Chapter Eight: The Riddles of Technology

Overview

Chapter Eight explores the riddles of technology related to the telephone and the use of electricity by highlighting the following themes:

• The events that led up to the division of 1909 that involved the telephone;
• The role of the telephone in marking social boundaries between the Old Order Amish and more progressive groups;
• The evolution and growth of telephone use in the last half of the twentieth century;
• The compromises regarding telephone use that have been negotiated in recent years;
• The historic factors that influenced the decision about the use of electricity;
• The evolution of the distinction between 12 Volt electricity from batteries and 110 Volt from public utility lines;
• The acceptance of bulk milk tanks with electric motor to stir the milk;
• The rise and use of inverters to make “homemade” 110 volt electricity;
• The compromises that emerged to permit wider use of electricity; and
• The increasing use of “Amish electricity” (air and hydraulic power) to operate machines in Amish shops and barns.

Key Points

• The use of the telephone was influenced by an internal division in 1909 and the telephone became a symbol of progress. Consider how a tool like a telephone has not only practical significance but can also assume symbolic meanings to distinguish groups. How do cars perform a similar symbolic function that signals social class or social prestige?
• Explore why the telephone might threaten social relationships in a community bonded together by face-to-face conversation. Consider the arguments against the telephone in pages 191 to 193. Do these make sense to people living in a high-tech culture?

• The Amish live in a high-context culture where people are embedded in tight social relationships that overlap in many ways. Demonstrate how the use of the telephone decontextualizes interaction by taking speakers out of their social context and thus represents a threat in a high-context culture.

• Does gender play a role in the Amish restrictions on the telephone? Some Amish men worry that a telephone in the home would permit women to gossip too much. Telephones have more widely been used for business and farming purposes. The telephone has always been restricted from the home, which in many ways is the woman’s domain. Since men make most of the rules of the Ordnung perhaps gender is entangled in the pattern of telephone restrictions.

• Explore the ways in which the use of public utility electricity could threaten the values and practices of Amish society. The decision to reject public electricity was a foundational decision that eliminated many appliances. How might Amish life be different today if they had begun using public utility electricity along with the larger society?

• Consider the impact of non-use of electricity on Amish family life. How are Amish homes and family life different without hair dryers, radios, television, dishwashers and microwaves?
• The development of “Amish Electricity” (air and hydraulic power) has had a major impact in the productivity of Amish farms and businesses. This key technological development has dramatically improved their financial success. How might Amish life be different today if the Church had forbidden the use of diesel-generated air and hydraulic power?

• The recent development of inverters makes it possible to create “homemade” 110 V current to operate electric typewriters, cash registers, copy machines, and digital scales. Will this be a “dangerous” pattern that might lead to wider use of electrical appliances and even the adoption of radio, television, and video?

• A key point to underscore in this chapter is the symbolic meanings that become attached to the use of technology. Patterns of technology used not only changes social behavior, but they also signify meanings and feelings related to ethnic identity, progress, tradition, etc. and also mark the turf between various subgroups.

• To what extent does technology control and govern our lives? What does the Amish experience say about technological determinism? Is it possible for human communities to control technology and shape it in ways that serve them?

Questions

1. Do people serve technology or does technology serve people? How do Amish patterns of telephone usage answer this question?

2. Explain why a telephone might threaten traditional patterns of social life in a high-context culture.

3. Discuss the role of gender in the development of Amish telephone rules and practices.

4. Describe in detail how your home and family life would be different today if your home was not equipped with electricity?
5. How might Amish society be different today if they had permitted the use of public electricity in the mid-20th century?

6. Why are the Amish so strongly opposed to television, radio, computer, and video?

7. The Amish often make a distinction between owning technology and using it. Why is this an important distinction and how does it help to control social change and preserve Amish values?

**Statements**

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish are hypocrites because of the double standards that they have for the use of telephones and electricity.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “Many of the rules in Amish culture governing the use of technology are silly and irrational.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The use of air and hydraulic power instead of electricity to operate sizeable machinery is a ridiculous practice that simply demonstrates the close-minded rigidity of Amish tradition.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish church has no business making rules about the use of telephones.”

**Activities**

1. Consider the role of the telephone in your life. How often do you use a telephone each day? How would your behavior change without access to a telephone? Identify the specific ways your life would change without the use of cell phones, stationary telephones, or e-mail?

2. Amish youth and adults are not exposed to television in their homes. In an essay, identify how the absence of television would change your personal life and your family life. How does the presence or absence of television impact social values, communication, consumer styles and expectations, role models, awareness of public and civic events? How does the absence of television impact Amish life and culture?