

Editor's Letter

Back to the Future

Last fall, I attended a lively and thought-provoking conference called NextMedia, held at the Design Exchange. The conference series launched in 2007 (with the bluntly honest tag line "Monetizing Digital Media"), offering a slew of seminars on communication in the digital age, targeted at people in TV, film, advertising, music, gaming and publishing. Most of the conferences I attend are strictly about journalism, and they're usually depressing, self-pitying affairs that attract a tired, anxious lot.

This conference was different. For one thing, the participants were well-dressed. For another, in contrast to professional gatherings of traditional media people, where the advancement of technology is perceived as a mortal threat, the mood was cheerful and optimistic. Whatever the future held, this group was looking forward to it. At NextMedia, tech innovation is viewed as a fount of creative and commercial possibilities.

I gamely signed up for a few panels, including one about social media featuring Rachel Sklar, the Toronto-born, New York-based editor-at-large for Mediaite, a gossipy website about media. The room was packed. Sklar is something of a rock star in the narrow world of media who cover media, and she's popular in the Twittersphere (20,000 followers and counting). The discussion, about the value of social media to corporations, was not nearly as interesting as the experience of attending the panel: well over half the people in the room were tweeting the best quotes from the panel seconds after they were uttered. At any event or talk these days, I expect a few people to broadcast the proceedings in 140-character bursts, but I'd never seen so many people doing it, in such a small space, all at one time. The vast majority of attendees at that session were too busy tapping their smart phones to look up at the stage. No one was listening, it seemed to me; they were regurgitating. I wondered: what would Marshall McLuhan think of this?

We'll never know, of course. But it's awfully tempting to try to imagine how he would have responded to 21st-century media. As Jason McBride describes in his article about McLuhan's legacy ("We Are McLuhan," page 32), the man predicted the digital age with astonishing precision. Reading some of McLuhan's quotes today

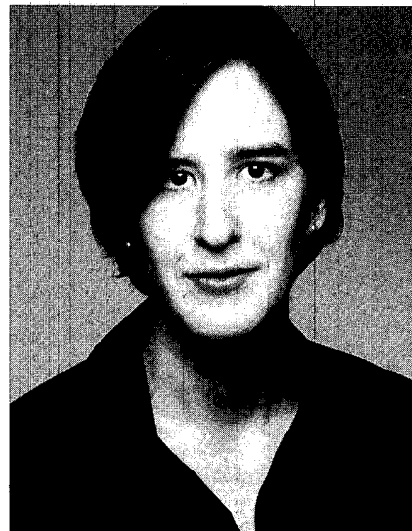
is a freaky experience; his prescience was eerie. July 21 is the 100th anniversary of his birth, and McLuhan-inspired events—lectures, panels, even walking tours—are happening all year.

Centenary celebrations often feel exactly like what they are: contrivances of tourism bureaus. But given the recent monumental shift in the way we consume information—the fact that Twitter has 200 million users, Facebook more than 500 million—this does seem like the perfect year to be talking again about McLuhan's ideas.

McBride, in the course of his engaging piece, revisits the Toronto that McLuhan inhabited in his heyday. The city was drab, as McLuhan himself observed, but in certain corners of the University of Toronto, it had the kind of energetic confidence that comes from dramatic intellectual upheaval.

The participants at the media conference I attended, a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs, have inherited the curiosity about the future that made McLuhan famous. It's a shame he isn't here to watch this new world unfold.

—Sarah Fulford, editor@torontolife.com



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