

COMMUNICATING STRATEGICALLY FOR AMISH
EMPOWERMENT

This book has explored the praxis of a group of people who consciously use technologies to create a dynamic social and cultural sanctuary to protect individuals from the negative impacts of high-tech capitalism. This project builds on the ideas of Shoshana Zuboff by illustrating how a group of people who are motivated by religion and spirituality build ideological space for living according to their own will and moral codes. It also reflects the philosophies of technology outlined by Albert Borgmann and Don Ihde. The Amish see technologies that mediate their relationships with others and the natural and spiritual worlds as ethically and morally nonneutral. Furthermore, they work creatively to understand the mechanics of these technologies to use them to manifest the fulfillment of their own moral and ethical goals. For them, it involves limiting and controlling digital technologies, which act as bridges that connect them to a social world governed by insatiable, amorphous authorities who use the public to enact their own will: the regulation of people's behavior to ensure consistent financial gain. In so doing, the Amish are able to make use of our global economic system to acquire the resources that they need to live but avoid becoming a pawn in the digital capitalists' ruthless game.

Additionally, this book shows that communication infrastructures can act as configurable political tools that facilitate or stifle the empowerment of localized communities. In particular it illustrates the importance of collective action in empowering communities that wish to configure their communication systems at the grassroots level so that they may fulfill shared goals and values. The Amish are particularly illustrative on this front, because they work locally to make rules about which digital technologies are acceptable for adoption and use from the ground up. In this way, local values, rituals, and ambitions guide the configuration of networks. As a result, the Amish have established modes of communication that connect them to the global information economy to accomplish their

economic goals, yet remain disconnected when infrastructure owners and programmers seek to lure them into dependence on the state or to fuel individual desires for conspicuous consumption. In this way, the Amish use grassroots network configuration as a tool for associating with centralized powers without being dominated by them. This allows them to calibrate their connection to the outside world for their own advantage, not that of the government or the global media and technology industries.

This book has explored specific Amish strategies for controlling digital technologies so that they are used to fulfill indigenous values and protect Amish cultural autonomy in a hyperconnected, global social world. Today, Amish people use formal and informal rule-making processes for the adoption of digital technologies, in which decisions are made publicly and communally (see chapters 3 and 4). Instead of simply consuming easily accessible content or artifacts aimed at distraction or improving user efficiency, they rely on a venerated tradition of *making* to repurpose and create new socio-technical artifacts and assemblages that offer functional ways of communicating while protecting their cultural autonomy from external influence (see chapters 5 and 6). For them, distraction, ease, and efficiency are not desirable characteristics in communication. Effort, for them, shows care and respect.

Guided by a preference for holism in daily living, the Amish prefer face-to-face communication over other media available today. This, they believe, strengthens local social networks and makes the connections among people, nature, and God more visible (see chapter 7). Together these strategies work to protect individual spiritual health, local close-knit bonds, and the reproduction of Amish religious traditions and communities in a world where the Amish are increasingly in contact with, and dependent on, outsiders for their own survival.

This research extends the literature on Amish technology use by showing how established procedures are being adapted for the adoption of digital technologies, something not yet widely studied. Instead of viewing the Amish as reacting to seemingly uniform forces of modernity, this analysis found that a technology's value can be assessed only by looking at how the community of users define value to begin with. It is not presumed that all groups of users define value in the same way. Thus, Amish sociotechnical change is brought about by local actors who operate within a complex, dynamic, and interactive environment constrained in various ways by historical, political, religious, cultural, geographic, and external forces.

Each of these forces is capable of exerting disproportionate force on the shaping of public sentiment, knowledge, and values and on the adoption and use of digital technologies at a given moment. A consistent or uniform view of modernity that in some way must be reacted to by the Amish, as has been identified in previous research, is incompatible with this perspective. In noting the interdependent and dynamic social forces behind the creation of digital technologies and their roles in our society, we must also consider and investigate what kinds of values, ideologies, and norms (often emphasizing efficiency and profits) are being embedded, and perhaps purposefully obfuscated, in the design of the devices that we use daily to conduct work and connect to one another.

For the Amish, a robust set of shared formal and informal rules works to ensure that digital technologies are used in ways that empower the Amish to fulfill their goals. Contrary to fears reported by some people I talked with, adopting new digital technologies in Amish ways may in fact strengthen Amish culture, not bring about its demise. The social constraints in place in Amish communities today seem to carry as much weight as material technological affordances, if not more so, in determining the use and adoption (or not) of new communication tools. *Whether* or not one can access a digital technology is less concerning than *how* one uses it in context—though efforts are documented that show that designed precarity, or making it difficult to use a digital technology, is useful in guiding behavior. Indeed, a focus on socialization and training throughout the life cycle also helps reproduce Amish worldviews and reinforce Amish identities. Additionally, I saw that there are many procedures, not just proper use of technology, in place to help keep the community together. These include small-scale church services located in the home; the time for lunch and fellowship with neighbors and family after the service; a shared origin story, heritage, language, and common values; or even just the appearance of common values. All these are symbols that show allegiance and deference to the Amish church. In this way, technology was but one aspect of social life that helped define dynamic and evolving boundaries that separate the Amish from non-Amish. By communicating allegiance to their collective, participants reported feeling empowered because they felt rooted, known, and part of a group whose members shared a purpose.

The Amish case study also calls into question techno-utopian philosophies that believe that the democratization of computers and global

connectivity will bring about a more egalitarian “global village” where inequalities are diminished and free access to information emancipates the connected. From an Amish viewpoint, just the opposite is true. Global connectivity makes people independent of one another, yet dependent on large-scale, centralized institutions such as corporations and the government for their own survival. Empowerment for the Amish comes from dependence on a strong-tie network of individuals who are well-known and share the same values. Together, they seek independence from corporations and centralized governments and work to create interdependencies among people locally on a small scale.

Similarly, global connectivity is seen as capable of drawing isolated individuals into closer contact with an anonymizing mass culture through the assimilation of ideas, values, beliefs, and practices. When an individual becomes assimilated into mass culture, according to Amish views, his or her spiritual, social, mental, and physical well-being is at stake. For them, digital technologies represent a channel for this kind of assimilation. As such, an increasing dependence on digital technologies raises stress and anxiety levels by speeding up the pace of life but reducing the amount of fulfillment that one gets from it. By drawing individuals’ minds into a virtual world, minds and bodies become separated from and ignorant of the natural environment that sustains them. This is particularly problematic for Amish creative work, where technology is seen to divorce the means from the ends, which diminishes human fulfillment and weakens a connection to a tangible reality.

This book also contributes to the evolving theoretical literature on critical making by exploring Amish making practices as mundane, everyday activities with macrolevel political implications. As in chapters 5 and 6, critical making can be seen as both an everyday activity and a significant symbolic and functional component of a larger strategy for the protection of cultural autonomy in an increasingly high-tech, networked world. Unique Amish creations such as plain computers and strategies for internet management act as workarounds that symbolize shared beliefs and values and mark the cultural boundaries of Amish communities. In privileging creation over consumption, ideological foci remain local instead of remote. In this way, Amish patterns of critical making contribute to an overarching political strategy for Amish empowerment.

Although Amish approaches are indeed unique, there are lessons that we can all learn from understanding why and how the Amish work so hard to maintain a safe place for their way of life to thrive. By making decisions about technology adoption based on morals and ethics, the Amish lean in to points of conflict and struggle because they help them maintain their cultural and ideological autonomy in the digital age. Guided by their morals, they have been working to maintain separation from the outside world for centuries. Today, because of changes in the economy, these communal decisions have become more complex and difficult. These complexities are not to be avoided. Instead, they help provide the social structure and support that is needed to create space for everyone in their communities to dwell peacefully. The Amish are very aware that individuals, on their own, do not stand a chance against the power of Big Other.

Even though it is becoming nearly impossible to opt out of today's high-tech capitalist society and economy, it does not mean that one cannot work to retain sovereignty over one's life and authorship of one's experience. By making similar decisions about digital technology usage, we can also create opportunities for inward reflection that allow us to develop our own will and share it with others close to us. This gives rise to the bottom-up development of grassroots collectives of different kinds whose members share values and are connected by strong-tie social bonds.

These groups stand to provide essential sanctuary for their inhabitants and help protect the characteristics of human beings that separate us from machines. They promote the exercise of creating instead of consuming and cherish the spontaneity and connection that come with the free, nonviolent expression of emotion. They protect individuals from the negative experiences of living in high-tech capitalism, such as feeling like time is speeding up, our work is increasingly invisible, we are divorced from those close to us, and we are out of touch with nature. Instead of feeling stressed, anxious, and lonely, efforts should be made today to help employees and users feel creative, known, and rooted as well as having a purpose and a part of the natural world. When the human experience of living and working in digital spaces today is considered, these efforts require a move toward holism by highlighting, not erasing, the connection between human action and its meaning. It requires seeing people as more than the data that they leave behind and more than the purchasing decisions that they will make in the future.

If we employed the strategies in use among the Amish, how would our daily, lived experiences change? Could we work with our family members, colleagues, friends, and neighbors to come up with shared ethical goals? If so, how would we go about making decisions about digital technology use that enable us to better fulfill those goals? Could we lean into the conflict and struggle that come with making these hard decisions? If making instead of consuming were our first inclination, how might our communication tools be different? These are open and guiding questions that require future reflection and collective empathy. In seeking to answer them, we must be aware that some members of society have more power than others to make decisions at odds with centralized powers. In Amish communities, people generally have a voice and are encouraged to participate in governance. This is not necessarily true outside Amish communities. Thus, localized social change should emphasize a spirit of caring through the recognition of difference and a dedication to bringing about inclusivity and equality.

Using Amish approaches to strengthen community in the non-Amish world might include pursuing more opportunities for face-to-face conversation with people we care about, rather than sending them an email, a text, or a tweet. Doing this would likely also help us feel less lonely, uprooted, or fragmented. Maybe over time, the effort we put into creating opportunities for face-to-face interactions would help us feel more integrated into a community that shares our values and supports each member. If we establish formal and informal decision-making procedures among our families and communities, perhaps we will be held accountable (and hold others accountable) for utilizing digital technologies in ways that make us feel good over the long term, instead of in temporary moments of weakness or crisis. Finally, by acknowledging and nurturing our innate abilities to create instead of our abilities to consume, perhaps we would find fulfillment in producing things that people need, close the spiritual and mental gap between human bodies and the natural world that sustains them, and make a political move that shifts power out of the hands of corporate and governmental owners and programmers of global information networks and, instead, into the hands, minds, and bodies of everyday people.

This exploration of the Amish has shown that much is at stake for people in taking such measures. To rectify social injustices that are part and parcel of our social structures today, we must first look inward, create reflective space for the development of our will, share it with those close to us, and

work to protect these spaces from the invasion of dominant logics. Through our participation in the market as consumers, we should request that technology designers reveal and limit their efforts to surveil and control users. As participants in the democratic process, we should also elect informed policy-makers who can regulate these organizations and infrastructures by restraining the exertion of their will at the expense of the public's.

Although the strategies outlined here have large-scale political implications for the sustainability of communities, they are primarily intended to ensure the well-being of individuals. Amish approaches to digital technology adoption emphasize holism, simplicity, spirituality, a slow pace of life, tradition, and heritage in the daily, lived experience of human beings. Because of the limits placed on mediated forms of communication, the individualizing influences of corporate advertising and intellectual and professional pursuits are less capable of disrupting a way of life in which people feel at peace, that they have a purpose, and that they are rooted and known. Although these are facets of Amish culture that they believe empower them the most, perhaps they have broader relevance for Amish and non-Amish people alike.

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

Virtually Amish

Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins

By: Lindsay Ems

Citation:

Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins

By: Lindsay Ems

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/11792.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262369381

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

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



The MIT Press

© 2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



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



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

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ems, Lindsay, author.

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

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

Identifiers: LCCN 2021031327 | ISBN 9780262543637 (paperback)

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

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

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

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1