

ICT Non-use Among The Amish

Lindsay Ems

Indiana University

Department of Telecommunications

lems@indiana.edu

ABSTRACT

This position paper presents insights and experiences culled from the author's dissertation research. Grounded in the cultural studies of communication, this study investigates the decision-making processes in place in Old Order Amish communities limiting the adoption and use of new information communication technologies (ICTs). Generally a conservative religious group known for its members living pre-modern lifestyles, the Amish do not take a hard line against all new technologies, as some may think. Ethnographic interviews with Amish business and church leaders illuminate a unique decision-making process in which religious values and political ambitions determine (non-)use. The Amish ICT decision-making process allows for the grassroots design of communication networks that work for Amish purposes while protecting them from forces that may weaken their cultural autonomy. Because of limitations on email, cell phone and internet use, methodological observations regarding the enrollment of research participants are also discussed.

Author Keywords

ICT, non-use, Amish, ethnographic methods, values, politics, infrastructure design.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.m. Computers and Society Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

While the Amish are not entirely anti-technology, their resistance to adopting digital communication technologies (in most cases) makes them an interesting case study for the interrogation of non-use as an academic concept. When studying the Amish, it is important to note that Amish communities, themselves are extremely diverse in their practices and lifestyles [15, 12]. What may be accepted in one community might not be in another. Communities range from "tradition-minded" to "change-minded" and

The author(s) retain copyright, but ACM receives an exclusive publication license.

everywhere in between—some do not have running water and some more progressive Anabaptists (Amish and Mennonites) drive cars and use social media [12]. In this study, insights are drawn from interviews with church leaders in two Old Order Amish settlements in Indiana (one in northern Indiana and one in southern Indiana). The unique decision-making processes in place in these Amish communities for adopting and using new ICTs like cell phones, smartphones and the internet will be discussed. By focusing attention on the decision-making process itself, many issues surrounding non-use will be brought to light. For example, the argument that values determine and are embedded in technology use [4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 17, 21] will be extended to non-use of a technology as well. Additionally, the idea that infrastructures have political motivations and implications [1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 14, 18, 19] will also be extended to infrastructure non-use. The above citations are provided to contribute to the workshop's living bibliography for non-use research. Finally, due to the particular limitations on use in place in Amish communities on cell phones, smartphones and the internet, methodological observations regarding the enrollment of research participants is also discussed.

WHO ARE THE AMISH?

The Amish are a religious subculture who have successfully resisted assimilation in American mainstream culture for centuries. Early in their history, they did this by separating themselves from others geographically. When European governments and the church were closely aligned in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Amish held religious beliefs that made them heretics who defied centralized state control. Because of widespread persecution, many peace-seeking Anabaptists emigrated to North America to evade control over their beliefs and practices by centralized powers. They settled in rural areas, away from the nucleus of state and corporate control, and for the most part, remain there today. Changes in the economy have pushed many into new professions that bring them into closer contact with outsiders [8]. Along with this has come an increased pressure to adopt new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that plug them into ubiquitous networked communication infrastructures [8].

Amish philosophies regarding adaptation to a changing world are largely inspired by their belief that they should live differently and separately from the rest of the world

[13]. A collection of Bible passages interpreted for practical daily life provide the inspiration for the Amish separatist strategy: Romans 12:2 calls for Christians to “Be not conformed to the world.” And, 1 John 2:15 says, “Love not the world or the things of the world.” James 4:4 says, “Whosoever...will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God.” The Amish separatist strategy is also inspired by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which says no one can serve two masters. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and he will provide for your needs” (Matthew 6:33). In this way, the Amish train their desires on spiritual priorities and allow the rest to be taken care of by God [13].

In an effort to maintain this separation, the Amish generally reject electricity supplied via the public power grid, television, radio, automobiles, and modern clothing fashions. However, among the diverse population of American Amish today, it is not uncommon to see people roller blading, families enjoying time on the lake in a motorboat, construction workers using power tools, homes with solar panels on roofs, businesses with websites and Facebook pages and Amish folks using cell phones to talk and send text messages. Though at first glance these choices may seem contradictory, they are actually the result of a sophisticated internal process in place to calibrate the link that connects them to the global network society. In making a decision about adopting or rejecting a technology, the Amish ask whether it will create a link over which corporate and governmental influences can indirectly reach in and corrode the cultural ties that bind their small communities together or not [16].

AMISH DECISIONS ABOUT ICT ADOPTION

Interviews with Amish ministers and bishops reveal that the development of rules governing technology use and ownership in individual communities is part of a dynamic, public, communal and democratic process that is shaped by Christian religious doctrine. These rules are aimed at protecting the social bonds that tie small-scale social groups together in order to provide economic, spiritual and social support to group members. For the Amish, salvation is a team effort. The Amish feel living a simple life that is pleasing to God is too hard for an individual to accomplish alone. Thus, community is a privileged value that organizes social priorities in Amish life.

Often made up of 25-35 families, each community, develops its own governing document—an *Ordnung*—that extends the Bible’s application for life in today’s world. Rules about technology use, clothing style, etc. are inscribed into the *Ordnung* using a formal, democratic process among church members. The *Ordnung* itself is not written down, making it dynamic and easily altered to change with the times. The *Ordnung* is a lived document; it is passed down through actions and face-to-face instruction from parents to their children.

Recently, in many Amish communities, individuals have been forced to leave traditional agricultural work and enter

other professions due to the increasing prices of farmland. This economic change has introduced a wholesale shift in lifestyle for Amish families that requires them to interact more with outsiders [8]. Thus, decisions in Amish communities about the adoption of cell phones, mobile devices, computers and the internet often represent a negotiation between holding onto traditions and biblical teachings and adapting to a changing economy. One minister and entrepreneur from northern Indiana reported feeling that having a website for his business—a tourism-oriented retail shop—was now a “matter of survival” in his community.

In the communities studied here, cell phones have become widely adopted over the last ten years or so. They are generally allowed for business purposes and emergencies and are not meant to enter the home. Smartphones, computers and the internet have not been widely adopted. In exceptional cases, however, uses of these tools can also be observed among Amish business owners. Currently, in many communities the adoption and use of all of these devices are sources of debate.

It is important to note that Amish bishops and ministers are not autocratic leaders. When asked about how rules governing technology adoption were made, one bishop from southern Indiana said, “We aren’t a dictatorship. We counsel with the church [members] and put each decision to a vote.” Church leaders are charged with curating these conversations, mediating negotiations among those in disagreement, and offering scriptural motivations for moving in one direction or the other. In general, according to the same bishop, “We keep trying to hold back. There will be a struggle in the future too keep back though. It’s harder to back up once people have already moved forward.”

One reason often given for deciding not to adopt ICTs like cell phones, smartphones and computers, include exposure to content they feel is “immoral,” like pornography. According to another bishop, it is not the smartphone or computer that is the actual danger; it is what can go through it that they find problematic. An Amish businessman reported feeling that pornography is addictive and can become a problem for families. Also, he noted that he feels it is degrading to women.

Other reasons given for non-use of ICTS among Amish church and business leaders were that they could lead to other kinds of sinful temptation. For example, many participants worried that that ICTs would isolate family members from one another by encouraging individuals to engage with the anonymous creators of digital content (some cited video content and video games) instead of the family or local community. Some felt that being able to view any kind of content at will would inspire young people to blindly chase after riches, a fast-paced life and social status. Others felt they inspired private, disembodied interactions (via email, social media and SMS messaging).

These were of concern because they may encourage individuals to do and say things to others that they might not have the courage to say via face-to-face conversation (e.g., sexting, starting relationships with married men/women). In short, one bishop said, “Technology amplifies temptation. We want to shun the temptation that leads to sin first.” From an Amish perspective, non-use of ICTs like cell phones, smartphones, computers and the internet is predominantly aimed at shunning the temptation they feel could endanger the souls of family and community members.

VALUES AND TECHNOLOGY (NON-)USE

In Amish communities Christian religious values inspire the development of rules limiting ICTs to deter members from engaging in what they see as unchristian behaviors. For example, it is now largely a settled matter that landline telephones can be owned and used as long as they are kept outside of the house. Because church services are held in individual residences, the home is often referred to as the alter in Amish spiritual life. Family conversations, child-rearing and collective daily scriptural study should not be interrupted by a ringing telephone.

In contrast, in southern Indiana, cell phone adoption/use is currently a source of much debate. Though many people in one Amish settlement (about 4,000 people) have adopted cell phones, Amish ministers are calling for the use of a “black box phone” instead. The black box phone is a landline phone with an attachment that interfaces with the cellular network. It can be powered by an automobile’s cigarette lighter. In this settlement it has been placed in a plywood box for transportation so that construction crews can use the device when on the road (See Figure 1.). This intentionally bulked up contraption allows for mobile communications from a vehicle but is very inconvenient to carry around. It is also shared among the crewmembers, making individual cell phones unnecessary.

The black box phone is a unique Amish modification or re-configuration of existing technology that is in better alignment with Amish values—no access to video, music, internet or texting. This just one example of a common trend among creative Amish tinkerers and technicians to (re)create devices and socio-technical configurations that better align with their values [10]. In this way, values are embedded in and determine ICT (non-)use. The Amish have modified a cell phone for use according to their religious and cultural values.



Figure 1. An Amish Modification: The Black Box Phone

POLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY (NON-)USE

Church leaders also feel placing limits on technology use helps them live in a social system protected from the outside world’s ideological and political control. Having this separation gives them the power to maintain a way of life that aligns with their religious beliefs. According to well-respected Amish opinion leader, Joseph Stoll, in a recent issue of the Amish magazine, *Family Life*, it is a fact that “there are two kingdoms- the world’s system and Christ’s kingdom.” He feels, “there needs to be separation between the two.” In this opinion editorial, he responds to an Amish family’s decision to go on welfare [20]. He critiques the family’s decision, saying accepting government assistance is “a violation of the two-kingdom concept. It is allowing the government to do what is the church’s responsibility.” This sentiment reveals a desire to maintain cultural, spiritual and financial control over Amish living. This critique reveals the existence in the author’s mind that two separate political spheres exist (two different sources of power/authority) which are governed by different logics. In “the world’s system” power/authority is determined by money, individualization, allegiance to a nation-state, bureaucracy, etc. In “Christ’s kingdom, dedication to God, family, community, and tradition determine power/authority. The author sees these two political systems as fundamentally incompatible.

Thus, adopting ICTs like cell phones, smartphones computers and the internet represent bridges, much like welfare, to the outside world. According to the church leaders participating in this study, maintaining separation between the Amish and non-Amish world requires limitations on technology use because the allures of the outside world could encourage young people to leave the community. A greater concern, however, is the corruption of souls within the community should the “world’s system” of pride and conspicuous consumption start to infiltrate its networks. According to one Amish minister, cell phones are destroying the culture, peace and simplicity associated with Amish life. This man feels that Amish culture is a benefit to

them and they do not want to lose it. When asked what benefits he meant, he said, “living simply and in peace.”

METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS FROM NON-USING PARTICIPANTS

Conducting research among a population with limitations on internet and cell phone use has required inventive approaches to participant enrollment. The approach outlined here was developed in situ and is tailored to an ethnographic study of Amish technology use. However, reflecting on some of the techniques used may indeed prove beneficial to others studying ICT non-use.

Engaging a Principal Informant

In each of the two Amish settlements studied in this dissertation, I engaged a *principle informant*—a well-respected and well-connected in-group member of the target population. These two individuals helped open doors to conducting interviews with other members of the target population (their peers) in this study. Much effort was invested in fostering these relationships. It was important for these men to get to know me on a personal level so that they could vouch for me among members of their peer groups. Additionally, these individuals were particularly interested in technology—the topic of this research project. This common interest, along with their generosity and willingness to help, proved to be essential in recruiting necessary participants.

Going Native: The Body as Communication Medium

Understanding Amish culture and social convention was essential to enrolling participants. Because most communication occurs face-to-face in Amish daily life, it was necessary for me to drive to, and “cold call” on potential interviewees. I used a local Amish church directory to find recruitable informants and literally knocked on their doors to ask for an interview. Indeed this is the approach out of which my relationships with the principal informants emerged. When walking into very busy businesses unannounced, I was endlessly surprised at how frequently I was warmly greeted, offered a workshop tour and generously given time to interview a top-notch business professional and/or spiritual community leader. These individuals often took an hour or two of their time to discuss the issues relevant to this research project without prior scheduling. As a frame of reference, I started this study by sending members of the target population (church leaders) recruitment letters via the U.S Postal Service. I did not receive a single response. Simply showing up, in this case, seemed to make all the difference.

Developing New Personal Connections Through Old(er) Personal Connections

Often in my trips to conduct interviews in Amish communities, I was accompanied by another individual in the field. In southern Indiana, the director of the county’s historical society and museum acted as a liaison to the local

community. In northern Indiana, my mother, a retired librarian, accompanied me to the field. In both cases, my relationships with these individuals helped engage new participants in conversation. Additionally, these individuals helped with the business of navigating the roads and recalling conversations for documentation. Perhaps most importantly, these individuals helped convey my legitimacy to informants. They also provided access to interviews with new informants, added spice to conversations and helped document them more objectively.

CONCLUSION

Studying the ways rules are made in Amish communities about how to use ICTs like cell phones, smartphones, computers and the internet reveal that technologies and infrastructures are far from neutral conduits. This study promotes the view that ICT non-use, like use, is an artificial manifestation of cultural values. Additionally, from an Amish point of view, technology (non-)use is inspired by the desire to maintain political control over an inherited way of life to ensure religious freedom. According to Amish informants, it is preferable to limit technology use in order to maintain this cultural autonomy in order to preserve the simple, peaceful, spiritual way of life their ancestors passed down to them. The methodological techniques for collecting ethnographic interview data among non-use communities identified as beneficial to this study include: engaging a principle informant, realizing the power of “simply showing up” and using existing personal connections to build new connections to potential informants in the target population.

REFERENCES

1. Appadurai, A. (2000). Grassroots globalization and the research imagination. *Public Culture*, 12(1): 1–19.
2. Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In *Culture and public action: A cross-disciplinary dialogue on development policy.*, eds. V. Rao and M. Walton, 59–85. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
3. Berland, J. (2009). *North of the Empire: Essays on the Cultural Technologies of Space*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
4. Bijker, W. E. (2001). Social Construction of Technology. In N. J. Smelser & P. B. Baltes (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Vol. 23, pp. 15522-15527). Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd.
5. boyd, d. (2011). “White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook.” In *Race After the Internet* (Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow, eds.). Routledge, pp. 203-222.

6. Carey, J. (1988). *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
7. de Gournay, C. (1988). Telephone networks in France and Great Britain. *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America*. Philadelphia: Temple University.
8. Hurst, C. E., & McConnell, D. L. (2010). *An Amish paradox: Diversity & change in the world's largest Amish community*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
9. Innis, H. A. (1951). *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
10. Kelly, K. (2010). *What technology wants*. New York: Viking.
11. Kling, R. (1992). Audiences, Narratives, and Human Values in Social Studies of Technology. *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 17(3): 349-365.
12. Kraybill, D. B., Johnson-Weiner, K., & Nolt, S. M. (2013). *The Amish*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
13. Kraybill, D. B., Nolt, S. M., & Weaver-Zercher, D. (2010). *The Amish way: Patient faith in a perilous world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
14. Mulgan, G. I. (1991). *Communication and Control: Networks and the New Economies of Communication*. New York: Guilford.
15. Nolt, S. & Meyers, T. (2007). *Plain diversity: Amish cultures and identities*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
16. Rheingold, H. (1999). "Look who's talking," *Wired*, 7(1). Online Available at: (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/amish_pr.htm)
17. Samarajiva & Shields (1990a). "Value Issues in Telecommunications Resource Allocation" in S. B. Lundstet, (ed), *The Third World, in Telecommunications, Values, and the Public Interest*, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
18. Samarajiva & Shields (1990b). Integration, Telecommunication, and Development: Power in the Paradigms. *Journal of Communication*, 40(3): 84-105.
19. Sawhney, H. & Jayakar, K. P. (2007). Universal Access. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 41: 159-221.
20. Stoll, J. (November 2013). Staff Notes. *Family Life*. Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway Publishers.
21. Wetmore, J. M. (2007). Amish technology: Reinforcing values and building community, *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, Summer(2007): 10-21.