Book Review Symposium

Lindsay Ems. *Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins*. **Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022. Pp. 208.**

In this symposium, three readers respond to Lindsay Ems's book, *Virtually Amish*, published in 2022 by MIT Press. We offer their reviews below, in alphabetical order.

Reviewer Gerald J. Mast is professor of communication at Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio, and the author of many books, most recently *Nonviolent Word: Anabaptism, the Bible, and the Grain of the Universe* (Pickwick, 2020). Benuel Riehl is a member of the Old Order Amish Church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Erik Wesner is the founder of the blog *Amish America* and the author of *Success Made Simple: An Inside Look at Why Amish Businesses Thrive* (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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Lindsay Ems's book *Virtually Amish* makes a significant contribution to Amish studies by combining diligent ethnographic research with a media studies perspective on Amish decisions about digital communication access and use. The topic of Amish internet usage is extraordinarily complicated and presents many challenges for analysis—most notably the significant diversity of frameworks and assumptions about the internet present in the Amish community, alongside a rapidly evolving toolbox for selective internet use.

Ems deals with this complexity and evolution by focusing on two Amish communities in Indiana—the Elkhart-LaGrange settlement in the north and the Montgomery-Oden settlement in the south. By interviewing a range of church and business leaders in these two settlements, Ems crafts a picture of Amish creativity in adapting their personal and commercial livelihoods to the demands of late digital capitalism while maintaining distinctive faith communities shaped primarily by interpersonal face-to-face interaction.

While she makes some use of Amish studies paradigms based in sociological descriptions of the Amish, her work also points to the inadequacies of models focusing on boundary maintenance and negotiation that have dominated traditional Amish studies, especially when dealing with the rapidly changing and complex reality of digital technology. Ems thus proposes a model for explaining Amish engagement with digital communication technology based in information systems—featuring the control of switches that regulate information flow within a network. This permits a more dynamic and likely more accurate picture than the boundary maintenance model of how Amish leaders and community members navigate the application of their church rules to the complicated daily-life world they face in business and commercial life. Within this framework,

members of Amish communities adjust digital information flows to and from the outside world through distinct and changing switch settings, depending on a combination of circumstances, including the rules of their church district, conditions of personal occupation, and the spiritual counsel of district leaders. The decisions by individual Amish community members about using mobile phones, computers, and various digital platforms are not simply decisions about how hard to push against the fences established by their district's *Ordnung* but rather an array of choices that control information flows in ways that align with or resist the spirit of the district's *Ordnung*—and the conversations about its application. Such choices may involve restricting use of a mobile phone for business, or preferring use of computers in a public library, or simply reducing the amount of time engaged in digital communication.

Church leaders thus need to employ persuasion in order to encourage compliance with the rules—a compliance that might look somewhat different from one person to the next. Ems identifies two primary approaches by Amish ministers in relation to internet use: "strong teaching" and "instilling personal convictions." When ministers employ strong teaching, they inveigh against the threats and harms caused by digital devices and the worldly entertainment culture they access. When preachers instill personal convictions, they focus on spiritual resources and willpower necessary to make good choices about how to use digital and computer devices. While strong teaching channels older models of communal accountability and instilling personal convictions encourages relying on personal virtue, both approaches function in Amish communities to enable critical and intentional choices about internet usage, rather than passive and consumeristic habits.

By emphasizing the deliberative and rhetorical dimensions of Amish decision-making about digital communication, Ems paints a picture of Amish agency that is more inventive than reactive, and that relies more on innovation than on obedience. She thus challenges paradigms of Amish culture that are rules-centered or piety-focused. Rather than expressing obedience to God by yielding to church authority (*Gelassenheit*), the Amish appear in her account to be savvy participants in the information-centered economies of late capitalism, finding work-arounds to church rules and hacking digital technologies to make them less threatening to Amish users.

Ems describes Amish decision-making as public, democratic, and inclusive, outlining a process of adopting or revising district *Ordnung* that gathers all the members of a district together to discuss and vote on the proposed changes. This description seems a bit overly idealized since it doesn't account for the more informal and less-than-public negotiations that likely preceded any members meetings, nor does it account for different habits of authority that reflect the distinct personalities of district ministers. On the one hand, this description of Amish decision-making as democratic and inclusive supports her hypothesis that Amish church members are quite actively involved in establishing the terms of their engagement with digital communication and computing platforms. On the other hand, this possibly overstated affirmation of Amish democracy perhaps points to the need for additional research and data to confirm her hypothesis. This question of whether the Amish communities Ems studied in Indiana can legitimately be described as practicing democracy raises several related questions that are also posed more generally by this ground-breaking work.

First, do Amish communities practice democracy in ways that are distinct from and that perhaps elude standard deliberative and parliamentary models of decision-making? For example, might the Amish represent a form of "fugitive democracy" as described by political theorist Sheldon Wolin—practices of episodic and more radicalized social agency that exceed the limits of traditional structures of representation that are regarded to define "democratic" governance today? Specifically, do Amish decisions about internet use signify more meaningful collective choices than those made, say, in a voting booth during a national election?

Second, does the underrepresentation of women in the group of informants Ems relied on for her data lead to an exaggeration of the experience of agency and choice in the communities she studied? Most of the Amish interviewed by Ems were either businessmen or ministers or both, and thus subjects more likely to experience greater control over digital information flow switches than, say, farmers or women who are not employed outside their households. The one woman interviewed by Ems is also a business owner and so may not be representative of Amish women's experiences.

Third, in the account provided by Ems, the regulation of digital information flows in Amish communities appears to generally be qualified by the needs of business owners, with very little attention to other possible legitimate needs—such as people with disabilities or victims of abuse or those who desire more formal education than the Amish are required to provide to their children. The informants Ems interviewed mostly appear to value the Amish way of life and to have found ways to live fulfilling lives within Amish culture and practice. The system of information regulation Ems describes mostly works well for these informants, enabling them to be both Amish and successful in business. One wonders how this system works for people with less power or privilege within Amish communities. What about a young person who seeks a professional career as a medical doctor, or as a journalist, rather than as a business owner or manager?

These questions all converge in a larger question of whether the Amish are best regarded as an exceptional community—a peaceable island of traditional values and social harmony unfolding close to the land and to one another—who should be granted political deference and even legal protection from the forces of modernity such as those represented by state school attendance laws and various public health and safety regulations that are seen to threaten the coherence of Amish society. Ems tends to mostly accept the somewhat utopian picture of Amish life as represented by the influential sociological model pioneered by John Hostetler and extended in the work of Donald Kraybill, even though she has also suggested that a key component of this model—the boundary maintenance paradigm—should be replaced by an information regulation paradigm. But Ems's approach to studying Amish digital communication—and the discoveries she made in pursuing it—suggests that the Amish are also an ordinary human community, one in which power is exercised, options are debated, and money talks—especially when church decisions involve business profits or entrepreneurial flexibility. In this way, Lindsay Ems has raised, perhaps unintentionally, another vital question for Amish studies: When Amish leaders and business owners act to control information flows into and out of their communities, and on their personal

devices, who in the Amish community benefits from these decisions and who is harmed? Answering this question will require interviewing more women.

Benuel Riehl, member of the Old Order Amish Church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, former small business owner, and current employee of a large hardware store.

Few issues that the Amish have dealt with in the past 60 years have been as complex as that of electronic media. One issue that the Amish dealt with from longer ago was telephone use. The telephone issue, however, had aspects that were different from later technology, such as television and radio. Telephones did have useful interpersonal communication functions. During those telephone debates, the principle of examining and attempting to understand the impact of the adoption of new technology already was well established with the Amish.

Radio, television, and other entertainment media were much easier to label as detrimental to the overall well-being of both the individual and the Amish community. Their function was mostly one way; that is, being "told and sold" on its content. Its content was mostly selfish, so the label "worldly" practically applied itself. Not so with the internet. The internet is both very useful and quite distracting and detrimental. It is very interactive insofar as you participate both in being told and sold and also in telling and selling. This is all further complicated by the convenience of being able to stick it in your pocket in the form of a smartphone. And for a people who place great importance on the now seemingly archaic notion of separation from the world and the newer notion of intentionally living on the periphery of the larger society (which is to say, being in but not of the world), a smartphone is dauntingly complicated and intimidating to use. The Amish think, in essence, "If only it would be a we-Phone instead of an iPhone!"

Nonetheless, there is the reality of providing for the needs of loved ones. Food, shelter, clothes, and nurturing them emotionally and spiritually remains to be done. The information on the internet, and the ability to manage and make use of the resources available, can be of great benefit if used properly, morally, and ethically.

Lindsay Ems, in her book *Virtually Amish*, uses the concepts of the "Big Other" and of "high-tech capitalism" to demonstrate how corporations watch what you click on and use the information gathered to gain a profit for themselves as well as to influence your further behavior, possibly even gaining control and directing future patterns.

Even though it took some work to understand and wrap my mind around those two concepts, Ems illustrates beautifully how the Amish use these technologies and analyzes the effect they will have on the well-being of both the individual and the community. These examples demonstrate that much can be done to thwart corporate and institutional control and put that control back into the hands of the user. The phrase "We want to control the technology and not have it control us," quoting one Amish interviewee, is illustrative of that process. Ems captures many methods and nuances of that process well.

The Amish lack a hierarchical, elitist leadership model, leaving the individual to make rational choices in conjunction with others, including the ministry. Even though the Amish know full well

that an individual does not stand a chance against Big Other on their own, it does not mean, in Ems's words, that one must give up the authorship of one's experience. That authorship, however, most Amish would ascribe to the Good Lord, rather than to a temporal Big Other. This, I think, is one of Lindsay key themes.

Ems's concepts and models of mutual respect for differences and necessary consensus, and also of strong teaching vs. personal conviction, do much to illustrate the interaction and dynamics of a typically change-resistant ministry whose interest is to preserve the good things and values of Amish culture. And she shows the motives and thinking of those innovative Amish individuals whose interest is temporal success, survival, and provision for loved ones in a way that hopefully is also of benefit to all in the community.

Although these dynamics vary from community to community, Lindsay Ems elucidates the tensions of these dynamics and the various different regional responses. Two salient themes seem to be that church leadership is usually more reactionary than proactive and that change is typically incremental. She illustrates those incrementalistic tendencies through her descriptions of work-arounds and critical Amish makers. Her examples all sounded very familiar to this Lancaster Amishman. And it describes well what she terms "sociotechnical precarity."

In the last three chapters, she talks about what I would term moral intelligence to counter, in her words, the inertia of technological development, and take responsibility for our choices at each step of the process. She provides insights from Christopher Petrovich, who posits that deferring to church leadership authority is the safest method of internet management and that you must choose between being Plain or being internet-friendly; you can have one or the other, but not both. Ems also provides the perspective of Carl Frederick Huele, whose thinking is that we cannot completely opt out of the internet anymore. Thus, it needs to be managed for optimal benefit to both the one and the many. He says church authority can, in fact, be a complementary influence, but also says that an individual can and should ask, "How can I solve my business needs and not damage my relationship with God and have the responsibility and freedom to do so?"

In the next to last chapter, Ems writes about holism, which in effect says that anything I do or experience becomes part of me and affects the rest of me. She also writes about an Amish preference for face-to-face communication and acknowledges that, because the practical demands of that kind of communication are not always possible, other mediums are necessary, and even if they are second best, they can still be useful and beneficial.

And finally, I can heartily endorse her words in the closing paragraphs with a slight paraphrase:

> In order to improve human social structures, we could look inward and create reflective spaces for our development and share the results with others, and work to protect those spaces from the invasion of dominant logics. The efforts of corporations and institutions to control and surveil should be revealed. And by nurturing our ability to create more than consume, we could close mental and spiritual gaps and reconnect human bodies and the natural world. We could move a share of power from the owners and programmers of information networks into

the hands, minds, and bodies of everyday users, ensuring that people are more than information to be manipulated and profited from. And, that humans are much more than the data they leave behind.

And in my own words, maybe—just maybe—the internet can be transformed into more of a beneficial democracy that is for the better of the one and the many, rather than a place of anarchy that it really is today.

Thank you, Lindsay Ems.

Erik Wesner, author of *Success Made Simple: An Inside Look at Why Amish Businesses Thrive* (2010) and creator of the Amish America blog

In *Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins*, Lindsay Ems examines how Amish encounter, adapt, restrict, and manage digital technology, using as primary sources church and business leaders in the Elkhart-LaGrange County and Daviess County, Indiana, Amish settlements.

Ems describes how, with the transition from a primarily agricultural society to a more entrepreneurial one, some Amish people are using digital information technologies—the internet in general, and smartphones in particular—to achieve business goals.

While digital tech is deemed useful and even necessary by some Amish for business survival, they seek to regulate it while harnessing its benefits—specifically, information flows, which they feel could corrode their individual morality, real-life social networks, and ultimately, institutions of family, church, and community. *Virtually Amish* explains how different Amish approach that challenge.

In terms of research and analysis, several things stand out here. One highlight is an in-depth analysis of how formal Amish church rules—*Ordnung*—come about, in particular how new technological allowances and restrictions enter the formal framework of rules. Ems shows that it is not simply some form of "the bishop decides the rules."

Rather, she outlines how arriving at formal rules is generally a collective and public process, incorporating input from members of the church. "We aren't a dictatorship," one bishop explains (35). Rather, church leaders generally consider changes, process community feedback, guide and nudge the conversation, negotiate, and make recommendations about innovations, but with ultimate decisions being taken by church members in a community voting process.

Another important contribution is the chapter outlining how *Ordnung* rules alone are not the sole mechanisms guiding technology use. Augmenting *Ordnung* regulations are three informal mechanisms: "(1) teaching the 'proper use' of a technology, (2) relying on old arrangements to guide future action, and (3) presenting proper use as a symbol of group identity" (45).

When it comes to "proper use" of a technology, the author identifies two main approaches: "strong teaching" (a reliance on clearly-defined rules) vs. an "instilling personal convictions" approach (emphasizing reasons behind rules and placing more decision-making power in the individual).

"Old arrangements" refers to inherited traditions and philosophies that affect how Amish use digital tech (for example, use through intermediaries). For instance, an Amish furniture company might hire an outsider to manage a website or execute digital marketing campaigns (similar to hiring an "Amish taxi" for transport needs). Another "old arrangement" would be an inclination to select spiritually edifying reading material, rather than reading for pleasure, in the face of the overwhelming amount of reading material online.

In another important contribution, Ems presents the concept of a "switch" when it comes to thinking about digital technology in Amish communities, in contrast to the "fence" metaphor. Fences suggest being able to physically block out a technology—for example, easily visible automobiles or public electric lines from Amish spaces. However, due to the nature of smartphones as concealable devices, the fence concept falters here.

Rather, Ems finds that here Amish employ a "switch," one "that can be opened and closed to prevent unwanted information from entering the minds of individuals and diffusing throughout their communities" (11). Within this switch framework, Amish "configure communication systems so that desirable packets of information are encouraged to flow throughout the community network and undesirable packets are blocked from entry" (11).

A switch is enacted via informal, intangible constraints on digital tech adoption and use—for example, an emphasis on Amish beliefs and values, imbued through institutions including the family and Amish schools, helping the individual regulate information flow through his or her personal choices. This may be seen in practice, for example, in individuals choosing spiritually edifying reading material, or avoiding temptations to seek material online that might "interfere with one's faith" as one Amishman puts it (70).

Rather than attempting to formally block out a technology, this model relies more on individual choice and conscience than a strictly rules-based framework. Some might object that this places too great a burden on the individual, but for those communities that permit digital technologies, this may simply be the best that can be done given their concealable and increasingly ubiquitous nature.

Ems covers further important themes in chapters on "critical Amish makers" (on Amish creation, innovations, and work-arounds); internet management (on strategies and tools for considering and engaging the internet for its business usefulness, while preserving Amish values), and holism as a guiding principle.

Another important concept addressed here is that Amish decisions about devices are not simply reflexive or superstitious acts against "evil" technology. "It's not the phone we're against. It's what comes through it that we disapprove of," explains one church leader (52).

At the same time, in one brief though noteworthy section, Ems does identify strains of thought among some Amish, depicting technology as "evil," particularly associating it with the "mark of the beast" as outlined in the book of Revelation.

This thinking appears to contradict the idea of a given technology not being inherently evil. Similarly, to offer another example not in the book, a decade ago, an Amishman reportedly described a smoke alarm as "a devil on the wall" in the midst of a building code dispute. Which

Amish consider certain "everyday" technologies categorically "evil"? And which technologies, and why? This would be an interesting thread of investigation to continue within the general vein of the Amish and technology.

Another plus of this work is the focus on the Daviess County community. Generally speaking, further studies of these "second-tier" Amish settlements—those of significant size and history (for example, Arthur, Illinois; Ethridge, Tennessee; Dover, Delaware)—would be of interest in balance to the focus on the largest communities.

In the closing chapter, Ems offers suggestions on how non-Amish might address the central dilemma presented throughout her book, that of retaining autonomy in the face of corporate and government surveillance and control via digital channels. The Amish offer one example of an attempt to do that. How feasible strategies drawn from the Amish might be outside of an Amish context is a matter for discussion and real-world testing. But by demonstrating how Amish strive to manage the double-edged nature of digital technology, she offers an intriguing real-world model to consider.