

# Write better to arrest book decline

The US has elected a President who glides effortlessly from reading books to surfing the internet, yet it remains no easier to imagine a sequel to “Books That Changed Our Minds”, a 1939 symposium in *The New Republic*.

The magazine honoured and probed the books guiding Big Thinking during the last Great Depression. Why isn't it easier to imagine a successor?

Because to imagine Barack Obama changing his mind on national policy as a result of a single book is also to imagine his local newspaper assisting him in the choice.

The week after he took office, *The Washington Post* announced it was closing *Book World*, its stand-alone section of literary commentary and criticism.

The *Post* then ignored the objections of 100 prominent scholars and writers to push its plans through.

With the final edition of the supplement on Sunday 15 February went one of the few stand-alone book sections in the newspaper industry.

The industry's managers have joined editors and publishing executives in a strategy of saving their asses by disappointing their most articulate readers in dispensing with their most revered traditions.

Reading, or something like it, still happens on American campuses, even if some academic monographs are poor alibis for deserting one's teaching post.

Lindsay Waters, executive editor at Harvard University Press and author of *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship* (2004), argued in January's *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* that essays, rather than books, should carry humanistic learning forward in the 21st century.

Blogger Scott McLemee goes further: he “daydreams of a world in which people would be penalised for publishing

too much and too early in their careers”.

Other suggestions, equally dramatic, are being seriously discussed. Walter Isaacson, editor of *Time* magazine, argued in a recent cover story, “How to Save Your Newspaper”, for charging online readers for content.

Historian Douglas Brinkley, speaking to *The New York Times* about a “bailout” for the publishing industry, argued for sending the bill to the Government.

*The New York Times* itself is midway through a series, “The Future of Reading”, about the influence of new technologies on school librarians.

The crisis of public literacy is real enough: the result of an industrial conception of knowledge as information and scholarship as an instance of status, rather than a source of ethics.

Nor do the reformers inspire hope. Messers Waters, Isaacson, Brinkley and McLemee write as if incentives and disincentives, penalties and rewards are the beginning and the end of the problem.

One possibility, widely overlooked, is that writers ought to try to write better in every circumstance.

In this age of abundance, that means restraint, surely. Stop producing piffle and a new generation of readers may yet arise.

Are any of *The New Republic*'s “Books That Changed Our Minds” still worth reading today? *The Education of Henry Adams* and Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* are, for sure.

Charles A. Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*? V. I. Lenin's *The State and Revolution*?

Yes to both, with reservations. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*? It's too soon to tell.

John H. Summers is the author of *Every Fury on Earth*.

