HAPPIEST IN THE MARGINS: AMISH APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATION IN HIGH-TECH CAPITALISM

Noah[1] is a fifty-seven-year-old Amish entrepreneur, minister, and self-proclaimed technology buff. I met him by chance on a short trip to an Amish settlement in March 2011. Having recently read about Amish approaches to technology, I was curious about their rejection of new communication tools like the internet. My mother accompanied me to the settlement, where I was hoping to find someone to talk with and have a look around. Stopping for lunch in an Amish-owned café, we began chatting with Noah, who was an owner of the café. Business in the café was slow that day, and Noah seemed intrigued by the topics I was curious about. He told me that the church leadership in his community was currently engaged in a heated debate about whether or not cell phones should be used by its members. If they were to be allowed, church leaders must decide *how* they should be used.

When I learned that Noah owned multiple businesses, I asked whether he had a website for them and was surprised when he said, "Yes, we're actually on our second website. The new one has SEO,[2] social media, and online purchasing." My preconceived notions that the Old Order Amish generally rejected digital technologies such as smartphones, computers, and the internet quickly faded into question marks. I had come to Noah's settlement in an effort to learn from the Amish about how the rejection of modern technology affected their community's well-being. In a world where smartphones, mobile devices, and near-constant connectivity to the internet seemed to be making people more anxious, overworked, and unhealthy, I sought answers from people who were presumably opting out of the fast-paced, always on, hyperconnected way of life. Noah's tech savvy suggested that there was much more to learn about how and why Amish people were making use of digital technologies today.

At the end of my conversation with Noah, he agreed to help connect me with other people that he knew so that I could learn more. Noah used his

smartphone in communicating with me to coordinate our future meetings, and I observed him using it extensively to discuss business and personal matters. As we got to know each other, we also emailed from time to time, talked on the phone about the social impacts of digital technologies, and even texted back and forth. I was surprised one day when I was asked to approve Noah's Facebook friend request. I became his seventh friend. After observing Noah's familiarity and fluency with a panoply of twenty-first-century technologies, I wanted to find out how his Amish peers and fellow church leaders were feeling about this.

When observed from a distance, it might seem that there is an air of hypocrisy or a lack of integrity in Amish decisions to use digital technologies. My conversations with Amish church and business leaders, however, reveal a complex but calculated set of strategies in place to guide the use of technologies in ways that allow members to physically sustain themselves and abide by their religious moral values in a high-tech world, from which they increasingly cannot opt out. I learned that there is much to discover beneath the surface of Amish discussions about technology adoption, because they represent larger, more complex tensions in communities between holding on to Amish traditions and changing with the times. Furthermore, there are lessons that we can learn from the Amish, who consider their own cultural, social, political, and religious autonomy in deciding how to engage with a broader social and economic system, because technologies are essential to the mediation of these relationships. In particular, Amish communities are in the process of determining how to navigate the social forces that have come along with what theorists such as Shoshana Zuboff (2019) call *high-tech capitalism*. Amish people describe technologies as both functional tools and symbols of engagement with and resistance to the external social world. Digital technologies are literally and figuratively bridges that connect their separatist communities to an alternative reality that they believe has the potential to erode their culture and religion from the outside in. Thus, decisions about technology adoption are multilayered, complex, dynamic, and contested. For the Amish, really understanding the functionality *and* potential social impacts of their tools is essential to deciding whether or not to adopt them. These decisions are productive sites of struggle that enable the Amish to create and sustain a dynamic social and cultural sanctuary where their way of life can thrive while resisting the disempowering aspects of the world around them.

This book aims to illustrate how members of Old Order Amish communities calibrate their use of communication technologies strategically in an effort to resist macrolevel social forces that work to fragment people in their communities from nature, religion, and each other. Many social theorists have also noted what the Amish seek to resist in the world around them. Namely, information technology works to amplify certain negative impacts of capitalism on people's lives. For example, they alter and accelerate our experience of time (Virilio 2006) and place by fragmenting people from nature (Brende 2005; Borgmann 1984) and each other (Putnam 2000; Sennett 1998, Zuboff 2019). Digital technologies contribute to the alienation of workers by making their labor invisible (Dyer-Witheford 1999; Gray and Suri 2019) and underpaid (Duffy 2017; Geissler 2014). The everyday lived experience of people working in a capitalist economy that is increasingly fueled by high technology is characterized by increased stress and anxiety (Rosen et al. 2012), increased feelings of loneliness (DiJulio et al. 2018), and an inability to fashion a long-term narrative of one's life (Sennett 1998). Importantly, analysts have noted that these negative experiences result from an inability to opt out of participation in a larger social and economic structure where power is intentionally asymmetrically distributed, and the most oppressed and marginalized people in society more acutely experience all these negative impacts (Castells 2009; Eubanks 2012, 2019; Noble 2018; O'Neil 2016; Tufekci 2017; Yueng 2019). The few individuals who have the most power in society own and program the infrastructures that undergird the high-tech economy by collecting user data and using it to further strengthen their power and control. These masters of digital capitalism stand to profit at the expense of those whose lives are increasingly surveilled, controlled, and made invisible and intelligible through obligatory participation.

Although various theoretical critiques of capitalism abound, there are few modern examples of everyday people who have found a sweet spot in which their participation in the economy allows them to acquire resources that can be used to fulfill their social, cultural, and political desires whether or not they align with the system's. Remarkably, members of Amish communities do just this. They participate in the global economy while maintaining cultural, spiritual, and ideological autonomy in defiance of what Shoshana Zuboff calls *Big Other*. Big Other refers to an instrumentarian superpower reigning over today's high-tech society that "reduces human

experience to measurable observable behavior while remaining steadfastly indifferent to the meaning of that experience" (376–377). Comprising commercial and governmental initiatives, in this new regime, "Big Other poaches our behavior for surplus and leaves behind all the meaning lodged in our bodies, our brains, and our beating hearts" (377). Just as Facebook's algorithm knows to serve a grandmother the first picture of her new grandson alongside advertisements for baby clothes, smart televisions are used by US national intelligence to detect (and eventually diffuse) terrorism threats. In recent elections around the world, social media have been weaponized by marketing companies that work to convince individuals to vote for a political candidate (or not) using false information. The lived experience under Big Other is a new kind of automaticity, a digital logic "that thrives within things and bodies, transforming volition into reinforcement and action into conditioned response" (Zuboff 2019, 379). This form of power is designed to reduce uncertainty in society. In so doing, it produces accumulated knowledge and profits for surveillance capitalists and diminished freedom for individuals.

At first, it may not be obvious to us that technologies are capable of diminishing our personal freedom or regulating our behavior. Indeed, because of recent advancements in digital technologies, we can simply ask a smart speaker in our house to order dinner from our favorite restaurant and it will show up on our doorstep within the hour. To cook our food at home is no longer a required chore. Is this not an expansion of freedom? We can also choose to video call our relatives who may live far away at any time. This relieves us of the trouble of traveling to have a conversation with someone whom we love and also to see their facial expressions as we talk. Is this not an expansion of freedom? It is easy to view such conveniences as expansions instead of limitations on personal freedom. From this stance, however, we disregard two important facts. First, these options generally are only available to people of socioeconomic privilege who have the technology available and the capability to use it. Second, if we meet these criteria, our actions and choices are limited and presented to us by the technology designer, a corporation (or multiple corporations) that stands to benefit from our use of their tools (a food delivery or video calling application [app]). By design, they offer us a purposefully narrow set of standardized actions but also personalize them to make it more likely that we will continue to use their tools. Over time, this may become routine, and we may become less likely to make dinner, exercising our creative energies, or

to organize social gatherings where homemade food is shared. If we regularly replace in-person family gatherings with video calls, we may find it unnecessary to travel to spend time with relatives and connect emotionally to our loved ones and old stomping grounds. Certainly creativity and emotion are qualities that separate humans from machines, but they also work to help people connect to one another, creating strong bonds of social support. Regularly exercising our creativity and having intimate emotional connections to others and to shared places may make human beings less predictable, but it may also make us less monotonous, more unique, and perhaps more beautiful.

What happens to us as a society when we give up uncertainty, chaos, and abnormality and instead opt for regularity, transparency, and confluence? What are the broader social drawbacks when the population en masse consents to the observation of more and more of our actions when they are then reinforced and rewarded by the surveillance capitalists' digital algorithms? According to Zuboff, "what is at stake here is the human expectation of sovereignty over one's own life and authorship of one's own experience" (2019, 521). By ceding this power to the programmers of digital infrastructures, we give up our right to private inward reflection and to creating space for the development of and acting on our own will. Crucially, this robs us of our own moral and political autonomy by making us active participants in the dissemination and implementation of the values and interests of the already powerful. In other words, what may seem like small, individual-level decisions about using new digital tools actually have significant consequences for the preservation of democratic structures and institutions in society, especially for solving our society's many problems related to social, cultural, and economic inequality. Without the space for inward reflection, for developing our own will and sharing it with others close to us (provided we still have others close to us), we become pawns for the enactment of the will of digital capitalists, whose infrastructures operate according to a logic that seeks to separate us from one another and make us dependent on them to ensure the generation of consistent profit and social control above all else.

That the Amish actively make decisions about technology that rest on their unique moral, spiritual, and faith-based values puts them precisely outside Big Other's reign of power. They do not acquiesce to surveillance by this new authority and do not consent to the rewriting of the religious, faith-based texts and identities that guide their behavior. As such, their

decisions about technology adoption and use provide an example of resistance to the powerful assault on the human capacity for authoring one's morals and will that we all face today. For example, an Amish person's decision to use electricity requires knowing where it comes from. If it comes from a solar panel or diesel generator, often it is allowed, whereas electric power from the public grid generally is not. Solar and diesel-derived electricity aligns better with Amish values, because it has limited, intentional purposes—often for powering tools in a workshop, not for a television or radio, which bring information and ideologies that are out of tune with Amish worldviews. The electricity generated by an individual generator or home solar kit is also not observable by large-scale anonymous institutions. Adoption strategies such as these are deliberate decisions that allow the Amish to get things done and compete for necessary resources in the twenty-first-century economy, without acting as pawns for large-scale, digital corporations and governments. From this holistic perspective, a relatively mundane tool (electricity) used for daily work is also seen as a political tool that helps resist forces that might entrap them in a larger political sociotechnical structure that is antithetical to their values.

This book highlights lessons from the Amish in their efforts to adopt technologies in ways that allow them to work and live according to their own value systems. Amish perspectives reveal that what may seem like routine decisions about digital technology adoption actually matter a great deal for human well-being. Additionally, it provides an update to our understanding of how the Amish work and live in an increasingly hightech, global economy. They ask, "What is lost when we heavily depend on devices that we only vaguely understand to carry out essential human tasks such as connecting meaningfully to the natural world and each other?" Although Amish responses are in some ways unique, their ability to retain social and spiritual connection and to find meaning in life is instructive for all who seek to find their own balance between using technology to fulfill their interests and values while resisting the alienating forces of today's high-tech society.

BACKGROUND

In general there is very little recent research on Amish approaches to digital technology adoption. One of the most extensive studies on this topic

was done by Diane Umble in the 1990s. Her research focused on Amish adoption and use of the telephone. Umble's (1996) book, *Holding the Line: The Telephone in Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life*, aimed to better understand the social impacts of the telephone on Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Amish communities during the twentieth century. She found that the arrival of the telephone brought new ways of communicating, which threatened face-to-face communication and oriented communication away from the home. When the telephone first appeared in Lancaster County, many Amish believed that "being able to know everything quickly" represented access to worldly knowledge, which resulted in some calling it a "sinful network" (Umble 1996). With the telephone, the world was brought to your door. This was a reality welcomed by some and shunned by others. The telephone, according to Umble, is not merely a neutral instrument. "It intrudes into already-established patterns of communication, potentially reorganizing and reordering practices that have long held 'the world' at bay" (xiv). The telephone made the community permeable to new information and introduced new methods for information gathering, association, and interpersonal interaction. At issue with the telephone was that "the telephone decontextualized communication and, thus the Old Order communicator" (2003, 152). Today telephones are found in or near many Amish homes and businesses, although a ban on phones in the home persists. "The coming of the telephone was a critical episode in the story of Old Order struggles to cope with social change" (Umble 1996, xiv). These struggles became known as the "telephone troubles." They set the terms of ongoing debates about how to manage communication with "the world" and how to respond to new technologies (Umble 1996). For the most part, the telephone troubles are now a settled issue. They have given way to debates about how to handle what many Amish people think is the most dangerous innovation of their time, the smartphone.

Author of many popular books on technology, Howard Rheingold also observed how Lancaster County Amish came to make decisions about adopting cell phones in the 1990s. His visit to the Amish was documented in a *Wired* magazine article in which he noted that the social health of the community is the primary focus when collective decisions about technology adoption are made (1999). He viewed the Amish as "technoselectives," not "knee-jerk technophobes." In his conversations with an Amish woodworker, he learned that the Amish "don't want to be the kind of people

who will interrupt a conversation at home to answer a telephone" (1999). For them, it is not just how you use the technology, it is what kind of person you become when you use it (Rheingold 1999).

The Amish approaches to digital technology use discussed in this book articulate a sophisticated vocabulary for exercising one's morals and ethics in the adoption of specific, limited tools for the accomplishment of daily goals. When visiting the Amish, I learned that a device known colloquially as "the black-box phone" was the source of much debate within one Amish settlement. It is a landline phone with an attachment (a "black box") that connects the phone to the local cellular network. The whole contraption is powered by plugging it into an automobile's cigarette lighter (making it a mobile telephone). One minister showed me a prototype of the mobile version of the device. In this case, the black box and the landline phone were placed in a plywood box for transportation so that construction crews could use it when on the road (figure 1.1). In this settlement, a large proportion of the workforce was employed as construction workers. According to informants, about 100 construction crews left the settlement daily for work. A number of ministers in the settlement believed that cell phones, which had been adopted by many people there, should be given up. Instead of owning a cell phone, they argued, people should adopt a black-box phone because it would be less threatening to the social and spiritual health of community members. Cell phones, a more private medium, were seen as providing opportunities for engaging in extramarital relationships via private text-messaging conversations. Smartphones, they thought, tempted users to access unfiltered, immoral content such as pornography, which was problematic because it was seen as a potential replacement for human intimacy. The black-box phone, on the other hand, is an intentionally bulked-up contraption that allows mobile communications from a vehicle but is very inconvenient to carry around. It only allows public, audible conversations—no texting or internet access. It is also shared among the crew members. Ministers in the settlement hoped that the adoption of these devices would make individual cell phone ownership among its constituents unnecessary. As an intended substitute for cell phones, the black-box phone is a unique Amish modification or reconfiguration of existing technology that is in better alignment with Amish values—no access to video, music, games, internet, or texting. It forces communicative arrangements that are public, allowing for peers to hold each other accountable for

Figure 1.1
An Amish modification, the black-box phone.

their actions. Additionally, this was a device that enabled Amish to use it to accomplish their goals and abide by their social norms, without subjecting themselves to Big Other's surveillance, control, and fragmentation.

This is just one example of how the Amish are actively configuring their sociotechnical world to better align with their values and protect their community's autonomy. Key to deciding whether a technology fits into their way of life is precisely tailoring the tool's means to the desired ends. In the early 2000s, Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate student Eric Brende conducted an 18-month experiment in which he and his wife gave up modern ways of living and joined a group of Amish who were living without technology. He writes of a "magisterial feeling that comes with wielding means precisely fitted to ends" (Brende 2005, 27). According to Brende, wielding complex tools that have unlimited (often imperceptible) functions forces us to experience distraction, diversion, duplication, and obstruction in efforts to complete our goals. For him, complex machines were not neutral agents. They required fuel, space, money, and time and

often "crowded out other important pursuits like involvement with family and community, or even the process of thinking itself" (Brende 2005, 7). His experience aligns with that of the Amish people I met. The black-box phone is a communication technology example of limiting the means of a task precisely to the desired ends.

Studying the Amish also helps move discussions of ethical technology design forward because members of their communities are actively contemplating and participating in the configuration of their information and communication networks and the design of their digital technologies (as in the black-box phone). Importantly, they are doing this in ways that enable them to fulfill their community's shared religious values, not those of large-scale anonymous institutions. They are extremely motivated to do so because they believe that the viability of their culture and way of life is at stake. On principle, they consult their shared values to determine how people should communicate inside and outside their community. They make rules about what technologies to adopt in their communities communally, publicly, and democratically. Every member of the church votes on amendments to the church's governing documents. Because the Amish actively design their digital technologies and use them to resist assimilating into powerful centralized entities such as metropolises, governments, and corporations, their approach stands to offer insights for others interested in configuring networked communication infrastructures that empower them to fulfill their own family and community values.

In resonance with the thinking of theorists including Manuel Castells (2009), Albert Borgmann (1984) Don Ihde (1990) and Langdon Winner (1980), the Amish actively view their digital technology use as political and as holding sway in determining how power flows over the communication structures that allow them to compete in the capitalist economy and sustain their community over time. For the Amish, in the past, empowerment has come from remaining disconnected. Today, however, this is changing—they are becoming extremely selective in *how* they connect. This book shows that there is a transition under way in how Amish communities are adopting technologies that connect them to the outside world. Previously, in determining how to adopt new technologies, the Amish simply built "fences": They separated themselves and their communities geographically from the outside world. Today, however, a changing economic environment and the materiality of technologies like the smartphone are making

geographic separation a less effective strategy. Instead of building fences, the Amish have begun to implement strategies that reflect a desire to program a network switch that can be opened and closed to prevent unwanted information from entering the minds of individuals and diffusing throughout their communities. In her book, Zuboff outlines the need for a right to sanctuary to escape the rule of Big Other. She beautifully describes her home as fulfilling the role of refuge, where secluded bodies lay and breathe together and spirits take root. For the Amish, their charge is to create a larger ideological and spiritual realm in which church groups and families can collectively dwell together. To do this, they configure communication systems so that desirable packets of information are encouraged to flow throughout the community network and undesirable packets are blocked from entry. The goal is to create a dynamic social and cultural sanctuary where their way of life can thrive while resisting the authority of Big Other.

The technologies in question in Amish communities today (cell phones and smartphones, wired and wireless internet) are qualitatively different from earlier technologies in their materiality. Whereas landline telephones, which were hotly debated in Amish communities over the course of the twentieth century, are immobile and the content that one can exchange through them is of relatively low resolution, the informational capabilities of mobile phones and the internet, by comparison, are almost limitless. Perhaps most consequentially, the materiality of the wireless network makes it impossible to keep it at arm's length from the community and the size of the device makes it very easy to conceal on the body. These new technologies are of increasing concern to the Amish because they bring global networks (and especially the vast torrent of information and content that one can access through connecting to them) into closer contact with families, communities, and church groups. This presents challenges for the previous resistance strategy of erecting a static fence between themselves and the outside world. Because of the encroachment of global networks and Amish dependence on global trade, a geographic separation no longer inhibits communication across distances.

The central claim put forth here is that the Amish—a community well known for rejecting modern technologies—has developed calculated strategies based on their shared values and ethics for adopting digital technologies that they believe empower people toward the fulfillment of their mutual humanity. We are often led to believe that making deliberate choices

about whether or not to adopt technology is nearly impossible, given the persistence and speed of our ravenous high-tech economy. Yet the Amish prove this wrong. Thus, this book articulates Amish strategies for value-oriented technology use that apply in a wide array of social contexts today.

The remainder of the book will further illustrate this through a variety of examples compiled thematically by chapter. The structure of the narrative is guided first by an introduction to Amish cultural history (chapter 2), which acts as a backdrop for understanding Amish ways of adopting and using technology. From here the book begins an empirical inquiry of different aspects of Amish creativity and ingenuity that allow them to make use of technology without deviating from their principles. This investigation is composed of three main focal areas. First, in chapters 3 and 4, rules are explored as innovations for resisting the negative impacts of digital technologies. Specifically, chapter 3 explores Amish practices in creating and abiding by explicit, codified rules about the use of digital technologies. While talking with people in Amish communities, I noticed that explicit rules were often easy to identify, but there were voids where people had to design their own approaches to "proper" technology use. Thus, in chapter 4, the creation of and adherence to implicit rules are explored. The second main focal area, the creation of communication artifacts, continues in chapter 5, where contraptions such as the black-box phone, made by Amish people for Amish people, are described. In chapters 6 and 7, the third focal area explores novel approaches to communication through digital networks. For example, in chapter 6, the development of a novel strategy for approaching digital communication for business is articulated. In chapter 7, perspectives on communication through digital networks show that the creative approaches to networked communication, as outlined in chapters 3 through 6, are fundamentally guided by a dedication to recognizing the mutual humanity of members of the community and on seeing holistic connections between people, spirituality, and nature. Finally, In chapter 8, the universality of these findings to Amish and non-Amish populations alike are considered.