

# Plain speaking in a world of suspect communication technologies

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Many of the plain people of the USA, such as the Amish, Old Order Mennonites, and Old German Baptist Brethren, believe most electronic media including computers and the Internet to be inherently unethical and sacrilegious. During research in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the author of the following article determined to find out why such groups abstain from the telephone, television, radio, film, and in many cases, the computer and the Internet.

From a distance the plain people seem like one homogenized American counter culture that shuns all technology, preserves ancient agricultural and social European traditions, and adheres to one narrow dress code. However, in truth there are plain people in numerous countries with many shadings of lifestyle, theology, and wardrobe. What they share in common are European Reformation ancestors who fled religious persecution to establish isolated farming communities.

The Amish take their name from their seventeenth century leader Jacob Amman and are the largest and most socially conservative group of plain people (Scott, 1988). Mennonites take their name from leader Menno Simons, who converted from Catholicism to Anabaptism in 1536 (Durnbaugh, 1968). The Brethren movement started in Germany in 1708. Due to their practice of baptism by immersion, they received the nicknames "Dunker" and "Dunkard" (Scott, 1988). Although some branches of Brethren faith have embraced modernity, the Old German Baptist Brethren (excepting some of their youth) shun electronic media.

All three groups – the Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren – are classified as Anabaptists (rebaptizers) because their founders advocated that each individual should freely choose baptism as an adult rather than be involuntarily baptized as an infant. The three traditions may also be categorized by what Max Weber called "the believers' church," a "community of personal believers who are "reborn" (Durnbaugh, 1968).

"Plain peoples" have received their name from their belief in utmost simplicity, humility, sobriety and a distinct dress. Jewellery, make-up, fashionable clothing, and amusements all detract from a climate of simplicity and piety. Thus radio, television, the Internet and film also pollute such an atmosphere of silence and the sacred.

Which plain people use which media?

Although many progressive Mennonite and Brethren congregations permit the use of electronic media, there are at least twenty-two sub-groups, including all Amish groups in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and many others elsewhere, which do not. Some groups ban only the visual media (TV, computers, film, photography) and at least two Old Brethren groups are in a transition period in which many of their youth listen to radio (Kraybill and Scott, 1984; Scott, 2000). Not surprisingly, there is a high correlation between those who abstain from electronic media and who also ban automobiles, musical instruments, and many automated conveniences.

Not all technologies are treated identically by these groups. For example, debate about photography has led to a mixture of acceptance and rejection in different Amish, Brethren and Mennonite settlements (Scott and Kraybill, 1984). Similarly, telephone use is neither universally adopted nor, where used, universally domestic. Some groups restrict the use of the telephone to businesses, or to telephone booths at the end of farm lanes (Umble, 1996). Tape players, although banned by some groups, have been used to record sermons and a capella music by others. (Scott, 1996).

The computer had an innocent introduction within many groups but was later proven guilty by association. In the Old Order context computer monitors resembled television and could house

video games and film, all of which were persona non grata (Kraybill, 1989). Moreover, by the 1990s Old Order groups had heard about the Internet and did not want the serpent which brought this venom onto their property. However, in many communities compromises have been made: several groups allow word processors and still others permit business computers which are not linked, or restrictively linked, to the Internet.

To outsiders it would seem that 'media free' Old Order life might be bereft of enjoyment. However, life was filled with what many might consider 'old media' magazines, library books, games, toys, puzzles, singing, family outings, conversation, and prayer (Scott, 1990). It is also important to Old Order philosophy what work and worship should of themselves be highly fulfilling activities.

#### Scripture and media ethics

Although much plain lifestyle is simply traditional, some Old Order living may be traced to a strict specific interpretation of the Bible. Thus when new media inventions appeared in society, they reminded church leaders of evils to be avoided as described in the Bible. For example, the advent of the mechanically reproduced photograph summoned up the second of the Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness?' (Exodus 20:4).

Television, film, and the Internet only served to make these likenesses more lifelike and thus more dangerous. With the advent of glamorous images from Madison Avenue and Hollywood, coated by seemingly endless cosmetics, hair colouring, special lighting and effects, those who were plain avoided those who seemed vain. An ethic advocating honesty (about who one is), modesty, and authenticity seemed deeply violated.

Almost every medium violated some injunction. Radio disturbed the 'quiet in the land' (Psalm 35:20) and Satan had been Biblically described as 'the Prince of the air' (interview Kanagy, 1997). In early 2000 a Brethren minister preached against the evils of Christian lyrics married to a rock beat because the 'very electric rhythms were from Satan' (Anonymous, 2000). More than any other Bible verse, Romans 12:2 'be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed' is quoted as the divine command which the plain people obey. Deliberate, socialized non-conformity has led to decades without electricity but not, in their view, to decades without light.

#### Ethical reasons for a media blackout

Kraybill has amassed some striking statistics about Amish family life. The average family has 6.6 children. Differing studies suggest that between 76% and 88% of Amish children eventually join the church (Kraybill, 1989). Strong family and community emphasis keep the Amish and other plain families large, functional, and efficient as a labour force. Plain people have a communitarian ethic. In secular neighbourhoods children eventually replace their parents with headsets or video games while parents gravitate toward adult programming. Plain people do not welcome this programmed 'generation gap.' Family outings, conversations, and silences are eventually drowned by endless noise and enlarged images if great care is not taken.

Non-violence is another ethical tenet of plain life. Historically, one reason which led these Anabaptists to separate from other religions was obedience to Biblical pacifism. Thus a Hollywood film such as *Witness* (1985) adds insult to injury by both misrepresenting the Amish way of life and featuring scenes of lethal violence and semi-nudity within a celluloid Amish community.

Despite a wide spectrum of 'wholesome' media - educational documentaries, children's features, and informational web sites, the plain people are not impressed (although some Brethren and Mennonites have produced films and videotapes). The very nature of acting is more than suspect 'the actor is a professional liar and thus to be shunned.' In theatre, television, and film an actor is seen as a phoney, playing the part of someone else. In the Amish mind,

playing the role of a character in a drama is the equivalent of a lie because the actor puts on the mask and deceives the audience by pretending that he's someone that he's really not (Hostetler and Kraybill, 1988). In short the plain view is that electronic media import an ethic of deception.

The plain people have taught themselves to be content with life as it is and to give thanks for their every blessing. Media, however, seek to teach consumers that "more is better", "bigger is superior", "faster is best", and other commercial values that would break the commandment not to covet. Notions of time-saving and speed-up are not necessarily healthy to people who find great worth in their slower, steady pace of manual work. Work builds character and community, not just health and home (Hostetler and Kraybill, 1988). Electronic media both interrupt and erode a strict work ethic.

At the heart of the Amish Order is the German notion of *Gelassenheit* which has several levels of meaning - submission, obedience, thrift, humility, and simplicity among others (Kraybill, 1989). It means letting one's individual will be yielded to and guided by the church. *Gelassenheit* keeps the individual meekly integrated within the community purpose whereas the media portray numerous (super-) heroes who champion rugged individualism, aggressive competition, and ego assertion. Often those heroes become role models for children and teens, role models who are unattractive to plain parents.

To plain people life is wholistic - all parts effect each other and thus the whole. Thus an Old Order Mennonite would not tolerate this line of reasoning from a city cousin: "Why should I worry if my child sees a horror movie on a Saturday so long as his homework is done during the week and he goes to church on Sunday?" For the plain person once the psychological damage has been done and the child's innocence destroyed, it can never be restored to an unsullied state. Each day of the week affects the others and each person effects the community. Atomized individualism and fragmented behaviour are not acceptable.

It is not surprising that rejected media technologies are primarily one-way transmitters. Television, film, the VCR and radio primarily import the values of outsiders to insiders without insiders being able to reply in kind. When the insiders did decide to reply, those few groups who adopted minimal radio use created limited evangelical programming. The controversies surrounding e-mail, business web sites, the telephone, and photographs in advertising demonstrate more tolerance to "talk back" media which enhance opportunities for better farming and business.

Among outsiders there is a commonly held notion that communication technology is "value free". This view suggests that any medium is neither positive nor negative but depends entirely upon who is using it and for what purpose. Conservative plain folk disagree. For example, it is hard to imagine what positive uses of technologies of torture might have and it is similarly impossible to imagine which technologies of deception (TV, film, movies, the Internet) might create "positive" lies.

The "value-free technology" argument is dismissed by Umble (1996) when discussing the telephone. The telephone is not merely a neutral instrument. Its use intrudes into already established patterns of communication, potentially reorganizing and reordering practices that have long held "the world" at bay. Community rituals of worship, work, silence and visiting strengthen community identity and articulate the edges of community. The telephone, however, makes the community permeable to new information and introduces new methods for information gathering, association, and interpersonal interaction. The telephone brings the world to your door, a reality welcomed by some and shunned by others.

Although many saw the telephone as practical or "value free," below are fourteen discrete, albeit overlapping, ways it seemed to disrupt a sealed community and import a secular ethic. The telephone:

&#8721; funnelled worldliness as a conveyor belt of unwanted news and perspectives;

&#8721;

&#8721; magnified and further exaggerated gossip;

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&#8721; disrupted the flow of family activity;

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&#8721; interrupted silences;

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&#8721; extracted conversation from a shared multi-sensory context (Kraybill, 1998);

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&#8721; increased contact with individualism, pride, vanity, materialism, and other corrosive values;

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&#8721; ushered in intrusive, unwanted strangers (epitomized by telemarketing, pollsters, etc.);

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&#8721; polluted the sacred home atmosphere;

&#8721;

&#8721; provided greater association with ?unbelievers?;

&#8721;

&#8721; increased ?jangling? (cf. idle chitchat, Umble, 1996);

&#8721;

• provided an avenue for youth to dissipate spiritual time;

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• shocked nerves of people and animals with loud ringing bells;

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• contributed to "uncontrollable drift" in which one technology, innovation, or conduit to the world leads to another, then another;

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• diminished face-to-face communication, and often interrupted it.

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Silence is very important to most plain people, just as it is to Quakers. Sundays should be free of workday sounds and silence begins and ends every meal. Generally services are punctuated with periods of silence, whether in prayer, meditation, or transition. Wisdom is frequently equated with silence as in the anonymous proverb "It is better to be silent and appear ignorant than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt." So many communication tools interrupt or eliminate silence that there is a fear the basic pauses of life will be lost forever.

Not only the pauses but the overall tempo of life seem irrevocably altered by the introduction of many media. For the Old Order plain people, nothing should be rushed save in an emergency. Media invite an accelerated racing by thriving upon police chases, adrenaline pumping action, "fast women," and fast-talking dee-jays. Advertising emphasizes fast cars, fast foods, and the opposite of everything paced by nature. Even the technology and programming itself has seemed obsessed with speed-up "modems, faster MTV-style storylines, and accelerated editing.

Plain people, computers and the Internet

Use of both the computer and the Internet varies according to how liberal a group has become over time. Employing the computer for strictly business purposes is alluring since one can order parts, products, and resources which are vital to the survival and competitive advantage of a small business or agricultural community. Moreover, the use of the computer does not automatically sanction the use of the World Wide Web, especially where there is no telephone. Using computers to store data, create business letters, make calculations, create ads and graphics, and word process is entirely different than giving children access to cyberhate groups, nudity, and secular philosophies.

Among the Amish use of computers is very rare and among conservative Mennonites and Brethren who do not use automobiles, use of the Internet is similarly forbidden or unpopular. Within groups which do permit automobiles there is a greater tendency to use the computer for practical purposes, such as soliciting information for children's homework, weather reports, travel directions, or general knowledge (interview Scott, 2000).

However, it is dangerous to give monolithic impressions that each group either shuns or embraces the cyberworld. Some use e-mail but not the World Wide Web due to the values imported by the

latter. Others might create a web site so that the outside world may better know their tradition but not randomly inspect the web sites of others. Still others may be debating among themselves how to use the business-friendly aspects of the Internet without welcoming obscenity and secular values into their home. Some possible but tentative solutions to such dilemmas include using a computer at a nearby library, keeping computers locked away in offices, and buying "nanny" and "granny" software which restricts access to "R" and "X" rated websites.

In sum, while Old Order plain groups have a strong aversion to the messages of the Internet, there is no one monolithic policy toward the cyberworld by the less conservative plain groups. Each may use some combination of the following: word processing, data computing, e-mail, the world wide web with varying restrictions and some may be currently debating which aspects of the computer culture to embrace, explore, or shun.

Ethical erosion avoided

The concern about media intrusion into plain life is more than scriptural. Much media feel and are psychologically alien to a placid, heterosexual, oral/aural culture. Plain people understand that there are economic, structural, amoral and rhythmic forces attached to media that have the penetrating power to transform, erode, and even erase plain life as they know it.

Although there are numerous scriptural reasons for abstaining from media, the cumulative prohibition list is much longer. Electronic media seem by their very nature and typical content to be opposed to essential ethical pillars upon which plain life is strongly situated. Such pillars include truthfulness, non-violence, communitarianism, human dignity, monogamy, privacy, and theocracy. To the plain people, electronic media, with few notable exceptions, are not only inherently unethical but also convey toxic content. Although they are best known for the social practice of shunning people who disobey the church, they more systematically and comprehensively shun those technologies that seem anti-religious and unethical.

While the computer world with its information society has been seen as the salvation of humankind in some quarters, Internet values are seen as part of the damnation of the world in the Old Order plain societies. Some of the more liberal Plain people may see themselves as inching their way toward slightly more integration of communication technology within their lives, but many are cautious and Old Order groups are ultra-conservative. Scriptural, ethical, cultural, and practical reasons combine to sustain deep beliefs that Plain living should not become fancy.

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