

Rolling Stone's archive going online -- for a price

April 16 2010, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer



In this screen shot provided by Rolling Stone magazine, the RollingStone.com website is shown.(AP Photo/Rolling Stone)

(AP) -- For the first time Rolling Stone is inviting its readers on the long, strange trip though the magazine's 43-year archive, putting complete digital replicas online along with the latest edition. But you'll have to pay to see it all.

With a new site launching Monday, Rolling Stone will become one of the most prominent magazines to decide that adding a "pay wall" is the best way to make money on the Web.

To many [publishers](#) and media analysts, charging for Web access is the fastest way to drive readers to free competition, where advertisers will

follow. But even free sites with lots of readers haven't been able to charge the kind of rates for [advertising](#) that print still commands. As one of the few major consumer magazines now asking readers for an online fee, Rolling Stone is likely to get a close look from the rest of the industry.

The magazine's revamped home page will remain mostly free. The kind of material that seems to work best on the Web - quick updates on who's breaking up, slide shows of popular bands on tour - won't cost readers anything.

But there will be reminders planted throughout the site that full access to Rolling Stone's latest issue is just a few clicks and a credit card number away.

A one-month pass will cost \$3.95 and annual access is \$29.99. Online subscribers will automatically get a print subscription, which normally costs \$19.95 a year. But print [subscribers](#) don't automatically get [Web access](#).

The magazine has never put a full issue online except to tease an article here and there. On the new site, readers can flip through, search and zoom in on a complete replica of the print edition.

The same goes for every issue since the magazine launched in 1967. If you're willing to pay, you can peruse a big grid with thumbnail views of every cover.

In an interview, Steven Schwartz, who is heading the revamp as chief digital officer for the magazine's parent company, Wenner Media, referred to the archive as "the collected history of everyone who's grown up over the past 40 years."

So is there a touch of mid-life crisis in all of this? A music magazine that planted itself in the countercultural zeitgeist of the 1960s now trying to prove that it's still relevant? The first thing a public relations representative pointed out to a visiting reporter recently was that the average age of Rolling Stone's readership is 30. It's not just old hippies!

Like every print product these days, Rolling Stone faces an array of Web-savvy competition. Young music fans are as likely to find new bands or artists on sites like Pitchfork.com or Stereogum. (According to comScore Inc., RollingStone.com had about 1.3 million unique visitors in March but only 9 million page views. Pitchfork had 906,000 visitors but 19 million page views.)

But while Rolling Stone and the rest of the publishing industry had a painful 2009 - it sold nearly 20 percent fewer ad pages than the year before - it can still boast about its print readership. It had an average paid circulation last year of about 1.5 million, up from 1.3 million in 2000, and it is still profitable.

It also ran one of the most widely cited stories of last year - Matt Taibbi's excoriating look at Goldman Sachs, "a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money."

Rolling Stone's relative health could give the magazine more flexibility than most publications to experiment with a new business model online.

"We're taking control of our digital destiny," Schwartz said.

The whole look of the site is being updated. The layout is getting broader and features more and bigger photos. The Rolling Stone masthead, which occupies a small corner at the upper left-hand side of the existing site, is ballooning across the top of the page.

Schwartz said the magazine's reporters will produce daily updates on music, culture and politics for the site's blogs. He wouldn't reveal how big of an editorial staff is devoted to the Web, but he said, "there is a commitment to it and it is growing with the launch of the new site."

It will also take advantage of Rolling Stone's access to musicians for a Web video series called "Live at RS." One segment already prepared features a performance by singer-songwriter Jason Mraz that was shot in the magazine's New York offices.

Album reviews will include audio samples.

Implicit in Rolling Stone's approach to the Web, however, is a major bet on the future of print. The magazine's feature articles are available online in a way that appears exactly as they do on paper. And the new digital subscriptions are bundled with the kind that come in the mail.

"This is not, let's rush to the Web because print isn't strong," Schwartz said. "This is our brand's ability to tap into a new medium."

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