

WHERE THE “RULES” END, INFORMAL APPROACHES TO
BEHAVIOR CHANGE BEGIN

In my first encounter with Noah, I realized that he was an exception in many ways. Time and again in my fieldwork, I spoke with Amish people who belonged to a church that had a rule against cell phone ownership, yet they owned a cell phone, had a family member who did, or knew someone who did. At a cynical first glance, one might simply read this as hypocrisy or an effort to present an overly rosy view of reality. My interviews with Amish leaders suggest that such inconsistencies are not evidence of people exploiting loopholes in the *Ordnung*, however. Instead, there are patterns revealing that informal systems work to extend the *Ordnung*. Indeed, these informal mechanisms work to ensure that members of the community have the freedom to be flexible and adaptable as they choose tools that are precisely tailored to conducting their work, fulfilling their values, and maintaining community. These individual decisions occur via conversations in families and church communities but are not inscribed in the *Ordnung*. Three types of informal mechanisms were observed, and together these work alongside formal rules to constrain and tailor tools to desired ends: (1) teaching the “proper use” of a technology, (2) relying on old arrangements to guide future action, and (3) presenting proper use as a symbol of group identity.

TEACHING THE PROPER USE OF A TECHNOLOGY

As previously noted, bishops, ministers, and deacons play an important role in executing the formal mechanisms governing sociotechnical change in Amish communities. Their work, however, does not stop there. Because it is their job to execute institutionalized processes, which are public, communal, and democratic, church leaders often believe that it is also their responsibility to understand how members feel about issues surrounding technology adoption or rejection. Often it is in these interpersonal

interactions that church leaders have more power to influence and regulate social change. Thus, using a wide-angle lens, one sees that the decision-making process also involves holding, curating, and provoking informal (sometimes public, sometimes private) conversations with church members that have the potential to sway public opinion throughout the close-knit social network in one direction or another. Here, church leaders typically identified two distinct visions for bringing out proper use among church members: *strong teaching* and *instilling personal convictions*.

Before exploring these approaches in detail, it is useful to understand the church leaders' most public forum for guiding thought and sociotechnical change: the Sunday sermon. Each Sunday, a church leader has the opportunity to give a sermon. It is often not decided until the church service begins which of the ministers (or bishop) will be giving the day's sermon. It is common to see varying degrees of preparedness among church leaders from week to week. Some are likely to come with scheduled topics to discuss, and some let themselves be divinely inspired in the moment. The topic of technology can come up during a church sermon, and the message espoused often influences church members' opinions on the subject. The sermon is seen as a religious and educational message that is taken up and referenced in church members' everyday conversations with family, including in daily devotional sessions throughout the week. These everyday conversations hold the potential to incite changes in group opinion and to promote the adoption or rejection of technologies formally at the community level and inconspicuously at the individual or family level. In interviews it was common for a participant to recall something that was discussed in the sermon during the preceding week and relate it to our conversation in the moment. In addition to sermons, church leaders might also curate (provoke or stifle depending on the situation) public topics of discussion by convening with other members, publicly enforcing rules, or both. In this way, church leaders use their power to set the agenda for public conversations and encourage a type of informal socialization that works at the grassroots level. This is intended to bring about the proper use of a technology in the community, when formal rules do not go far enough.

In my interviews with church leaders, I asked them to explain how best to ensure that people are using digital technologies properly. In all cases proper use was seen as usage that was limited in some way. The strategies that church leaders used to influence church members' behaviors, however,

were slightly different. One of the notable variations that I observed was in the preference for either a *strong teaching* approach or an *instilling personal convictions* approach. Although it was not perfectly divided along settlement lines, more church leaders in northern Indiana preferred *instilling personal convictions*, whereas southern Indiana church leaders relied more on *strong teaching* to guide proper technology use. Similarly, younger ministers who had businesses where digital technologies were used generally reported favoring *instilling convictions*. In contrast, farmers and older church leaders favored *strong teaching* approaches. Regardless of the favored approach, most church leaders agreed that a combination of both was needed to bring about proper use today.

For example, Jacob, a southern Indiana bishop, took a *strong teaching* approach toward bringing about proper use among his church members. For Jacob and many other church leaders, their primary motivation for limiting technology use was the preservation of the souls of their members. Jacob thought that digital technologies were especially dangerous because they “took the mind away from where it should be.” Portable gaming devices like Game Boys were an example he gave. As a bishop, he believed that his job was to “teach, talk, and warn” people not to go near these things. “It’s like teaching children to stay away from a burning fire,” he said. “Parents must warn and teach their children not to go near it because kids don’t know.” Although he actively preached against the use of digital technologies by church members, he had little ability to enforce such behaviors. Jacob’s use of common adages in describing his philosophies on technology seemed to suggest that this was not the first time that he had had conversations on this topic. He told me, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” in describing how his preaching was sometimes ignored by church members when he discussed such issues. He also noted, “You can convict a man against his will, but he will remain unconvicted¹ still,” as we were talking about how to instill convictions in church members that governed their behaviors and discouraged the use of digital technologies according to Amish beliefs.

Like Jacob, another southern Indiana bishop named Levi also took a *strong teaching* approach to restricting church members’ digital technology usage. He said, “I try to keep reminding people of and enforcing church rules.” In his community, though, he thought that the church rules were of little consequence. “People live their lives to their own heart’s content,”

he said. That was the trend in his church. “Instead of asking the church for permission, people just go ahead and do what they want to do.” In warning them about the dangers of technologies such as television, video games, cell phones, and the internet, he said, “I tell them. I preach it. And it seems like it goes in one ear and out the other.” For Levi, this “causes a sadness. We know we don’t want it but we know we have it. Noah preached until the door closed. How far are we from flood times now?” he asked, referencing the biblical parable of Noah’s Ark.

Levi told me that he thought that as a society, we were headed in a dangerous direction and that he believed the second coming of Christ was growing closer every day, citing environmental crises and humanitarian atrocities such as school shootings that he saw in the daily news. He worried that people would be caught unprepared, saying, “God told us there would be no making ready” when he comes again to take his believers to heaven. Levi felt his frustrations with trends in his church acutely. He was sincerely worried about the impact that new technologies were having on his congregation’s souls because he believed that the day of ultimate judgment was quickly approaching. The fact that his church members did not always listen to his warnings brought him deep emotional distress. Like Jacob, he thought that there was not much he could do about it, though, because “The Amish don’t believe in putting force to things like others might.” He thought that this was something that outsiders had trouble understanding about the way in which the Amish did things.

Instead of relying primarily on *strong teaching*, other church leaders reported having a greater reliance on *instilling personal convictions* in church members, preferably at a very early age, to ensure proper use of digital technologies. I asked many informants, “What do you think is the best way to ensure that people use digital technologies according to Amish beliefs?” The answers for people who preferred to rely on *instilling personal convictions* often used language such as “People must consult their conscience” or “Technology use is determined by one’s religious convictions.” For example, Melvin, a business owner, used a computer and the internet daily in his work as a financial manager at a construction company. He used Google Maps and told me that he had not “put his foot down” on his children’s use of mobile devices and social media because he was afraid that it would push them away from joining the church. When I asked him how to use these technologies according to Amish beliefs, he said, “Controlling the

use of a phone, computer, or the internet is mainly done through personal convictions.” The rules in his church that limited technologies were justified, he believed. He said that he was allowed to use technologies because he had control over himself. “Some people did not have this self-control, though.” When I asked how one teaches this control to others, he said, “I don’t know . . . but having a conscience and convictions toward that helps.” When he started using computers, he said that there was a firewall and a pop-up blocker on them. This helped train him to use them the right way. He told me that he had looked at YouTube and had decided that if it was showing something that he did not want to see, he would turn it off. If he were not able to do this, he said, “I would not have convictions.”

Noah and I had many conversations about how best to encourage people to use technology according to Amish beliefs. For him, it was acceptable to use new digital technologies so long as the person used them in accordance with Amish values. He had a smartphone and used a computer and the internet at work daily. As a purchaser at a construction company, he said, he currently did all his buying online. He believed that for his business, having access to the internet and computers was “a matter of survival.” He said that his bishop did not want to ignore the fact that “technology is here” and took a proactive stance in making decisions about technology adoption in businesses like his. Thus, his bishop and fellow church leaders consented to the technology in his business, but he still felt guilty about using it. For Noah, his convictions limited his use in a way that signaled his respect for Amish tradition and values. This, he thought, was something that he was able to regulate best through consulting his own conscience. For him, the issue was not whether you used a cell phone or the internet but how it was used that was more important. He believed that it was essential for his business to have these tools to compete in the marketplace and that his deeply held convictions helped him use these tools in a way that allowed him to adhere to his Amish values.

For Noah, it was very clear. Adopting technologies was no different than any other individual choice about one’s behavior. Noah thought it was best not to use digital technologies, but if it must be done, one should use them according to Amish values through demonstrating self-control. Self-control, he said, was based on what he called “The three Cs,” which he told me he had preached about before: conviction, confession, and contrition. Conviction refers to modeling behaviors according to biblical teachings and

Amish tradition. Confession refers to asking others to hold you accountable for your actions. And contrition, according to Noah, had to do with turning things around or “doing an about-face” if you realized that you had “gone down the wrong path.” Noah also believed that using technologies responsibly was not counter to the Amish lifestyle. From his viewpoint, it would have been disrespectful to use technologies in ostentatious ways, but for work and necessities they were acceptable and useful tools. In this way, Noah’s vision about how to ensure proper use best exemplified *instilling personal convictions*.

When I asked Floyd, a minister, business owner, and grandfather, how to teach a child to use a technology in the proper way, he said, “They already know.”

The church has rules which kids are taught all the way through. Children grow into it and learn the values that way. It’s hard to explain because they just know. They’ve been brought up in a certain way to understand the values and the way of life. You start teaching your kids how to talk to others before they are born in how you talk as husband and wife. You start talking to them as children and explaining to them what values are important.

Echoing these sentiments, Robert, a minister from northern Indiana, said, “Instilling convictions starts when we hold [our children] in our arms. It begins when we talk together as mother and father before they’re born. We have to speak to them before they can speak to you.” Sam, a businessman, said this was important to reiterate as children entered adolescence. He stated, “We must teach young people ‘the why’ of what we [cannot] do as Amish. Otherwise we won’t keep the youth.” He said today’s youth have gotten better in the past ten years, saying that they are more sincere and conscientious. Technology use, from this viewpoint, is not a space where actions become divorced from values, nor is it separate from other ways of acting in the world. It is simply seen as another annex of social life where deeply engrained Amish values are enacted.

Andy, a deacon and business owner from northern Indiana, believed that both enforcing limitations on use and relying on moral values contributed to the proper use of digital technologies. He thought that personal convictions and limitations on use complemented one other. According to Andy, “You have to be the master of your own actions. If you can’t, you should remove the thing that brings temptation.” He said, “I don’t care

what you do. You have to be a master over your actions. If you can't, you shouldn't have the technology that gives you access to the temptation.” Others shared Andy's sentiments as well, noting the importance of both approaches in daily life. Ryan, a bishop and business owner, also emphasized the importance of instilling convictions and emphasizing restrictions and limitations. He used a computer for designing homes with a computer-aided design system at work on a daily basis and had his email open on one of his two monitors as I was talking to him. He believed, however, that computers could bring along problems because they made it possible to access evils via the internet. “In general, if people have convictions they will stay away from the problems,” he said. “If they don't have convictions, it could lead to problems in the community.” I asked Ryan how to instill convictions in people. He replied that it is done through talking and warning people about the dangers of technology. He also thought that convictions could be instilled by establishing restrictions and limits on technology use. “If we limit computer access by allowing computer use, but only for business and not for personal use, we put restrictions on them,” he said.

RELIANCE ON OLD ARRANGEMENTS AS MODELS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Inherited Amish traditions and philosophies also work to regulate the use of digital technologies in Amish communities. These philosophies work to throttle information flows that are seen as potentially threatening to individual souls and the sustainability of the community over time.

“HOLDING BACK” TO CONTROL INFORMATION FLOWS

One such philosophy is a tendency to “hold back” in terms of adopting new conveniences. Almost all participants noted a desire to lag behind mainstream society in their adoption of new technologies. Among other things, this philosophy is associated with maintaining a separation from the world as well as controlling information flows. For example, Calvin, a bishop, told me that his philosophy on technological change stemmed from the need to maintain separation from the world. “We keep trying to hold back. There will be a struggle in the future to keep back. It's hard to back up.” In the interviews, a common phrase was repeated that described shared feelings about the inevitability of sociotechnical change: “Once the toothpaste

is out of the tube, it's hard to put back in." Although Calvin thought that there was a great opportunity for evil influences to infiltrate his community through technology, he said he could not totally condemn such technology. The Amish philosophy that Christians should be "in the world not of the world" required them to hold back, however.

Many participants viewed the technologies themselves as troublesome only because they provided unrestrained access to all kinds of information. Calvin and many other church leaders told me, "It's not the phone we're against. It's what comes through it that we disapprove of." Thus, church leaders were averse to the information that could be accessed by the technology, not the technology itself. Joe, a minister and business owner, added to this, saying, ". . . videos, pornography, texting, music, pictures, etc. And all of that comes through a device that fits in the palm of your hand." He felt that this was problematic because it was specifically this kind of content that could be damaging to the soul and the strong connections that sustained their communities over generations. The information flows that these new devices made possible were, in participants' minds, synonymous with creating bridges that connected them "to the world." And they were especially troubling because they connected them in such an effortless, intimate, and private way. Specifically, church leaders feared that the convenience and inconspicuousness of smartphones and cell phones would lower the access barriers to worldly ideas that could corrupt souls and the Amish way of life. Business owner Dennis thought that imposing limits on technology use was wise. "By limiting technologies like the internet and cars, we want to control influences on young people's thinking. We want them to develop an appreciation for where they are from [before they experience the outside world]."

John, a minister, explained how this philosophy guided his everyday actions. He told me that he had no plans to adopt a cell phone because it "would offer [him] a bridge or a connection to things [he] really [has] no need of connecting to." When I asked what kinds of things he meant, he said,

I don't know if you'll understand it or not, but what I would consider to be worldly things . . . non-Amish related . . . things I can do well without in my lifestyle, which is a plain . . . I choose to live a plain lifestyle. Things like [popular] music, YouTube, games . . . everything like that . . . non-essential items in my life.

Others believed that connecting to the world through new digital technologies was dangerous because it would divert their attention away from their religion and culture. Nelson, a business owner, said, “Technologies like cell phones and the internet are one way to participate in the fast pace of life which results in Christianity being crowded out.” He thought that “cell phones were the world’s worst addiction.” Christianity, he said, was like the salt that preserved souls and humanity—and technology, he thought, destroyed the salt. “This stuff (digital technology) is crowding Christianity out. When the salt is gone, preservatives are gone and the meat spoils.” Similarly, Floyd, a minister and business owner, said, “If we get more involved in the outside world, we will lose our culture, and technology is a bridge to the outside.” Similarly, Robert, a minister and business owner from northern Indiana, believed that “technologies made you independent not dependent on your community.” For him this was problematic because technologies might eventually lead to a dissolution of the Amish culture if people were no longer dependent on their community.

Many participants reported feeling that the various material characteristics of digital technologies were threatening to the sustainability of Amish culture and rituals. Levi, a bishop, reported feeling that the ease of access to information and speed of communication changed rituals such as informing community members when someone passed away. “Texting is such a fast communication,” he said. “Used to be, when someone died, you had to hitch up a horse and buggy and go to each person’s house. Now, in minutes everyone knows.” According to Levi, “When we adopt more technology we are giving up our lifestyle a little bit. We become more independent. We don’t do thrashings and silo fillings anymore, which brought the community together. We used to write a lot of letters but do that much less now too.”

According to Nelson, a harness maker, the slow (Amish) pace of life is preferable to the fast (outsider’s) pace of life, which new digital technologies make possible and encourage. He does not have as many employees today because he despises the fast pace of life. He believes that it shoves out the good and important parts of life. “We’re caught up in it bad. We can’t deny it. We must cope with it.” I asked him how one does cope with this. He told me a story about a man coming into his shop who asked him why he did not try to grow his business. He responded, “Bigger isn’t always better. Success has failed many a good man. It ruins them. Not everyone, though.” His son

is in business with him, and he tries to teach him this lesson. “One has to be reasonable. People who are not satisfied are always discontent. Advancement in technology doesn’t satisfy discontentment. It feeds it.” He cared a lot about education and saw education and spirituality as inseparable. For Nelson and others, they see the way in which non-Amish public schools separate education and spirituality as artificial. For them, to grow and learn intellectually is also to do so morally and spiritually. To elaborate on this perspective, Nelson offered an example from his childhood, in which he attended a public school with Amish and non-Amish children. He remembered when President Kennedy was assassinated. He remembered that his teacher asked the children in his class to start praying when they heard this dreadful news. He said, “That couldn’t happen today and we wonder why there are shootings in schools. It’s something to be concerned about.”

Similarly, Timothy, a bishop, told me that cell phones were used by young people to organize large parties where alcohol was often served. If the police were made aware of the party and came to the scene, text messages were sent around, resulting in the dispersal of (often) underage partygoers. Timothy, a leader in the community, had meetings with police about this. He believed that this was a spiritual and physical hazard for young partygoers and for the coherence and reputation of the community as a whole. He said, “With cell phones, if there’s a problem anywhere, within five minutes everyone knows.”

PURIFYING ONE’S READING DIET TO CONTROL INFORMATION FLOWS

Given an overwhelming aversion among participants to the internet and the worldly information that it makes accessible, I was surprised to learn how many participants enjoyed reading mainstream newspapers, magazines, and books. For example, Daniel, a business owner, talked about an article on video game design that he had read in *Time* magazine, discussing the intention of designers to make the game as addicting as possible for users. Kevin, a minister and business owner, told me that he had subscriptions to *Entrepreneur* and *Inc.* magazines, two entrepreneur- and business-oriented publications. He said that he was turned off by them, though, because all the articles lately had been about internet businesses, which did not interest him.

In an interview with the owner and manager of the largest Amish-focused, local publication in northern Indiana, *The People’s Exchange*

(circulation for the publication, printed every other week, is 15,000), I learned that the bulk of an Amish media diet included Amish-produced publications that cater to Amish audiences. *The People’s Exchange* fit this bill and was read by most Amish people in the settlement, they said, along with national Amish newspapers such as *The Budget* and *Die Botschaft*, as well as a variety of other Amish-produced magazines such as *The Connection* (produced in northern Indiana), *The Plain Communities Business Exchange*, *Family Life*, *Young Companion*, *Blackboard Bulletin*, and books, especially those from the well-known Amish press, Pathway Publishers. In addition to these, members of the Amish community might subscribe to mainstream local newspapers that provide them with local, national, and international news, as well as weather reports and other information. One of the men I interviewed at *The People’s Exchange* also had a pharmacy where newspapers and magazines were sold. He said, “When we used to sell the *Chicago Tribune*, almost all of them were purchased by Amish people.” These customers also purchased *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Many individuals described filtering their reading material according to their religious philosophies. Sam, a business owner with whom I worked very closely during my fieldwork in southern Indiana, told me that he really liked to read. He said he only reads to better himself, though. “Reading for pleasure is as bad as being illiterate,” he said. For him reading should have a distinct purpose. He thought that it should be something that could be used for work or spiritual edification. He told me that he learned a lot from reading, and many professional doors have opened for him because he is such an avid reader. He believes strongly that “ignorance is not bliss. It is a curse. There is no reason for ignorance in today’s world.” In addition to reading many trade journals and books, he also reads spiritually enlightening publications including *Family Life*, *Blackboard Bulletin*, *Young Companion*, and *Anabaptist*. These publications are aimed at conservative Anabaptist audiences and contain stories and information in a variety of topical areas including nature, science, morality, and pedagogy. They also cater to various demographic groups including intellectuals, young people, women, children, spiritual leaders, and teachers. All the information and stories in these publications, however, explicitly espouse and support Anabaptist beliefs and values.

In the November 2013 issue of the Amish publication *Family Life* (13), an essayist discussed what he or she would do differently were the writer

to become a first-time parent again, especially with regard to filtering the information and media to which children are exposed. The writer believed that over the course of twenty years as a parent, the world has come to be seen as rapidly deteriorating.

If we'd be starting to raise our children again, we'd spend less time tending flower-beds, and more time tending young souls. We'd explain about God. We'd talk every day about Jesus and His love. We'd listen more attentively to childish prayers and prattle. Instead of just reading Bible stories, we'd try to apply them to their lives. Back then we knew nothing of little electronic devices that could spew vile images into the minds of our young sons. We had no clue that filth could noiselessly creep into our homes in such tiny ways. Today we search in vain at the local library for books with sound moral values. Those titles have long been discarded, and replaced with books containing more excitement, more violence, more filth. Back then many forms of music seemed harmless. Today, we cringe upon hearing the words of some of the lyrics our children might be exposed to.

In another essay appearing in the October 2013 issue of *Family Life* (8) by Leroy D. Beachy, titled "Give Attendance to Reading," various considerations were given with regard to properly filtering one's "reading diet."

Not all printed material is acceptable in our homes. What we read does influence our mind and thought patterns. Our thoughts regulate our words, deeds, and walk of life. Therefore it is important that we screen our reading material. Very important indeed!

The material that the author found objectionable included missives that carry a note of "modernism, sports, luxurious living, and the modern missionary theme. . . . Romances, novels, mysteries, or Westerns contain much filth. They fill our minds with such thoughts that it is impossible to lead a godly life as long as we are reading them. Any such books or magazines lying around need to be consigned to the fire."

PATRONIZING PUBLIC LIBRARIES TO CONTROL INFORMATION FLOWS
In my fieldwork I learned that an increasing number of Amish people in the northern Indiana settlement were patronizing the local public libraries. They were checking out a variety of books and videos and using public computers and the internet. I conducted two interviews with librarians at two different libraries and asked what types of information were of interest

to Amish patrons. They said that the publicly available computers were most often used by Amish patrons for conducting work. Business owners often came in to check email and place orders online because they did not have computers at their homes or businesses. Librarians also noted that young Amish people who came in to use computers used them in ways quite similar to their non-Amish counterparts. They played games, went on social media sites, and listened to popular music. Often women would come in with their children and shop online. During the economic downturn in 2008, many people were laid off from the RV factories in the settlement. The libraries became very popular at that time because the laid-off workers could come in and fill out job applications and file for unemployment.

Because I learned that many church and business leaders feared the internet for its capacity to make pornography accessible, I asked librarians if they had witnessed Amish patrons accessing this kind of content. One librarian responded,

We had a few, a couple of people who were looking at porn. And in fact we got a call from a bishop saying, you know, that we shouldn't have that. We explained that no matter what kind of filters you have there are ways of getting around them. That is one of the reasons why we now have the computers where we do. We can see from the [circulation] desk what they're doing. We have not had a problem since we did that.

Prior to this, the computer monitors were turned so that they faced a nearby wall, “or they would see us coming and start playing solitaire,” the librarian said. “We had a guy who played a whole lot of solitaire [laughs].” At the other library one young Amishman had been caught using his father's credit card to view the *Playboy* website. Generally, however, both librarians said this was an exception to the rule and that other patrons tipped them off to that type of behavior because they also found it to be offensive.

According to the librarians, there is little difference in the type of content that Amish and non-Amish patrons consume in the libraries. One librarian who had lived in the area for twenty-five years said, “They probably check out the same movies. And a lot of them probably watch them together too.” In her estimation there was very little cultural difference between members of the local Amish and non-Amish populations besides those that were visible, such as attire and the horse and buggy. According to the librarian,

One [tourist] asked me where to get Amish cooking? I literally laughed! I said they're no different than anybody else. I said this is the Midwest. It's farmers. We all eat the same thing. We all do the same thing. And you're always going to have differences from town to town and from church to church.

In my conversation with this librarian, I was surprised to learn that the Amish were checking out videos, but she told me that it was quite common. She said, "It was so much more common today than twenty-five years ago. It amazes the tourists that come in here to see all the Amish checking out DVDs. [laughs] And I get asked, 'How do they watch them?'" Being a tourist of sorts myself, I asked, "Well, how *do* they watch them?" Her response was that they might have a laptop or an iPad or take them to a friend's house. I wondered about the demographics of these particular patrons, and she informed me that it is not just teenagers. "We have families coming in, they're going on a camping trip and they will have a DVD player so they get DVDs." I also observed people in Amish attire reading on Kindles in public places in town and asked one of the librarians whether their patrons check out e-books. She said,

I know we have at least one because one night . . . it was a group of young . . . and I'm talking twenties . . . couples that were checking out and one wanted to know if we had a certain book and it was checked out or something. And the one young woman told one of the guys, well, you can just download that on your Kindle or whatever. Yeah. So, I know that some of them do, yeah.

She also noted that some young men have come in with TomToms or other Global Positioning System (GPS) devices, seeking to update them via the internet. She said, "I'm not sure what they're using them for, but it's not my business. To locate fishing holes maybe?"

The librarian at the other local library noticed an increase in Amish patrons checking out videos about three years ago. She said,

At first it was just the teenagers and we thought they were just going to an English² friend's house and somehow they've got access to a player or a video. And then families will take them out. . . . Older couples, sometimes. . . . Not as much with the older couples. But families will take them out and younger people will take them out.

I asked in what context she thought people were watching these videos, wondering if perhaps it was just a Friday or Saturday night thing. She said,

“Unless we know somebody. And I personally don’t know anybody I’ve checked videos out to . . . that well that I could say, ‘Oh, you’re watching a video’ [laughs]!” Both librarians were inclined to protect their patrons’ privacy and not cast judgment on their choices. The second librarian, however, recalled one incident from about ten years ago. She was at a local restaurant for lunch and a teenager was there in a separate little room where there was a television with a videocassette recorder (VCR) attached to it. He was watching the screen while he was eating. When he was done eating, he reached into the VCR unit and pulled out a videocassette. He put it in his jacket and was on his way, she said.

On another occasion, the librarian said, an Amish parochial school teacher brought his students into the library a couple of times. She said, “We set them up in the community room with our laptops that we use for teaching. And they were doing some research. And he was showing them how to be on the computers.” He was teaching them how to do basic internet searches, she said. “He didn’t need any of us to go and show them how to do it or anything. He just wanted to introduce them to it, I guess.”

She also mentioned that some patrons use library computers to access social media sites like Facebook. “There’s one family where two girls . . . the two older girls would come in and they’re obviously on Facebook. I don’t know if they’re allowed to . . . you know.” On further inquiry, the librarian felt that her observation of Amish people on Facebook was pretty limited. “Honestly, it was probably just those two girls that I know for sure use Facebook. Umm . . . I would guess not the older ones. They are generally just using [the internet] for more . . . practical things.”

For example, one woman came into the library because she had been diagnosed with a medical condition and her doctor asked her to watch a video to learn how to do a particular sort of massage. She came in and “watched it several times.” Another gentleman used the computers to sell his organic produce in Chicago. Others used the computers to research horse-breeding techniques, stud services, or horse auctions. According to the librarian, “I’ve talked to a couple guys who needed help getting onto a horse auction site. They were either putting horses in there or there were horses in there and they wanted to see it.” Other uses reported by librarians included acquiring a hunting or fishing license. Sometimes taking an online test was required to get the license, according to the librarian. “They have to do it through the state, so they’ll come in and do that.” She also said,

“I’ve had young ladies print off their wedding programs or invitations. And many women are now representatives for companies who sell products to their social networks out of their homes, like Tupperware or Thirty-One Gifts [a company selling canvas bags].” According to the librarian, “They come in and put their orders online. Or keep in touch with the home company that way.”

I asked the librarians what kind of content their (Amish) patrons most commonly checked out. One librarian said, “If it’s the parents coming in, it’s more the family-oriented stuff. Or if you get the teenagers, they try and check out the R-rated stuff. Stuff like that, which obviously they can’t do. That’s no different from the non-Amish.” In describing general trends in the books checked out by Amish patrons, she said, “The men tend to go a little more toward the fiction. But the majority of it would be Christian fiction or children’s books.” Men, she believed, were more inclined to check out books by popular fiction authors James Patterson and John Grisham. “The women and some of the men went for the Christian fiction. Christian fiction is our biggest section,” she said. I asked whether people came in to do medical research. According to the librarian, “Some people find out they’re diabetic and they come in looking for recipe books and guide books and stuff like that. Yeah, there are a few. They know we can get books if we don’t have them from other libraries. And they appreciate that.”

The other librarian said,

Well, again there is a range. They do check out a lot of kids’ books. . . . The men will usually take out Westerns. They will take things out on military memoirs. . . . Some of the more recent wars. . . . Things that I guess they hear about through the grapevine. And people like John Grisham . . . some of those other authors. A lot of the women . . . we have a . . . it’s called inspirational but it’s mostly Christian fiction. And so those go out a lot, in the general population too. But they take those, but they’ll also take romances or other things out. A lot of “how-to,” not a lot, but some “how-to.” Healthy cooking has become something . . . I’ve noticed some of the younger couples taking out. Building, books on building . . . hunting/fishing. The teen-agers will take those out.

I asked her if she thought that was representative of both Amish and non-Amish patrons. Her response was, “Yeah, I think so. It is pretty much, as far as what they read, more or less homogeneous.”

My interviews with librarians revealed that the library was a site where members of the Amish population were coming to access information via

multiple media formats. The library itself acted as a gateway to worldly information, and certainly there were a number of people I spoke with who disapproved of the information that it made possible for Amish people to access. I spoke to one minister and business owner who did not allow his children to go to the library. He liked for them to read and bought them books from *Pathway Publishers* instead. Nonetheless, the library seemed to be an increasingly popular place for Amish people to go to access the internet, videos, and books. Perhaps because it represented a workaround to owning and having access to this information and technology at home, it was seen by some as an appropriate annex of Amish public life in which it was acceptable to use these tools and access outside information for work, health, and pleasure. Despite the variety of media formats available to Amish library patrons, librarians believed that their tastes and preferences for content were not especially remarkable and closely resembled those of non-Amish patrons. Their preferences for popular fiction, Christian fiction, nonfiction, and children’s books aligned generally with regional values and allowed them to educate and entertain themselves via visible, controlled media that they did not own themselves and were required eventually to return to the library.

These realizations prompted me to wonder whether a media’s format contributed to Amish participants’ aversion or affection for the information accessed through it. So I asked the publishers of *The People’s Exchange* a question that might shed light on this. When discussing Amish preferences for outside newspapers, I asked why reading the *Chicago Tribune* in print would be different from going onto the *Chicago Tribune* website. The parents of the owner of *The People’s Exchange* left the Amish church when he was young. He grew up in the area, speaks Pennsylvania Dutch, is in contact with Amish relatives, and, as a result, is still very connected to the Amish community, culture, and way of life. He said,

A lot of it would just be the convenience. I mean you can carry it home and sit in your rocking chair and read it. You don’t have Wi-Fi at home [as an Amish person]. But smartphones are becoming more prevalent. So that could be happening more. My guess is it’d just be the convenience of it. It’s not something they could do. Until just in the last however many years that they’ve been allowed to.

My sense in talking with other participants was that it was not that they were against information coming in from the outside, because in a sense many relied on it for essential purposes. In situations where they believed

that the information that was made accessible by new digital technologies endangered souls or the integrity of their community, their objections sometimes cited the materiality of the newer media formats through which the information comes as being disturbing, or they identified them as a distraction from appreciating where they were from (natural surroundings, culture, religion, family, community). Media such as cell phones and smartphones that were largely invisible were seen as less easily controlled than those that were visible, like newspapers and magazines—even if the information they made accessible was considered worldly. These were the types of media that they more often rejected or limited. These forms of media were often framed as offering a “slippery slope” where everything comes through and filtering is not possible. Visibility and control were often seen as connected, whereas invisibility was more closely associated with chaos and spiritual danger.

ATTENDING AMISH PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS TO CONTROL INFORMATION FLOWS

I had the opportunity to interview a few members and former members of the Amish State School Board Association. This organization governs a parochial school system customized for educating Amish young people and preparing them for learning a trade or getting a job after they finish eighth grade. I also visited two Amish parochial schools over the course of my fieldwork. In an interview with Stanley, a board member and minister, I was told, “Students learn math, spelling, reading, vocabulary, English/language arts.” They do not learn social studies. There is no computer training in Amish schools. If students gain computer literacy, that comes after their schooling. In Amish schools, students have no internet access or computers. There are also no vocational skills taught in Amish parochial schools.

Twenty years ago, Stanley said, half of Amish kids went to public school and half went to Amish schools. Today, however, between two thirds and three fourths go to Amish schools and one third to one fourth go to public schools. Amish parochial schools, he said, “were a new idea” twenty years ago. As public schools became subject to consolidation, the Amish began organizing improvements to their own schools and working with government officials to ensure their legitimacy in their eyes. According to Stanley, “They were an experiment that worked.” Students take a standardized test (the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) every year, and they seem to

be above average, according to Stanley and the other current board member. Fifteen years ago Amish school students scored low in vocabulary, he said. They have improved their score in this area and are much better now. According to Stanley, Amish schools are “running five months ahead of the national average and are five percent higher” in their students’ mastery of test material.

The success of Amish schools has seemed to foster community cooperation and cohesion on a broader level. One participant called schools “the heart of the community.” According to Stanley, “Teachers work closely with parents, church, and community.” There is a monthly Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting where participants “iron out any wrinkles that might exist.” At each PTA meeting, a parting song is sung. Each teacher has four grades and about twenty pupils. Two or three teachers may teach in the same schoolhouse. Stanley also said, “[the teachers] seem to be getting the job done” according to standardized test scores. The efforts that community members put into their children’s educational system helps keep the community together. The importance placed on Amish schooling reveals a desire to maintain community control over what is taught and what kids are exposed to, as well as to keep social groups local, small, and well integrated within and across generational lines.

Often Amish parents have to decide whether to send their children to Amish parochial schools or public schools. In making this choice, they are likely to consider the informational, cultural, and social influences that the schools have on their child. According to Stanley, parents are likely to choose to send their children to an Amish school because, “[there] they start the day in prayer and by singing Amish songs . . . instead of other kinds of songs.” Parents’ decision about whether to send their child to a parochial school or a public school also involves price; it costs \$800 to \$1,000 per child per term to attend Amish schools. “When you have four to five kids that is a significant cost. Whereas public school is basically free,” Stanley said. In this way, Amish schools also represent a means for maintaining social, intellectual, and cultural separation between the Amish and mainstream society.

USING INTERMEDIARIES TO CONTROL INFORMATION FLOWS

Amish participants commonly reported employing non-Amish individuals to use a device for them that they considered off limits for their own use.

Using a technology *via an intermediary* involved making a specific choice to use a tool, often for business purposes, while upholding one's commitment to his or her Amish values, traditions, and way of life. This is a model of technology use that was developed early on to deal with telephone adoption (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013). Today it has been extended to limit transportation and has most recently been adopted to govern digital technology use as well. It is related to Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt's (2013) category of technology use "ownership vs. access," in which the Amish often make a distinction between ownership and access in their use of technology. In terms of transportation, Amish people hire drivers to drive them to weddings, funerals, work, shopping, and leisure activities that they cannot get to via horse and buggy. They also commonly pay to take public transportation, including trains and buses. Old Order Amish typically draw a line at owning a car or driving it themselves. They do this to make it inconvenient to use a technology that they believe endangers the sustainability of their close-knit, local bonds or diverts their attention away from the local community.

According to Dennis, a business owner, limitations on automobile operation and ownership and technology operation and ownership help people develop an appreciation for where they are from. Perhaps it is not surprising that the *use via an intermediary* model, then, has been applied in situations to govern technology adoption recently as well, because digital technologies are seen by many as vehicles for the mind to travel outside local Amish knowledge systems and for exploring worldly knowledge systems. A strategy for *internet management*, which involves outsourcing internet labor to a non-Amish person, is discussed in depth in chapter 6. Here a few other examples will show how this model for governance has been extended to limit new technologies in Amish communities.

I became aware of this model applying to digital technologies when, during one of our many conversations, Noah explained to me that sometimes Amish people think that they must use a technology for their business to compete in the modern economy. In such instances, they might hire a non-Amish person to use the technology on their behalf. Usually these individuals are trusted friends and fellow Christians. The Amish employ this kind of intermediary increasingly to do graphic and web design, taxes, and accounting. As noted earlier in this chapter, I interviewed the owner of a large advertising and printing company who had many Amish clients and

customers. In addition to publishing the *People’s Exchange*, he has increasingly handled digital advertising and public relations for his Amish clients. He sends “email blasts” to advertise wholesale wood furniture to retail stores and, at the time of our interview, had just started developing websites for Amish clients. At that time, he saw this as an area for future growth for his business.

PRAGMATICALLY LIMITING AND CONTROLLING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGIES

Sometimes price and better functionality or efficiency also influence decisions to adopt new technologies. According to Perry, who owned and operated a cutting-edge technology company that provided off-grid power solutions, Amish people have begun adopting electricity so long as it does not connect them to the public power grid. Although the philosophy of maintaining a separation between the Amish and the outside world prevents them from hooking up to the public grid, many have opted for electricity generated by solar panels to operate tools and charge batteries. According to Perry, many families have switched to using solar electricity to power their home water pumps because the old ones that ran on compressed air would often rust. Solar ones, however, do not. The price of solar power has also dropped significantly in recent years. Fifteen years ago, when solar technology started, according to Perry, it was two to three times the cost of energy accessible by the public grid. “Today, you can get a panel system with a 12-volt battery pack, which you only have to recharge every four days, for \$175. That just comes with the basics.” At Perry’s shop, he and his colleagues work with people to design and rebuild their homes’ power systems. They prompt customers to think about what kinds of windows to buy and where to place windows to get the best cross draft. They suggest that home owners properly insulate and buy energy-efficient appliances. In this way, although the philosophy of maintaining separation inspires the Amish to remain detached from the public electric grid, they have adopted new technologies such as solar power because they are more effective and cheaper than older ones. Perry informed me, however, that solar electricity in the home is still a limited source of power and intrinsically tied to natural (God-made) resources. Without prolonged, abundant sunshine, the solar-powered water pump will not work, for example. Solar electricity among the Amish is intended for use as a utility and not as a

means for adopting “conveniences” like radios, televisions, computers, or dishwashers, Perry noted.

MOVING FROM THE FENCE TO THE SWITCH

Scholars so far have conceptualized the Amish approach to adopting new technologies as a process of fortifying old fences, moving fences, and building new ones (Kraybill 2001). It has been shown here that there are multiple philosophical, cultural, social, and political mechanisms in place in Amish communities that work together to restrain and limit technology adoption, in addition to formal decisions made by official community leaders. In today’s dynamic and complex sociotechnical arrangements, simply identifying where a fence should be erected no longer makes sense for the Amish. In a world where church leaders (and everyone else) perhaps had more control over the use of a technology because it was visible, it was easier to rely on the formal mechanisms of technology adoption that made public rules and established where fences should be. When a rule was made, people could reference it. People knew that a telephone must be in a shed outside the house. Whether or not one abided by this rule was visible for all to see. This simply is not the case with cell phones and smartphones.

Today, in some church communities, cell phones used for work have been explicitly allowed. In many places, however, explicit rules have not been made, and informal mechanisms for regulating technology adoption hold sway. Even in communities where cell phones have officially been adopted, informal mechanisms guide the use of other digital technologies. Amish church and business leaders believe that the unique material character of new digital technologies inspires them to rely on shared Amish values and convictions to guide proper technology use, instead of formal decisions that are inscribed into the *Ordnung*. In this way, using a cell phone is simply another annex of Amish life in which behaviors are inspired by Amish beliefs and values.

Bridges are increasingly being built that connect the Amish to the outside world, despite efforts to maintain social, intellectual, and cultural separation. Changes in the economy and exposure to outside information via media (among other things) contribute to this. In general, Amish businesses are becoming more and more dependent on outsiders for the resources that they need to sustain their communities. At the same time, many business

owners have concerns about how to regulate communication channels. For example, Kenneth, a business owner, estimated that ninety-nine percent of products made in the settlement were sold to non-Amish people. Sam, a businessman who produced furniture, said, “I’m as dependent on the automobile as you are” [for example, to deliver his products]. Kenneth said that for businesses there must be compromises. Although he thought that digital technologies opened new channels of communication with the outside world that were useful for business, he also realized that it was difficult to open these channels without being able to filter out unwanted information to which they also provided access. “If we could sort the good from the bad, technology is not all bad,” he said.

In fact, many participants noted the positive things that they experienced because they were dependent on the outside and modern technology. Floyd, a minister and business owner from northern Indiana, recognized that the Amish depended on the outside world for their medical care. For example, “We go to hospitals and want the best care. We’re not against using it,” he said. Timothy, a bishop from northern Indiana, called me seven months after I had last seen him during my fieldwork because he believed that it was important that I know “there were also a lot of good things that go along with [technology].” He thought perhaps he had been too negative about technology in his interview with me seven months earlier. He came across my business card and wanted to call and mention the good things too. He described a health situation in which his grandson’s skull had not developed normally. They took him to a hospital in Indianapolis, and a surgeon repaired it, he said. “Now it looks great and he doesn’t have headaches any more. That is a great blessing.” He also mentioned using a continuous positive airway pressure machine to help him breathe while he was asleep. For Floyd, these were technologies that he thought made a positive difference in his and his family members’ lives. Other participants reported researching genetic illnesses online and maintaining strong relationships with their physicians (who are always non-Amish). Nonetheless, according to Floyd, there is a fear that if they open the doors to technology and the outside world, “there wouldn’t be any limits.”

One bishop told me that he was not sure whether technical ways of communication for business were problematic or not. In his business he used a computer with two monitors to design blueprints for homes and check email. He thought that computers, however, could bring problems with

them because they allowed access to evils via the internet. However, in general he believed that if people had convictions, they would stay away from the problems. As a church leader, he thought that instilling convictions occurred through talking to people and warning them about the potential dangers. He also believed that placing limits on use—for business only, for example—helped people use technologies responsibly. He still worried that members of his community would ignore history and allow new technologies to create a split in the Amish church—this had been the case, he said, when cars, the telephone, and new ways of farming emerged.

Others also thought that changes in the economy and professions and new technologies were changing the Amish way of life in troubling ways. Many believed that something was lost from the Amish lifestyle and culture as “progress” was made. Nonetheless, Sarah, a business owner, said members of the Amish community were still willing to come together in a time of crisis.

It used to be people would come together and help one another do work at a silo-filling or a thrashing. They would show support that way, and this was a very good way to strengthen relationships in the community. Today, however, more than not they provide money. There is a lot more money flowing through the community today than before. Instead of going to provide physical help, people send money to provide help. The factory mentality is “go, go, go”; it’s more of a fast pace. It is, however, always a choice to keep things simple. That should be the goal.

She believed that possessing certain values like honesty and integrity have helped her develop a successful business.

We may not sell as much as other people do, but that’s not the point. We feel like we have been very blessed. Amish is not a religion. It’s a way of life. It’s about the choices you make. We believe in the same God all Christians do. It’s the choices you make on a daily basis to keep things simple and the pace of life slow.

In this way, despite changes, Sarah believes that it is possible to maintain the Amish way of life by making everyday choices.

In my interview with bishop Ryan, he asked me what I thought church leaders should do to prevent a fracture in the church. Although feeling extremely inadequate to offer this advice, I believed that I owed him an answer to his question. At the time, I told him that I thought reminding people of their history and identity was important. Having Amish

forefathers, I thought, was pretty remarkable and unique and helped people feel that they had a purpose and were part of something larger than themselves. I also expressed that talking about technologies was important instead of ignoring the fact that they were being adopted. Looking back now, I believe that Sarah’s sentiments would have also been useful for Ryan to hear.

Specifically, when I asked Sarah how she worked to ensure proper technology use in her family, she suggested the importance of drawing more attention to “the family altar.” This encouraged the appropriate use of technologies without opening the door to unwanted interactions or information from outside. The family altar is a commonly understood concept among the Amish I spoke with. It refers to the fact that the home is a sacred sanctuary in Amish life where family bonds are maintained and daily spiritual education occurs. For Sarah, it “is the time when the family gets together for devotions” on a daily basis. Sarah told me she believes that today the family altar is more important than ever. For her it is crucially important “to convey Amish beliefs to young people because there is so much more out there in the [public] schools that could influence their minds, bodies, and spirits. We really need to stress our values at home more than ever before.” In this way, instead of attempting to limit or control information coming into individuals’ minds or natural groupings like the home, Sarah believes that focusing her family members’ attention, studying Amish values, and connecting to one another through spiritual practice is a better course of action. In this way, like Shoshana Zuboff, Sarah finds the need for sanctuary essential for resisting the harmful impacts of increasing dependence on the owners and programmers of global information networks for economic survival. This is at the heart of Amish strategies for empowerment and cultural autonomy in an increasingly digital world.

Although Sarah highlighted the importance of the home, a bounded physical space, others though it was important to demarcate informational boundaries for sanctuary by curating their reading diet or founding and supporting Amish schools. These are techniques for calibrating their community’s attention to control the information that entered their collective minds. They did this to protect their spiritual and social well-being and maintain cultural autonomy in a world where digital infrastructures are increasingly used to surveil and control users for the benefit of the owners and programmers of the infrastructures. In a conversation with John,

a father and minister, who used email and the internet in his daily work as a manager at an RV factory, I asked if he shared the feeling that it was more important than ever to instill values in young children at home. He responded, “Most definitely. There has never been a more important time for parents to instill values and morals and character in their children than it is now. Because, if we do not, someone else will.” John also thought that it was important to make sure the information consumed via the internet does not obstruct one’s faith. He said,

I have to really watch myself with the world wide web. The temptation there is to . . . I have to know every single detail about every single thing. And sometimes that interferes with one’s faith . . . in what we believe to be fact. And so, sometimes, you know, and I just had an elder remind me of that last evening. Where he said, “But John, if we know all the details, wouldn’t that diminish our need to have true faith?” And you know, so, I can kind of see . . . I can see his viewpoint.

John informed me that there were some questions among authorities about where the biblical Mt. Sinai actually stood. He said some people thought it was in Egypt and others had now discovered that it could possibly be a mountain in Saudi Arabia. John was sharing this information with the elder, who asked, “Do you really need to know, John, which mountain it was that Moses went up and God came down to? Or do you just need to have the faith that, yes, God did come down on the mountain?” In this way, John and Sarah articulated a means of regulating flows of information made possible via new digital technologies by targeting one’s mental focus on spiritually enriching information rather than limiting one’s use of technology altogether.

These perspectives illustrated nuanced views about how to regulate technology’s influence on Amish ways of life. John and Sarah articulated ways of enacting informal constraints on digital technology adoption and use. These were aimed at controlling the flows of information that they saw as particularly harmful for instilling values in young people and maintaining mental focus on spiritually edifying information and experiences. At a community level, such informal constraints are similar to flipping a switch on a network that allows only certain packets of information to flow into a node (an Amish individual’s mind) or an isolated cluster of nodes (an Amish community) from a larger node or more interconnected area of the

network (the outside world). The Amish clearly recognize their dependence on outsiders for business, health care, transportation, and information. As times change, it seems likely that the formal mechanisms and cultural fences approach to limiting technology use will be increasingly augmented by this “controlling the switch” approach. By having their hand firmly on the lever that controls the switch, the Amish continue their quest to limit exposure to generally ubiquitous information that they believe could endanger their cultural autonomy, as they have for decades, by separating themselves geographically from worldly others and information.

Seen in this way, a dynamic, multimodal decision-making process becomes visible. In addition to formal, public, democratic political procedures, informal efforts aimed at training and socialization play an important role in governing the adoption and use of new digital technologies in Amish communities. According to Henry, a business owner and Amish School Board member, “Going forward young people will feel pressure from the outside to start using computers and the internet, but they will also still feel pressure from within not to use it.” Another business owner and deacon noted that a balance must be met where personal convictions and limitations on use complement each other.

Additionally, we have seen that particular uses of technologies, or workarounds, adopted and diffused through Amish communities act much like clothing, language, and transportation vehicles in Amish daily life. They are symbols of one’s Amishness and association with the Amish community. By deciding not to have a computer visible in one’s retail store, which is accessible to the public, an Amish business owner shows deference to his or her church leaders, fellow church members, and the broader society of Amish people who may patronize the establishment. This is not to say that the computer is not an essential tool for the business. Its inconspicuous use, however, sends a strong message. An adopted workaround acts to communicate to other in-group members that the adopter is part of the group and they share the same values. At the same time, the adopter shows that he or she is not “of the world” or associated with outsiders and reinforces the group’s boundaries and identity as separate from mainstream culture and society. This boundary work also acts to protect the Amish from assimilation and to preserve their cultural autonomy.

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Virtually Amish

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