

Technological Prudence: What the Amish Can Teach Us

BY KEVIN D. MILLER

The Amish have managed for a century to keep phone technology in check to foster a sense of community that we yearn for in our electronically tethered and frenetically paced lives. How might we leverage this power of the air to subject it to the purposes of God's kingdom?

Nathan Yoder, an Amish farmer in his thirties near Grantsville, Maryland, milks cows and drives a horse and buggy. He does not own a car, a computer, or a cell phone. But he does own a tractor for some operations, shares a landline telephone with two other nearby Amish families (located two walking minutes from his house), and even hires an “English” neighbor with a van to “hull” his young family to other states to visit relatives and friends.

Such selective use of technology can seem maddeningly inconsistent to outsiders. But there is logic behind it—and one that makes increasing sense to modern Americans as we grapple with our relationship to technology and its hegemonic tendency in our lives. Whatever the apparent inconsistencies, the Amish have managed to keep technology in check, and in doing so they have fostered a sense of community that many of us yearn for in our electronically tethered and frenetically paced lives. It’s not that we are not connected—280 million Americans out of a population of 307 million have a cell phone, not to mention Facebook and Twitter accounts—but we still find ourselves inwardly yearning for *that something* the Amish seem to possess in their lack and which we lack in our possessing: the serenity, the quietness, the sense of knowing where one belongs in a defined community.

Some moderns, as a result, are making feeble attempts to unplug from the grid. A *BusinessWeek* article lists notables who have stopped owning or carrying cell phones and smartphones, including the billionaire owner of the New Jersey Nets, Mikhail Prokhorov, investor Warren Buffett, and PBS talk show host Tavis Smiley. The article confirms the “worldly” dangers of cell phone technology that the Amish object to: thirty-three percent in a national survey admitted to breaking up with someone by text or email, fifteen percent said they suspended lovemaking to take a call or a text, and twenty percent of iPhone owners admitted to watching pornography on their smartphones.¹

But not all of us are watching porn on our iPhones in solipsistic closets, and even the Amish are grappling with how to make modern electronic gadgetry serve relationships rather than sever them. So it is important in Amish-and-technology discussions to avoid falling into a common false dichotomy – to either romanticize as ideal or dismiss as hopelessly compromised the accommodation that Nathan Yoder and over 200,000 people in North American Amish communities have struck with modern technologies like the telephone in all its permutations. I propose that a more fruitful line of conversation begins by asking what we moderns might learn from the Amish and their attempts to control technology, and then re-contextualize those principles for our habitus. It may also be that the Amish will need to learn from our best practices using technology to foster community as social and economic forces challenge and reframe the Amish compromise with the telephone and other high-tech tools in this age of rapidly evolving electronic communication.



Context – including historical context – shapes what cell phones and other electronic devices mean to relationships and community structures. Nathan Yoder is my third cousin. The reason I own a cell phone and he doesn't stems from the differing church membership choices our respective great-grandmothers (who were sisters) made in 1895 when their congregation split between a stricter “old order” and those accepting more modern technologies and theological tenets (such as evangelism, which the Old Order Amish reject). As a result of that church split in Grantsville, Maryland, I was raised decades later hearing the ring of a kitchen telephone in my Conservative (“Amish” was in the name until 1957) Mennonite home. Nathan's Old Order Amish home not only lacked that ring but also the sound of the radio (which we had, but not a television).

Of course, that 1895 church schism ran deeper than just the question of owning Alexander Graham Bell's recently invented talking device. It included, for example, deeper differences about how and by whom decisions were made concerning telephones and other modern inventions like the automobile. Thus, in the Conservative Mennonite Conference today members decide

to own a cell phone without consulting the will of the congregation first, but members of Nathan's church submit to asking for the church's permission for such an acquisition.

It is an understatement to say that most Americans do not want their purchasing decisions subject to such oversight. And yet it is this very practice of discernment and discipleship in the Amish church order – grounded in

an ecclesiology structured to produce full accountability between individual members in the church and the will and discernment of the larger group – that has allowed the Old Order Amish to control and manage technologies across an amazing breadth of time and geography. One can find these plain "brethren" living simple, unwired lives not only in the eastern states (where they first set-

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tled when immigrating from Europe as early as the 1730s to escape military conscription and to find new farm land) but also in regions ranging as far west as Colorado, to Canada in the north, and to Mexico and Belize in the southern stretches of the North American continent.

Given the huge cultural and religious gap between these pre-moderns and us postmoderns, what of true relevance can be learned from them in our ultra-wired lives? The *BusinessWeek* celebrities giving up cell phones even as they jet about the globe with members of their entourages (who are, as the article pointed out, carrying Blackberries if their VIP should need one) cannot really approximate the simplicity and communality of the Amish made possible by their tight control of technology. Getting rid of one's cell phone does not an Amish make. Imitation by degree is not the answer. The lesson to be learned does not lie in the number of mobile devices one is connected to or disconnected from. I propose it lies instead in what might be called the "life narratives" Nathan Yoder and the Amish purposefully and religiously lead that a jet-setting Mikhail Prokhorov or any typical modern person cannot cohabit – unless they undergo a major conversion in their relationship to time.

For the Amish, there is a steadfast determination to make technology fit what anthropologists call relational time. The ancient Greeks and the Apostle Paul (in Titus 1:1-3; also Galatians 4:4) called it *kairos*, or "ripeness," time. When we zip past an Amish buggy on a Holmes County, Ohio, or Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, road, it hits us that our modern time is on a different wavelength than the time those Amish in our rearview mirror are experiencing. Ours is a trajectory of time shaped like an arrow. *Chronos* time gets us

“there” quickly and efficiently but just as often leaves us feeling as if *there* is nowhere. There was little joy in the journey; our existence is reduced to a ride down a conveyor belt we have been dumped upon and will be dumped off at the end of the production line.

If philosophers like Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor are right, humans make their lives meaningful by giving the events in them a narrative structure, which Ricoeur calls the “emplotment” of time, or making time “meaningful.”² A diet high in chronological time leaves us undernourished and craving the richer fiber of *kairos* time. Or to switch metaphors, we fill the void of broken relationships and isolation with pornography, always titillating but never ultimately satisfying, its greatest allure perhaps being not the content it offers but temporary amnesia it provides to our aching loneliness and hunger for communion. That longing is for an existence that transcends the ticking of the mechanical clock—a device that first came into common usage in the fourteenth century and was arguably as formative of modernity as the printing press.³ Spiritually we realize that the less *kairos* wholeness that we experience in our relationships and schedules and the more we are in tutelage to the god *chronos* (and its cousin mammon), the more our life stories feel plot-less, which is to say, pointless. Cell phones and laptops and iPads, and the very mobility of these devices—the constancy and immediacy of their demand for our attention and their parasitic attendance on our very persons—leave us feeling lost in the moral topography of our lives. We do not feel Sabbath or shalom or whole. We instead feel...a vibration in our pockets.



But telephones themselves are not evil, are they? Is it not our relationship to them that is of moral significance? That answer to these questions leads us to the specific lesson the Amish (an unlikely people group for this topic) can teach us about the latest smart mobile devices and how we should think of them in relation to our socially constructed selves. A look at their complicated and varied relationship with the telephone in the last hundred years and up to the newest cell phone app suggests to us values and approaches we might apply in our own dance with modernity and from our side of the digital divide.

The first point is that the history of the telephone and the plain people has always been fluid and negotiated and never a settled matter. Life narratives—even Amish ones—are elastic and unfolding, not static and set in stone. What is hopeful here, then, is that there are multiple practices we can employ to make technology serve humanity rather than humanity serve technology. The Amish teach us that these practices can and must be adapted over time and in different situations with the advent of new technologies.

There is more than a touch of irony in the fact that a century ago a number of Amish were among the early creators and stockholders of emerging telephone companies. The *New Holland Clarion* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania) in

1891 reported that farmers in the area “have established among themselves a telephone system covering eight or ten miles of wire, the wire used being barbed wire fences. The middle wire of the fence is used, and the farmers are able to converse with each other without difficulty.”⁴ In what would become the Conestoga Telegraph and Telegraph Company by 1902, Amish Mennonite farmer Aaron K. Stoltzfus connected fifteen homesteads by wire.⁵ Most of these homes, Diane Zimmerman Umble recounts in her book *Hold-ing the Line: The Telephone in Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life*, were between Amish Mennonite farms.

What was the immediate reaction of the Amish congregations to these innovators? Nothing. A decade would elapse before an Old Order Amish congregation formally pronounced a ban on the telephone. By then (1910), some Amish families had already installed telephones in their homes.⁶ By comparison, Lancaster County Old Order *Mennonites* (horse-and-buggy Mennonites, but direct descendents in the Menno Simons line and not from the Jacob Ammon tradition) prohibited only ministers from owning telephones while members could opt to have a single phone in their homes. By 1950, most Old Order *Amish* districts had adjusted their *Ordnung* (the oral tradition of community rules and practices) to allow their members, including ministers, to own a telephone if it was shared by multiple families and located away from the house. (They are often located in a stand-alone shanty that outsiders mistake for an Amish outhouse.)

To this day the Old Order Amish still prohibit landline telephones inside their homes. Cell phones, on the other hand, are being informally accepted in some communities for some uses. The Maryland districts of the Old Order Amish I am most closely acquainted with strictly prohibit cell phones. Yet Stephen Nolt, a historian and interpreter of the Amish to the outside world, observes that with the Old Order Amish in northern Indiana cell phones are commonly used by young people who have not yet joined the church, but that even for church members the picture is increasingly mixed. In some more progressive districts in northern Indiana, he notes, cell phones are permitted for use by business people, while in more conservative districts they are prohibited. “It happens that the more progressive districts are geographically clustered around Shipshewana where a good deal of the tourist trade is located, with the effect that it’s probably more common for outsiders to see Amish people with cell phones here. In other words, the Amish who have the most exposure are disproportionately cell-phone owners, which can give a skewed picture of the whole settlement to someone visiting the area if they only visit the Shipshewana area.”⁷ He adds anecdotal stories of Amish adult children purchasing a cell phone for an aging parent who might need to dial 911.

Another increasingly common accommodation of the phone is hooking up landline telephones in sheds or booths next to woodworking and metalworking shops, sometimes even inside them.⁸ This trend reflects the economic reality of

many Old Order Amish having been forced out of farming by the scarcity of land and into small business ventures, where business transactions depend on phone connections with “English” customers and vendors. By contrast, New Order Amish groups – which emerged out of Old Order congregations who rejected the New Order’s evangelical emphasis on “new birth” – have from their beginnings in the 1960s and 70s allowed telephones in the homes of members if their usage was limited. And in the 1990s, the 1910 Old Order Mennonite compromise in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which restricted church leaders from having a phone in their homes, was lifted for most congregations.

This quick historical survey of telephone usage among the Amish demonstrates that a plastic rather than rigid posture toward innovations allowed these groups to successfully leverage the telephone as a tool for maintaining community rather than ripping its fabric apart. Flexible traditionalism, as opposed to a rigid dogmatism, kept their traditions and communities alive and pliable. I found this logic present in the idiomatic answers to questions I put to a brother named Moses and a sister named Nancy, both in their early twenties and members of the Old Order Amish community where Nathan Yoder lives. Why can’t telephones be in your homes? I asked bluntly. “If you walk a quarter mile,” Moses told me, “you don’t use it as much.” Did they ever wish they had a cell phone? “What you never had you never miss,” Moses answered. Nancy added: “The phone itself isn’t wrong. It’s about keeping with simplicity. Without a phone, there’s more quietness.

Once you jump to one thing, you then jump to another. You never stop. So before something new is accepted, we think about it for a while. Everything is decided through the voice of the church.”

Nancy’s reasoning was confirmed by a bishop of a New Order Amish congregation, even though his district has allowed a single telephone per home since the church district became New Order in 1964. “The

misuse of something is what makes it wrong,” he told me. “The phone can lead to idle and foolish talk, which the apostle Paul warns against.” Cell phones, he added, were not prohibited, but the newer smart phones “have become a problem for our congregations” since they play videos and connect to the Internet. His congregations were presently considering banning video- and internet-connected cell phones. He noted that they were already

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actively “discouraging” texting among their young people since texting involves so many “slang words.” “We see that as another kind of idle and foolish talk that could also lead to the younger losing the German language.”



The sociologist Donald Kraybill explains that the conditional acceptance of modern technology by the Amish is, in fact, an ongoing negotiation around the *Ordnung*. What guides the discussion is the ultimate interest in keeping sacrosanct the form of community the Amish see as mandated in Scripture and which has been handed down to the present from their European Anabaptist forebears of the sixteenth century. Kraybill identifies several Amish values and positions that have allowed them to control technology rather than letting it control them.

First, the Amish through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century have managed to *keep birth, work, play, education, worship, friendship, and death in (or close to) the home*, even as each of these societal functions have become specialized and regimented to separate spheres by moderns in the form of “birthing centers, fitness spas, day care centers, schools, grooming salons, factories, hospitals, golf courses, hospices, and funeral homes.”⁹

The Amish *emphasize commonality*. That is why Nathan Yoder and every man in his congregation dress the same and do not have telephones in their homes. Modernity in its pluralistic ethos, by contrast, is held together by diversity (e.g., what color laptop do you want?).

The Amish *nurture relationships that are “local, enduring, and stable”* while modernity, with its discontinuity in social life, leaves us often with social ties that are temporary and transitory.¹⁰

The Amish *order their church districts as loose federations and shun artificial approaches to planning families or careers* as opposed to the highly rationalized and future-oriented modernity with its propensity for controlling physical and social relationships through hierarchical bureaucracies.

Similarly, the Amish order themselves to *free individuals from choice*. This rings contradictory to the modern person who sees choice as an individual human right, though this often leaves us feeling paralyzed by the lack of calling in our lives.

The Amish, unlike the modern, seek to *safeguard “the predictability that undergirds traditional cultures, which are regulated by seasonal routines, customary norms, and fatalistic views.”*¹¹ Individualism is the keystone to modernity, Kraybill explains, and a characteristic the Amish particularly resist in its excesses.

These principles are abstract enough to allow for varied applications, not only within plain communities but also modernist ones. All new technologies acquire over time and through trial and error an emerging social etiquette, and there are signs of our own worldly *Ordnung* forming to protect our online identity and humanity in its more meaningful, narrative forms.

A *New York Times* article with the surprising headline “Tell-All Generation Learns to Keep Things Offline” reports on teen and young adults having second thoughts about tell-all Facebook postings. Unlike even five years earlier, a majority of young adults – the generation that pioneered “sexting” through cell phone and social networking sites – now mirrors the percentage of adults their parents’ ages who are concerned about their online footprints and reputations.¹² In *Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology*, Yale and MIT graduate Eric Brende describes how he and his young wife, disillusioned with the corporate rate race and in pursuit of a more sane life, learned to live off the land and off the electric grid among a group of Amish and plain people he calls “the Minimists.” He soon came to the realization that in our modern information-saturated society, “the human brain is treated as just another processing device.”¹³ He found these Amish were not against tools per se, but deeply cautious of *automated* machinery. The extent automation is constrained from a community, the members of that group are made interdependent and the threads of the community remain interwoven.

These are examples of the e-generation recovering balance and re-calibrating chronological time to human time. Even as I type these words, I viewed the first Facebook post on my wall from my mother, an eighty-two-year-old covering-wearing Mennonite who just opened a Facebook account and admits to finding the technology hard to master. One of my young nephews warned her in a teasing manner about becoming addicted to social networking. Her reply:

“Your Grandma is not smart enough to get addicted. I do however want to connect with my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and friends of Flint years. My desire is to use it for good.”

I do not know how soon or if ever I will be able to text Nathan Yoder to ask how milking is going. The challenge we face on a planet where mobile phone subscriptions are projected

to reach five billion by the end of 2010 (when the world population is 6.9 billion) is to leverage this electronic connectivity in ways that create rather than destroy community.¹⁴ Drawing from the theological ethics of John Howard Yoder (who draws on the work of Hendrik Berkof), one might frame the question this way: How might we leverage this power of the air to subject it to the just and good purposes of the kingdom of God?¹⁵

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Cell phones have been used to photograph and instantly transmit abuses by police in Iranian street protests. In developing countries, poor people employ cell phones to gain information and as a form of currency for the first time. Social networking sites are being used to connect grandmas with their families and to organize for the good. These are indicators of how the modern permutations of the telephone can foster not alienation, but community.

NOTES

1 Joel Stein, "America's Most Exclusive Club," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, August 5, 2010, www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10_33/b4191077620370.htm (accessed November 12, 2010).

2 See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1 (Time & Narrative)* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1990), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3 Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/ (accessed November 12, 2010).

4 Diane Zimmerman Umble, *Holding the Line: The Telephone in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 64.

5 The Conestoga Telegraph and Telegraph Company is still privately owned and operated. See the *Bloomberg.com* snapshot at <http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapId=6563197> (accessed November 12, 2010).

6 Umble, *Holding the Line*, 113.

7 Personal email, July 30, 2010.

8 Umble, *Holding the Line*, 157.

9 Donald B. Kraybill, "The Amish Encounter with Modernity," in *The Amish Struggle with Modernity*, edited by Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 21-34, here citing 25.

10 *Ibid.*, 26.

11 *Ibid.*, 31.

12 Laura M. Holson, "Tell-All Generation Learns to Keep Things Offline," *New York Times*, May 8, 2001, www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/fashion/09privacy.html (accessed November 12, 2010).

13 Eric Brende, *Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 67.

14 Lance Whitney, "Cell Phone Subscriptions to Hit 5 Billion Globally," *CNet.com*, February 16, 2010, http://reviews.cnet.com/8301-13970_7-10454065-78.html, (accessed November 12, 2010).

15 See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972) and Hendrik Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, translated by John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977 [1953]).



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