Below are some things that caught my attention during my recent listening of The Economist (These are from the July 9th to 15th 2011 print edition, the text of which is available at www.economist.com, although full access may be limited to subscribers). More background on these listening activities appears at the bottom of this post.

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<th>Article</th>
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<td>Leaders - - The future of news - - Back to the coffee house - - The internet is taking the news industry back to the conversational culture of the era before mass media - - Jul 7th 2011</td>
<td>THREE hundred years ago news travelled by word of mouth or letter, and circulated in taverns and coffee houses in the form of pamphlets, newsletters and broadsides. “The Coffee houses particularly are very commodious for a free Conversation, and for reading at an easie Rate all manner of printed News,” noted one observer. Everything changed in 1833 when the first mass-audience newspaper, the New York Sun, pioneered the use of advertising to reduce the cost of news, thus giving advertisers access to a wider audience. At the time of the launch America’s bestselling paper sold just 4,500 copies a day; the Sun, with its steam press, soon reached 15,000. The penny press, followed by radio and television, turned news from a two-way conversation into a one-way broadcast, with a relatively small number of firms controlling the media. Now, as our special report explains, the news industry is returning to something closer to the coffee house. The internet is making news more participatory, social, diverse and partisan, reviving the discursive ethos of the era before mass media. That will have profound effects on society and politics.</td>
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<td>Leaders - - America's debt - - Shame on them - - The Republicans are playing a cynical political game with hugely high economic stakes - - Jul 7th 2011</td>
<td>And the closer you look, the more unprincipled the Republicans look. Earlier this year House Republicans produced a report noting that an 85%-15% split between spending cuts and tax rises was the average for successful fiscal consolidations, according to historical evidence. The White House is offering an 83%-17% split (hardly a huge distance) and a promise that none of the revenue increase will come from higher marginal rates, only from eliminating loopholes. If the Republicans were real tax reformers, they would seize this offer. Both parties have in recent months been guilty of fiscal recklessness. Right now, though, the blame falls clearly on the Republicans. Independent</td>
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United States - - Food deserts - - If you build it, they may not come - - A shortage of healthy food is not the only problem - - Jul 7th 2011 | SEATTLE | from the print edition

Official figures for the number of people living in food deserts already show a decline, from 23.5m in 2009 to 13.5m at the launch of the website in May. Although this might on the face of it suggest that the initiative is off to a superb start, sadly it does not in fact represent a single additional banana bought or soda shunned. This is because in America, the definition of a food desert is any census area where at least 20% of inhabitants are below the poverty line and 33% live more than a mile from a supermarket. By simply extending the cut-off in rural areas to ten miles, the USDA managed to rescue 10m people from desert life.

Special Report: The News Industry - - Bulletins from the future - - The internet has turned the news industry upside down, making it more participatory, social, diverse and partisan—as it used to be before the arrival of the mass media, says Tom Standage - - Jul 7th 2011 | from the print edition

Clearly something dramatic has happened to the news business. That something is, of course, the internet, which has disrupted this industry just as it has disrupted so many others. By undermining advertising revenue, making news reports a commodity and blurring the boundaries between previously distinct news organisations, the internet has upended newspapers’ traditional business model. But as well as demolishing old ways of doing things, it has also made new ones possible. As patterns of news consumption shift, much experimentation is under way. The internet may have hurt some newspapers financially, but it has stimulated innovation in journalism . . .

This special report will . . . argue that as news becomes more social, participatory, diverse and partisan, it is in many ways returning to the more chaotic, freewheeling and politically charged environment of the era before the emergence of mass media in the 19th century. And although the internet has proved hugely disruptive to journalists, for consumers—who now have a wider choice than ever of news sources and ways of accessing them—it has proved an almost unqualified blessing.

Special Report: The News Industry - - Impartiality - - The Foxification of news
In the internet age, transparency may count for more than objectivity - - Jul 7th 2011 | from the print edition

The idea that journalists should be impartial in reporting news is a relatively recent one. “A lot of newspaper people treat it as one true religion, when it’s an artefact of a certain set of economic and historical circumstances,” says Joshua Benton of the Nieman Journalism Lab. America’s
Founding Fathers nurtured a vibrant, fiercely partisan press with no licensing of newspapers or policing of content. During the 19th century newspapers gradually adopted a more objective stance, for several reasons. By appealing to a wider audience, they were able to increase their circulation and hence their advertising revenue. Consolidation, and the emergence of local newspaper monopolies, also promoted impartiality. “When you are the only paper in town, you can’t risk pissing off liberals by being too conservative, or vice versa,” says Mr Benton.

With the professionalisation of journalism in the early 20th century came a more detached style of reporting. In effect, a deal was struck between advertisers, publishers and journalists, says New York University’s Jay Rosen. Journalists agreed not to alienate anyone so that advertisers could aim their messages at everyone. That way the publishers got a broader market and the journalists got steady jobs but gave up their voices. Objectivity is “a grand bargain between all the different players”, says Mr Rosen. When radio and television emerged, America’s private broadcasters embraced impartiality in their news reporting to maximise their appeal to audiences and advertisers and avoid trouble with regulators.

The biggest shift is that journalism is no longer the exclusive preserve of journalists. Ordinary people are playing a more active role in the news system, along with a host of technology firms, news start-ups and not-for-profit groups. Social media are certainly not a fad, and their impact is only just beginning to be felt. “It’s everywhere—and it’s going to be even more everywhere,” says Arianna Huffington. Successful media organisations will be the ones that accept this new reality. They need to reorient themselves towards serving readers rather than advertisers, embrace social features and collaboration, get off political and moral high horses and stop trying to erect barriers around journalism to protect their position. The digital future of news has much in common with its chaotic, ink-stained past.

Until recently, most robots could be thought of as belonging to one of two phyla. The
### Robots

Widgetophora, equipped with claws, grabs and wheels, stuck to the essentials and did not try too hard to look like anything other than machines (think R2-D2). The Anthropoidea, by contrast, did their best to look like their creators—sporting arms with proper hands, legs with real feet, and faces (think C-3PO). The few animal-like robots that fell between these extremes were usually built to resemble pets (Sony’s robot dog, AIBO, for example) and were, in truth, not much more than just amusing toys.

They are toys no longer, though, for it has belatedly dawned on robot engineers that they are missing a trick. The great natural designer, evolution, has come up with solutions to problems that neither the Widgetophora nor the Anthropoidea can manage. Why not copy these proven models, the engineers wondered, rather than trying to outguess 4 billion years of natural selection?

The result has been a flourishing of animal-like robots.

### Books and Arts

This is not the first indictment of the Bush administration’s conduct of the war on terror, its rendition of detainees to “black” sites and its sanction of “enhanced interrogation techniques”. But Mr Carle takes us further into the “dark side” than we have gone before, by depicting in raw human terms the intolerable pressures placed on those torn between the need to prevent another September 11th and the dictates of conscience and constitution. America, he argues persuasively, misread the character of its enemy, creating a culture of fear which in turn led it to subvert its own laws and values. The whole experience has been, as Mr Carle’s subtitle suggests, “an education”. And not just for him.

WITH a police bomb squad present, armour-plated cars for many speakers, platoons of bodyguards and enough firearms to quell an insurrection, “Trame” (“Plots”) was an unusual literary festival. Held recently in Lamezia Terme, the five-day event posed an unusually acute security problem because it focused on recent books about the Mafia, because the lives of
several speakers have been threatened and because the town where it was held is in southern Calabria, a region that has long been ruled by the clans.

NOTE ABOUT MY LISTENING ACTIVITIES: I listen to The Economist each week by downloading mp3 files available to subscribers, then using a cheap mp3 player while running, working out at the gym, commuting, or doing chores. There are about 8 hours of audio per week, sometimes more when The Economist has a special edition or includes a supplement, such as their quarterly technology update. By noting certain items I heard I reinforce my memory of them, and this written record will help me be able to refer to them in the future. And, if these things appeal to you, the entire articles, or the entire edition of the “newspaper,” may be of interest to you. If you go to www.economist.com, you’ll find a tab toward the upper left of the homepage that will take you to “this week’s print edition,” from which you may also find “previous print editions.” (Don’t go to www.theeconomist.com, unless you want to see a website put up by some fan of Alan Greenspan)

(The above is pasted from the following .doc file: )