

Building Amish Community with Technology

Regulating Machines and Techniques to Forward Social Goals



An Amish farmer works the fields near Arthur, Illinois.

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The use of technology by the Old Order Amish is a modern puzzle.¹ The Amish are usually portrayed as rural farmers who live in a bygone era. They are supposed to be a people who would never set foot in automobiles, never study the workings of a diesel engine, and never admit change into their society. And yet, when a non-Amish person – or “English” person as the Amish call their English speaking neighbors – travels through an Amish community, he or she discovers something very different.² An observer may see an Amish woman talking on a pay phone, an Amish carpenter using a drill press, or even an Amish teenager driving a car. This revelation is often startling, but scenes like these are in fact the norm. They are not examples of Amish straying from their faith, but evidence that the modern conception of the Amish is based on a stereotype rather than the intricate truth.

This confusion should not exasperate the modern observer. Not even all Amish people understand why they behave as they do. But while the relationships the Amish have with the outside world and technology at first seems arbitrary, they are the result of careful consideration. The Amish are not fundamentally anti-technology; rather, they believe that change does not necessarily result in desirable ends. Thus, while the Amish do not outlaw all machines and intricate technological processes, they do exercise extreme caution when dealing with new tools. They regulate which technologies are to be used, when they are to be used, how they are to be used, and why they are to be used.

The Amish are cautious because they fear the changes that can accompany new technology. Some of these undesirable effects, like pollution and injuries caused by heavy equipment, are relatively easy for a modern observer to understand. But these represent only a small part (if any) of the Amish misgivings. The foremost reason the Amish carefully regulate technology is to preserve their culture. The Amish are a society based upon tradition, religion, and family. In order to sustain their values, the Amish have determined that technological change should not be accepted without reservation. As one Amish person put it, “Machinery is not wrong in itself, but if it doesn’t help fellowship, you shouldn’t have it” [1].³

This article will begin to unravel the puzzling relationship between the Amish and technology. The first step is to realize that the Amish do not view any aspect of their lives as a part dissociated from the whole. Technology is no exception. Machines, tools, and techniques are intricately woven into Amish life. Thus, to give a full explanation of how the Amish interact with technology, several facets of their religion, culture, and society must be laid out.

A Religion of Separatism

The Amish religion is a sect of Christianity. As Christians, they share the same Bible and many basic theological beliefs with other Protestant churches. But differences between the Amish and other forms of Christianity have arisen because of their history, their ideas about community, and

¹ In this article I will be primarily referring to the Old Order Amish. Because this is the largest and most recognizable group of Amish people, they are typically referred to as simply “Amish.” For an explanation of the different types of Amish see [17, pp. 21-22].

² When talking to one another, most Amish speak a derivative of German usually referred to as “Pennsylvania Dutch.”

³ This paper is partly based on a handful of interviews conducted by the author in Amish communities in Indiana, Illinois, and New York. Because the Amish value their privacy their names will not be cited. For an interesting discussion on the difficulties of interviewing the Amish see [24].

the Bible passages they deem most important.

The initial split occurred in the 1530s when a priest named Menno Simons and a group of followers (who came to be known as Mennonites) broke from the Church of Rome.⁴ Simons and his followers were Anabaptists, they believed only adults – i.e. those who could make an informed choice – should be fully accepted into the church. They also felt that the church was straying from God's work by becoming too closely aligned with political governments. These views were deemed heretical by Catholic and Protestant groups alike, and the Mennonites were banished to desolate mountain regions of Europe where they became as self-sufficient as possible through farming. In the 1690s, there was a subsequent rift in the Mennonite communities. A priest from Alsace named Jacob Amman charged that the Anabaptist culture was changing too quickly. He and a group of followers formed splinter communities which came to be known as the Amish.

In the early 1700's, the promise of a land without religious persecution drew thousands of Amish to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where they were able to farm fertile soil, form communities, practice their faith, and govern themselves according to their own principles. Yet despite the fact that they were not forced into seclusion, when the Amish came to America they willingly adopted it as a way of strengthening their religion. They maintained their belief that the best way to serve God was to live in a community of believers distinctly separate from non-believers. They organized themselves into districts of between thirty and fifty families that sought to work together in community.

As their numbers have grown, the Amish have gradually spread into 25 American States and the province of Ontario, but still they seek to remain as independent as possible from the world around them.⁵ When asked why they continue to insist on this separation, the Amish usually refer to two scripture passages they hold close to their hearts.

The first of these was paraphrased eloquently by an Amish bishop (the religious and secular organizer for a district) when he stated that his people must “Be not conformed to the world” [1], [2]. The Amish believe that the outside world is a world of distractions that must be avoided if they are to be Christ-like in everything they do. To avoid these distractions, the Amish pay heed to another passage. They believe they should not be “yoked together with unbelievers,” and thus must “come from among them and be... separate” [3]. These teachings have led the Amish to form their own communities in which they practice their religion with relatively little interaction with the outside world.⁶

Rules that Bind and Nurture

The basic ideas of community and separation do not immediately explain why the Amish have developed a very different relationship with technology than the rest of the United States. But the manner in which they form and structure their communities can begin to shed some light on the question.

The Amish do not believe that Bible passages can explain how to deal with situations that

⁴ For a more detailed account of Amish history see [25].

⁵ As of 2001, the Amish number over 180,000 children and adults [5, p. 336].

⁶ Although the Amish separate themselves for the good of their own people, they have not forgotten the outside world. Their desire to help others is often directed towards those outside their community. Should a non-Amish neighbor's barn burn down, the Amish will band together and help with the erection of a new one, just as they would for a fellow Amish person. Above and beyond this, some Amish communities are known to participate actively in hunger relief and disaster relief projects across the world.

come up in everyday life like how to run a business, whether or not to purchase medical insurance, or how to govern a community. So each Amish district has developed its own code of conduct known as its “Ordnung.” Each Ordnung is an unwritten collection of rules comprised of the district’s long established traditions, as well as more recently agreed upon norms. It is conveyed both by example and by instruction when someone breaks a rule or inquires about a rule.

An Ordnung primarily serves two interconnected purposes. First, it is meant to provide the members of an Amish district with a template for living that they believe will nurture their community, their religious beliefs, and their values. It is the Amish way to promote unity, instill responsibility, and pass down traditions and touches on a wide array of topics and situations. For example, the Ordnung emphasizes the Amish dedication to non-violence by forbidding Amish people from becoming soldiers. It requires that church services be held at a different family’s house each week so that members of the community are continually supporting and relying on each other. And it prohibits schooling past the eighth grade because the Amish believe “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” [4, p. 91].

One value that shapes (and helps to explain) a large number and variety of these rules is the Amish belief in the importance of humility. To ensure that no individual becomes prideful about the way they look, the clothing that people are to wear in a district is specified right down to the design of hats (that men are required to wear) and bonnets (that women are required to wear). The style of buggies within each district is also mandated – everything from color to shape to number of seats to whether or not the vehicle has a roof. Many districts even reject buttons as unnecessary adornment and require Amish to use straight pins to fasten their clothing. And the Ordnung encourages Amish adults to avoid being photographed in such a way that a viewer can distinguish who particular individuals are. As long as they appear to be anonymous representatives of the community, pictures are fine. One Amish minister described the effective use of an Ordnung when he stated: “a respected Ordnung generates peace, love, contentment, equality, and unity” [5, p. 115]. Because it lays out how their life should be lived, in a very real sense the Ordnung is what makes an Amish person Amish.

In defining what is Amish, however, an Ordnung also serves the additional purpose of defining what is not Amish. In a sense, the Ordnung is the line that separates the Amish from non-Amish. For instance, each of the rules that detail what an Amish person should wear not only ensures that they will look Amish, but also that they will be easily distinguished from outsiders. The Ordnung helps build a community by keeping what is desirable in and what is not desirable out. One Amishman used a parable to describe how the Ordnung works [6]. He said that if you own a cow and your property is surrounded by green pastures, you need a good fence to keep it in. For the Amish, who are as human as anyone and are tempted by the outside world to abandon their faith and way of life, there need to be good fences, good rules. For them, the outside world is a distraction that must be mediated. The Ordnung provides the barriers that keep community members focused on their fellow Amish and their faith.

These sets of rules are not, however, static. While a district’s Ordnung is meant to convey the traditions of the community, it can – and occasionally is – changed. When individual members discover or try out new abilities and possibilities, the district must decide whether or not such activities should be allowed. To facilitate this process, twice a year each Amish district holds a council. The role of the council is to resolve concerns that have developed. It does this by bringing together all of the adult members of the church – men and women – to vote on the practices in question. To ensure that the implications of new practices are carefully considered,

the voting system is designed such that change is very difficult. If two or more people (out of a possible 60-100) reject the change, the Ordnung remains unaltered. While the Amish allow for change, the emphasis on tradition is built into the mechanisms that allow this change.

These deliberations are further complicated by the fact that the members must consider the other districts around them. If they make a change that their neighbors consider too radical they may be shunned, i.e. the offended districts could break off all communications with them and no longer recognize them as fellow Amish. This threat is of particular concern not only for community reasons but also because there are often close family ties between districts. An Amish woman might, for instance decide that voting for allowing electrical appliances in the home is not worth risking the possibility that she may never again get to talk to her daughters who married into neighboring districts that strongly opposed the technology. This practice explains why a trained observer can find small differences from one district to another – like the use (or nonuse) of rubber tires or bicycles – but also why change to the Ordnung is incremental and often done in concert with other districts.

Regulating Technological Change

The ability to change an Ordnung became particularly important for the Amish relationship with technology during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Only a few years earlier, their communities might have been difficult to distinguish from many other rural American communities. Their dress may have been a bit different, and their buggies less flashy, but they farmed in largely the same way and used many of the same technologies. The development of powerful new technologies like electricity, the automobile, and the airplane, however, generated a significant amount of concern in Amish communities. There was a suspicion that these technologies would cause a significant disruption in the Amish world and many Ordnung were amended to ban them from use.

The precise reason why specific technologies were prohibited then and why there continue to be intricate rules about the ownership and use of technologies is difficult to precisely pin down. The Amish have left very few, if any written explanations. After all, the Ordnung is an oral tradition and is created through a combination of habit and spoken debate. Non-Amish are not allowed to attend the Amish councils and most Amish are very hesitant to provide details of these meetings to outsiders [7], [8]. Discussions with and further study of the Amish can, however, begin to shed some light on the decision making process. As with any democratic process, there are likely many factors that are taken into account and different people involved have very different ideas about why things happened the way they did. But there are a number of general themes that can help begin to explain the rationale.

The dual purpose of the Ordnung can help illuminate some of the different factors involved. The first goal of the Ordnung – to strengthen the Amish religion, tradition, community, and even families – is a major reason why the Amish make very careful decisions about technology. If they fear that a particular technology might disrupt any of these, they are likely to prohibit it. The Amish not only believe that the English world is distracting, but also that many English machines and methods are distracting. For instance, the Amish believe that the pride, sense of power, and convenience that can come from owning an automobile may cause a person to focus on him or herself as an individual and thereby neglect the group. The Amish believe that technologies in general must be mediated in order to avoid situations like this and help to ensure that their way of life is not compromised.

An Amish minister described the decision making process in the following way: “We try

to find out how new ideas, inventions or trends will affect us as a people, as a community, as a church. If they affect us adversely, we are wary. Many things are not what they appear to be at first glance. It is not individual technologies that concern us, but the total chain” [9, p. 16]. The Amish do not see an inherent value in technological progress. Believing that better community is of the utmost importance, when it comes to technology they have chosen to err on the side of caution to protect their traditions as much as possible.

The second purpose of the *Ordnung* – to create a fence between the Amish and non-Amish – has also played an important role in the Amish decisions about technology. Today, the most visible differences between the Amish and English worlds are the technologies they use. Most Americans do not see the Amish as different because they believe in adult baptism, but rather because they drive buggies, use horse drawn plows, etc. These differences were not accidental. The major technologies being developed in the non-Amish world at the beginning of the 20th century – like electricity, the automobile, and the airplane – very quickly became symbols of the modern world. The Amish rejected many of these technologies in part to retain their identity as separate from the modern world. When asked today why they have rejected a specific technology, many members of the church will simply reply: “Because it’s not Amish.”⁷ This argument is circular, but it emphasizes the way in which the Amish link their identity to the technologies they use. By banning these highly visible technologies, the Amish developed a new way of distinguishing themselves and strengthening the fence between themselves and the English world.

The way these motives interact can be seen in an example where there is some historical record. The Amish ban on electricity began in 1910 when Isaac Glick, an Amish farmer in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, hooked an electric light up to a generator [5, pp. 198-201]. His use of the new technology led to a council debate and the decision was made not to allow it. Donald Kraybill, who recounts this story, argues that the reason was twofold. First of all, the Peachey Church, a group that broke off from the Mennonites as the Amish had, had just decided to allow electricity and the Amish were looking to prove that they were distinct from this new (and they believed, less devout) congregation. Secondly, they believed that physically hooking one’s house up to the grid, a public utility owned by large corporations, did not help in the drive to be separate from the modern world. As one Amish farmer feared: “It seems to me that after people get everything hooked up to electricity, then it will all go on fire and the end of the world’s going to come” [5, p. 200]. Instead, the Amish continued to use kerosene and natural gas to cook their food and illuminate and heat their homes.

To this day, the Amish do not allow their homes to be hooked to the electrical grid. But the justification for this rule may have changed over the years. When Amish today are asked if they do not link to the grid because they want to avoid a physical connection to the outside world, many disagree [1], [8]. They point out that they have tapped into natural gas lines (or would if a utility provided them) rather than have to pick up canisters in town. An argument analogous to the anti-grid stance would forbid such a practice. Thus the precise reasons why the Amish initially deemed connection to the grid as a threat to their community no longer matter, if they ever did matter. What is more important is that the Amish have defined electricity as the domain of the outside world, and thus any use of the technology must be very carefully considered. The Amish practice of linking their homes to a public utility through gas lines is acceptable, in part, because they are still behaving in a visibly different way from their English

⁷ Nearly every Amish person I interviewed gave this answer at one point or another.

neighbors.



Amish buggies stand in sharp contrast to the trucks and minivans driven by their Indiana neighbors.

Amish Transportation

The decisions the Amish have made about transportation are another lens through which to examine the Amish relationship with technology. By the second decade of the 20th century, after a few Amish had purchased motorcars, every Amish district in the United States independently decided to prohibit the use of the automobile [10, p. 37, 73]. In 1907, an automobile manufacturing company was formed in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the heart of Amish country. This company advertised its product as “the king of sports and the queen of amusements,” and immediately alienated the Amish, who saw it as an unnecessary luxury and dangerous source of pride [5, p. 214]. Because most of the people an Amish family knows live relatively close to their home, because the Amish are not relegated to a strict schedule that demands speedy transportation, because horses have become practically family members, and because buggies are relatively inexpensive (costing today between two and three thousand dollars new), require little maintenance, and last for up to twenty years, the Amish saw no reason for changing their traditional way of life [11, p. 8].

But economics are not the only reason why the Amish have chosen to keep their buggies. Some argue that buggies are a social equalizer because they are uniform, free from excess body-work and color, and because one buggy cannot be made significantly faster or slower than another. Automobiles, on the other hand are criticized for providing an abnormal sensation of power that can be used to not only show up one’s neighbors, but to abandon them altogether. As one Amish man noted, “Young people can just jump in the car and go to town and have a good time in it.... It destroys the family life at home” [12]. Buggies are deemed better because they slow the pace of life to ten or twelve miles-per-hour and give people a chance to interact with their environment rather than fly by it.

Despite these criticisms, however, there are several situations today in which an Amish person would be allowed to make use of a motor vehicle. For instance, it is not uncommon for an Amish woman to be driven to the grocery store by an English friend; for an Amish family to travel from Indiana to Florida via bus; for an Amish business to lease a car indirectly through a non-Amish employee; or even for an Amish teenager to actually drive and own an automobile. While these at first may seem to contradict Amish principles, each case signifies an arrangement

that the Amish believe can help strengthen their community, and is therefore allowed under the Ordnung.

In the first scenario, it is probably not a necessity that the Amish woman be driven to the store – it is likely that she could take her own horse and buggy – but because she is not the one driving the car, it is acceptable behavior. She does not have the freedom to roam as she pleases, but rather must depend on another person. This scenario also reflects the fact that many of the Amish rules regarding automobiles were created when the Amish could use trolleys and other forms of public transportation to travel across counties to visit other churches or shop at specialty stores. Now that those systems have been largely disabled, the Amish have had to find new options. One of these alternatives has been friendly non-Amish people. Some of these English people have gotten so involved in transporting the Amish, that they have actually started their own thriving taxi-cab companies. These services are welcomed by the Amish because they satisfy a need and still make it inconvenient for a person to tour about on a whim.

The second scenario is somewhat similar. Because the family does not own the bus, it is not likely that it will abandon the community. As long as the family returns and does not lose sight of Amish values, using public transportation (other than airplanes) to explore the outside world is allowed. The Amish community is a highly structured environment, but it is not a prison.

The third scenario reflects a fairly recent change that will be explored later. To sum up quickly, this scenario is the result of the belief that many Amish businesses cannot survive without an automobile. For instance, a number of Amish businesses specialize in building fences. These businesses typically meet the local need for fences rather quickly. To find additional work the company may need to look beyond distances that can be easily traversed in buggies. Thus some districts grant businesses special permission to lease a car, but only if the Amish person agrees to abide by certain rules. Under no condition would an Amish person be able to drive it; he or she must instead hire and be dependent upon an English employee. A district may also prohibit parking the car near an Amish home because the temptation to use the car for trivial things might be too great.

“Running About”

The fourth scenario is the result of a deeply rooted Amish tradition that will require further explanation of how the Amish structure their society. The Amish understand that it is difficult to be Amish. It requires a significant amount of humility, patience, and dedication. They also understand that because their lives are so intertwined, members who do not accept these responsibilities can threaten the active and united nature of their community. Therefore, the Amish go out of their way to ensure that their members truly want to be Amish. The primary technique they use is the church admission process itself. To curtail immature and uninformed decisions, as is the Anabaptist tradition, no one is allowed to enter into the church until they are in a position where they can readily think for themselves. Because the Amish realize that it takes not just age but also experience to develop such wisdom, they give their children the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the world by allowing them to rebel against their Amish upbringing. This rebellion often leads Amish children to try out many of the technologies prohibited by the Ordnung.

This seems to be contradictory to the Amish value system – and in fact many Amish adults are saddened by what they see as a period of sinning – but it is a crucial component of their society. The Amish term for this phase of life is “rumspringa,” or “running about.” This

practice has recently been subject to a fair amount of media coverage in the United States because of the 2004 UPN television show “Amish in the City” and the 2002 feature-length documentary *Devil's Playground*. These programs can be a bit misleading, however, as most Amish teenagers do not live in Los Angeles, parade up the red carpet at movie premiers, or deal drugs. Usually the deviations a person “running about” makes are not large. Amish adolescents will do something as simple as curling the brim of a hat as a sign of rebellion. It is also often said that one can tell that a teenager is driving a buggy whenever it is going fifteen miles-per-hour, rather than the average of ten to twelve.

One of the most extreme deviations a young person can make is to purchase an automobile. The automobile is a symbol of the modern world and antithetic to the Amish culture. Giving teenagers the opportunity to take such an action, a decision that many sincerely regret later, gives them a chance to learn the benefits of the Amish culture first-hand [6]. The end result is that over eighty percent of children (and perhaps as many as ninety-five percent in some places) not only decide to remain in the Amish religion; they make an informed and intelligent commitment to their community and church [13]. Offering children the option to leave the rigorous and humble life of an Amish person and explore what the outside world has to offer ensures that the people that make up the community truly want to be there and will henceforth work for the good of the Amish people.

Modern Pressures

While the questions of whether to adopt electricity and automobiles were important for the Amish to resolve, these were only the beginning of the difficulties their society encountered in the 20th century. Although they work hard to remain separate, changes in American government, economics, society, and technology affect the Amish as well. In recent years the stability of the Amish has been put to rigorous tests. In their efforts to meet these challenges and stay focused on their values as much as possible, the Amish have chosen to alter some of their traditions and, in particular, the technologies they employ.

An example of this can be seen in the Amish response to new milk regulations imposed by a number of states in the 1950s and '60s. These regulations required farmers to install electric powered bulk tanks with cooling systems if they wanted their milk rated Grade ‘A’ quality. The regulation clashed head on with the *Ordnung* of Amish communities.

This put the Amish in a bit of a dilemma. Much of their tradition is built upon an intimate relationship with the land. Menno Simons advised his people to “rent a farm, milk cows, learn a trade if possible, do manual labor as did Paul, and all that which you then fall short of will doubtlessly be given and provided you by pious brethren, by the grace of God” [14, p. 451]. Farming has remained a cornerstone of Amish culture. They have kept themselves separate and free from the outside world by working the land upon which they settle. Therefore, in 1968, a group of five Lancaster bishops and four milk inspectors from Pennsylvania met to iron out an agreement that would satisfy both parties [5, pp. 202-205].

The inspectors’ primary concern was that the milk be kept refrigerated. They suggested simply installing normal electric refrigeration units. But the Amish refused to run electric lines into their barns. Instead they developed an “Amish solution.” They agreed to install coolers, but chose to power them using diesel engines salvaged from old trucks. The inspectors also required that the milk be automatically stirred five minutes every hour. This was a difficult request for the Amish to grant because the very word “automatic” bothered them, but they eventually consented to a newly devised system that used a 12-volt battery, rather than 110-volt electricity,

to run an automatic starter. The fact that the Amish had traditionally used batteries to power a few devices like flashlights made this a bit more palatable. Finally, the inspectors wanted to be able to pick up milk every day so that it would not spoil. At this point, the Amish drew a line they would not cross for any reason. They would not allow anyone to interfere with Sunday, their day of rest and church services. Here, the bulk milk industry gave in, and agreed that milk would be picked up late Saturday night, rather than Sunday morning. With this specially devised arrangement, the Amish won a minor battle in keeping their community economically sound and their cultural relatively unchanged.

The story of an Amish corn and dairy farmer in Arthur, Illinois, who I will call Amos Yoder, illustrates how the Amish have been forced to adapt to these changes on a more personal level [15]. When the original Illinois regulations were implemented, Yoder switched to Grade 'B' milk, a grade that is primarily used in cheese production. This resulted in a lower income, but it was a change Yoder agreed to make to conform with the Ordnung of his district.



Amos Yoder's bulk tank and mechanized agitator

Over time, however, he began to feel new pressures. First of all, his corn crop and chickens were not bringing him the money he was used to receiving. Second, as nearly all farms around Arthur changed their production from 'B' to 'A' milk, milk companies became very hesitant to keep Grade B trucks solely to service the scattered Amish farms that remained in the cheese business. The other Amish farmers were also feeling these pressures, and gradually each of the districts in the area chose to relax their Ordnung. According to Yoder, it was either "go A, or go out." Therefore, in 1974, he purchased a new bulk tank and motorized agitator.

The resolution of the milk controversy is an instance where the Amish accepted new technology, but they did it in a uniquely Amish way and for Amish reasons. The compromise was important because it protected the ability for the Amish to continue to earn a living doing the work they find most rewarding – farming. Yet while they introduced new technologies into their society, they made sure that the machines were different from those used by their English

neighbors and that the electricity they generated could not be easily put to other uses. With this new – seemingly modern – technology, the Amish were able to retain their identity and practice of being different from the outside world.

Amish Entrepreneurs

Despite these compromises, the Amish have not been able to rely completely on farming to support themselves economically. For at least the last forty years, they have been in the middle of a land squeeze. Because married couples desire to have children and the Ordnung prohibits contraceptives, an Amish family has an average of seven children [16]. Even though not every Amish child enters the church, this has resulted in a constant rise in Amish population. The increasing numbers of Amish, coupled with the fact that the American population is increasing and land prices are rising, has meant that there simply is not enough farmland to go around.

Many newly baptized Amish, just starting out on their own, have turned to local English businesses for employment. In the first half of the century, nearly all the Amish in the area surrounding Arthur, Illinois were farmers. By 1989, that number is less than half [11, p. 9]. In Indiana the changes have been even more marked. While over fifty percent of Amish men under the age of 35 were farming in some Indiana areas in 1993, less than twenty-five percent of young Amish men were farming in 2001 [17, pp. 119-120]. Instead of farming, many of these Amish work in factories, supermarkets, or stores in the area.

Generally, these young people are treated well and receive a good wage. But being employed by the English can disrupt an Amish community. The hours and location of the business can restrict an Amish person's ability to participate in his or her culture and the exposure to the culture of the modern world can exert an influence as well. As one Amish woman noted, "The shops coming in were a good thing. They gave our young people jobs among our own people. But now they've got money and they go to town" [18].

Because of their concern that working for outsiders will dilute their culture and traditions, Amish communities have begun developing their own entrepreneurial talents and have increased the number and variety of businesses they own and operate. Amish people have explored business ventures as diverse as machinery assembly, log house construction, upholstering, engine repair, grocery stores, bookstores, and cabinetry building. Economic forces have made the Amish ideal of communities comprised primarily of farmers impossible. But by developing their own businesses, the Amish ensure that they can work relatively close to home, work with their fellow church members, be free to attend community events like weekday weddings, and reinforce their separation from the outside world.

As the Amish have entered new fields – many of which are dominated by large American corporations – they have chosen to make some compromises when it comes to technology. They believe that in order to produce and sell an affordable product in the modern age, some increase in technology is necessary. As an Amish man put it, "To make a living, we need to have some things we didn't have fifty years ago" [1].



A sophisticated sawdust collection system, powered by a diesel engine, services an Amish carpentry shop.

An example of this can be seen in the issues faced by Amish carpenters. Because the Amish have traditionally been good at building and feel that it is admirable to work with one's hands, carpentry has become one of their key industries. However, it would have been very difficult to survive on the output one could create using hand powered tools. Therefore, the Amish struck another bargain. They still strongly disagreed with wiring their shops with electricity, so they motorized hand tools in a different way. A number of carpentry shops purchased regular electric saws, routers, and sanders, and retrofitted them with motors that could be powered with air pressure. They then installed large diesel engines just outside their shops and strung pneumatic lines to the various work stations.⁸ Why go to all the trouble and expense to create such an intricate power system when electricity does the same job? In part because it distinguishes the Amish as different from their neighbors. But also because, as an Amish minister explained, "so far no Amish person has ever figured out how to run a television with an air compressor" [11, p. 3]. Television is seen as a technology that is contradictory to Amish ideals because it brings the outside world into the home and can distract one from one's family and neighbors. It is often used as a barometer by the Amish to determine whether or not something is acceptable. Certain forms of electricity are allowed, but the Amish try hard to make it difficult to power devices like kitchen appliances, radios, and televisions.

Where they can, the Amish try to compete by increasing the efficiency of "old" technologies. They are surprisingly inventive and have even been awarded patents in a few cases. For instance, they have developed a cook-stove that employs an airtight combustion compartment that some claim is the "only significant advance in wood-fire stoves in 300 years" [20, p. 30]. In another district they designed a horse-drawn plow fitted with a hydraulic lift so that rocks do not present as much of a problem to farming [21].

The Amish have also developed ways of gaining the business benefits of certain technologies while maintaining their distance from them. One way they do this is by hiring English companies to take care of certain aspects of an industry that they do not want to do

⁸ These new systems proved to be so efficient that a few English companies now produce them for non-Amish shops.

themselves. As was already mentioned, the Amish will often hire English drivers to transport them to work sites, etc. But the Amish may also rely on non-Amish businesses to help them attract and interact with customers in ways they cannot or prefer not to do themselves. For instance, the Amish have been able to tap into the market for remodeling kitchens in far away cities by contracting with companies who do the on-site work. It is also now possible to buy Amish made furniture online through websites developed and maintained by English companies. These arrangements help the Amish economically and yet minimize the distraction and compromises that come with using particular technologies themselves.



A pneumatically powered belt sander lies on a workbench in an Amish carpentry shop.

The Line Between Home and Work

One place the Amish are particularly concerned about minimizing distractions is in their domestic life. While they have made some compromises for the sake of business, they are much less likely to change the parts of the *Ordnung* that concerns the home. They believe that the simplicity of the home must be reinforced to make up for changes that are occurring outside.⁹ A stark example of this demarcation is the fact that diesel generators and pneumatic equipment are not allowed in the Amish home; kitchens are empty of electric appliances and interiors are still lit by candles, gas lamps, and large windows.

⁹A number of scholars have criticized this stance as just one more method the male dominated society uses to repress women [26].



The interior of an Amish kitchen is nearly identical to a modern kitchen except that it has no electrical appliances and is lit with sunlight and gaslight.

Another illustration is the Amish rules concerning telephones [19]. Traditionally the Amish have been opposed to owning telephones, except perhaps in emergency situations. Their basic complaint has been that phones disrupt the natural interactions between people. An Amish buggy maker feared: “If everyone had telephones, they wouldn’t trouble to walk down the road or get in the buggy to go visiting anymore” [11, p. 3]. Telephones are seen as distracting; they give the outside world an easy entrance into Amish households and make them needlessly noisy.

But the English companies and customers that the Amish rely on have abandoned many of the forms of communication that the Amish prefer. Without a phone it is difficult for furniture shops to communicate with distant customers, stores to order merchandise, or even farmers to coordinate milk and produce pick-ups with dairy and grocery companies. To remedy this problem originally, these businesses simply used the phones of their non-Amish neighbors, but as businesses got bigger and were sometimes far away from English phones, this became increasingly difficult. Gradually, many Amish districts have begun to allow telephones, but with certain qualifications that ensure they do not compromise their lives at home.

Most districts maintain the rule that telephones are not allowed inside buildings owned by Amish people. Instead they are usually placed in small shacks, or “Amish phone booths,” that are kept “a safe distance away” from Amish dwellings. Typically the telephones are purchased by either the community in general or by specific Amish businesses, but they are always kept accessible to the entire community. They are outfitted with a log so that calls can be recorded and payments can easily be made by individual people. This arrangement encourages cooperation, keeps their traditions relatively unaltered, and allows Amish businesses to develop. But most of all it keeps telephones outside of the home.

Where the Amish Stand Today

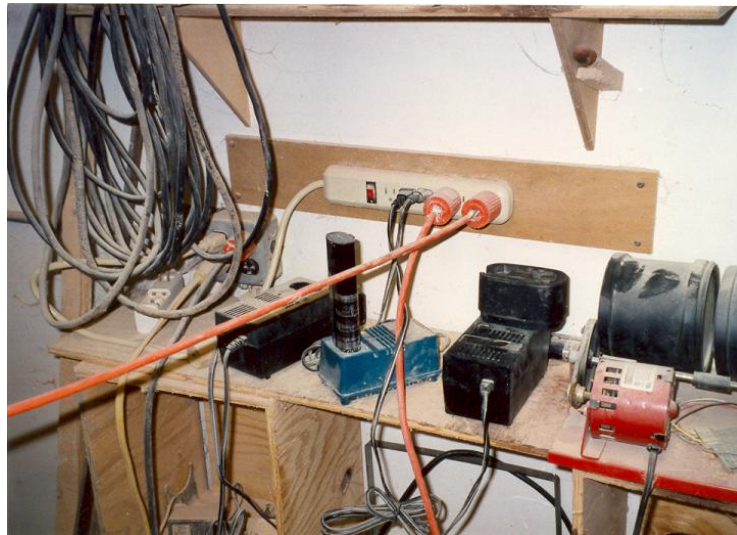
The technologies the Amish use and the ways they use these technologies is changing. There is constant pressure from the outside world, and from within the communities themselves, to adopt new machines and techniques. These pressures have led to somewhat marked changes. Some Amish communities now allow battery-operated typewriters, electric cash registers, fax machines, cell phones, and even the occasional computer, as long as they are not owned by the

Amish themselves. These new machines have led to a fierce debate because many of them require 110 volt electricity (easily done by coupling invertors to their existing diesel engines) which could also be used to power a television. But some districts have decided that their businesses cannot survive without them.

The Amish are not, however, about to abandon their roots. Their belief in simplicity, humility, and community is too strong to buckle under to the latest economic and technological pressures. They recognize the impact that technology can have and they continue to guard against it. One

Amish man admitted, “We realize ... that the more modern equipment we have and the more mechanized we become, the more we are drawn into the swirl of the world, and away from the simplicity of Christ and our life in Him” [23, p. 95]. This trend has been an ever present challenge for the Amish and will continue to influence their daily lives. As one bishop explained his difficult position, “Time will bring some changes; that’s why our responsibility is so great....

We can prolong our time [and] I’ll do what I can” [1]. Why this dedication when the world around them is changing so quickly? One Amish farmer argued that “If it hasn’t worked for the good of [English] families, why will it work for our society? It’s not good community” [15].



An "Amish power strip" draws power from a generator to supply energy to various batteries for a carpentry shop.

Deciding what technologies contribute to community and which do not, is not always easy to discern. There are often disagreements among the Amish as to what should be allowed and what should not. For instance, when a young Amish farmer was asked whether he would like to install glass piping that would quickly transport the milk from the cows to the refrigerators and relieve him of a lot of work, he noted that he, and every other Amish dairy farmer, would love to if only it were allowed [22]. Yet this farmer is still firmly committed to his community. He has agreed to live in a society that does not accept rapid change and willingly sacrifices the ability to use some technologies for the greater good. The son of a bishop admitted that he could not explain why certain technologies were used and not others, but he did note that he knew if he asked, his father could give him a good reason [6]. Many Amish struggle with the *Ordnung*, but their dedication to it has given the Amish the strength to make slow and deliberate decisions about technology and their way of life.

The Amish have used this strength to keep their technology simple in order to keep their

lives simple. They have been able to assess each situation as it presents itself and keep the greater framework of their lives in mind when they choose which technologies they will adapt. In recent years, the Amish have agreed some compromises; they have assented to some new mechanized equipment. But they have done so on their own terms. They have chosen technologies which they believe will foster their interactions with each other and help them remain dedicated to their community and religion. When they believe they must have a tool in order to survive, they have made sure that their tools are different from the outside world. This differentiation helps the Amish prevent the outside world from sneaking into their everyday lives. It is a safeguard they have erected in an effort to strengthen their ability to accept technology on their own terms.

The Amish order every facet of their lives around their religion and their community in order to strengthen their relationship with God. While they believe that many technologies can be a distraction from this goal, they also recognize that they must adopt new tools and techniques if they are to continue to survive as a people. In an effort to minimize distraction, the Amish actively regulate which technologies they adopt, how they are employed, and where they can be used. The Amish deliberately structure their relationship with technology in an effort to differentiate themselves from the outside world and promote the values they hold most dear.

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