

Media ecology. Those two words – to me – don't sound like they should go together, but media ecology theory is a real thing. Media ecology is the study of how media influences human environments.

One of the most important contributions to the theory of media ecology is Neil Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Published 30 years ago, Postman argued that intelligent public dialogue was becoming increasingly impossible in a 'show business' age; where even television news is generated and adapted to achieve the highest ratings. The cover of Neil Postman's book depicted a family watching television together, but the heads of each family member are missing, replaced with television screens.

In his preface, Postman contrasted how two, long dead, writers had envisioned the future: the world they thought we'd be living in today. Published in 1949, George Orwell's *1984* predicted a world where 'Big Brother' used technology to oversee and control the masses; depriving people of their autonomy, their privacy, and their history. Civil libertarians feared that the post-9/11 Homeland Security Office was evocative of Orwell's nightmarish vision. Think of societies with Closed Circuit Television Cameras on every street corner to monitor for criminal activity!

The other sci-fi writer, Aldous Huxley, penned his vision of the future in *Brave New World* in 1931, almost 20 years before Orwell published *1984*. Huxley did not believe 'Big Brother' would be necessary to control societal behavior and thinking. Huxley predicted that people would come to adore their technologies even as these technologies undermined their capacity to think for themselves. Amusement would replace civic engagement.

While Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information to manipulate our thinking and behavior, Huxley feared that information overload would cripple an individual's capacity to act accountably. Postman wrote, "George Orwell feared we would become a captive culture, [but] Aldous Huxley feared that we'd become a trivial culture." Postman argued that it was Huxley's vision that best describes American culture in the media age. And I suspect Postman

would say the same thing now that he did 30 years ago.

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I first read *Amusing Ourselves to Death* when I was a youth minister. I was taking stock of my approach to youth ministry. As I read the book, I kept thinking of the times I'd called teenagers to invite and encourage them to attend this or that event. So often I'd say, "It will be fun... or, you'll have fun... or, it's gonna' be really fun." As I thought about this, I realized that I was imitating the broader culture where amusement and entertainment are considered the most powerful attractions.

It began to dawn on me how telling youth "you'll have fun" trivialized faith by equating it with the amusements they'd been pursuing on TV screens, computer screens, video game screens, and now... telephone screens. Unwittingly, I was also inviting them to buy into a consumeristic notion of church – where participation is mostly based on having an experience that is 'fun' for the individual. In a culture that can't stand still for fear of being accused of being 'boring', having fun is all too often the definitive criteria for participation.

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On this 3rd Sunday in Advent, I'd invite you to consider how 'fun' is different from 'joy'?

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'Fun' would not be the appropriate word to describe our reading from the prophet Isaiah. While the passage is meant to be uplifting, we need to know the dire context into which Isaiah is speaking these words! In this passage, Isaiah is speaking to Israelites who are returning to their homeland after a prolonged period in exile. As they return to their 'Promised Land', these Israelites find that their crops are failing, that poverty and famine are rampant, and that their homes and Temple have been left in ruins.

Isaiah takes on the task of announcing good news into this bleak situation, but he doesn't say anything as trivial as "it's gonna' be fun", does he? No, Isaiah says that in spite of all the devastation, God will yet prevail. And because God will prevail, the Israelites will obtain joy and gladness; gifts that deliver something much more meaningful than 'fun' and 'amusement.'

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Like Isaiah, the apostle Paul has a similar task in front of him as he corresponds to the Christians who are in Thessalonica. Earlier in his letter, Paul praises the church for its endurance in the face of tribulation, and he encourages and consoles the church about the deaths of some of their members—perhaps friends and family members who have been killed because of their faith. It is not a ‘fun’ situation in Thessalonica and Paul can’t tell these Christians to find something amusing to take their minds off of the threats they are facing.

Nonetheless, like Isaiah, Paul takes on the task of speaking hopeful and encouraging words to these Christians. But again, neither Isaiah nor Paul tell the people to ignore their circumstances. They do not offer a Pollyanna message, but rather a call to something deeper – to seek joy in spite of the situations the people are facing.

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We might find it difficult to do what Isaiah and Paul encourage for two reasons. First, we don’t live in such a desperate situation. We may be anxious about the economy, about threats of nuclear war, and plots of terrorist activity, but we are not a devastated people; and we have plenty of amusements to distract us. Second, in spite of our comparatively benign circumstances, we still tend to be incredibly cynical and reactive: where even phrases like ‘happy holidays’ or ‘Merry Christmas’ can cause us to feel offended.

Paul’s words invite us to put away cynicism and point us in a direction of seeking ‘joy’. v. 15 of our reading from 1 Thessalonians could be translated, “Don’t be hateful to people, just because they are hateful to you.” And then he goes further, inviting us to, “give thanks in ALL circumstances.” I think what Paul would affirm is that we can be joyful no matter if our circumstances seem ‘fun’ or not. And further, I think Paul knows how destructive cynicism is to the life and soul of a Christ-based community.

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We know the saying, ‘one bad apple can spoil the barrel’ and we also know how the ‘squeaky wheel’ can distract the noble aims of a larger group, but the reverse is also true. Researchers at the University of Virginia have found that when

people watch a video of those acting kindly, these people report feeling a warm glow in their chest. And they found a monitored change in heart rhythms, in a way that has been associated with good health. Researchers also found that those who watched a video about Mother Teresa felt more loving, and were more likely to volunteer for charitable work, than a group that watch reruns of *Americas Funniest Home Videos*. The researchers concluded, “When we see moral saints, it affects us emotionally... it elevates us.” That is what Isaiah and Paul are both encouraging when they write to their respective audiences.

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Some time ago I had lunch with a young adult in another church. He’d been exploring other spiritual and ethical paths. One of the things he said he’d learned was to ask himself, “If it’s not fun, why am I doing it?” That’s a good question for people who feel stuck in soul-sucking professions. But I wish I’d suggested to that young adult that there was a more worthwhile question to ask of himself: “If it doesn’t give me joy, and if it doesn’t give joy to others, and if it doesn’t help me find joy in my relationship with God, why am I doing it?” Because joy is different than fun. Asking ourselves such a question might radically transform the way we spend our time and our money on our amusements; even at Christmas.

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Jesus’ teenage, unwed, mother provides a good model. When Mary praises God after hearing the news that she will bear Jesus into the world, she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord... my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior.” I think her words convict us, because we so often aim to magnify our own lives, our own well-being, but Mary is focused on elevating and serving God because this truly is the way to bring “joy to the world”.

As we seek to celebrate a life-giving Christmas, I wonder if your plans can include how you will bring joy into the world? Amen.