

INTERNET MANAGEMENT: CONFIGURING THE AMISH  
INTERNET

In the early 2010s, the potential of adopting and using the internet was a relatively taboo topic of conversation among the Amish. Over the course of ten months between 2013 and 2014, however, two Amish thought leaders published a series of nine essays in *The Plain Communities Business Exchange* (TPCBE) about if and how to adopt the internet for limited Amish business purposes. These authors, Christopher Petrovich and Friedrich Carl Heule, are early Amish adopters of the internet, and the questions, thoughts, and solutions discussed in their TPCBE essays provide invaluable windows into increasingly dominant Amish philosophies about internet adoption in a world where these information infrastructures are increasingly programmed by surveillance capitalists to control our behavior and make us dependent on them. In previous chapters, I outlined two distinct approaches to Amish technology use: strong teaching against it and use according to personal convictions. I was curious whether Petrovich or Heule would endorse such approaches or take a different tack altogether. Close readings of their essays reveal similarities to these approaches. Petrovich adopts a strong teaching against stance and suggests that Amish people should avoid the internet because its use is inherently incompatible with the accomplishment of Amish goals in Christ's kingdom. Heule, on the other hand, takes more of a use according to personal convictions approach, arguing for the reader to become informed about what the internet is and then, guided by Amish ambitions, delegate internet tasks to a non-Amish colleague. Although these views seem distinctly different, there are also important commonalities to consider. In effect, both strategies, outlined in the following pages, compel readers, as they consider adopting the internet, to first identify their business goals. Second, they should seek to understand how various communication media, including the internet, work. Third, they should work to tailor their communication mechanisms for the fulfillment of their goals. Petrovich makes his case in two articles in a series

titled “*The Internet Question*.” The first of Petrovich’s essays appeared in the December 2013 *TPCBE*, and the second was published in the January 2014 edition. In this series, Petrovich provides philosophical and religious reasons for Amish business owners to avoid adopting the internet. Heule, on the other hand, outlines his views in seven essays in the series “*Internet Management: How to Be Successful Online without an Internet Connection*.” These essays appeared one per month from June to December 2014.

THE INTERNET QUESTION, CHRISTOPHER PETROVICH, DECEMBER  
2013—JANUARY 2014

At the time of publication of his essays, in contributing author Christopher Petrovich’s estimation, “The use or non-use of the internet seems to be a live question among many plain Anabaptist groups” (2013, 16). According to Petrovich, the variety of thought on this topic among Amish entrepreneurs ranges from “absolute rejection to joyful acceptance [of the internet]” (16). Petrovich finds this baffling and believes that Anabaptist churches have “a clear enough perspective on life” and “consistent . . . interpretation of Scripture” to reach a moderately unified response to the “Internet Question” (16). Despite the range of diverse feelings across Anabaptist groups, Petrovich attempts to answer “the simple but important question—What should our response [to the Internet Question] be?” (16).

In his first essay, Petrovich interrogates the claim that plain Anabaptist communities *must* embrace the internet. As he sets up his argument, he identifies potential advantages to adopting the internet. Among these is the fact that selling products online would improve the marketing power of Amish businesses. Second, he believes that going online would enable Amish businesses to “stay ahead of the game.” For example, today the tax code is published exclusively online, he says. This makes it increasingly difficult to do business and pay taxes without the internet. More specific benefits of the internet, according to Petrovich, include (1) the ability to access books and other products not available in the local community, (2) the ability to communicate and transfer data cheaply and quickly, (3) the accessibility of information, and (4) lower overhead expenses for business owners.

Despite these advantages, Petrovich believes that they do not outweigh the potential drawbacks for Amish business owners. Most importantly, he says, “The internet, by definition, links computers together irrespective of the moral or religious convictions of their owners” (2013, 37). According

to Petrovich, “Purchasing a computer and connecting it to the internet entails forging a connection with the wider world” (2013, 37). Petrovich continues by discrediting the claim that if Amish businesses do not adopt computers and the internet, they “won’t be as competitive and won’t earn nearly as much money.” He questions whether this is actually a problem. Apparently, for many it is, he says. “But why is money such a concern? After all, we are some of the wealthiest people in the world” (2013, 18). Petrovich recalls a backpacking trip that he took through Kosovo in which “six or seven Gypsy boys . . . [were] hanging onto [his] sleeve . . . begging for money. . . . We live in a very affluent, comfortable, environment and yet some of us seem overwhelmingly concerned that we keep up with the Joneses. But why?” (2013, 18). Petrovich questions the assumption that connecting to the global information economy will deliver the type of returns that business owners seek. For him, it is shortsighted to think that a business will not survive if it does not go online. Instead, he believes that it may not make excessive profits but that this should not be a concern, because his readers (apparently) live in relatively affluent circumstances. His thoughts reflect a sentiment that I heard frequently in my interviews as well: that blindly chasing after earthly wealth and possessions fuels discontentment because it distracts from the more honorable pursuit of time with family and spiritual prosperity. In this move, Petrovich is asking readers to identify their business goals. Are they to make money—a worldly ambition? Or are they to achieve success according to the principles and values that govern Christ’s kingdom, including dedication to God, family, community, and tradition?

As Petrovich’s essay continues, he identifies and evaluates three primary arguments given by plain Anabaptist church members for using the internet. First is a tendency to think that church standards conflict with being led by the Holy Spirit. As a result, he says, some people have suggested that we need to get rid of our “man-made rules” and “restrictions” and instead be led by the Spirit of God. Here Petrovich takes issue with the approach to technology use that is guided by personal convictions—a philosophy held by many people whom I interviewed for this book. According to this viewpoint, removing church rules that prohibit internet use would allow people to use the internet according to their convictions or the Holy Spirit working inside them. Petrovich, on the other hand, believes that this is dangerous. In discrediting this claim, he says, it is “not an either–or situation.”

People are not led by church regulations *or* the Spirit of God, but by both concurrently. Lives are lived according to the Spirit of God *and* patterned according to the *Ordnung*, he says.

So many of our actions are dictated by rules, rules that order life and without which we could not make sense of what is going on, nor figure out what the next step ought to be. And at the same time so many of these choices are made subconsciously, following the course they do because they were channeled by experience and habit, not individual “Holy Spirit leadings.” Therefore, it seems that those who confess they want to be free of church regulations in order to be led by the Spirit simply don’t understand what they are claiming. (2013, 20)

According to Petrovich, the second source of resistance to limitations on the internet among Amish business owners is a lack of historical consciousness. To illustrate this, he says, he has met people who are members of very specific denominations but have little idea how the tradition of their group originated, “how it got to where it is today, or where it is headed.” Petrovich finds this “very problematic.” For him, lacking historical consciousness about one’s religious and ancestral traditions and heritage makes it easier to engage in potentially dangerous behaviors. He believes that one should think about one’s behavior and modify it to adhere to trajectories outlined in the Bible, not rely on divine whim to direct a person along the right path.

The third source of resistance to limiting internet use, according to Petrovich, is the adoption of “societal patterns.” In this section, Petrovich uses the word *societal* or *society* interchangeably with *worldly* or *of the world*. According to Amish teachings, thinking like the world is becoming one with the world, and the Amish view themselves as pilgrims *in* the world; they are not (or should not be) *of* the world. For Petrovich, adopting the internet is a move toward thinking like the world. He says, “Yes, we might be a member of a church tradition that identifies itself as ‘plain’ but if we think like the world, we are members of the world and sooner or later it will become apparent [to God] that we have been with the world.” Here again Petrovich urges against the adoption of the internet because he fears that it could lead to spiritual danger and cultural and social assimilation with outsiders. He thinks that being less concerned about “earthly comforts” and “one’s reputation in the eyes of the world” will help people lead a life more pleasing to God. To put a finer point on it, Petrovich says, “I

believe that many arguments in favor of complete acceptance of internet usage on the basis of 'the need to succeed' are ultimately grounded in principles that are contrary to the teaching of Scripture and will ultimately lead toward assimilation with society" (2013, 23).

In Petrovich's second (January 2014) essay, he spends a considerable amount of time evaluating the material characteristics of the internet and answers the question, "What exactly is the internet?" (2014, 37). He describes the internet as "a vast network of computers that share information with one another." This network, he continues, "is not restricted to one geographical location but instead crosses international borders and spans the globe." Anyone with access to the network can view the information that another person has posted using the World Wide Web. For Petrovich, this characteristic is undesirable because it creates a link between individuals regardless of their moral or religious convictions. Petrovich also critiques the internet's material nature because it is an unfilterable medium often used for entertainment. The fact that the internet is unfiltered is a distinct problem for him because it enables "instant access to anything and everything, from the nicest sermon notes to the vilest satanic machinations" (2014, 38). Additionally, Petrovich notes, "The internet has also become an astoundingly popular medium for watching videos and listening to music. . . . Thus, it also functions as a medium of entertainment" and "should be seen as similar to the television." According to Petrovich, the internet has the potential to "damage human beings to a far greater extent than television has ever done" because it is "wide open," in contrast to television, which is "filtered." Via the internet, he worries, children could gain access to "the most disturbing programs that a person could imagine." For these reasons, Petrovich cannot understand why Anabaptists would accept unfiltered access to the internet if they are agreed in not permitting filtered (broadcast) television. In this way, Petrovich believes that a top-down filtering approach is needed, in which an authority determines what content is available for the consumption of others. Because Petrovich acknowledges that there are some advantages to the internet, he asks, "Isn't it possible to filter the internet?" In answering this question, he states that it is possible but "not totally, and probably not very effectively" (2014, 39). For him, filters are problematic because they can be easily bypassed by tech-savvy individuals. He also worries that a software program is not a sufficient judge of moral character.

It just isn't very easy for a computer program to be able to discern between a good and a bad picture, or between good writing and unedifying writing. And even if we could design a program that would filter the good from the bad, whose opinion of good and bad would we use? (2014, 39)

In this way, Petrovich believes that limiting access to outside information through enacting shared, agreed-upon rules about technology adoption is the best way to empower the Amish and help sustain their way of life going forward. He believes strongly that anything short of outright rejection would encourage Amish people to be one with the world and that this could mean the dissolution of the Amish culture and way of life over the long term.

Petrovich continues by reflecting on existing technologies that were rejected by the Amish because they were seen as dangerous to indigenous cultural autonomy and local social structures. The automobile, Petrovich notes, was outlawed in the early twentieth century because it increased mobility, and this stood to undermine a belief that the local community should be the primary site for work and social life. Comparing automobiles to the internet, he says, "If we object to automobile ownership because we do not want such frequent interaction with society, I don't know why permitting internet access in our homes and businesses would even be a live question" (2014, 39). He is also concerned about the "potential of social networking to undermine the authority of locally oriented religious communities" (2014, 39). He explains,

Suppose that your son or daughter is going through an intense personal struggle. Perhaps they are living in rebellion. If they have ready access to a social network that spans the globe they will be more likely to try to fill the void in their life with the cheap wares provided by distant "others." (2014, 39)

Additionally, Petrovich is concerned that if Amish people open themselves

. . . to the entire world and their thoughts and ways, our council meetings will no longer hold the sway that they should because the youth might compare the local church with thousands of other churches, congregations that they have had no personal experience of but might look better than ours when viewed from a distance. . . . I don't think some people see the inherent dangers, the way that social networking will shift our focus from local communities to the wider world and thus shift the balance from community-oriented church authority to becoming one among many brands competing for a share in the open religious marketplace (2014, 39).

For Petrovich, the potential advantages of the internet for Amish businesses do not outweigh the risks. For him, it comes down to achieving a specific balance. He is not suggesting that the Amish be so isolated that there is no interaction with people outside the community, but “we need an appropriate balance,” he says (2014, 40).

We need to forge personal bonds in our local communities. And we also need to reach out to those that are lost and in need of a Savior. However, if we spend a considerable portion of our time on the internet, and as a result less time with the brothers and sisters in our local community, we will become worldly. And what, then, will we have to offer a perishing world. (2014, 40)

In his conclusion, Petrovich emphasizes his concerns about the future of Amish churches that want to be both “plain” and internet friendly. He thinks that “the road will eventually fork and congregations will be forced to decide whether they want to be plain or internet friendly, one or the other, not both.”

Petrovich’s essays are enlightening because they point to concerns shared by a number of Amish people I spoke with. Although he agrees that a balance is needed, for him, the response to the internet question falls along the conservative or tradition-minded end of the spectrum. He advocates largely for a strong teaching approach against technology use. Thus, for him, use and access should be limited by the inscription of formal rules in the *Ordnung*. He comes to this view by urging readers to privilege the ends or goals for their work that fit into a taxonomy of values and authority that structure Christ’s kingdom, as opposed to the world’s system. Interestingly, his second article expands on this perspective by educating the reader about the mechanics of the internet. Namely, he shows that the internet, as a means of communicating and doing work, is unfit for fulfilling the Amish ends under the authorities governing Christ’s kingdom.

INTERNET MANAGEMENT: HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL ONLINE WITHOUT  
AN INTERNET CONNECTION, FRIEDRICH CARL HEULE, JUNE

2014–DECEMBER 2014

Whereas Petrovich believes that limiting the adoption of the internet is the appropriate way forward for Amish churches, Friedrich Carl Heule offers an alternative approach. In the first of seven *TPCBE* essays, he identifies himself as a “fairly sophisticated” internet user who is also “amazed and

somewhat bewildered by its presence, power, and rapid evolution” (2014a, 44). He remembers when his father’s business went online in the 1990s and says that today “the internet intersects nearly every aspect of my personal and professional life, and I do not see a future without it” (44). Heule views the internet as a utility, much like electricity, gas, and water. Unlike these traditional utilities, however, Heule says, “Consumers can access the internet with and without wires, and the ramifications of this massive, shared computer are affecting all people, including those in the plain communities” (44). For example, he continues, “Major telephone companies want to remove landlines and the United States Postal Office is closing remote branches. Why? Because these organizations *assume* that everyone has cell phones and has access to email. What will happen when these organizations make the final transition to the internet for its computing power?” In his answer, he mentions fiction author David Eggers’s (2013) dystopian novel *The Circle*, in which “his characters lose their personal freedom because the internet is creating a hyper-connected society, one that demands total participation and complete transparency” (44). “Even self-sufficient families,” Heule says, “cannot escape the growing reach of the internet in this dark work of fiction” (46). Heule believes that had Eggers addressed the plain communities in his book, the ending would not have been so daunting, because “historically speaking, plain entrepreneurs have overcome these kinds of challenges many times before” (46).

Heule says his series of *TPCBE* essays is aimed at overcoming the challenge facing Amish entrepreneurs today: continuing to acquire the resources necessary for survival while adhering to Amish values when customers and suppliers operate in an increasingly internet-connected world. From Heule’s perspective, “Today’s entrepreneurs navigate a hyper-connected economy, and must go online to simply survive. This means that a successful ‘offline’ operation is highly unusual, and the decision to stay offline can be interpreted morally and strategically” (2014f, 34). When an off-grid entrepreneur serves non-Amish customers or has non-Amish suppliers, he states, they are likely to benefit from the computing power provided by the internet. For him, “internet management” is the process of selecting and outsourcing the right combination of related activities. Heule’s stance is that “a business does not need an internet connection to be successful online” (46). Instead, he believes that “an internet-free business needs a plan and a strategy for managing and outsourcing its internet needs and its presence



online” (46). The goal of his *TPCBE* essays, then, is to educate entrepreneurs so that they may develop such a plan.

The concept *internet management* is a system of decisions and actions that can be managed by a business owner, according to Heule. Additionally, internet management is offered as a solution for steering clear of the dangers associated with internet adoption, as outlined by Petrovich. Heule’s view is that business owners can empower themselves by learning about the internet so that they can make decisions and communicate their wishes to others who will actually engage with the technology and do the work for them. He says that many plain entrepreneurs already outsource tasks related to their businesses, such as transportation, accounting, photography, design, printing, and mailing, so the system already fits within current business practices. Having knowledge of these matters, according to Heule, is not the same as having “direct access to the internet, but the knowledge is far more valuable when it is applied correctly” (48). According to Heule, internet management is the process of delegating internet tasks to persons with an internet connection. This allows a business to conduct its core operation offline but “still utilize digital resources on the internet for secondary tasks” (2014c, 52). This, he thinks, allows the owner of an off-grid business to manage his internet-based assets “as efficiently as the CEO of a major company: in both cases, awareness and sound delegation are more important than the internet connection itself” (2014c, 52).

Heule provides practical information for enacting internet management techniques. He teaches readers what the internet is in physical terms, how to outsource internet searches (2014b), and how to understand and make good use of one’s digital presence without compromising personal conviction or security (2014c). In so doing, he explains why it is important for a business’s website to appear in the first pages of Google search results, how one can employ digital marketing strategies to segment and target ads to specialized demographic groups, how companies pay search engines that drive traffic to their websites, and so forth (2014d). In one essay (2014e), Heule takes up social media marketing as a topic of discussion. He explains social media for Amish readers in terms of newspapers aimed at Amish audiences, such as *Die Botschaft*. The content of these newspapers is also user generated, because each article contains a letter from a representative of an Amish church district who writes with news from the community. The letters are compiled and printed on newsprint and arrive in subscribers’

physical mailboxes once a week. According to Heule, “Social media existed long before the internet” and “is simply a technological evolution of the long-standing tradition of printed communication” (2014e, 40).

He highlights a few differences associated with the material character of online and offline social media. For example, “Compared to printed social media, the digital alternatives are the ultimate aggregators of personal data and they collect and sell information like names, addresses, family connections, health issues, professional interests and much much more” (40). Additionally, news sent through printed social media travels much more slowly than through online social media. Heule discusses the widespread popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, YouTube, and Pinterest. He identifies ways for readers to use the personal data that users of these platforms generate for their own business purposes. By utilizing this kind of data, he says, businesses can “mine for specific kinds of customers” (48). According to Heule, “Through social media, a company can educate, reward, and help its customer base, and in exchange, customers benefit from better service” (48–49).

In his sixth essay, Heule discusses mobile media marketing and video marketing. He discusses the advantages that he sees in utilizing both these channels of influence for business owners. For example, when traveling, he uses the mobile app Yelp to locate and select restaurants to patronize. Additionally, his father, who is a horseman, watches videos on YouTube to learn various horse-training techniques. Unlike Petrovich, he thinks that YouTube offers an advantage over television because its content is aimed at a few thousand viewers whereas television content is intended for millions of viewers. According to Heule, “The luxury of choice and the reversal of power has slashed the heels of mainstream media and has empowered content creators who promote niche categories” (2014f, 38). In this way, in contrast to Petrovich, Heule sees a decentralization of content through technology to be an advantage for people in plain communities. Unlike Petrovich, he does not believe that the lack of a filtering authority, as used to be present with broadcast television, is a problem. Heule describes the utility of YouTube for Amish business owners by identifying a business that made use of the platform to provide visual instructions for the use of a unique heating device for off-grid living. In noting the video’s poor production quality, he says,

I believe this online video was created by a third-party jobber—in other words, “a guy with Amish neighbors.” Even though the production value was far from professional, seeing the various parts of the machine and how they work could influence the most skeptical consumer to make a purchase. (38)

Heule thinks that plain entrepreneurs, who are known for their exceptional record of mechanical innovation, could greatly benefit from video marketing.

In his final essay, titled “*The Big Picture*,” Heule suggests that the information he presented in his first six essays was meant to help readers formulate their own answer to the question, “How can I use the internet to solve a business problem without damaging my relationship to God?” (2014g, 34). Heule says that “there is no rush to go ‘online,’ and when it comes to using the internet, it is better to analyze the pros and cons of new technology than thoughtlessly adopt it” (35). He cites Cambridge technology scholar John Naughton, who says, “One thing we have learned from the history of communications technology is that people tend to overestimate the short-term effects of new technologies—and to *underestimate* their long-term implications.”

Heule uses the internet to solve business problems in a way that he believes is harmonious with his relationship to his Savior. In daily life, however, he says, “I still limit this activity as much as possible” (2014g, 40). According to Heule,

Some people celebrate the evolution of information sharing and others are terrified by it. Internet management acknowledges a grey area where individuals and businesses *choose* their level of exposure. It also challenges the assumption that any person or business can completely sever their ties to the internet. (2014c, 60)

Petrovich and Heule’s insights shed light on Amish thinking about adopting the internet and computers in today’s globally networked world. Petrovich and Heule both see a need for placing limits on internet use and adoption and making sure that Amish businesses are not so isolated that they become irrelevant to outsiders, given a rapidly changing economy. Both also seek to find an appropriate balance where these two vectors intersect. For each author, however, this point of intersection is different. Petrovich emphasizes the importance of limitations and agreed-upon church rules

for guiding appropriate technology use. His views align with those who believe that strong teaching is the best approach to limiting technology use. He thinks that an authority is a better filter of content than an individual. Heule, on the other hand, thinks that giving readers as much information as he can about the various components of the internet and how they can be used for conducting business among the Amish will allow readers to make their own decisions about whether or how to utilize the internet to achieve their goals. Heule embodies the approach to technology use that is guided by personal convictions. Interestingly, both authors find it important to help readers understand what the internet is and show how these mechanical components can (or cannot) be utilized to fulfill Amish goals.

Heule's strategy of internet management is intended to enable business owners to utilize the internet without an internet connection. This strategy is composed of a series of decisions and actions that can be managed by the leader of an organization. It calls on the leader of the organization, a cultural insider, to learn about the internet so that the leader can make decisions and communicate his or her wishes to those who will use the technology and do the work. Thus, internet management is offered as a solution for steering clear of the dangers associated with internet adoption, as outlined by Petrovich. By outsourcing internet-related activities to a non-Amish person, the Amish business owner empowers those in the organization to live and act according to shared community values. In this way, Heule is calling for readers to use a version of the print shop outlined in the previous chapter to introduce a speed bump and an element of precarity in the sociotechnical arrangement. The desired outcome of configuring the communication system in this way is to protect community members' souls from the dangers associated with access to unrestrained inward flows of information. In this way, Heule articulates a workaround that enables Amish communities to connect to the global information economy while protecting their cultural autonomy.

Before the introduction of digital technologies, Amish communities were made up of isolated tight-knit social networks that were often interconnected with one another but were generally disconnected from outsiders. The links in these networks represented relationships that were largely sustained via face-to-face communication through travel and migration. As technologies came on the scene and the economy changed, the networks largely stayed the same, even though relationships within the community

were now sustained via telephone, email, and other options. This is somewhat remarkable, because it has not been the case in the non-Amish world (Putnam 2000; Wellman 2001). In the non-Amish world, we have become networked individuals who no longer participate in local clubs and unions in the way that our parents and grandparents did. We rely on large institutions to deliver the goods that we need to our doorsteps instead of patronizing our local establishments. Our families are increasingly dispersed, living in different cities, states, and even countries today.

Heule suggests that with effort this does not have to be the case among the Amish. For him, the internet represents a channel that the Amish can open when they want, a channel through which they can connect to the outside to accomplish their goals and satiate their needs: filing taxes, medical research, advertising, and so forth. The key, from this viewpoint, is to make the switch that opens this channel excessively visible and to educate users about what is happening technologically when the metaphorical switch is opened. This, according to Heule, will help protect the small, tight-knit networks that are key to Amish spiritual, cultural, physical, social, and mental well-being. It is especially important to ensure that members of the community utilize the network for Amish reasons. When successful, Amish communities effectively place their hand on a switch that controls the information flowing into their communities. In this way, the Amish prevent exposure to non-Amish corporate advertisements that encourage conspicuous consumption and to governments that encourage dependence on anonymous institutions and spiritual and emotional control.

In summary, from Heule's view, internet management makes it possible to resist (or reduce) the influence of these forces on indigenous social structures and cultural autonomy by managing and manipulating the configurations of their social networks and routing information flows. The key to doing this is by utilizing a buffer that mediates an Amish person's use of the internet. This intermediary is instructed by an educated Amish business owner to accomplish digital tasks that will ultimately help the Amish person fulfill his or her goals. In this way, Heule also believes that the user should understand the means of communication and must work to tailor the means to a desired Amish end.

