"You hold the whole world in your hand"
Cell phones and discernment in Amish churches

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"I don't have a cell phone. I really don't want any part of it, for myself or my family." The forty-something Amish man who passed this judgment on mobile telephony was no Luddite. He's a patent-holding inventor and successful entrepreneur who operates a manufacturing shop with state-of-the-art machining equipment. Nevertheless, his otherwise soft-spoken demeanor gives way to passionate concern about the perils posed by cell phones, espe-

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cially smart phones or any phones that include data plans and Internet access.[1]

Someone else in his position would be hard pressed to imagine life without a mobile phone. Indeed, more than 90 percent of residents of the United States—and virtually all adults his age and younger—have cell phones, and last year 67 percent of them told Pew Center researchers that they "find themselves checking their phone for messages . . . even when they don't notice their phone ringing or vibrating."[2]

The fact that an Amish man would keep at arm's length a device the rest of the world[3] regards as indispensable may strike observers as unsurprising since popular media portray the Amish as shunning all technology. But as the example of the technologically sophisticated entrepreneur suggests, Amish dissent from the mechanical mainstream is not a straightforward all-or-nothing proposition. Instead, it reflects complex patterns of discernment that have produced neither a flight from technology nor an uncritical equation of *new* and *improved*.[4] In recent years, cell phones have received a great deal of discussion in Amish circles, and they offer a lively example of contemporary discernment among these old order Christians.

We should note that it is hazardous to generalize about "the" Amish. More than 300,000 horse-and-buggy-driving Amish live across thirty-one US states and in eastern Canada, and their nearly 2,200 church districts (congregations) vary somewhat in their practices.[5] Nevertheless, several deep assumptions center Amish thinking when it comes to adopting, adapting, or rejecting technologies, including cell phones.

"We are more bound to human limits"

A recent advertisement for a phone data plan captured mainstream society's prevailing sentiments with its pitch line: "I need to upload all of it. I need—no, I have the *right* to be unlimited!"[6] In contrast, Amish faith accepts human limitation as an expression of humility and as essential to being a follower of Jesus, who exemplified a spirit of self-limiting submission and obedience. Amish people believe that giving up self to God, to the church, and to others is a mark of Christian faithfulness.[7] Limits on technology both reflect and nurture this understanding. Asked why his church sees motorized transportation as problematic, an Amish bishop replied, "We are more bound to human limits. Man was not designed to work twenty-four hours a day. When the horse gets tired, you have to stop. You can't go all day like [you can] with a car or a tractor."[8]

A broad acceptance of limits means that Amish people are less concerned with maximizing efficiency and productivity—the metrics with which most modern folks measure a technology's value. Instead, they focus on a technology's social ethic. "The use of the automobile is hardly wrong in itself," one publication explains, "but the free use of it will certainly lead us where we don't want to go. The social effect on the American family has been profound, with members heading off in all directions and leading essentially separate lives."[9] Similarly, public utility electricity is problematic not because electricity itself is wrong, but because, as an unlimited power source, its presence in every room of a house an-

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nounces that the homeowner is ready to plug in anything and that a decision to embrace new devices is a foregone conclusion.[10] Instead, as a consumer community the Amish believe that moral discernment comes first and that power arrangements—batteries for clocks, naphtha gas for lamps, propane for refrigerators, and so on—can follow later for those things deemed worthwhile.

There are few technologies that all Amish consider categorically out of bounds.[11] Instead, Amish churches generally focus on how to limit what they see as the primary peril posed by technology: its ability to make individuals self-reliant and independent. To curb this tendency, Amish frequently draw a distinction between access and ownership. A store owner might lease a building with electric lights but not install such lighting in her own home, or a man might hire a non-Amish driver to take him somewhere in a car. By foregoing ownership, they give up control and are indebted to another. Rather than being a kind of technological hypocrisy, the use/ownership distinction reveals a deeply consistent concern to limit individual autonomy.[12]

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Finally, their assumptions about technology are revealed in the way the Amish deploy technology across the social landscape. Amish schools are the most technologically restricted realms. A clock, heating stove, and hand pump for water are all the technology most schools have. Amish schools isolate children from technology and convey the message that advanced technology is not important. Homes are less restricted than schools but are still devoid of most of the consumer technologies North Americans take for granted, because the home is the center of family life and a key environment in which children are being formed.[13] The fact that Amish homes are also the sites of Sunday worship, weddings, and funerals also makes them inappropriate places for the intrusion and noise that emanate from radios, computers, air conditioners, and the like. The farther one moves away from the home—out into the barn, a shop, or a distant construction site, the looser the restrictions on

technology become. For example, a church that prohibits a woodworker from using power tools in his home-based shop might allow a contractor to use a wider array of equipment when building houses for outsiders.

Amish-style discernment

The locus of technology discernment in Amish life is usually the local church district, an ecclesial body comprising roughly sixteen to twenty households, with plural leadership that typically includes a bishop, two associate ministers, and a deacon. Bishops cannot make decisions for the church, but they can affect the pace of change.[14]

In a formal sense, each church district takes up such questions twice a year when, prior to their district's semiannual communion service, members review the district's *Ordnung* (church order), which, among other things, includes agreed-on parameters for using, owning, and deploying technology.[15] The actual *process* of discernment in Amish churches is less formal. It involves informal discussion, sensitivity to tradition, an eye to the opinions of neighboring church districts, and a dose of everyday practicality. The burden of proof is always on change, but since the formal discussion of church order that precedes communion usually centers on reaffirming longstanding custom, there is considerable scope for tinkering in areas that have little or no body of accompanying tradition, and for finessing distinctions within old rubrics. For example, a district might reaffirm a taboo on in-home telephones without being specific about just how far from the home a community phone must be located (the end of the lane? in a shop by the house?). The result is a good deal of dynamic experimentation that might result in gradual acceptance, or in which individuals who push the boundaries for several months or years may eventually be called on to pull back their practices.

What about cell phones?

Economic concerns are implicit in many of the examples above. Even if Amish businessmen and businesswomen are not driven to maximize efficiency and productivity, neither are they entirely unconcerned about such matters. In recent years a growing number of Amish businesspeople argued that phones were becom-

ing essential to their livelihood, especially during and after the 2009 recession, when competition for customer service shot up. They also contended that cell phones were simply a variation on a longstanding Amish tradition (in most places) of business landlines.

Telephone technology has had a checkered Amish history. For example, in the early 1900s Amish households in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, installed home telephones, but then collectively disconnected their service in 1910 after a series of conflicts arose that were rooted in gossip spread over the lines.[16]

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Telephones, the church decided, decontextualize communication by shutting out a host of nonverbal cues, dress, body language, and silence that came through face-to-face conversations. Still, it seemed obvious that phone *access* could be useful in some cases, so families joined together to put up community phone booths at the end of farm lanes or on fence rows, to be shared by multiple households. In time, businesspeople moved their phones closer to their shops, although many still lived with limitations their non-Amish competitors would never countenance.[17] For example, some Amish retail advertisements inform customers of "Best time to call, 6:30–7:00 a.m.," since that is when the owner stands by an outdoor phone; otherwise a caller would get an answering service.[18]

In the early 1990s Amish building contractors began flirting with cell phones. Constructing new homes in developments that did not yet have landline utilities in place, carpenters turned to cell phones, which were emerging as an economically practical option. One Amish man explained this gradual pattern of acceptance with a metaphor from the world of software: landline phones under certain circumstances had been deemed okay, "and so cell phones kind of became 'okay 2.0.' "[19]

Had cell phones remained simply mobile versions of traditional telephony, they likely would have seen gradually greater acceptance across much of the Amish world.[20] But what happened was that cell phones moved into new technological territory, with

texting and camera capabilities, and then, especially after 2007, with fast and reliable Internet access. These features changed the nature of the debate in many Amish communities. There had long been rumblings of dissent from those who saw cell phones breaking down the traditional home/work dichotomy because, as mobile devices, they were easily brought into the house in the evening and not turned off. The addition of the Internet, however, rather than making cell phones a more appealingly efficient technology, caused alarm. The Internet was an established taboo because of its general worldliness and its association with television, cinema, and video games, and now it seemed to have found a backdoor into the home.

Cell phone supporters argued that the devices were business tools, they were used away from the home, and they could be shared by several subcontractors on a single site—all features of traditional parameters for landlines. Critics—including some businesspeople, such as the entrepreneur in our introduction—insisted that these characteristics were surface similarities and that Internet connectivity qualitatively changed the discussion.

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One window into the current conversation comes from a 2014 presentation to a group of teens and young adults in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Amish settlement. Parents there knew that many of the young people had cell phones—in fact, so did a good number of the parents.[21] The parents asked an Amish businessman who had once used a cell phone for work, but then gave it up, to speak to the hazards of Internet-connected phones. Although he began by saying that "I'm not here to take sides," he listed a host of phone-inflamed problems from "the immoral chatter of social media" to easily accessible Internet pornography.[22] Conceding that "there is nothing on the Internet that has not been with humans for thousands of years," he asserted that "the difference here today is that the cell phone and the Internet brings all this together in one little device. You hold the whole world in your hand and you can put it in your pocket." Given human nature,

that convenience "makes the development of compulsive behaviors and bad habits so, so very much easier and so much more likely," especially with features that promote anonymity.

Doubling down on what he saw as the central spiritual problem raised by cell phones, he identified the fundamentally private and isolating nature of the Internet as accessed through a personal device. "It would be easy now to just say to you 'Keep the Lord in your heart and make good choices and all will be well.' But the issue goes deeper." Drawing on basic Amish anthropology and ecclesiology, he explained that individuals are unable to make consistently good choices on their own. That's why collective discernment is a spiritual necessity, and that is why the Internet-connected cell phone is so problematic: the technology dismantles discernment by privatizing choices and rendering them invisible.

> One of the marks of America is its individualism. . . . Yet the Bible was written to communities about communities. It was meant to be lived and expressed as a people not a person. According to scripture each individual has something vital for the whole community. It is one of the oldest schemes of . . . Satan to isolate people [because] he knows that isolation will cut us off from the wisdom that multiple perspectives bring.

Given Amish understanding of high-context community, the World Wide Web was not a place of connection but a source of atomization.[23]

Technology to the rescue?

Discerning cell phone use is by no means resolved in most Amish circles. Connoisseurs of irony may appreciate that, in some quarters, new technology has helped resolve the cell phone quandary. In recent months on visits to places in Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, I have encountered church districts that have decided to accept wireless phone technology, commonly known as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Those who had cell phones—and there were some in each place—have gotten rid of them and instead obtained a VoIP box offered by a company such

as Verizon or AT&T, which carries phone calls over the airways to an otherwise old-fashioned cordless telephone. Like a cell phone, a home wireless phone is mobile: the black box receiver can be hooked up to a battery (instead of plugged into the wall) and transported with a landline-type phone to a job site or from desk to desk in a small business. Unlike a cell phone, however, VoIP does not allow texting, video, or data plans.[24]

The VoIP option illustrates one outcome of Amish technological discernment: it is a collective decision that required some people to give up their cell phones while conceding that conventional phones might more easily slip into homes, though the VoIP boxes and cordless phones are much larger than cell phones, less able to be hidden, and thus less private. Significantly, this outcome also separated cultural conversations about telephones from those about the Internet and insisted that each technology needed to be weighed on its own merits. The fact that a cellular technology (VoIP) offered a way forward does not bother the Amish, because their goal was not technological "purity" but rather a particular expression of community.

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For those of us who live in much more individually oriented contexts, the Amish cell phone discussion is a reminder that even in a church community primed to be skeptical of technology's claims, discerning technology is still necessary, ongoing, and not easily resolved. Satisfying outcomes emerge from deep accountability in a fairly local context, managed by informal discussion alongside a keen awareness that even small, local decisions ripple outward and across time with consequences that finite humans cannot imagine. The result becomes: Go slow, think about others, and check with the church. Here, as in so many areas of life, the values of humility and the acceptance of limits may be among the most profound aspects of Amish witness.

Notes

[1] Interview, S. F. S., Arthur, IL, March 26, 2015.
[2] Http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/.

[3] North America actually lags a bit in cell phone penetration, compared to most other parts of the world, and even World Bank–designated "poorest countries" have 89.4 cell phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants; see http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2.

[4] More extended discussion of Amish and technology can be found in Donald B. Kraybill, Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 312–34.

[5] Amish churches trace their roots to the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century, and more specifically to the reforming efforts, in the 1690s, of an Anabaptist convert named Jakob Ammann, who lived in Switzerland and then the Alsace region of what is today eastern France. On the emergence of an "old order" Amish movement in North America in the mid-1800s, see the concise explanation in chapter 8 of Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988). Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, details the considerable variation in practice among today's Amish. Diverse practices and localism complicate even how to define who should be counted as Amish. Most academic studies have adopted the parameters of an Amish historian in Aylmer, Ontario, who includes those who forbid automobile ownership, use the name "Amish," and adhere to the 1632 Dortrecht Confession of Faith. Part of being "old order" is maintaining a highly congregational polity; the Amish have no national bureaucracy, conferences, headquarters, or think tanks to offer definitive statements or standards. Instead, oral tradition and concern to remain "in fellowship" with neighboring Amish congregations provide a sort of social ballast in lieu of the organizational structures, institutions, budgets, and professional staff on which most Western denominations rely. In 2015 virtually all the Canadian Amish live in Ontario; there is a new, small settlement in New Brunswick.

[6] Sprint "I am unlimited" advertisement, 2013, available at https://youtu.be/GCUO3-yq3eg.

[7] The German dialect term for this sort of "giving up" is *uffgevva*. For more on how this concept is at the heart of Amish spirituality, see Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish Way: Patient Faith in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 31–89.

[8] Interview, S. D. S., Arthur, IL, March 26, 2015.

[9] *1001 Questions and Answers on the Christian Life* (Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 1992), 141.

[10] For a thoughtful discussion of how electricity, as a *public utility* rather than as a power source per se, changed how North Americans thought about and engaged technology, see Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

[11] Examples would include television, or things deeply symbolic of modernity, such as airplane travel (for almost all groups).

[12] A variation on the use/ownership principle surfaces in cases of Amish and non-Amish business partners. If the non-Amish partners have a 51 percent stake, the company might operate well outside the *Ordnung*—but again, the Amish partner has had to give up significant control.

[13] Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, "Technological Diversity and Cultural Change among Contemporary Amish Groups," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88 (January 2014): 5–22, examines differences between highly traditional and more change-minded Amish groups, with an eye to home and family life, and highlights the importance of the home in Amish thinking about the proper deployment of technology.

[14] In effect, a bishop manages the agenda of district's members meetings and therefore can, if he wishes, affect the pace of change either by delaying formal ratification of something new or by ignoring creeping innovation. Although church leaders are male, each baptized man and woman has an equal vote, and anecdotal evidence points in some cases to the decisive role of women's opinions.

[15] With rare exceptions, *Ordnung* is an exclusively oral tradition, not a written code to be read or studied. See Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zuercher, *The Amish Way*, 53–58, 125–26.

[16] Diane Zimmerman Umble, *Holding the Line: The Telephone in Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 107–18. Zimmerman Umble includes more detail from Pennsylvania and Iowa. For broad context, see Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

[17] Zimmerman Umble, *Holding the Line*, 143–59.

[18] See advertisements in various business directories. Even as Amish businesses rely more and more on telephone service, their dependence on voicemail sets their use of the phone apart; see http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2015/06/10/412866432/businesses-are-hanging-up-on-voice-mail-to-dial-in-productivity.

[19] Interview, B. S. R., Narvon, PA, February 10, 2015.

[20] Again, one must be careful about making generalizations. In some Amish communities—the one around Shipshewana, Indiana, for example—cell phones have been fairly common for at least a decade, and non-Amish neighbors are likely to believe that "all Amish" now have cell phones, based on their observation of this particular corner of Amish society. But in large swaths of the Amish world, cell phones have never been used (and, I would aver, likely won't be for some time). Members of the ultra-conservative "Swartzentruber" Amish in upstate New York, for example, do not directly use conventional landlines, let alone cell phones. Swarztentruber Amish there ask Karen Johnson-Weiner, professor of anthropology, State University of New York at Potsdam, and other non-Amish neighbors to make phone calls on their behalf, because they will not speak directly into a phone themselves.

[21] Another dynamic in discussions of technology is the fact that, as an Anabaptist church, the Amish do not regard children as members accountable to the church until those children request baptism, usually between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. As a result, in some Amish communities, teens possess things that are not allowed for their parents. Upon baptism, teens are to give up these things, but the influence of the Internet during impressionable adolescent years has been a source of concern for parents in those communities where significant deviance from church *Ordnung* on the part of unbaptized teens is tolerated. See discussion in the second edition of Richard A. Stevick, *Growing Up Amish: The Rumspringa Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

[22] Summary and quotations that follow are drawn from a fifteen-page handwritten document, rough but complete notes, prepared and used by the speaker. Another brief piece on cell phones from an Amish periodical is "The World Is Watching," *Family Life*, May 2013, 12.

[23] In a conversation not focused on cell phones, an Amish person who used the Internet extensively when working for a non-Amish employer offered this critique: "People talk about the Internet being a democratic force, but that's baloney. It's anarchy. In a democracy, people get together to decide how to live together. In an anarchy, it's every man for himself, and that's the Internet"; interview, B. S. R., Narvon, PA, February 10, 2015.

[24] A somewhat similar outcome has jelled in some Amish communities where opposition to the Internet remains strong but the practical desire for business computing (word processing, spreadsheets, tax preparation programs, payroll software, and the like) is strong. There is at least one Amish-owned IT company building computers (Intel i7 processors, one terabyte hard drive, etc.) that have a DSL line for e-mail but no Internet, audio, or video capability. Amish clients run the computers with batteries charged via solar or diesel generation, or with public utility electricity if they are leasing in a non-Amish industrial park. In some progressive pockets of the Amish world, businesses have signed up for Internet service along with a third-party accountability system and filtering software that sharply limits the Internet to uses such as scheduling shipping or checking a supplier's Web page.

About the author

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