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# Amish Philosophies on Information Communication Technology Design and Use

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## ABSTRACT

This position paper explores a community of technology users who deploy sophisticated tactics to shape its members information communication technology (ICT) use according to shared religious values. Namely, when the Old Order Amish make decisions about if, and how ICTs should be used, they are guided primarily by notions that technologies are non-neutral in their moral and ethical impacts. Ethnographic fieldwork provides support for the philosophy of technology's relevance in HCI by identifying strategies for technology use that enable users to accomplish their functional and moral goals.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → *Human computer interaction (HCI)*.

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ACM ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x/YY/MM...\$15.00  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn>

## KEYWORDS

HCI, philosophy of technology, non-neutrality, holism, values, ethics, Amish technology

### ACM Reference Format:

Lindsay Ems. 2019. Amish Philosophies on Information Communication Technology Design and Use. In *CHI'19 Extended Abstracts: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Exploring the Intersection of Philosophy and HCI, May 04–09, 2019, Glasgow, Scotland UK*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 6 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn>

## INTRODUCTION

This position paper articulates strategies deployed by members of Old Order Amish communities to shape the adoption and use of information communication technologies (ICTs) among their constituents. Today it is increasingly common for the Amish to adopt computers, the internet and mobile devices in calculated ways to remain competitive in business. Very often, however, the use of these devices blends into the personal sphere as well. This position paper extends a book project currently in progress [3] that investigates Amish approaches to ICT adoption and use. Comprised of ethnographic fieldwork among the Amish from 2011–2014, the book is notable for its empirical observations showing that shared ethics and values are key to determining patterns of ICT use in Amish communities. The findings of this research stand to offer new insights for discussions pertaining to HCI, human-centered design and the philosophy of technology.

## BACKGROUND

Adapting to economic changes in recent years has pushed many Amish families to start adopting new technologies. Generally a conservative religious group known for its members living pre-modern lifestyles, the Amish do not take a hard line against all new technologies, as some may think. The Amish do generally reject electricity supplied via the public power grid, television, radio, automobiles, and modern clothing fashions. However, among the diverse population of American Amish today, it is not uncommon to see people roller blading, families enjoying time on the lake in a motorboat, construction workers using power tools, homes with solar panels on the roof, businesses with websites and Facebook pages and Amish folks using cell phones to talk and send text messages. Some may view these decisions as hypocritical or haphazard. This research, however, suggests an alternative: that these decisions are highly context-dependent, value-driven and often the result of calculated, communal compromises intended to dodge the stress and anxiety associated with modern life while remaining competitive in the marketplace.

Indeed, making decisions about using new, more efficient modes of communication or holding onto older slower modes-whether for work, family, entertainment, social or political reasons-are decisions we all make. Today's ICTs have succeeded in enabling us to work, connect, be informed and entertained

more easily than we could without them. Often, our demand for efficiency supersedes other values when making decisions about the adoption of a new gadget. The Amish commonly ask, "What is at stake here?", "What exactly is sacrificed in a seemingly unwavering pursuit of evermore-efficient communication?" These are questions of interest to many theorists studying the social impacts of technology as well. Understanding how the Amish answer these questions may provide answers to larger questions about how ethics and values might take a more central role in determining which technologies we adopt and use and how we use them.

The Amish may offer valuable insights for HCI analysts interested in infusing design with user-derived ethics. For instance, they are keen tinkerers and makers who care deeply about the values expressed in their daily work and their choices about the tools they use. For them, a decision to use electricity requires knowing where it comes from. If it comes from a solar panel or diesel generator, often it is allowed. While electric power from the public grid, generally, is not. Solar and diesel-derived electricity aligns better with Amish values, as it has limited, intentional purposes—often for powering tools in a workshop, not a television or radio. Adoption strategies like these are compromises that allow the Amish to get things done and compete in the twenty-first century economy, while restraining other unintended consequences that come along with unbridled connectivity. For the Amish, understanding the functionality and potential social impacts of their tools is at the heart of deciding whether or not to adopt them.

## **FINDINGS**

In a variety of instances Amish leaders indicated that they felt there were certain dangers associated with wielding complex communication tools—like smartphones and the internet—that have unlimited (and, often imperceptible) functions. This, they felt, opened the user up to potential experiences that distract, divert duplicate and obstruct them from accomplishing their desired goals. An example of this is the adoption of a device known colloquially as the "Black Box Phone" in one Amish settlement in place of more common mobile devices.

The Black Box Phone is a landline phone with an attachment (a "black box") that connects the phone to the local cellular network. The whole contraption is powered by plugging it into an automobile's cigarette lighter (making it a mobile telephone). One minister showed me a prototype of the device. In this case, the black box and the landline phone were placed in a plywood box for transportation so that construction crews could use it when on the road (See Figure 1 below).

In this settlement, a large proportion of the Amish workforce worked in construction. According to participants, about 100 construction crews left the settlement daily for work. A number of ministers in the settlement felt that cell phones, which had been adopted by many people there, should be given up. Instead of owning a cell phone, they felt people should adopt a black box phone because it would be less threatening to the social and spiritual health of community members. Cell phones, a more



**Figure 1: An Amish modification, The Black Box Phone.**

private medium, were seen as providing opportunities for engaging in extramarital relationships via private text messaging conversations. Smart phones, they felt, tempted users to access unfiltered, immoral content like pornography. The Black Box Phone, on the other hand, is an intentionally bulked up contraption that allows mobile communications from a vehicle but is very inconvenient to carry around. It only allows public, audible conversations-no texting or internet access. It is also shared among the crew members.

Ministers in the settlement hoped that the adoption of these devices would make individual cell phone ownership among its constituents unnecessary. As an intended replacement for cell phones, the Black Box Phone is a unique Amish modification or re-configuration of existing technology that is in better alignment with Amish values-no access to video, music, games, internet or texting. It forces communicative arrangements that are public, allowing for peers to hold each other accountable for their actions.

This is just one example of how the Amish are actively configuring their socio-technical world to better align with their values. Key to calibrating a device's moral and technological affordances with the accomplishment of human goals is understanding and precisely tailoring the communication means to the desired ends.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

Observations like these strengthen the relevance of a group of philosophies of technology that characterize technology as morally and ethically non-neutral [1], [2], [4], [5][6], [7] for the study of HCI. This strand of philosophy is connected by a notion that technology is inherently imbued with political bias. From this perspective, in its mediation of user engagement with the world, technology urges the user in one direction or the other. Even a relatively innocuous technology like eyeglasses changes a user's perception of, and engagement with the world around them, according to Don Ihde [5]. "For every revealing transformation there is simultaneously concealing transformation of the world, which is given through a technological mediation. Technologies transform experience, however subtly, and that is one root of their non-neutrality" [5, p. 49].

Albert Borgmann [1] suggests this is problematic because we have become heavily dependent on technology today and yet scarcely understand the mechanisms upon which we depend for physical and social well being. Additionally, he suggests we have increasingly limited choices available to us about which technologies we adopt and which we reject. For example, it would be ludicrous (outside of Amish communities) to suggest that there is a legitimate choice available to us today to continue using a horse and carriage despite society's widespread adoption of automobiles. Crucially, for Borgmann, this has undesirable consequences for people who want to fulfill their own values using technology.

This can be further illustrated by Eric Brende's auto-ethnographic experience among the Amish as a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate student in the early 2000s[2]. Brende and his wife joined a community of what he calls, Minimites-a group of Amish who were living without modern technology. His observations are particularly relevant to this project because of the satisfaction he and his wife felt using low-tech tools like a crank-handled washing machine. He described their experience of using this device as "cathartic." For him there was a "magisterial feeling that came with wielding means precisely fitted to ends" [2, p. 27]. Brende felt wielding complex tools with unlimited and invisible functions is detrimental to the accomplishment of a user's goals. Use of overly-complex tools often results in users losing control as the tool mediates their engagement with the world in unknown and undesirable ways.

Amish approaches to technology adoption and use shed new light on HCI and the philosophy of technology. This analysis suggests that users can be empowered when they wield technology tailored precisely to the fulfillment of their own goals. The Amish show that it is indeed possible to make collective choices about what technologies to use and how to use them based on their values, not those of the corporations and/or governments who design them and survive and control users through them. Thus, when users understand how a device functions-especially one that users depend heavily upon for social, spiritual, psychological and physical well being-they are empowered to wield technology in a way that will encourage the fulfillment of their functional, moral and ethical goals.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lindsay Ems is an Assistant Professor in Communication and Media Studies at Butler University. She is currently writing a book tentatively entitled, *Medium Control, Maximum Empowerment: Strategies for Amish Living in the Digital Age*. From 2011-2014 she conducted fieldwork among the Amish to gain an understanding of how they are working and living today given a wide array of social changes associated with the proliferation of ICTs. She teaches courses in organizational communication and communication and social responsibility at Butler University in Indianapolis. Broadly, her research explores the political and social impacts of ICTs. She has published research on the role ICTs play in social movements like the Arab Spring and the prevention of communicable diseases like HIV. Recently she has been reading and writing about the philosophy of technology and putting this body of literature in conversation with her empirical observations.

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