

French papers aim at younger readers

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Newspapers have tried many things to stave off a seemingly relentless decline in readers. Now France is pushing forward with a novel approach: giving away papers to young readers in an effort to turn them into regular customers.

The government Tuesday detailed plans of a project called "My Free Newspaper," under which 18- to 24-year-olds will be offered a free, yearlong subscription to a newspaper of their choice.

"Winning back young readers is essential for the financial survival of the press, and for its civic dimension," the culture minister, Frédéric Mitterrand, said.

The project is one of a number of measures, including direct financial subsidies, announced by the government last winter, after a study of the problems facing the newspaper industry.

While newspapers nearly everywhere in the developed world are in crisis, hurt by an advertising slump and readers' defection to the Internet, the problems are particularly pronounced in France. On a per-capita basis, only about half as many papers are sold as in Britain or Germany, according to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers in Paris.

Readership in France is especially low among young people. According to a government study, only 10 percent of those aged 15 to 24 read a paid-for newspaper daily in 2007, down from 20 percent a decade earlier.

About 60 publications are participating in the new project. In addition to papers like Le Monde and Le Figaro, they include a variety of local publications, as well as the Paris-based International Herald Tribune, the global edition of The New York Times. Even L'Équipe, a popular sports daily, is taking part.

Costs of the project are being shared by the newspapers and the state, with the government allocating €15 million, or \$22.5 million, over three years.

The government said 30,000 people had already signed up for free subscriptions under a preregistration program with individual newspapers; a special Web site will be available soon to speed the process.

Emmanuel Schwartzberg, a former media editor of Le Figaro who has written a book about the problems of the French press, said he was skeptical about the project. At a time when advertising is in steep decline, newspapers should instead be looking at ways to raise more revenue from readers, rather than giving papers away, he said.

"This just reinforces the belief that newspapers should be free, which is a very bad idea," Mr. Schwartzberg said.

French readers young and old already have plenty of free options from which to choose, including newspaper Web sites and the free papers handed out daily in many city centers.

Some bloggers said the new program might hold the most appeal to the few young people who do already read, and buy, newspapers.

The government plans to promote the program with an advertising campaign aimed at young readers and their parents. But, in a sign of the possible challenges involved in attracting young readers to print, the government said the primary outlet for the ads would be the Internet.

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