What Did Ong Discover?

As significant as these two cultural temperings have been in the United States to this time, they are best understood as byproducts of the far larger cultural shift in Western culture that Ong came to identify as the rise of communication media that accentuate sound (e.g., television, radio, telephone, sound amplifications systems, sound recordings, including movies with soundtracks). After World War II, the communication media that accentuate sound reached a steadily growing critical mass in the United States. Considering the broad sweep of human existence, Ong sees Western cultural history as unfolding in four historically successive waves:

(1) primary oral culture (i.e., pre-literate culture), which has never come to an end;
(2) manuscript or chirographic culture involving writing with the phonetic alphabetic writing;
(3) print culture with the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in the 1450s; and
(4) secondary oral culture with the rise of communication media that accentuate sound.

More recently, photocopiers and printers attached to computers have vastly expanded the influence of Gutenberg print culture. But we should remember that an estimated one billion people in the world today do not know how to read or write any language, which means that they live in a residual form of oral culture and will not be using computers or the Internet.

Regarding these four successive waves of Western cultural development, Ong worked up what he styled a relationist thesis. According to Ong’s relationist way of thinking about cultural changes, probably all major cultural changes in Gutenberg print culture, for example, were connected to changes associated with the Gutenberg printing press, which served to advance and carry forward cultural developments that had originated in ancient and medieval Western culture such as visuality, the quantification of thought in medieval logic, and the inward turn of consciousness. According to Ong’s relationist way of thinking, modern capitalism and the culture of capitalism, modern science and the culture of modern science, and modern democracy in America and the culture of modern democracy in America, the Industrial Revolution and the culture of the Industrial Revolution, and the Romantic Movement and the culture of the Romantic Movement emerged historically in Gutenberg print culture. Thus in the final analysis, Ong’s impressive body of work from the 1950s onward can be understood as being about Western culture in general and American culture in particular.

But it remains to be seen still how many Americans are ready to undergo the cultural navel-gazing and deconstruction that Ong’s thought invites us to undertake. We Americans today are the products of Western cultural history as Ong has detailed Western cultural history. In short, Ong’s work from the 1950s onward is about us Americans and our cultural conditioning.