Mapping Myriad Positionalities in Amish Media Studies

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Abstract: Within the United States popular and academic imaginaries, Amish/Mennonite identities tend to get flattened into a monolithic, anti-modern stereotype simultaneously fearful of information communication technology and yet titillated by their utility. This pan-Amish construction relies on reducing interpersonal and intercultural complexities regarding media into bite-size binaries easily understood by English outsiders, which is critical when distilling information about myriad Amish norms and sects even if it means choosing breadth over depth. As a result, academic literature on the Amish mediascape tends to focus on binaries of traditionalism and modernity from a variety of disciplines, and research has not kept up with the rapidity with which newer information communication technologies are adopted by Amish/Mennonite communities. This research note discusses the budding field and literature of Amish media studies, presents a case study of a public Old Order Amish media-focused event to complicate traditional/modern binaries, and provides suggestions for future scholarship in this area. [Abstract by author]

Keywords: Amish media studies; mediated technology; information communication technology

INTRODUCTION

When the words "Amish" and "media" are used together, it is to typically conjure up images of some pan-Amish identity within the American popular imaginary (Nolt 2008); photographs of innocent white children in straw hats and dark overalls (Chhabra 2010); depictions of 'unruly' Amish disregarding the normative status quo in reality shows *Amish Mafia* or *Breaking Amish* (Bottinelli 2005); whispered discussions of news articles about Nickel Mines (Zimmerman Umble and Weaver-Zercher 2008); or the seemingly contradictory image of an Old Order Amish woman using a mobile phone (Jantzi 2017). Less common, however, is a broader discussion of various, disparate Amish communities using and creating media.

To date, a single academic book has been published on this subject, *The Amish and the Media*, (Zimmerman Umble and Weaver-Zercher 2008), which is less about the interaction between the field of mass communications and Amish studies, and more about how religious scholars interpret Amish-related and Amish-created media. There are some groundbreaking works, like Neriya-Ben Shahar's (2017) excellent article on Old Order Amish and Orthodox Jewish women acting as technological gatekeepers within their homes and the impact gender has on information communication technologies. Ems' (2014; 2015) research on Amish workarounds and information communication technology usage as a set of practices decided by community consensus is also a rigorous contribution to mapping the Amish mediascape. However, there are still large gaps in literature that have not kept pace with rapid changes in mediated technologies. Concise histories of Amish media usage, as well as contemporary overviews complicating functionalist notions of shifting Amish media usage, are lacking, with only some aspects filled in by current research.

Existing research delving into the contemporary Amish mediascape tends to view the severe Amish restrictions on media usage *positively*, reinforcing ideologies about Amish communities as somehow pure and more naïve than the rest of U.S. culture due to lack of exposure (Štekovič 2012). This strain of scholarship positions most media—particularly newer media like video games, television, and mobile phone-based social media—as a dangerous force Amish communities are wise to avoid.

By mapping out the contemporary Amish mediascape, this research note contributes to literature by illustrating tensions among different communities and breaking up the essentialist, monolithic view of Amishness academic scholarship might create. This paper first discusses some difficulties in creating a cohesive summary of Amish media usage, briefly discusses the history of norms regarding media within Amish communities, and offers an illustrative case study of a recent Amish-focused event involving media to provide a counterpoint to existing literature. Finally, the paper closes with recommendations for future research, as there are still many understudied areas to explore. As each Amish community has its own set of rules—the community *Ordnung*—perspectives regarding media usage necessarily differ. There are many different subgroups of Amish identities: Old Order, New Order, Beachy, Swartzentruber, and others. All have slight variations on what is appropriate and what is deviant, thus challenging scholarly generalizations constructing Amish identity as a flat, modernity-averse, ethnoreligious identity.

DIFFICULTIES IN MAPPING OUT A MEDIASCAPE

Inventions and innovations from automobiles to mobile phones have all caused a great deal of consternation not just in Amish communities, but for scholars as well. This has resulted in a mishmash of research on myriad Amish groups. As noted by Ems (2015), "[information communication technology] use and non-use has not been systematically studied among this population since the early to mid-1990s when Diane Zimmerman Umble (1996) examined the adoption of the telephone among Pennsylvania Amish" (p. 2). Years later, Amish media usage is still an understudied area even though exploring media separatist groups could provide rich data in media effects; social norms and social control; and the complex interrelationships among a normalized status quo, identity formation, and media exposure, to name a few.

There have been some scattered works that focus on Amish media usage, mainly from sociological and religious scholarship perspectives.

Chronologically speaking, however, the literature has not caught up with the vast increases in media technology during the past decade. Kraybill (1998) wrote one of the first analyses of Amish media use in his article on computers and Zimmerman Umble's (1996) exploration of the telephone was conducted only a few years earlier. Cooper (2006) explored why Amish groups—specifically the more conservative Old Order and Beachy Amish-Mennonite churches—perpetuate a "media fast", and acknowledged, "life is filled with what many might consider 'old media'—magazines, library books, games, toys, puzzles" (p. 144), although no further explanation was given as to community norms surrounding these 'old' types of media. It seems to be taken for granted among academics who study Amish and Mennonite communities that older forms of media are generally acceptable and above the type of critique reserved for newer forms.

Cooper's work is but one example of the gaps in literature created by these oversights. For instance, Kraybill (2011) argues Amish communities bargain and negotiate with the trappings of modernity based on community opinion leaders like bishops and farmers; the seemingly arbitrary sets of rules in a local *Ordnung* are symbolic of this fluid dogma. Kraybill (2013) and Cooper (2006) alike both connect Amish reluctance to adopt newer forms of media and technology with strong communal ethics, purity, and a sense of morality.

Wueschner (2002) and Tharp (2007) argue differently, stating the rise of economic changes and increasing wealth inequalities due to Amish-based tourism both impact and are impacted by technology. Unlike Kraybill, Wueschner claims new technologies are seen as aiding or helping Amish traditions, not corroding them. Ems (2015) calls these "workarounds," a particular use of a technology that reflects local values and is determined by a social context. The adoption of a workaround is also seen here as signaling one's Amishness or shared group identity. Motivations for creating workarounds may be political, cultural, or functional, or a combination" (pp. 48-49).

For Ems, Amish communities negotiate these relationships with technological innovations in order to maintain social control and interface with the outside world in a recognizably Amish manner. Ems (2015) relays the ways in which an inter-

viewee and Old Order Amish entrepreneur, Amos, negotiated media use: "He used his phone to conduct business but also to talk to his wife about their evening plans and about whether he could stop and get a bag of ice on his way home" (p. 54). Amos also hired a non-Amish co-owner specifically to use technology, "to file their taxes and do their banking via the internet and computers, to build websites, and advertise their businesses via social and traditional media" (p. 55).

Jantzi (2017) further explores and nuances tensions between moral arguments and economic arguments about technology; "Amish generally do not consider technology evil in itself. They therefore often allow access to, but not ownership of, new technological advances. Thus, rather than opposing all change, the Amish tend to reject what is likely to be harmful to the community" (pp. 71-72). Scholarship on various Amish communities flattens and generalizes Amish use of technology into two types of adoption: economic/pragmatic and moral. While there are many overlapping aspects of these two strains of innovation adoption, they are fundamentally different and impact different community members. Research operating from the perception that new media technology is adopted for economic reasons treats media like a set of tools, a bargain with modernity that can be controlled and used to aid in the increasing neoliberalization of Amish industry (Jantzi, 2017).

The second area of scholarship on Amish technological adoptions, however, tends to skew heavily dystopic, with researcher bias against newer forms of media seeping in. Video games, television, movies, and mobile phones may be viewed as troubling by researchers already, so interviewing media separatist Amish simply confirms the perspective that a life without many forms of media is holistically positive (Kraybill, 2013). Gender norms, socialization, normative views of media as dangerous, and even definitions of what technology can be defined as "new" tend to get muddled in these descriptive, generalized analyses of myriad slightly different groups. However, existing studies do provide important and useful longitudinal data as to changes in perceptions, local rulings, and usage of media technology throughout time.

Most recently, Neriya-Ben Shahar's (2017) work exploring Old Order Amish and Orthodox Jewish women's use of the internet provides one of only a few analyses centering gender as an

important cultural factor in who actually gets to use media. This sentiment is echoed by Faulkner (2017), who argues a lack of critical research and media representation regarding a wide variety of Amishness does a disservice to Amish intercultural diversity. "[I]t is the cultural conversations, both literal and metaphorical, in which the Amish engage that produce their collective sensibility and truly define the Amish" (p. 452)—see also Weaver-Zercher (2001), Nolt and Meyers (2007), and Hurst and McConnell (2010). Faulkner (2017) found even among ex-Amish individuals–folks no longer Amish but raised within these communities–aspects of Amish cultural and linguistic norms remained internalized to a high degree.

These findings regarding gender norms, circulating cultural norms, and intergenerational norms further challenge generalized Amish identities based on visible difference (e.g., plain clothing) and separateness from mainstream U.S. cultures (e.g., insular linguistic norms). If this is the case, then restrictions surrounding technology such as eschewing zippers, mobile phones, or radios may have wider implications for populations tangential to various Amish communities. These populations, such as ex-Amish, those with ex-Amish and Amish families (such as myself), and English people who regularly interact with Amish communities, may not at first glance seem impacted by the Amish mediascape, even as intercultural knowledge and comfort with certain media technologies is directly informed by the localized Amish status quo. As such, there are seemingly endless ways for Amish media studies to approach the intersections of power, tradition, culture, and technologies.

Existing literature on Amish media usage are disparate and contain understandably imprecise definitions and contradictions based on when the literature was written, who was interviewed as well as who was interviewing, and local rulings regarding technology. This budding field of literature presents a conundrum when mapping out the forms of media various Amish communities can access, and under which circumstances and local cultural contexts. The following section discusses some historical aspects of Amish media usage and adoption that may impact the forms of media deemed acceptable today.

AMISH COMMUNITIES AND MEDIA USE THROUGH TIME

Before widespread industrial innovations in the United States in the late 1800s, Amish communities and other Anabaptist groups had far fewer visible differences. However,

> In response to [mass-market culture], though also in connection with debates about revivalism, dress codes, and church disciplinary practices, some [Amish groups]... deemed the fruits of progress—cultural, religious, and technological—forbidden... even as most rural Americans hooked happily into the electric power grid and public telephone service, the Old Orders opted for less technologically sophisticated ways of life. (Zimmerman Umble & Weaver-Zercher 2008, 9)

This historical resistance to change included many forms of media innovation excluding that of print media, which already existed prior to the restricted rulings. It may be difficult to find clear consensus on newer forms of media, but evidence highlights the importance of print media within Amish and Mennonite groups throughout time, even though advanced education and extensive private reading are frowned upon (Ediger 1998).

In research on how Amish communities use media, there is one study in particular that gets forgotten, namely Galindo's (1994) genre study of the Amish and Mennonite newspaper *The Budget*, a community-driven newsletter that is part rumor mill and part "Facebook on paper" (Esther Stoltzfus, personal correspondence, 2017). *The Budget* has several local, national, and even international editions; community "scribes" detail local goings-on in a stream-of-consciousness format that reads like a personal letter as opposed to formal journalism. This newspaper is a staple of many Amish and Mennonite homes and is a popular, regular publication. Galindo's work studied the function this particular media artifact has in maintaining communication as well as how it ties into Amish and Mennonites' positive views of newspapers more generally. Carey's (2016) study of the Amish diaspora and how geographically distant kin use *The Budget* updates Galindo's original argument and offers an example of a media artifact that has remained stable through time:

> In the spring of 2016, *The Budget*'s national edition circulation was about 18,000, a number that has changed very little over the past four decades... Common themes of Amish and Mennonite life revolving around faith, tradition, and social cohesion appear consistently in the hundreds of scribe letters published weekly in *The Budget*. Those themes create a platform for readers to experience a mediated sense of community. (Carey 2016, 114)

This form of print media, then, serves an important function within Old Order and New Order communities alike.

Later scholarship on how Amish groups use media take for granted the fact that newsletters are *also* media technology, albeit an older form, much like Cooper's (2006) lack of definitional clarity with "old media" (p. 144) that may or may not include periodicals. *The Budget* is an essential part of the Amish mediascape reflecting both historical norms surrounding appropriate forms of media as well as contemporary attitudes, as discussed earlier. *The Budget* and other newspapers, despite their status as media, are widely consumed in even the most conservative of Amish households. Similarly, books have had a traditionally important role.

As Tharp (2007) notes, many Amish homes have a familial Bible passed down in intra-familial fashion, and my own extended Amish and Mennonite family networks have many copies of *The Martyrs Mirror*, the Bible, the *Ausbund*, the *Fisher Book*, and many other religious, cultural, and familial texts. Historically, these texts served community-building purposes that connected one generation to the next, and one family to another. For instance, the *Fisher Book* is both a history of the first Amish families in the United States and a comprehensive genealogy of current descendants. Its presence in the Amish and Mennonite household marks it as not only a valuable community tool, but also a way to connect past and present. The Amish book of hymns, the *Ausbund*, is similar in that it is also a community-building media, historically and culturally significant to Amish/Mennonite families. Only parts of *Ausbund* hymns are actually written down, and the missing pieces are passed down through oral tradition, resulting in hybrid media artifacts that both change and remain the same through time.

Print media's importance in Amish and Mennonite communities has remained stable through time, with key texts such as those discussed above providing community, historical cultural context, and a sense of self as belonging to a rich religious tradition. However, Ediger (1998) argues that even print media have normative parameters; science curricula for Old Order Amish schools may not contain information contradictory to Amish beliefs. Similarly, print media should still adhere to the local *Ordnung*. Anderson (2011) outlines how moral and economic arguments regarding media have led to schisms within Amish and Mennonite groups, creating smaller factions, each containing its own unique norms on media:

> The first, from the late 1920s through the 1940s, emerged when strong shunning [also known as excommunication] of automobiles, electricity, and several other technological innovations became taboo among the Old Orders, forcing those Amish congregations that had adopted such innovations into the Amish Mennonite stream. The second, from the mid-1950s through the 1970s, was dominated by conflicts over tobacco, language used in church... marks of plainness such as suspenders... The third period, from the 1990s into [now], saw the creation of additional sub-affiliations driven by disagreements over governing structure...use of radios and other electronics, and the retention of outward identifiers of plainness. (p. 366)

This succinctly describes the internal tensions, confrontations, and argumentations various Amish and Amish Mennonite groups had faced moving into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These confrontations regarding media echo that of the original Old Order resistance to most forms of innovations in the late nineteenth century. Much like many rural communities who have grappled with the pressures of suburbanization, conformity, technological dystopianism or utopianism, these tensions have very real material effects. Thus, widely accepted and traditional legacy media such as newspapers are essential to the maintenance of a shared diasporic identity even as newer media contribute to postmodern fragmentation of Amish identities.

VARYING AMISH VIEWS OF MEDIA

Boyer's (2008) analysis of myriad Amish views of technology claims that

> Each new technology becomes a matter of group discussion, as communities observe its social impact... Eventually the local bishop, sensing a developing consensus, proposes a guideline that is ratified by the congregation. Given the decentralized structure of Amish polity, with each bishop exerting authority only in his district, a range of responses to new technologies is possible. Cell phones offer a case in point. Some conservative districts ban cell phones altogether; others prohibit them for personal use but permit them for business. (p. 363)

Chhabra (2010) calls this dissonant process "selected negotiation," arguing it creates more difficulties for English, or non-Amish, society than it does among Amish groups due to the ways this disallows for easy stereotyping of a monolithic pan-Amish identity" (p. 103).

However, according to Kraybill (1998), Cooper (2006), and Tharp (2007), Old Order sand Beachy Amish-Mennonites eschew modern forms of media such as radio, television, most telephones (e.g., landlines at the end of personal property), mobile phones, and computers due to their corruptive potential. In interviews conducted with male Amish community leaders, sentiments such as Christian rock being "from Satan" (Cooper 2006, 145); Hollywood being "the outhouse of society" (p. 146); or "TV is a brainwasher for sure. It is certainly no good for the young mind" (p. 146), all highlight attitudes that newer forms of media—particularly digital media—are corrosive. As Petrovich's (2014) notes in his analysis of the conservative Andy Weaver Amish,

> … the Andy Weaver group forbids youth from participating in organized sports or owning a vehicle or cellular phone... [these] groups are particularly suspicious of computers, though they tend to express their opposition more as a fear that computers enable the emergence of a one-world government and the persecution that will inevitably follow, rather than seeing them as dangerous tools. (p. 33)

This view conflates medium with message; to nuance changing technological norms, Andelson (2011) argues that despite traditional views of much media as dangerous, economic factors complicate moral ones. Many Amish communities have had to contend with "the growing scarcity and rising price of farmland" (Andelson 2011, 562), which has exacerbated tensions regarding modernity, technology, and media usage. Hurst and McConnell (2010) argue the decrease in agrarian Amishness has led to an increase in working in construction, retail, and other skilled labor; however, with a lack of education past eighth grade, it can be difficult for Amish individuals to acquire higher-paying jobs outside Amish communities. Working retail or on a construction site necessitates differing relationships with various technology, as Ems (2015) notes. Chhabra (2010) echoes this in her work on Amish identity-based tourism, wherein the economic incentive to create retail businesses catering to non-Amish consumers is too strong to ignore in farm-scarce communities, so mediated technologies are critical for Amish familial success.

CASE STUDY IN MEDIA ATTITUDES: FREUNDSCHAFT AND MEDIA PERMISSIVENESS

The author is personally most familiar with Old Order Amish and Beachy Amish-Mennonite / Mennonite cultures. Knowing a wide range of Old Order Amish, Beachys, conservative Mennonites, and liberal Mennonites simply because these are relatives. the author also researches these Anabaptist groups, so is familiar with myriad ideologies, cultural praxes, and normative behaviors. The author's father was raised Old Order Amish; when his parents left the church, the family became Beachy Amish-Mennonite / Mennonite but retained many trappings of Amish societal norms (Faulkner, 2017). The author's mother was raised conservative Mennonite. Mennonites often act as 'gateways' between various Amish groups and larger mainstream U.S. culture, acting as a technological, media, and/or economic 'buffer zone' due to shared intercultural knowledge. The bonds of familial kinship within the larger Amish-Mennonite kinship network is called *Freundschaft*, or friendship, and acts as an intergenerational, intercultural force connecting otherwise disparate populations, including the author's non-Amish yet Amish-informed identity.

The author's position as an insider-outsider has created some unusual circumstances for research, such as being invited to attend, due to genealogy and presence in the *Fisher Book*, the 2018 Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead auction in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. The author used this event to explore how literature and reality may differ at the time of writing, while being cognizant of how the author's own lack of visible Amish identity could affect what attendees were willing to discuss (Pavia 2015; Lehman 1998). Thus, the author took care in asking open-ended questions in an unstructured way, letting the comments of others and general atmosphere guide questions regarding media usage, adoption, and negotiations. This event was treated as a case study, with the subject of the study being the case itself, and the object being myriad Amish positionalities regarding media. This particular method is informed by Gary Thomas' (2011) typology for case studies as particular, contextualized subjects (the case) that are used to explicate a given "frame or theory" (p. 511).

The annual Nicholas Stoltzfus auction is attended mostly by descendants of the Stoltzfus family, many of whom are still some version of Amish or Mennonite; however, there are many non-Amish descendants who attend for a mix of personal and research purposes. An ex-Amish artist and his non-Amish son are researching the Nicholas Stoltzfus homestead and the Stoltzfus family story. They were taking photographs, flying a camera-equipped drone, and talking to potential interviewees during the auction festivities. When asked why this highly unusual level of media permissiveness of filming and photographing is allowable, the artist stated,

> We are Stoltzfuses. The concept of *Freundschaft* is very important—I may not be Amish [any longer], but I will tell this story correctly. I know this community and they trust me. [Local Old Order Amish bishop] said the church relaxed the *Ordnung* for this documentary, so kinship and authenticity, allowing folks to tell their own stories, really matters. We want to get the story right, especially after all those shows like *Amish Mafia* that are just ridiculous or people from the outside saying whatever about the Amish. We get to talk about our history and story in the way we want. (Stoltzfus, personal communication, 4 May 2018)

This artist relayed that a number of Old Order Amish individuals will be appearing on camera for the documentary. Several attendees approached him, curious about the camera, drone, and overall project. His use of the phrase "we" in discussing both Amish and non-Amish Stoltzfus descendants was echoed by a number of Old Order Amish for whom kinship is stronger than differences in media usage norms. When the author asked an Old Order Amish attendee their thoughts about appearing on camera, the attendee responded, "I don't want to be filmed, but I think it is good our story is being told. Yes, I probably will watch it, I can watch it here [at the homestead]" (Anonymous, personal communication, 4 May 2018). The simultaneous excitement and internal tensions over this digitally based, modern project complicate the already complex negotiations with newer forms of media associated with Amish communities (Lehman 1998).

Inside the homestead, a simple documentary outlining the Nicholas Stoltzfus family history was playing on a half-hour loop; audience members were multigenerational, multi-affiliational, and conversant. An Old Order Amish family was speaking to the documentary itself, asking questions of the narrator that were inadvertently ignored due to the medium of film. The family then spoke to a nearby Mennonite family and attempted to figure out how many ways they were related. This sense of talking back to, and with, a documentary in a communal way is reminiscent of a public sphere or the early days of cinema. A young Old Order Amish child smiled for someone taking a picture via a mobile phone, indicative of a preexisting familiarity with socialized norms surrounding photography as suggested by Chhabra (2010). Watching and listening to attendees, the author was struck by how different these interactions were than what existing literature on Amish media usage portrays—norms regarding cameras, smart phones, and films were much more individualized, interpersonal, and nebulous than the opinion leader model espoused by scholars such as Kraybill (e.g. 1998; 2013) and Zimmerman Umble (e.g. 1996; 2008).

The author was privy to participating in a media-rich environment, and the various para-Amish families in attendance seemed excited and willing to engage in newer forms of media technology for purposes of familial discovery akin to the *Fisher*

Book; community maintenance similar to *The Budget*; and historical documentation reminiscent of oral family stories. Thus, the media available at the event fit into the traditional, historically determined roles media ought to inhabit. While this small example of a singular event cannot be broadly generalized, it does challenge the notion that *all* decisions regarding newer forms of media are done in a communal setting, dictated by the local bishop. The author's experiences participating in and observing attendees at the auction suggest the contemporary Amish mediascape is in constant flux, similar to how many non-urban communities globally grapple with information communication technologies, technological innovations and development, and changing media norms. Decisions regarding media usage may not just rest on religious, moral, or economic grounds; they may also be made by comparing a newer form of media to its closest historic link. Media usage may also depend much more on the actual *message* as opposed to the *medium* itself, troubling academic generalizations of Amish communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are still notable gaps in research and literature regarding the ways in which previous and present Amish groups negotiate media innovations and technological advancements; the research that exists provides a complex and often contradictory map of the Amish mediascape. This paper presented a summary of research on Amish media usage based on available academic literature, and then presented a case study of media allowances to provide a counterpoint to prevailing themes across scholarship on Amish groups. For future research, one could do archival research in an attempt to find historical documents revealing attitudes on changing media through time. As there is a lack of scholarly engagement with Amish primary sources, archives may prove useful for discussions of when certain media became controversial as well as the reasons behind censure.

Regarding the contemporary realm of Amish media usage, the author recommends more contextualized, rigorous research that foregrounds one's own biases (Neriya-Ben Shahar 2017). As demonstrated, one thread of existing literature uses Amish attitudes to justify the beliefs of the researcher, resulting in ethically questionable findings (e.g., the recommendations of Jantzi, 2017; the methods section of Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013; or Kidder and Hostetler 1990). Including one's own background and interest in the field would result in work that is more transparent; it also provides more methodological clarity as readers could determine how to gain access or make sense of cultural norms (Ems 2015). Finally, more in-depth discussions with Amish and ex-Amish individuals on various forms of newer media could provide a sense of how attitudes, norms, and rationale may be shifting. Asking questions of video games, social media, and increasing reliance on mobile phones may be useful in adding to a wider body of knowledge regarding socialization, normative behavior, and the wider effects—positive and negative—media have.

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