

THE SUNDAY AGE

How technology is transforming life and literature



The internet and e-books are changing the way we read stories.

AFTER the earthquake hit Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the earliest sources of information came from individuals using Twitter and Facebook. "We're all fine, pray for those in the slums," twittered Troy Livesay, quoted on a BBC report. The same report quoted Pierre Cote, who described himself as a "real-time storyteller", giving reports from Haiti that he said were unadulterated by news editors and media filters. Mr Cote was interviewed on Skype, the free internet voice and video call service. Social media such as Twitter are often criticised — by those who don't use them — for the triviality of their content and the facile nature of the connections they establish. As *The Sunday Age* reports today, Twitter is also increasingly used as a marketing tool. But last week from Haiti, Twitter helped provide early information from a nation plunged into chaos. "As technology evolves, so will ways of telling

stories," the BBC report on Haiti and new media concluded. And yet the same report conceded that not all the new media information from Haiti was reliable: some included pictures from an earthquake in Japan, for instance. Because the new forms of social media are not centralised, they allow for more grassroots participation, but they are also experienced in a piecemeal fashion. Television remains a widely shared resource, although cable channels and the wider range of free high-definition channels are also working to fragment the habits of viewers. The latest innovation — high-definition 3D broadcasts — may be available in Australia next year. The *Sunday Age* reports that although the London-based Australian trend predictor Benjamin Harrison believes there is a limit to how much change a consumer is able to embrace. He believes "upgrade fatigue" will set a limit on

the number of people willing to watch 3D TV at home. Also unknown is the impact e-books will have on book-buying habits and the publishing industry generally. The new Apple product, as yet unavailable, is being hyped as a game-changer. Certainly, if the e-book is embraced, it will influence the territorial rights debate that has dogged Australian publishing for decades. If books can be disseminated globally, via electronic devices, the issue of territorial rights makes less sense. However, Amazon's e-book reader, the Kindle, disadvantages Australian consumers and writers: the average price of an electronic book from Amazon is 40 per cent higher for non-US customers. Last year, the Australian Society of Authors was advising writers to resist publishing through Kindle because the deal offered by Amazon meant the return to local authors and publishers was small.

It can only be hoped that future purveyors of e-books allow for more democratic arrangements. Twitter and Facebook have been embraced by business, but flourish because of the individual exchanges they also make possible. The danger of the e-book as we know it, is that it centralises control of published material. Last year, two books by George Orwell — *1984* and *Animal Farm* — were erased from people's Kindles after they had been purchased because the books had been added to the Kindle store by a company that did not have the rights to them. Angry consumers were unimpressed by the literary irony. Amazon later admitted the deletions were a bad idea. One technology expert has said that buying an e-book usurped his rights as a consumer. An e-book, he explained, can't be lent and can't be sold once it's read. Technology should serve us: how we read is as important as what we are reading.

And another thing . . .
ALMOST everyone has something to say about the ridiculous nature of golf, some of it even clever. Mark Twain famously said "golf is a good walk spoiled", and the crooner Dean Martin said: "If you drink, don't drive. Don't even putt." Winston Churchill said it was "like chasing a quinine pill around a cow pasture". Greenies say the game is environmental vandalsm. Now several of Victoria's golf clubs have dropped prices in a bid to stop their courses reverting to cow pastures. The people who have the time to play the game don't have the money, and the people who have the money don't have the time. So fees have been dropped to attract new members, for whom Mark Twain had some excellent advice: "It's good sportsmanship not to pick up lost balls while they are still rolling."