How Newspapers Are Killing Themselves

We can dub it newspaper suicide when newspapers do things that are guaranteed to reduce subscription rates, and I don't mean by endorsing an unpopular candidate or showing bias on their pages. It is by cannibalizing their own print readers.

Let me give you a case in point about my local newspaper, the fabled Washington Post. Last Friday, I am checking the weather and blogs on the Washington Post website, and lo and behold, I see columnist Mark Fisher's LAST column. I read it to learn that he is leaving the Post, why, etc. Fast forward to Sunday. I settle in with my ever-thinner newspaper, and guess what, I see Mark Fisher's last column in PRINT. Now let me rephrase this in monetary terms. I read Mark Fisher's column on Friday online for FREE, and I read the same column in print for a price. (P.S. you can read lots of Sunday print columns online, on Friday).

Then, if this is not enough to get me thinking that I am a sucker for paying to have the newspaper delivered to me when all I have to do is turn on my computer to read the same stuff online, that I see that TV Week has now become an opt-in to the paper, meaning I have to actually call the Post to tell them that I want to continue receiving this handy-dandy TV guide. Let me repeat this again: I have to tell them to deliver it.

A couple of months ago, the Post folded its printed Book World supplement, making it online only. And in fact, if you want a listing of paperback bestsellers in the DC area, you have to go online, because the printed edition just lists the hardcover bestseller list.

And here's another piece of the suicide pact that the Post

seems to have: they are now touting a special online only investigation on the front page of the printed paper. So, it seems, they want me, a reader of the print version, to go online. If I haven't been online before, then I will realize that the entire newspaper plus much more is available for free.

In effect, the newspaper is driving me to go online. Special investigations, columns available before their print date, up to date event reviews, blog posts, discussions….why would I want to pay to get a newspaper delivered? I am asking that every day, and I bet a bunch of people are too. The thing is the paper is still making money from subscriptions and print advertising, right? So why are they not giving subscribers more not less????

In my opinion, this is a conscious attempt to drive people to the online version so that they can stop issuing a print version. Then, they will save printing and delivery costs, and finally, start charging for the online version once the printed version disappears. You will only pay for something if there is no alternative, right? The Post has been doing this piecemeal, but we are seeing the effects in a much reduced printed version, a heftier online version and a mandate for all reporters to blog, Tweet, and have a Facebook page. Obviously, the future in online.

What do you think?

