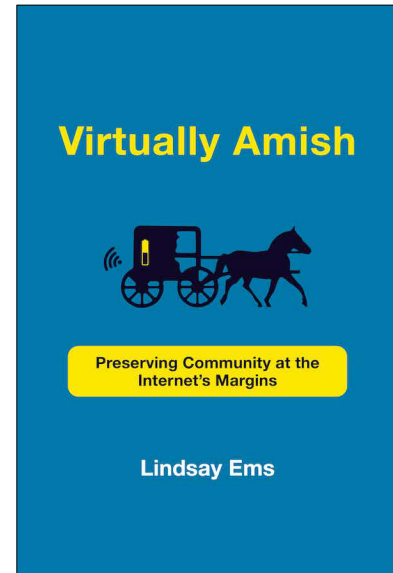


Lindsay Ems, **Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022, 208 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Louisa S. White
University of Virginia

In ***Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins***, author Lindsay Ems uses the Amish communities of Indiana as exemplars for technological consumption, positing their thoughtful adoption of tech as a potential roadmap for the general population. She describes how they have been able to adopt technologies in ways that “allow them to work and live according to their own value system” (p. 6). This book would be a useful resource for media studies scholars interested in the intersection of technology and religion. Outside of academia, *Virtually Amish* is a work that should be read by anyone who actively uses digital media in their day-to-day life. The author’s exploration reveals alternate practices around communicative technology that can help alleviate some of the drawbacks associated with its use.



To understand the scope of Ems’ research, there needs to be an understanding of the scholars who motivated the questions she sought to answer. Ems frequently refers to Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) and her work on surveillance capitalism, an economic system centered around the commodification of human behavior (p. 4). She describes the threat of surveillance capitalism as giving up “the human expectation of sovereignty over one’s own life” and the right to “private inward reflection” (p. 5). For the Amish, these risks are detrimental not only to the individual but to the way of life they have sought to preserve. They believe that technology, when left unchecked, has the power to divorce people from their work, their community, their natural environment, and themselves. Along with Zuboff, Ems uses the philosophies of Albert Borgmann (1987) to shape her argument. Referring frequently to his work, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, she explores the Amish understanding that technology is ethically and morally nonneutral (Borgmann, 1987). Borgmann’s work on mindless consumption resonates strongly with Ems’ Amish interlocutors; they strive to understand the mechanics behind the technology they use and implement “roadblocks” to avoid this kind of behavior. By making these devices slightly more difficult to use, they believe it makes an individual less likely to mindlessly engage.

One of the most significant findings in Ems’ work with the Amish is their method of selective technological engagement. As previously stated, the Amish understand that technology is not a politically ambiguous object. In many ways, the distance between the Amish community and modernity allows for a more discerning eye. For the general population, technological development is an undeniable consequence of a society striving for “progress.” It seems natural, and many of us go about our days without an understanding of the countless ways technology has affected our relationships to each other and the world around us. This unquestioning acceptance of technology, and the ignorance it represents, is what Ems’

Amish communities are fighting against. She is sure to state that the Amish are not universally antitechnology, and that many of her interlocutors understand its importance for economic prosperity and business development. At the same time, the high value placed on family and community means the Amish continue to negotiate their consumption of technology and digital media to preserve these morals.

The first step in this selective engagement is understanding both the functionality and social impacts of these tools. The pros and cons of a new technology are debated among high-ranking church officials before being proposed to church members, who then share their thoughts on implementation. Potential consequences are discussed extensively in terms of the threat they pose to Amish values. A common concern among contemporary Amish is not simply how an individual uses technology but the person they become when they are using it. An example would be someone interrupting family dinner to answer the phone. Although seemingly harmless, this action defies some of the values that the Amish hold most dear. Family time is sacred time. Thus, the adoption of a telephone not only threatens the sanctuary of the family home but also the very character of the individual who engages with it.

Ems describes new Amish attitudes toward technology in terms of a "switch." While they were previously able to hold off technology with geographical boundaries, the influence of tech today extends beyond the physical and proves all-encompassing. The "switch" method allows Amish individuals and communities to selectively adopt technology as they see fit. Switches can be "closed" to prevent unwanted information from entering and "opened" when technologies have the potential to benefit livelihoods. Amish communities are choosing to adopt technology on their own terms through things like considerate, intentional use and technical modification. In *What Technology Wants*, Kevin Kelly (2011) posits that the Amish are expert "hackers," repurposing other items to fit their own goals. This occurs throughout *Virtually Amish* as Ems' subjects reconfigure non-Amish technology to fit their community standards, often replacing electronic power with another energy source. These exceptionally creative modifications are invented by Amish business owners and farmers alike, many with only a formal 8th-grade education.

The idea of the Amish as "hackers" relates to another key element of Ems' research: the critical act of making. Creation is an integral part of Amish history, going back to the traditional occupation of farming. Farming exemplifies the glory of creation, the act of raising something from a simple seed to nourishment for the community. Additionally, the toilsome nature of farming furthers Amish concepts of morality and virtue being rooted in hard work. For Ems' interlocutors, there is value in effort, not efficiency. This is an idea diametrically opposed to many of the features of modern technology. Today, a product is valued both on its efficiency and its ability to make the consumer's life easier. This is the type of ease that the Amish work to rid their technology of, oftentimes making their products intentionally difficult to use (within the realm of reason). The addition of these "roadblocks" help dissuade flippant technological use, like someone mindlessly scrolling through their phone. These "hackers" who modify non-Amish machinery are reaffirming their Amish identity by rejecting a culture of consumption and celebrating their own culture of making. In a more personal sense, the act of making not only affirms Amish identity but also physically embodies values like love and care. One of Ems' subjects describes how his wife makes their bread from scratch and prays for those who are going to consume it as she kneads the dough; he contends that he could get a loaf of bread easily at the grocery store, but that meaning would be lost without the work of his

wife's loving hands. The same love is found in the clothes she sews for their children and in the wheelchair another Amish interlocutor makes for a disabled friend from scratch.

I find *Virtually Amish's* strength to be in its interviews. Getting real-life dialogue from Ems' Amish subjects produces some of the book's most compelling arguments, as the reader is able to witness these values in action. By accessing church clergy and prominent leaders in the community, Ems provides insight into how formal laws are created in a more insular, "off the grid" population. Additionally, her engagement with various forms of media provides a vast resource for critical analysis; Ems does not rely on interviews alone and uses artifacts from Amish life to enrich her argument. An example would be *The Plain Communities Business Exchange* (TPCBE), a newspaper geared specifically toward Anabaptist groups like the Amish and Mennonites. Throughout *Virtually Amish*, Ems analyzes various stories and advertisements in TPCBE. This analysis adds another dimension to her argument, as these concrete, visual sources provide insight into the ways these communities adopt a capitalistic system on their own terms.

As for weaknesses, I found the lack of female voices in Ems' ethnography to be a drawback; however, this was an issue she acknowledges within the first few pages of the book. As an outsider, her access was limited to respected Amish men in the community and established church members. Her limited ability to meet with Amish women is understandable but still something I wish could have somehow been explored. In that same vein, I would have appreciated younger interlocutors to add some generational diversity to her ethnography. As younger people are generally more technologically connected (and for the Amish, the ones going on *rumspringa* and experiencing the outside world) it would have been enlightening to hear their thoughts on how technology has affected their communities. These groups, women and young adults, would provide an interesting dimension to future research on Amish modernization. Overall, Ems' work is immensely valuable for the general population. Using the Amish as a template, she proposes that we can all work to create healthier habits in our technological consumption. Through awareness of surveillance capitalism and biases in technological design, we can become vigilant consumers and avoid the mindless usage her subjects preach against.

References

- Borgmann, A. (1987). *Technology and the character of contemporary life: A philosophical inquiry*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kelly, K. (2011). *What technology wants*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs.