These are a few recollections and observation about the Media Ecology Conference, June 27-30, at the University of Toronto, Canada.

I have never been at a major conference where I was twice an outsider. Once in terms of age. This is now happening at every conference and is something I am still struggling to get used to. But the age difference was particularly striking at this conference. The majority of the people in attendance were young people, from undergraduates and PhD candidates to people up to about 40/50 years of age. Senior colleagues were a distinct minority at the Conference.

Secondly, I was an outsider in terms of academic discipline: almost nobody in religion let alone biblical scholarship. Among the founding personalities of the MEA, Paul Soukup, a Jesuit as Walter Ong, was, as far as I could tell, the only person with a theological/philosophical educational background. He is chair of the Communication Department at Santa Clara University, CA.

Being an outsider has its advantages. It puts one’s own personal and professional status into broader perspectives, makes one aware of the limitations of one’s own field, and generates plenty of novel insights. I learned much about the MEA, and ironically about my own academic discipline and about my own professional identity.

I am hugely grateful to the MEA for selecting me for the prestigious Walter J. Ong Award for Career Achievement in Scholarship, and I profoundly admire the Association for its intellectual generosity and for operating without any disciplinary boundaries.

As far as presenters were concerned, from among humanities departments, English and philosophy were conspicuously represented. Both Ong and McLuhan spent their academic careers in English departments, and thereby created in these departments a measure of interest in media studies. As for philosophy, both Ong and McLuhan pursued what came to be called media studies with deep interests in philosophical and theological questions.

The majority of active participants represented departments of communication (and media studies), among them people who were media theorists, culture critics, some working in film and journalism, foreign correspondents, students of popular culture, intelligence technology and digital design, of digital policy and cybersecurity, web designers and developers, digital consultants for computer science and corporations, poets and attorneys, etc., etc.
The Conference commenced with a lengthy, impressive Opening Ceremony. It began with an Acknowledgement of Traditional Land by two Indian tribal representatives whose people have for thousands of years been living on the land now occupied by Toronto. It was followed by greetings from the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, as the Queen’s representative of Ontario [Canada being part of the Commonwealth], a representative of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the Mayor of Toronto, and the President of the University’s St. Michael’s College which had hosted the Conference.

[The University of Toronto has adopted the British system of Colleges. St. Michael’s College was where McLuhan taught from 1946 almost until his death 1980. It hosted the Conference and was also the venue for the Awards Dinner.]

There were some 500 persons in attendance, with ca. 361 presenters. The conference was structured into a huge number of sessions, many of them parallel sessions. The printed Program Book comprises over 100 pages in heavily glossy paper.

It was a thoroughly international Conference with representatives from some 30 countries in attendance. A heavy presence of Latin American colleagues was conspicuous. I have been reflecting about the reason(s) for the active Latin American participation, but have not come to a firm conclusion.

European countries were rather poorly represented. Germany, as far as I could tell, was not represented by a single person.

The University of Toronto is the leading research institution in Canada. Founded in 1827, it has an undergraduate student enrollment of ca. 68,000, a graduate student body of ca. 15,000, and faculty of ca. 14,000, and it is located on three different campuses.

In the area of media and communications studies it is the home of the McLuhan Centre for Culture and Technology. The Centre was created by the University in 1963 with the distinct purpose of retaining McLuhan at the University during a period when he was receiving offers for teaching positions from numerous academic institutions around the world.

McLuhan is clearly a patron saint of the University. His picture was prominently displayed at the Conference, and the Conference arranged a walking tour of the McLuhan sites.

His son Eric continued the work of his father. The Conference presented a video of Eric McLuhan’s last academic talk at a Latin American University. He died in his hotel room the night after he had given the talk. The grandson Andrew is now carrying on the legacy of the McLuhans. Andrew was also receiving an award at the Awards Dinner. He is building The McLuhan Institute which will be “a research institute, archive, museum, centre for learning and exploration, refuge and incubator for all kinds of arts.” Principally, the Institute will be designed to foster the “understanding of the nature of media.”
One has to remember that McLuhan was not the media guru that the media turned him into, although admittedly he was not entirely innocent of the media storm that surrounded and virtually engulfed him in the later years of his career.

Personally, I look upon Marshall McLuhan as one of the most significant culture critics of the 20th century. A thinker of almost unprecedented originality, and at times exhibiting a sense of genuine profundity.

He was also a deeply religious man who converted to Catholicism. This is not the place to explicate the religious and cultural dynamics that were operative in McLuhan, but to me, his conversion to Catholicism makes good sense in the context of his work as a media critic. His hermeneutical model was premised on the breakdown and fragmentation of a unitary paradigm. In his view, in the history of communications the ancient Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, an astronomy) were undergoing a fragmentation that resulted first from alphabetic literacy and was being accelerated by the print technology. From this perspective, Protestantism and its close alliance with the typographic revolution was a significant catalyst in the sensory impoverishment and in speeding up processes of disintegration and fragmentation.

As far as I could determine, a number of the talks were of a casual, unstructured, informal kind. The genre of the formal academic talk and the coherent narrative were breaking down a number of instances. In different words: the habits, sensibilities, and thought processes of some of the younger participants were manifestly conditioned by their experience of the Internet, the social media and their smart phones.

Not surprisingly, most talks were present-oriented, reflecting on the manifestations and implications of media in our current historical situation. Quite obviously, the Association will have a bright future with a predominantly young body of very active and enthusiastic participants coping with many of the most relevant issues of our time and their implications for the future of humankind.

I made it a point – both in my formal presentation, and in my acceptance speech of the Ong Award – to remind the audiences that both McLuhan and Ong had been deeply versed in the ancient history of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic and logic. Both had been experts in the ancient and medieval history of rhetoric, and both had thoroughly studied the 15th-17th century transition from late medievalism to pre-modernism under the impact of the Gutenberg revolution. In short, McLuhan and Ong knew significant portions of the Western history of communications – ancient, medieval, and pre-modern – and for that reason were able to understand the digital revolution as well as they did.

As far as I could tell, Gutenberg’s invention -- the most consequential media revolution in Western history prior to the digital revolution -- was not, or hardly ever, a major subject at the Conference discussions. My own talk was possibly the only one that focused on
the Gutenberg high tech of the 15th and 16th centuries, and discussed the momentous social, political, and religious upheaval that affected European societies in its wake.

Here are a few lecture topics, just to convey a sense of the breadth and scope, the vast and diverse assortment of the topics that were being discussed at the Conference. Perhaps they may also convey a sense of the extent to which media studies are capable of providing explanatory models for a multitude of experiences, events, and phenomena of the human condition. And, last not least, these topics will introduce a foreign world with an often strange language that may very well be a harbinger of what is to come in the future.

There was -- understandably -- a good deal of anti-Trumpism. The Trump phenomenon, and the accompanying crisis of liberal democracies, lends itself perfectly to a media analysis because it is to a large extent a media phenomenon.

Among the lecture topics:

philosophical approach to artificial intelligence
  media and the contemporary airport design
  a philosophy of computer science
  the digital unconscious
  neural networking
  algorithmic accountability
  automatization of cognitive tasks
digital connectivity
  journalism and the innovation of news media technologies
  the age of fake-news and post-truth
  the age of no-content
  scientific deception and marketing practices
  ecologies of emotions
far-right violence and online practices
  McLuhan’s understanding of media logic
  media ethics and Internet governance
  media technology and Catholic social ethics
media technology and the void of spirituality
  television and comic books
  media and the ghost of Shoah
  reading McLuhan in Japanese
  Brazilian vision of McLuhan
  rethinking the cultural values of the computer code
  propaganda, censorship and free speech
  poetry after Auschwitz
post-Luddism
datification
the media and Brett Kanavaugh’s hearings
senses, sensoria, and interiority
nothing inside or inside nothing
thought, time, and interiority
the ear and the eye: oral herme-neutics and general semantics

the analogy of proper proportionality in McLuhan’s media ecology
the reconfigured eye
what you touch is not what you see
new ethos for education in the digital ecosystem
frontiers of advertising
engineering education: an ethical dilemma
the Media Ecology of Judaism

“cyber warfare” in fashion: *Cambridge Analytica* and the “weaponization” of consumer brand preferences
inappropriate necessities: requirement of representation
among criminal organizations in a social mediatized life
world
Why Study Media (presenter: Andrew McLuhan)
media environments: affective priming and
nonconscious emotions
consent, privacy, and the ethics of digital
advertising

Part of my acceptance speech examined the pre-Gutenberg communications culture, and the causes and effects of its metamorphosis into what I called a “post-Gutenberg intellectualism,” a new world order that both generated and in turn was generated by a technological and cultural transformation of massive proportions.

While there exists a myriad of differences between the typographic and the digital revolutions, there are nonetheless a large number of analogies that render the study of the former a worthwhile historical undertaking with a view toward the technological and cultural transformations we are currently experiencing.

In honor of Walter Ong my talk focused heavily on his *magnum opus, Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1958). In this book, Ong explored in painstaking detail how the changes brought on by the typographic revolution were initially argued out at the University level, turning the academic system upside down, initially in France, and rapidly across all of Europe. The *high tech* of the 15th and 16th centuries generated a severe intervention into and subversion of the whole conventional academic apparatus, dislodging a
centuries-old system of the organization and production of knowledge, and reprioritized the ratio and balance of the human sensorium.

I came away from the Conference more persuaded than ever that the digital revolution and its impact and consequences constitute the greatest challenge facing the Universities (and society as a whole). I am equally convinced that the work of organizations such as the Media Ecology Association and its wide-ranging study of media technologies and their impact on civil society and human cognition is uniquely suited to alert (and perhaps prepare) the academic community for a future that is already upon us.