that big. It's possible only because for 60 years the Times has been part of what amounts to a JOA with Madison's remaining print daily, the morning Wisconsin State Journal.

The family-owned Times gets half the combined profits while generating only a small fraction of the combined revenues.

The Journal subsidizes the Times, Fanlund acknowledges, "but they've been doing it for 30 years. And the subsidy is less substantial now (since the Times went primarily online) than it's probably ever been."

By the time the Times stopped publishing daily in print last April, its weekday circulation had dwindled to just 17,000, while the Journal's stood at 89,000.

The line between the two papers has blurred since the Times moved primarily online. Its two weekly print tabloids - one focusing on news and opinion, the other on arts and entertainment - are inserted in the Journal.

Each publication's Web site links to some stories from the other. Sports reporters from both collaborated on a blog from the state high-school wrestling tournament last month.

At first, Fanlund says, the online Capital Times tried to be "a CNN for Madison," emphasizing breaking news.

There's still plenty of that on the site. But Fanlund says he's pushing the online Times to become "a more substantial, magazine-type publication," with at least one good long-form read every day plus lots of opinion and commentary.

Sue Robinson, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has followed The Capital Times' transformation, says it's too soon to say whether the move online will succeed.

The site's economic fate may continue to be linked to the Wisconsin State Journal's, and that paper's owner, Iowa-based Lee Enterprises, is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

The online Capital Times has more Q&As, more profiles, more issue stories and less meeting coverage, Robinson says. Most beat reporters blog, which creates a greater sense of informality.

But giving up daily print publication hasn't been easy for the paper's staff _ or its readers, she said in an e-mail. "The company continues to struggle with a perception in the community that it has died."

OTHER PAPERS DE-EMPHASIZING PRINT, EMPHASIZING WEB

- East Valley Tribune: Daily paper in Phoenix suburbs cut print

publication to four days a week in January while continuing to publish daily online.

- Detroit Free Press/Detroit News: Partners in a joint-operating agreement are scheduled this month to cut back home delivery of print papers to three days a week while beefing up online presence.
- Christian Science Monitor: National paper plans to stop publishing daily in April, replacing it with weekly print magazine and daily subscription-only online edition.

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