

FROM THE FENCE TO THE SWITCH: CONFIGURING  
COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS FOR SANCTUARY

Members of today's Amish communities are active participants in the global economy. They travel for work and pleasure—often via train and hired vans and buses (Meek 2012). They communicate frequently via digital technologies to maintain connections with relatives and work colleagues who live far away. Increasingly, the Amish are dependent on outsiders to acquire the resources that they need to survive. They are different from others, though, in that they care a great deal about the nature of their connection to the outside world. As a result, over time, the Amish have developed sophisticated ways to regulate the communication channels connecting their local communities to everyone else in an effort to hold powerful ideological and cultural forces at bay—especially those that they believe could disrupt their strong, locally focused communities and simple way of life.

Adapting to economic changes has pushed Amish families to adopt many new technologies in recent years. Which technologies and how they are adopted, however, is not yet well understood outside Amish communities themselves. Generally a conservative religious group known for adhering to old-fashioned lifestyles, the Amish do not take a hard line against all new technologies, as some may think. The Amish do generally reject electricity supplied via the public power grid, as well as television, radio, automobiles, and modern clothing fashions. Among the diverse population of American Amish today, however, it is not uncommon to see people rollerblading, families enjoying time on the lake in a motorboat, construction workers using power tools, homes with solar panels on the roof, businesses with websites and Facebook pages, and individuals using cell phones to talk and send text messages. Some may view these behaviors as hypocritical or haphazard. This book, however, suggests an alternative: that these decisions are highly context dependent and often the result of calculated, communal negotiations intended to dodge the stress and anxiety associated with modern life while remaining competitive in the marketplace.

In making a decision about adopting or rejecting a technology, the Amish ask whether it could create a link over which corporate and governmental control can indirectly reach in and corrode the cultural ties that bind their small communities together. The Amish care deeply about maintaining community coherence because they view it as central to the sustainability of their religion and way of life. Although the most basic unit of Amish social organization is the family, the local church community comprises families living in close proximity who provide economic, informational, spiritual, physical, and social support for daily life. Members of Amish communities often report believing that corporate media messages are dangerous to community coherence because such messages emphasize individuality, independence, and personal expression. Similarly, they are averse to governmental interference in their communities because governments conceptualize people as being anonymized: constituents, voters, taxpayers, and citizens. Instead the Amish view themselves as collectives with densely connected histories, people related to one another through strong multigenerational social bonds.

Today, like the rest of us, the Amish are moving toward a flatter, decentralized but highly programmed communication system where technology connects the local community network to the global information network. Rules guide communication flows in two distinct ways. First, communicative behaviors are shaped internally through informal socialization (especially of young people). From childhood on, the Amish are instilled with values such as humility and *Gelassenheit* (a term in the Amish native language, Pennsylvania Dutch, that means “the act of giving up”) that guide their interactions with others. They are taught to have an internal instead of external primary social orientation. They learn to feel the practical and spiritual benefits of mutual dependence and enjoy the peace of mind that comes from following tradition and working according to nature’s rhythms. They are taught to form a “living brotherhood” and work together by giving “gifts of love” through the things that they make or the services that they provide to others (Cronk 1981). They learn to exert power through restraint and peace, not violence or aggression. Similarly, they are taught to identify the pitfalls and alienation that come from chasing after the fleeting allures of modernity. So when cell phones become intimately found on Amish bodies and in natural groupings, they are used according to Amish values, not modern values. The cell phone simply becomes an extension

of them, their community, and their values, not the values of the corporations or governments that own the infrastructures and distribute information that travels through them. The materiality of the link to the global connection also matters. If these channels are difficult to calibrate, as is the case with television and radio, the technology is easier to reject altogether.

Amish philosophies regarding adaptation to a changing world are largely inspired by their belief that they should live differently and separately from the rest of the world. According to Amish studies scholars Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher (2010), the Amish wish not to change the world but to resist it. In describing the Amish approach to negotiating with external ideological forces, these scholars call the Amish “a counterculture of religious affection” (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010, xiv). The Amish, however, would call their approach separation from the world. A collection of Bible passages interpreted for practical daily life provides the inspiration for the Amish separatist strategy: Romans 12:2 calls for Christians to “be not conformed to the world”; 1 John 2:15 states, “Love not the world or the things of the world”; James 4:4 says, “Who-soever . . . will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God.” The Amish separatist strategy is also inspired by Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, which says that no one can serve two masters. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and he will provide for your needs” (Matthew 6:33). In choosing to focus on these passages, according to Kraybill and colleagues (2010), the Amish train their desires on spiritual priorities and allow the rest to be taken care of by God.

The goal of achieving salvation is a public and communal one, which fundamentally organizes Amish life and communication patterns. In contrast to other Christian groups, the Amish do not believe that confessing one’s faith and being baptized ensures their salvation. To them this view is presumptuous. Instead, salvation according to Amish doctrine is a judgment based on one’s actions, not words. This judgment is one that only God can make at the end of a person’s life. The Amish talk of a “living hope” that at their death, God will be a merciful and just judge (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). They see the goal of salvation also as an inherently practical, public, and common goal, not an individual or abstract one, because living separately and differently from the rest of the world is too difficult for a person to do on his or her own (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010).

Community for the Amish is a privileged value that organizes nearly all aspects of daily life. It is at the heart of their religious beliefs and inspires the building of tangible boundaries between the subculture and the outside world (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010; Umble 2003; Umble 1996). The community is often described by Amish people as the wine or the loaf of bread, whereas individuals are the grapes or the grains of wheat. Only when they come together do they form a functional, enjoyable whole (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). The reason that community is so important to the Amish is that they believe living a life pleasing to God presents insurmountable difficulties for the individual. Receiving God's favor, for them, is a communal effort, not an individual one. The Pennsylvania Dutch word for community, *Gmay*, connotes three English words: church, district, and community. Districts (*Gmays*) are explicitly defined geographical areas in an Amish settlement. Whoever lives within the district's bounds attends church there (so long as they are Amish). As a member of a church, one is also a member of a collective economic unit. For example, if a member of the community suffers an injury or is ill and requires medical attention beyond his or her financial capacity, the church community steps in to help (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). Medical insurance, according to the Amish perspective, is "an attempt to make secure that which Jesus said is not secure" (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). For them, real security comes when people care for each other as much as they can. Districts generally break apart and form new districts when they grow larger than thirty or so families. Therefore, in addition to being a group of people who share similar religious beliefs, the church is geographically bounded and refers to an explicit body of community members. These factors underscore the importance of community for the Amish, which is foundational when studying the design of their communication networks and are designed to protect the local community over the long term.

In Amish communities the most common daily interactions are governed by tradition and rules: Who sits where at church, what chores are done at certain times of day, what month of the year people get married, what color one's house should be, and so on. These decisions are all made by social convention instead of individuals. That people are relieved from making such individual decisions acts to constrain individual egos, which are often seen as dangerous to group coherence over time. For the Amish,

deference to God and to each other are one and the same (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010).

The Amish design their social world to ensure that collectively they are in good standing and available to receive God's favor at the end of their lives. To do this, over time, the Amish have developed a highly structured social system that helps individuals live a life according to a literal interpretation of Jesus's teachings in the Bible. This also helps them "fit in" and function in the group, which is seen as essential to receiving God's favor. They believe that their faith is inextricable from their everyday actions. In other words, actions, not just belief in God, are open to ultimate judgment. Putting an individual in the best possible position on judgment day is a group effort. They believe that the world is too alluring (and damning) for individuals to make their way on their own. Thus the social system that they have designed is comprehensive, explicit, and ordered. The Amish often cite 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40: "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" and "Let all things be done decently and in order" (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010, 70).

This stringent ordering of social life is extended to technology adoption as well. I found that Amish leaders acted to configure their communication networks strategically and communally because they believed that their way of life was in danger of disappearing. In particular, they feared the encroachment of a normative American ideology that privileged sectarianism over religiosity, empiricism over faith, consumption over creation, individuality over collectivity, and novelty over nature. Today's powerful smartphones and other mobile devices represent increasingly invisible connections between members of their communities and this "worldly" ideology. Such connections represent ways of working that erase the means from the ends. If not kept at bay, leaders believe that such social tendencies would upset the Amish social structures intended to protect members' spiritual, social, and mental well-being. As a result, leaders were inclined to deploy evolving strategies of separatism, including, in some cases, placing limits on digital technologies or rejecting them altogether. They feared that widespread smartphone and internet adoption would endanger Amish belief systems, erode their shared values, and weaken the strong bonds that have sustained their communities for generations.

Separatist impulses among the Amish have historical roots. The presence of Amish people in North America is the result of emigration due to

religious persecution in Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when European governments and the church were closely aligned, the Amish held religious beliefs that made them heretics who defied centralized state control. Because of widespread persecution, many peace-seeking Anabaptists (Amish and Mennonites) immigrated to North America to evade control over their beliefs and practices by centralized powers. They settled in rural areas, away from the nucleus of state and corporate control, and for the most part they remain there today. The fact that the earliest Anabaptists were literally burned at the stake for their religious beliefs is still a living part of Amish folklore and identity. As a result, Amish groups continue to distrust large-scale government and deploy isolationist approaches for self-preservation. This contributes to the fact that their religious and cultural beliefs are still largely misunderstood and stigmatized by outsiders.

Although Amish communities seek to retain cultural independence from non-Amish society, internally people are encouraged to mutually depend on one another and renounce their own egos to ensure group cohesion. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Amish won an exemption from the US Social Security program because of their decades-long record of mutual care (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010; Social Security Legislation 1958). Many Amish homes have attachments called *Dawdyhouses* (grandparent houses) where elderly in-laws live so that younger family members can look after them and keep them involved in the family and community. Generally, the Amish reject putting elderly members in nursing homes, preferring to care for them themselves. Because church services take place only every other Sunday, on alternate Sundays families often go visiting. In other words, they travel by horse and buggy to the homes of their friends and acquaintances to talk to them. This generates an internally focused, strong-tie network in which channels of communication are open and the provision and receipt of mutual aid are encouraged.

In addition to mutual dependence, another social norm helps order Amish social relations and protect community ties. *Gelassenheit*, or “giving up,” is privileging the value of humility over pride. *Gelassenheit* is seen as essential to creating a close-knit community that endures over time. According to Umble (2003), *Gelassenheit* is a term used by early Anabaptists to communicate the ideal of yielding completely to the will of God. It entails deferring to clear and distinct higher authority. In the Amish community, higher authority exists in God, the church, the community, church

leadership, parents, and the Amish tradition. It is important to note that *Gelassenheit* orders relationships to have an internal focus. That is, although Amish are not opposed to deferring to non-Amish in certain situations, deference to Amish authorities is systematically expected. This works to deter an individual who may seek to gain social status through commodities, personal and professional success, worldly knowledge, individuality, aesthetic appeal, and so forth.

The principle of *Gelassenheit* also inspires the adherence to an Amish symbolic repertoire. This includes wearing simple homemade clothing, observing limitations on colors of house and buggy exteriors, eschewing participation in competitive sports and higher education, and using technologies only in approved “Amish” ways. These symbols all mark the Amish as different from the mainstream. Extensive rules about such issues as clothing, colors, technologies, and professional traditions diminish the need for individuals to stand out from one another, allowing the Amish to walk in the footsteps of their ancestors. Using these types of symbols to distinguish members of the community from outsiders helps create a tangible separation that makes visible those to whom one should and should not defer.

The Amish generally have large families (five children per couple on average) whose members often live close by and work together. The separate threads of work, spirituality, and community are tightly woven to form the broader fabric of everyday social life in Amish communities. Because driving a car is mostly forbidden, work is (very often) situated in the local community. Work and professional activity hold a special status in Amish life because they are seen as essential to the important task of family and community building in the present as well as across generations (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). Work practices, ideally, should connect one to his or her forefathers and to God. The kinds of work done by Amish people are organized by rigid gender roles and one’s place in the life cycle. Historically, fathers with young children have held jobs in farming, which enables the whole family to work together. Work is the preferred site for instilling everyday Amish values and developing a strong communal family core (Hurst and McConnell 2010). I was once told that being a corn farmer was not about growing corn but about growing upstanding young people and that your children were the only things you could take with you to heaven. Farming continues to be seen as an ideal profession for

making connections to nature and instilling the proper character and values in children.

The Amish also build their community through personal gifts of work, whereas the outside world depends on an impersonal distribution system for goods and services (Cronk 1981). Work for them is considered a service of love for others, not primarily as a way of gaining wealth, power, or prestige. When a man or woman helps his or her neighbors after their barn burns, time is taken away from one's own work to provide assistance to others. Instead of encouraging a daughter to get a higher-paying job in town, for example, a family prefers that she work at the home of a community member to help a new mother with housework after the birth of her baby (Cronk 1981). Mothers often make clothes for their family members instead of buying ready-made clothes from the store, because they see this as a gift to them. In general, Amish think that work-saving conveniences reduce sharing and erode the caring relationships that they want to encourage in their system of community-oriented living (Cronk 1981).

Much of the training for living an Amish life is done through lived behavior, modeled by parents working with their children. Although the church plays an important role in guiding spiritual life, work is where these abstract values become manifest in one's everyday actions. The injection of values into everyday life might be the single most distinctive characteristic of the Amish religion (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). The Amish understand that living life according to the Bible is an impossible goal but one that they must strive to reach. The first steps occur in training young children while passing down important skills that they will need to work. Children are taught through repetition by their parents, who model appropriate behaviors and practices, ensuring that the children follow their example (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). These efforts are reinforced at school, where Amish children learn values that encourage them to be nice to others, think of others before themselves, and obey their parents and the Bible. All this training prepares future members of the Amish church for participation in community life. So thoroughly enveloping children in the Amish ways and repeating to them the tenets of the Amish ideology in word and deed result in young people often feeling extreme culture shock when they enter the outside world for the first time.



The Amish believe that by including young children in their work, they learn to contribute to the family early in life and will not have time to cause trouble (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010). Amish people often cite Genesis 3:19, a verse about working by the sweat of one's brow to produce food. The proverb "Idleness is the devil's workshop" also enters Amish conversation, and the widely read *Rules of a Godly Life* states that idleness is a resting pillow of the devil and a cause for all sorts of wickedness (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010, 101). Keeping busy, in other words, makes it difficult for Amish youth to get into trouble (i.e., to be susceptible to outside ideological influences).

Although farming is still seen as the ideal kind of work for Amish men, there are fewer Amish farmers today than ever before (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Many Amish people today are moving from venerable agricultural professions to working in construction, tourism, or other cottage industries. This is causing anxiety for many older Amish and is having a significant impact on the texture of family and community life across the continent. Because of this shift, the economic landscape of many Amish communities today is in a state of flux. The risk, unlike for non-Amish, is not unemployment,<sup>1</sup> but that the kinds of employment available do not provide individuals and families with the ideal family-oriented lifestyle that farming once did. As a result, many Amish men find themselves working next to non-Amish people in factories, shops, and service jobs and as entrepreneurs with non-Amish clients. Women, too, are working more outside the home and are interacting with non-Amish in retail, tourism, service, and factory jobs to help increase family income. The impact that this will ultimately have on the coherence of families and communities over time is not yet known.

Amish people today believe that they must do their best to pick a profession that allows them to exercise their religious values, principles, and responsibilities as much as possible. Men feel pressure to find jobs that allow them to stay close to home so that they can spend time with family and are able to leave if an emergency arises; moreover, such jobs must provide them with a nonviolent (tolerant) and moral work culture (Hurst and McConnell 2010). In some areas, conservative church leaders prohibit members from working in these new industries. In these cases, innovation has occurred, resulting in the development of new sources of income. Innovative new

economic “farming” enterprises include dog breeding and deer farming. Other industries acceptable to some conservative churches include running salvage stores that sell dented cans of food and medicine to bargain shoppers, operating greenhouses, engaging in hydroponic gardening, and sponsoring produce auctions (Hurst and McConnell 2010).

Innovation and economic necessity have put Amish entrepreneurs and (especially) nonfarm workers in positions where they must use modern communication technologies to remain competitive with non-Amish (and increasingly even other Amish) businesses. Hurst and McConnell (2010) note that efforts to maintain ethical and cultural boundaries between themselves and non-Amish people are most tested when it comes to technology. Over the course of one generation, the Amish have sprinted through the industrial revolution by moving out of farming into small business.

According to Donald Kraybill, the Amish of Lancaster County (Pennsylvania) have changed dramatically in recent decades. Citing an Amishman born in 1943 who describes the changes that he witnessed in the last half of the twentieth century, Kraybill (2001) reports,

You’re halfway over the hill in the Pequea when you can tell your children and grandchildren about things you never had when you were their age. Never had sisters day, brothers day, etc. only work days, no fruit pizza, no cheese pizza, in fact no pizza at all. No bathrooms, no phone shanty, no church melody books. Our outside toilets then were smaller than today’s phone shanty. No compressed air or hydraulic tools. No *Botschaft*, no *Diary*, no *Pathway Magazine*. No \$100 scooters or rollerblades. No trampolines, no gang mowers, no outdoor grills. Balers and binders put hay bales and corn bundles on the ground. No Amish school board, teachers or Amish schools in Leacock Township. No cheese dip or pretzel dip. In fact the only dip we knew was swimming in Pequea Creek. No fire company sales, no benefit sales, no school sales. You never heard, “yeah right,” or “have a good one.” No hot air balloons, no seat belts.

This list provides an enlightening glimpse of the multiple planes across which change has occurred in Amish communities such as Lancaster in just one generation.

It should be noted that in the nineteenth century, Amish identity was not closely linked with resistance to change, because their farms and households were similar to their rural neighbors. Distinctive Amish responses

to technology began to emerge in the twentieth century “as the fruits of the late Industrial Revolution—driven by electrification and advanced transportation—moved into rural America” (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013, 313). When industrialized ways of life began to emerge, the Amish began separating themselves symbolically through resisting certain aspects of “progress.” Kraybill asks, “Why do some aspects of Amish life change while others remain stuck in tradition? Is there a formula by which some innovations are accepted and others rejected?” (Kraybill 2001, 296). His answer is that the Amish view social change as a matter of moving cultural fences. Cultural fences mark the lines of separation between the Amish way and the modern world. Coping with social change, Kraybill says, involves fortifying old fences, moving fences, and building new ones. According to Kraybill, no single principle or value determines change or adaptation in Amish society. He sees change as a dynamic process in which a variety of factors impinge on a decision to accept or reject a particular practice. “Decisions to move symbolic boundaries always emerge out of the ebb and flow of a fluid social matrix” (Kraybill 2001, 297). Moreover, he says, with seventy-five bishops in the Lancaster settlement alone, it is impossible to maintain uniform standards. Therefore the diversity of practices increases as the Amish population continues to grow. These factors characterize the move that Amish people have made in recent years to strategically configure their technology adoption and communication systems to create a dynamic sanctuary that allows them to control information flows into their communities.

In 2019, there were 341,900 Amish living in North America. This is an increase from 128,145 in 1992—making them one of the fastest growing religious groups in North America (Amish Population Profile 2019). Although this trend is mostly indicative of a higher than average birth-rate (compared to other Americans), it also suggests that the Amish have been exceptionally successful at navigating rapid social change. Although it might seem that technological and economic developments pose insurmountable hurdles for the Amish, their population is thriving, and work is not hard to come by (Hurst and McConnell 2010). Thus, when considering the necessity of digital technologies for economic viability and social progress, the Amish are a particularly interesting case. We are often led to believe that we cannot lead fulfilling, successful lives without technology. The fact that the Amish limit the use of digital technologies within

their communities, yet seem to be thriving economically, raises a number of interesting questions.

FROM THE FENCE TO THE SWITCH: SHIFTING TRENDS IN AMISH  
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION AND USE

The observations and experiences described in this book will show that strategies for adopting and rejecting digital technologies among the Amish are changing to continue resisting assimilation in the information age. In the past, mediated connections between the Amish and the outside world were more static (newspapers, books, telephones, letters, etc.). Fences were built to geographically separate Amish bodies and connections to the outside world, including communication technologies. For example, the telephone in most Amish communities has been removed from the home. It sits in an outbuilding in front of the home so as not to disturb family conversation. It is there in case of an emergency. Business associates can also leave messages on the answering machine. This is desirable because it does not disturb family conversation inside the home—a sacred space. By separating the telephone from the body and the social processes that sustain natural groupings such as family, religion, and community, the Amish believe that they are able to hold centralized corporate and governmental powers at bay. This book offers a first step toward understanding how this approach has been adapted to deal with more dynamic technologies such as cell phones or smartphones and the internet.

Kraybill suggests that there is a process in place in Amish communities whereby the acceptance of new artifacts and the relaxation of old standards often happen by default. In this kind of system, the adoption of technologies starts to diffuse through social networks informally. Sometimes this diffusion will result in more formal rulings later on. Social changes or new technologies, he says, are discussed at formal meetings held twice a year where ministers come together to try to maintain uniformity across the (Lancaster) settlement. Sometimes, though, “change just kind of happens,” according to a minister whom Kraybill interviewed. Church leaders rarely plan or *initiate* social changes. More commonly, decisions are made to *resist* changes. For example, if a questionable practice such as the use of computers or wall-to-wall carpeting in homes begins to gain widespread adoption, the bishops could deliberately curtail it. The bishops use biblical images

to frame their responsibilities in such situations. They see themselves as responsible for guarding the flock. They are not the source of innovation; instead their charge is to observe and inspect potential changes and resist the detrimental ones (Kraybill 2001).

Thus, change in Amish society comes from neither the top nor the center of the social system, but from the periphery. “It is often instigated by those living on the edge of the cultural system who try to stretch the boundaries” (Kraybill 2001, 298). These individuals are often called *fence jumpers* or *fence crowders*. They might experiment with a new gadget such as a fax machine, a corn harvester, a mixer powered by air, a computer plugged into an electrical inverter, or a website for their business, he says. If someone complains, church leaders may pay the early adopter a visit. Then the “deviant may make a confession and ‘put away’ the questionable item” (Kraybill 2001, 298). In the Amish system, limitations on technology use come from a reactionary social authority instead of a proactive one.

Kraybill suggests that fence jumpers usually know what is likely to “pass inspection.” If a new item such as a calculator, disposable diapers, or a cash register is adopted by others and is met with few complaints, eventually the practice will creep into use by default, he says. These decisions, however, take place over a significant course of time. Borderline practices, such as artificial insemination of cows or the use of telephones, may be tolerated or put on hold for several years to more thoroughly assess their impact. There is some danger, however, in letting things go too far for too long without adequate attention from the bishops. “There is a delicate line of no return,” says Kraybill. There was a division in the church in 1966 when bishops tried to eradicate pieces of farm equipment that had already been in use in several church districts for a decade. In observing the potential impacts of such decisions, one Amish leader told Kraybill, “If we’re not tolerant, we’ll have more [Old Order Amish Church schisms], but too much tolerance can wreck the whole thing too” (Kraybill 2001, 302). The Amish approach to change, then, is hallmarked by a dynamic process of collective resistance and negotiation. The governance structure in place to guide such processes in Amish communities provides a framework that outlines where the freedom to negotiate with modernity exists and where restraints on individual actions are more firm.

The decision-making process in place in Amish communities for adopting or rejecting a new technology has been in development since the late

nineteenth century and has been extensively studied (Cong 1992; Cooper 2006; Hurst and McConnell 2010; Kraybill 1998; Kraybill 2001; Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher 2010; Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013; Murphy 2009; Rheingold 1999; Scott and Pellman 1990; Umble 1996; Umble 2003; Wetmore 2007; Wueschner 2002). Previously, in determining how to adopt new technologies, the Amish simply built “fences”: They separated themselves and their natural groupings (family and church groups) geographically from the outside world. Today, however, a changing economic environment and the materiality of technologies such as the smartphone are making geographic separation a less effective strategy. In macrolevel political negotiations via social and information network configuration, the Amish have begun to implement strategies that reflect a desire to program a network switch that can be closed to prevent unwanted information from entering the minds of individuals and diffusing throughout their communities. Information flows are calibrated specifically to allow Amish communities to protect their cultural autonomy in much the same way that fences did in previous eras.

Today, in moving from building fences to flipping a switch, the Amish are building a flatter, decentralized, but highly programmed communication system where a technology and the prescribed usage of it connects the local network (community) to the global information network. Rules control communication flows in two distinct ways. First, communicative behaviors are shaped internally through informal socialization. From childhood on, the Amish are instilled with values such as humility and *Gelassenheit* that guide their interactions with others. They are taught to have an internal, instead of an external, primary social orientation. They learn to feel the practical and spiritual benefits of mutual dependence and enjoy the peace of mind that comes from following tradition and working according to nature’s rhythms. They are taught to form a living brother- and sisterhood and to work together by giving gifts of love through the things that they make or the services that they provide to others. They learn to exert power through restraint and peace, not violence or aggression. Similarly, they are taught to identify the pitfalls and alienation that come from chasing after the fleeting allures of modernity. Therefore, when cell phones mediate Amish communication, they are used according to Amish values, not modern values. This reflects an interest in fulfilling Amish values while resisting the power of corporations and or governments to anonymize and

fragment society by making people dependent on technology and the services offered through it.

Second, communicative behaviors are guided by the democratic establishment of a set of formal rules, called the *Ordnung*, that govern technology use. The *Ordnung* governs relationships and ways of life among Amish church members and makes rules about technology adoption explicit for members of the church. Amish *Ordnungs* vary across district, despite various efforts to achieve uniformity among certain “tribes” within the Amish population, as Kraybill and colleagues call them (2013). *Ordnungs* are locally developed in each district and are meant to augment the Bible for modern living. Much collective thought and solemnity goes into decisions about what rules to inscribe into the *Ordnung*. Some communities have rules in their *Ordnungs* that make cell phone ownership illegal for members of their community. In others, cell phones are allowed for work purposes only. In some, there is no rule about cell phones in the *Ordnung*, leaving people to make individual decisions about whether to acquire one. The materiality of the device that links Amish people to the global network matters a great deal to them because they want to be able to control what flows over the various channels of influence into their communities. An *Ordnung*, then, contains codified rules outlining how the material link to the outside world should be configured.

According to Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher (2010), the *Ordnung* is considered a cluster of time-tested practices that enhance community well-being. Compliance with the *Ordnung* signals a member’s desire to live in harmony with others. Interestingly, this venerated document is not written down but communicated through lived behavior. Showing disregard for the *Ordnung* signals an individual’s disregard for God and the community. Although there are sometimes severe consequences for disobeying the *Ordnung*, including shunning, the Amish are generally quite forgiving if forgiveness is requested. That the *Ordnung* is not written but passed down through lived example positions the Amish to embrace and adapt to environmental change. The malleability of this arrangement allows them to easily react to a changing technological and economic environment. The *Ordnung* is sacred and respected. Although the Amish way of life is highly organized and structured through rigid social and gender norms rooted in religious doctrine and tradition, the flexibility of the *Ordnung* allows them to adjust to dynamic environments and roll with the punches, so to speak.

It presumes an uncontrollable, changing, and uncertain external environment and positions the community to evolve in harmony with the outside world, yet in many ways separate from it.

The purpose of the *Ordnung*, or the rationale for its existence, is to create of the community a “living brotherhood” (Cronk 1981). Essential to this undertaking is following the behavior of Jesus, who did not use his power to manipulate or coerce others to achieve his will. “He would not even allow Peter to use his sword to prevent his capture when Judas betrayed him. He yielded himself so completely to God’s will that he allowed himself to suffer and die on the cross” (Cronk 1981, 7). From this, the Amish have come to believe that eternal life comes not from conquering through might, but from yielding and submission. As a result, members of most Anabaptist groups conscientiously object to serving in the military. As Cronk notes, God works in the world with “the power of powerlessness” (1981, 7). She suggests that this understanding of power is paradoxical. Using love instead of coercion signifies the rejection of “the usual forms of power.” However, Christ’s love, according to the Bible, has had great power and has also brought about radical change. Understanding this paradox, according to Cronk, is essential to understanding Amish rites and rituals, because each has this profound insight at its root.

The people in Amish communities in charge of updating and enforcing the *Ordnung* are the church bishop, ministers, and deacons. These church community leaders are men who have been chosen through the drawing of lots. This diminishes human choice and accents submission to God and the community. By using this approach, the community gives up control over the outcome and hands it over to God. Church leaders are not elected or appointed by their constituents or external entities, though in some communities the population of eligible men is dwindled down through a nomination process. According to Kraybill, the most important qualifications for ministry include being sound in the faith and presiding well over their households. Qualified men should “have good order in their own homes” (2001, 51). They should be ready to model the Amish way through daily habits, attitudes, and disposition, according to Kraybill.

These positions are held for life. When an opening needs to be filled, a slip of paper is inserted into a hymnal. Without disclosing which hymnal has the slip in it, the books are distributed to the eligible candidates. The man who opens the hymnal with the slip in it fills the position, and he does



not have the option to decline. One man who went through the lot said, “It’s a weighty time . . . there are no congratulations. You realize your life is now changed forever and you’ve now gotten an additional set of responsibilities that . . . you can only carry with the Lord’s help” (Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher, 2010, 52–53). This process communicates to members of Amish communities that God chooses the church’s leaders. Sometimes it might not be clear to people why God chose a particular man. This is yet another reminder to Amish people that they must surrender their own egos and defer to higher authorities.

In doing research for this book, I interviewed forty-five participants (thirty-five of whom were Amish church or business leaders). Being an Amish bishop or minister is an unpaid position. So participants in this study all had other professions and hobbies in addition to their duties as ordained clergymen.<sup>2</sup> This group was very eclectic, containing entrepreneurs, farmers, furniture makers, buggy builders, cabinetmakers, mechanical engineers, millionaires, school board members, patent holders, a historian, a manager at a multinational corporation, a clock maker, an employee at a business that sells almost two million dollars’ worth of product on a popular online auction website, and at least one world traveler. As is conventional among the Amish, these men had only eighth-grade educations and were largely self-taught.

These individuals described workarounds such as the black-box phone and explicit and implicit rules guiding the adoption and use of digital technologies among today’s Amish. They also articulated efforts that they made to ensure human well-being as their sociotechnical environments changed. In particular, they worked extensively to strategically arrange their social relationships through technology use in an effort to privilege the fulfillment of human spirituality, connection to nature, strong social bonds, cultural autonomy, economic vitality, and individual social and psychological health.

Strict gender roles continue to structure the way in which people work and interact in Amish communities today. I heard only a few female business owners articulate philosophies about the adoption of technology. The views of these women were focused primarily on technology adoption and use that spilled over from business into family and spiritual life. Women are not eligible for formal leadership within the Amish church, so it was common for people to refer me to male church and business leaders to answer

my questions. Church and business leaders were generally seen as uniquely capable of speaking for the community, especially to outsiders. Others were not.

For this reason, regrettably, I was not able to hear the perspectives of many Amish women. As a result, this book contains mainly the experiences and ideas of men; asking women about these topics, unfortunately, was simply not an option. With the exception of recently conducted research by Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar (2017a, 2017b), there are few published studies outlining the unique cultural experiences of Amish women. Certainly more research is needed in this domain. I did have encounters with Amish women (and one extremely insightful interviewee was a female business owner), but generally I did not get the opportunity to observe women acting as thought leaders. In my encounters, women were reluctant to articulate viewpoints about the social and political impacts of technologies broadly, or for specific classes of Amish people. On a tour of Amish businesses in Lancaster County, I asked a prominent female business owner, whose business was notably high-tech (computers and printers were visible in the workplace, and the business had a website, online marketplace, and Facebook page), if there were gender differences in technology adoption and use among business leaders. The response I received was a simple “No, I don’t think so.”

It is also important to note that what might appear to non-Amish observers as obvious gender inequality in Amish social structures is not necessarily perceived as such by members of the community itself. First, women and men are both considered members of the church with equal representation in voting for changes to the *Ordnung*. Additionally, the fact that women are not eligible for formal leadership roles in the church is reported by many women to be a relief. This job is frequently cited, by men and women alike, as causing stress and requiring much time and energy. Furthermore, at home—the center of Amish work and spiritual life—women’s voices tend to hold sway. Therefore, in an effort to maintain access to the already reclusive Amish population, given the unique nature of its strict gender roles, I did not seek to interview less powerful people within the community or ask questions about nondominant uses of digital technologies within Amish communities.

During the period when this research was conducted, the adoption of new communication technologies was a topic of interest to many Amish

business and church leaders, and the influx of new technologies was a source of much debate. This contributed in various ways to the amount and type of data I was able to collect. I have written extensively about how I did this research elsewhere (Ems 2015). To summarize, I used two primary methodological approaches. First, I conducted semistructured interviews with Amish church and business leaders in two settlements in Indiana from March 2011 to February 2014. Indiana, home to the third largest population of Amish in North America, has received less attention than the two states with larger Amish populations, Pennsylvania and Ohio. I sought to talk with Amish ministers and business owners via a snowball sampling method because they were central figures in the negotiation of sociotechnical change in their communities and were more accessible to outsiders than nonleaders.

Many community leaders were also facing dilemmas about how to collectively move forward given the changes going on around them. Talking to their peers about adopting digital technologies was generally seen as taboo. One interviewee told me that there is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in place in many communities that inhibits conversations on this topic. Perhaps when participants received an invitation from me to share their experiences and opinions on these topics for this book, knowing that they would be anonymized, they then felt happy to have an opportunity to speak their minds. As a result, this book captures a wide array of differing viewpoints as well as a collective *Zeitgeist* among the Old Order Amish that shows a poise and readiness for navigating today’s sociotechnical challenges.

Secondly, while in the field, I also observed a number of uniquely Amish technological artifacts and sociotechnical arrangements. Therefore, in addition to my interviews with business and church leaders, I conducted a thematic content analysis of a trade journal popular among Amish entrepreneurs, *The Plain Communities Business Exchange (TPCBE)*, which provided insights into the spread of these artifacts and arrangements among the broader Amish population. According to the *TPCBE* website, the journal appeals to readers who do not have access to the internet and rely on mail publications to learn about and buy products that meet their family’s needs. The journal contains advertisements for products made by people from plain communities, which gives the publication the feel of a catalog. It resembles a version of the *Whole Earth Catalog* meant for Amish living. One can find information for purchasing nearly everything that an Amish

home-based business or household might need for daily operation, from ice cream makers to equestrian supplies to off-grid, electric office equipment. In addition to the advertisements, the publication contains a number of articles that explore issues that plain business owners might face in their work. It is educational in the sense that the articles are often written by experts from the plain community on topics such as finance, technology, management, or travel. Articles often consist of real life stories that illustrate a way to overcome a particular type of challenge in the workplace. In chapter 5 a number of unique digital technologies and related services repeatedly appearing in *TPCBE* advertisements are presented and described. In chapter 6 a set of nine articles exploring Amish strategies for internet adoption, appearing monthly from December 2013 to October 2014, are summarized and analyzed.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11792.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11792.001.0001)

# Virtually Amish

## Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins

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### Citation:

*Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins*

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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/11792.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262369381

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin



The MIT Press

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The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by New Best-set Typesetters Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ems, Lindsay, author.

Title: Virtually Amish : preserving community at the Internet's margins / Lindsay Ems.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] | Series: Acting with technology | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021031327 | ISBN 9780262543637 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Amish—Indiana—Customs and practices. | Information technology—Religious aspects—Amish. | Telephone—Religious aspects—Amish. | Internet—Religious aspects—Amish. | Technological innovations—Evaluation—Case studies. | Information technology—Evaluation—Case studies. | Decision making—Religious aspects—Amish. | Information society—Indiana. | Amish—Indiana—Economic conditions. | Amish—Indiana—Interviews.

Classification: LCC F535.M45 E47 2022 | DDC 977.2—dc23/eng/20211007

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021031327>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1