

Technology Alters Importance of Face-to-Face Communication

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The Amish people are often described as isolated, self-sufficient and gentle. The group migrated to the United States starting in the eighteenth century (Robinson 2008). Currently, about 250,000 Amish live in North America, with about two-thirds of their population being found in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana (Elizabethtown College 2010). Pennsylvania alone is thought to contain around sixty-thousand Amish (Elizabethtown College 2010). Juniata County, Pennsylvania, located in central Pennsylvania, is home to a strong and flourishing Amish population. However, the Amish here are isolated within the small community of Juniata County. A clash results between the young, techno-savvy non-Amish population and the Amish in Juniata County, possibly based on the use or lack of use of technology alone.

Past research has already yielded some results of why the Amish live in isolation. The Amish themselves believe that complete isolation is “neither sought after nor considered desirable” (Hostetler 1980:113), but they appear to be isolated in Juniata County nonetheless. Some researchers have found that this is due to the core beliefs that make up Amish religion. According to John Hostetler, silence (isolation) has many different purposes in the Amish way of life (2005:294). Periods of silence occur during prayers, and are even appropriate during times of disaster (Hostetler 2005:294). In addition, silence is the appropriate response to anything that is feared (Hostetler 2005:294). The outside world is feared in this manner because the Amish feel that it is cruel and unforgiving (Hostetler 2005:293). Therefore, they prefer to veer away from outside contact, especially in all forms of technology. The group has prohibited many forms of technology for this reason, including radio, television, motion pictures, and automobiles (Smith 1960:66). Electricity is considered “worldly” by the Amish, and so it is feared and banned from households (Strouse and James 1998). This results in a reduced use of technology.

In contrast, researchers have concluded that non-Amish Americans now communicate via technology with such frequency that their lives are almost consumed by it. Patrick Tucker states that “the average American spends more time using media-an iPod, computer, radio, television, etc.-than in any other wakeful activity, almost nine hours a day” (2007:12). About ninety-one percent of people watch broadcast television in a given day, eighty-three percent listen to the radio, sixty-three percent use the internet, and about forty-three percent use a cell phone (Tucker 2007:12). Tucker also holds that this immense amount of time spent using these devices affects the way in which we interact when not using the media (2001:17). All the time Americans spend conversing via the internet or cell phone greatly affects their ability to socially interact with others.

Like Tucker, other researchers have found that use of such media is commonplace for Americans. The number of cellular phone subscribers in the United States alone rose from 109 million in 2000 to 148.6 million in 2002 (Davie, Panting, and Charlton 2004). Similarly, half of all 7 to 16 year-olds were cellular phone subscribers by January 2001 (Davie, Panting, and Charlton 2004). Davie points out that this increase in cell phone use may have some negative effects, as Tucker found as well. Davie says that cell phone use has severed social ties between young cell phone users and their parents (Davie 2004; Ling 2000). He also points out that even the people these children talk to on the phone may not be receiving proper communication. Face-to-face communication seems to be the only true way one can pick up on the body language, verbal cues, and other clues that are extremely limited during communication via the media (Davie 2004). Davie also notes that the use of a cell phone may put heavy emphasis on young children’s peer groups and significantly less emphasis on the family group (2004).

Through their research, other authors have begun to advocate for more emphasis on face-to-face communication instead of communication via the media. Alison Stein Wellner concluded that communication conducted solely by e-mail can lessen the quality of interpersonal communication (Wellner 2005:37). Wellner also mentioned a study conducted by UCLA psychology professor Albert Mehrabian in which he found 55% of understanding of a conversation comes from body language and facial expressions and only 7% comes from the words alone (Wellner 2005:38). Without meaningful clues, such as voice tone and other forms of nonverbal communication, Wellner says that a conversation's meaning can be lost (Wellner 2005:38). Many miscommunications can occur simply due to the lack of such clues. It is hard to catch someone else's meaning through just the words that they speak. It is helpful and vital to know the context of these words. Through face-to-face communication, one can sometimes identify the speaker's mood by the tone of voice used and body language that the speaker expresses. For example, the recipient of a text message that read, "I was in a car accident," may not know that the "accident" was a minor fender-bender and the sender was laughing about the ordeal. Due to the fact that the recipient could not see the verbal cues that would have been present in a face-to-face conversation, the recipient may have thought the accident was horrendous and the sender was in despair.

Like Wellner, David Rohlander seems to agree that face-to-face communication is by far a better means of communication than relying on media to converse. In fact, Rohlander calls face-to-face communication "the most intense and highest quality way to communicate" (Rohlander 2000:22). Rohlander reiterates Wellner's point of the necessity of observing the facial expressions and body language of another person while conversing to capture the full meaning (Rohlander 2000:22). It seems that all four researchers are in agreement that technology

has become almost overwhelming in the lives of non-Amish Americans. Face-to-face communication remains important to the Amish in today's fast-paced world. This paper examines the relationship between Amish and non-Amish in Juniata County, through a literature review and independent, first-hand ethnographic research.

Methods

Participants

The research was conducted in two parts consisting of two direct observations and a series of informal interviews. The observations included anyone who happened to be at the Juniata County farmers market on the given day of the observation. During the first observation, I focused on individuals who interacted with the Amish community. These participants ranged in age from infants and toddlers to elderly individuals over the age of sixty-five. There were a total of forty-four customers that I observed in this particular instance, of which sixty-one percent were male and thirty-nine percent were female. During the second observation, I focused on individuals that used any sort of mass media throughout the duration of their stay at the market. This time, only seven individuals were observed, three of which were male and four of which were female. Each of these participants was under the age of twenty.

The interview participants were randomly selected from two age groups. The first five individuals were randomly chosen from the 17-19 years of age generation. The next five individuals were randomly chosen from the 50-55 years of age generation. All participants reside in Juniata County.

Procedure

The observations were conducted over a one-hour time period for each observation. I observed the Juniata County farmers market by standing off to the side, so as to not interfere with the social setting. During the first observation, I took notes on anything that I thought might explain the “cool” relationship between the Amish and non-Amish communities, including age, gender, dress, and social class. During the second observation, I took notes only on individuals who made use of any sort of technology, such as cell phones or computers. I recorded the duration of the use and the quality of the interactions with those around them during the use of the device. This was the etic, or outsider’s perspective, portion of my fieldwork. The interviews, the emic (insider’s perspective) portion of my fieldwork, were performed on a confidential basis. Each individual was asked a series of ten questions about the frequency of their use of technology and the frequency that they talk to others face-to-face. Each individual was also asked to rate the importance of different technologies.

The observations allowed for detailed descriptions of the encounters at the farmers market, but limited the amount of direct participation. The perspective I was able to gain by only watching the actions of the market-goers was very narrow. I could only take notes on what was happening because I had very little knowledge of why it was happening. To gain an insider’s perspective, I would have needed to directly take part in the observation, but I did not want to alter the interactions among others. The informal interviews, on the other hand, allowed me to quickly gain an insider’s perspective. I asked each person the same basic questions, but the informality of the interview allowed me to ask for more of an explanation of why a certain behavior was performed. I gathered very uninhibited, useful data in this manner.

Results

The first observation yielded that older non-Amish Americans (50 or more years old) carried on lengthy conversations with the Amish, while young non-Amish (20 and under years old) communicated for a limited amount of time with the other individuals at the farmers market. The elderly spent an average of 2.29 minutes conversing with the Amish, while younger generations spent only 1.97 minutes conversing. The second observation yielded that young non-Amish Americans use their cell phones even while involved in face-to-face communication with others.

Each member of the 17 to 19 year-old age group owned a cell phone. As a group, the amount of time reported as being spent talking or using the internet on their cell phones was fairly consistent. The mean time was about 2.6 hours per day with a standard deviation of 1.8 hours, and the mean number of texts sent per day was 118 with a standard deviation of 78.2 texts. The mean number of people that the participants communicated with via their cell phone per day was four. All participants also had access to the internet on a daily basis. The mean amount of time spent on the internet was about 6.8 hours a day with a standard deviation of 4.1 hours, and the average number that the participants communicated with via the internet was about twelve. When asked to rate the importance of a cell phone in every-day life on a scale of one to ten (one being not important at all and ten being extremely important), the average score was an eight. When asked to rate the importance of the internet in the same manner, the average ranking was also an eight. The most common response when questioned about why these items held so much importance in their lives was that the internet and cellular phones helped them to stay in touch with their family and friends.

The results collected from the 50 to 55 age group were extremely different. Only sixty percent of the participants had a cell phone, and the mean time of daily use was only ten minutes.

The standard deviation was found to be 9.4 minutes. When asked why these individuals did not own cell phones, the most common response was that they had no need for one. They stated that they had a house phone to contact those who they were not in contact with everyday. Only one participant reported that they knew how to text, and even then the individual sent just one text message per day. The average number that the participants communicated with via their cell phone was about one person. Eighty percent of the individuals interviewed had access to the internet on a daily basis, and the average time spent the internet was twenty-one minutes per day. The standard deviation was found to be 22.7 minutes. The average number that this age group conversed with via the internet was also just one person. When asked to rate the importance of cell phones in daily activities on a scale of one to ten, the average answer was a four. When asked the same question about the importance of the internet, the average rating was a three.

Discussion

Even though the small sample of individuals may have limited the study, the results reveal that a relationship exists between age and communication methods. My data shows that non-Amish Americans between the ages of 17 and 19 spend more time on their cell phones and the internet than non-Amish Americans between the ages of 50 and 55. These results are in line with other current research. In fact, a study conducted by Selwyn in 2003, Davie, Panting, and Charlton found that nine out of ten high school students in the United Kingdom had a cell phone by 2001 (2004). My research revealed that one-hundred percent of 17 to 19 year-olds interviewed reported that they had their own cell phone compared to only sixty percent of the 50 to 55-year-olds. This suggests that the non-Amish teens are more willing to use technology to make friends, get to know another person, or stay in touch with family and friends. This could explain the difficulties that the younger generation faces when it comes to speaking to others

face-to-face. Since the older generation relies on this method of communication to converse on a daily basis and the younger generation relies almost completely on their cell phones and the internet, it can be said that the older generation of the non-Amish may be more inclined to engage in face-to-face communication to go about these same actions.

The moderate use of technology reported by the non-Amish age group of 50 to 55-year-olds is comparable to the lack of technology use of the Amish population. This is one proposal used to explain why these two groups converse more often than the Amish and the younger generation of non-Amish. As Strouse and James found, the Amish see technology as being too “worldly,” which is a quality they try to avoid (1998). My research revealed that the non-Amish Americans between the ages of 50 and 55 share similar views. When asked why they do not own a cell phone, individuals in this population answered that they did not feel the need to possess such a thing. They converse face-to-face with those that they feel are important, as do the Amish. The two groups share parallel beliefs about communication technology, which leads them to converse in the same manner. Therefore, the Amish and the non-Amish between the ages of 50 and 55 would find face-to-face communication and interaction to be second-nature.

On the other hand, teens’ communication technology use seems to be preventing them from engaging in quality interactions with others. As Patrick Tucker pointed out, the more time individuals spend using the media, the less time they will devote to solely talking face-to-face (2007:12). The younger generation spends an average of 9.4 hours using the media per day, while the older generation spends only thirty-one minutes. More of the younger generation’s time is consumed by the media, leaving them with little time to take part in a quality face-to-face conversation. Tucker’s findings would mean, then, that the younger generation of non-Amish Americans would not converse with the Amish as much as the older generation of non-Amish

Americans based on their use of technology alone. This hypothesis was verified with the data collected during the first observation of the farmers market. The younger generation spent on average less time conversing with the Amish than the older generation of non-Amish.

Technology not only prevents quality communication, but it changes the dynamics of social bonds. For example, Ling has found that use of cell phone can actually alter relations among people (Davie, Panting, and Charlton 2004). Since communication is the main contributing factor in creating social bonds, any slight change in it can weaken these ties. Poor communication leaves each side feeling unsatisfied. My research found that the individuals who used their cell phones while having an interaction with others at the farmers market were not fully immersed in the face-to-face contact. Their attention was more focused on their cell phone, causing them to miss out on the body language of both the individual standing before them and the individual on the cell phone. This is problematic because we rely on these cues to understand the meaning of a conversation (Wellner 2005:38). It was obvious that some of the meaning of the conversations that took place at the farmers market was lost due to the interference of cell phones. The added distraction may have clouded the entire significance of the face-to-face interaction.

Researchers seem to agree that communication technology use has grown to the point that it is vital to the every-day lives of most Americans. It is evident that this use of technology impacts methods of communication. The Amish, for example, use little to no technology. The Amish rely almost solely on face-to-face communication, and they see this as the basis of their close-knit communities. The non-Amish American generation of 50 to 55 year-olds seem to also refrain from excessive technology use. It is useful, then, to compare the technology use of the Amish to the technology use of the non-Amish Americans age 50 to 55. It could be said that this group was observed conversing with Amish at a more frequent rate than the 17 to 19 age group

due to this similarity of communication styles. Since the 17 to 19 age group uses technology at a higher rate than both of the other groups combined, it is easy to see why face-to-face contact has become of less importance to these teens.

With more research, perhaps these findings can further clarify some of the basic questions that anthropologists yearn to answer. As Walter Goldschmidt puts it in his book, “Comparative Functionalism: An Essay in Anthropological Theory,” each anthropologist aims to recognize the “phenomenon of culture,” the fact that society influences the way in which humans behave, and the fact that there is a relationship between these social influences and an individual’s psychological make-up (1966:2). These goals could be applied to the Amish in order to develop a more functionalist view of their culture, as well as to the overall culture of technology. Functionalists would seek to know how each social aspect of a society helps it to function as a whole (Radcliffe-Brown 1935:396). This would be helpful in discovering why communication technology takes on varying levels of importance across many different cultures and how this affects the quality of interactions. If this concrete answer can be developed, perhaps each individual’s method of communication can be further assessed.

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