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IDSE 102 Position Paper 3

# Technology is not neutral.

Describe the changing nature of designed culture, based on the increased presence and ubiquity — and acceptance — of technology in our lives; describe the difference between applying this technology in the US, as compared to in a developing country.

Neil Postman argues that when we are constantly bombarded with information in a world without spiritual or intellectual order, we have no framework by which to assess what is believable, or even what is surprising. In today's world, we put our trust in Science and Technology itself without questioning how that technology affects our lives, our relationships, and our culture.

What follows are two discussions — about the Amish and cyberbullying. The Amish use a spiritual framework that guides how they think about and interact with technology. Looking critically at their framework gives us clues into how technology has changed our culture and offers some possible solutions for how we can assess technology in our own lives.

When we start to get a sense of what our culture looks like now, we can start to see how the attributes of the world we live in now (which dictates and is dictated by the types of technology we use) add up to a perfect incubator for phenomenon like cyberbullying.

The recurrent theme is that while technology can be used for both good and bad (and the judgment of good and bad depends largely on your own worldview), that does not make it neutral. It is changing the world we live in, and the world we live in dictates the need for certain types of new technology. Without reflection and critical discourse about technology, culture, and us, we will get carried away along this wave toward a society that we never intended to create: one that is quicker, more “connected”, and more invasive than is good for us.

## The Amish can do it; Why can't we?

While some perceive the Amish as rejecting technology altogether, in actuality, they have formalized methods for considering the effects of any new technology before allowing it to negatively affect their way of life.

"The Amish feel that Gelassenheit [submission to the will of God] should permeate every facet of their existence, and even be apparent in their material possessions. Consequently, they will only selectively use modern technologies. As seen in the symbols of Gelassenheit, the Amish believe that using lanterns and the buggies typifies their lifestyle of simplicity and modesty. Any technology that does not uphold the Gelassenheit principles is banned from use."<sup>1</sup>

While some minor technology (like the rubber band) sneak in under the radar, anything that is perceived to pose a threat to the Amish society is reviewed at a semi-annual meeting called the Ordnungsgemeel, where "both church leaders and members debate upon the ramifications that a technology will have if accepted into the Amish society. After the debate, a vote is taken."

The Amish use 14 cultural regulators to determine whether or not to accept a technology:<sup>2</sup>

1. Economic Impact (increased profits allowed)
2. Visible Change
3. Relationship to Ordnung (community's list of rules)
4. Adaptability to Ordnung
5. Ties to Sacred Symbols
6. Linkage to Secular Symbols
7. Threat to Sacred Ritual
8. Limitations
9. Interaction with Outsiders
10. External Influence (opens avenues of influence from

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.shawcreekgeneralstore.com/amish\\_article1.htm](http://www.shawcreekgeneralstore.com/amish_article1.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Kraybill, Donald. *The Riddle of Amish Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989, p.86.

modern life)

11. Threat to Family Solidarity
12. Ostentatious Display
13. Size (enlarges the scale of things)
14. Promotes Individualism

For instance:

"Automobiles are not often used because they degrade the Gelassenheit principle of a small, close-knit community. The Amish fear, with good reason, that these modern transportation technologies will cause them to spread apart, much like most modern American families. Also, the Amish fear that the automobile will promote competition among themselves. They worry that the car will become a status symbol and promote vanity, which is in direct violation of the Gelassenheit value of modesty. The telephone is banned from the household because, much like the automobile, it promotes a separation of community. Instead of taking a carriage or walking to a friend's house, the Amish feel that they would be tempted to simply stay home and speak on the phone. In order to uphold Gelassenheit, many modern technologies have been banned from regular use."

## Technology's impact on culture

The Amish list of cultural regulators do give us clues into how technology changes, have changed, and will continue to change our society. These are certainly predictable changes to consider when introducing technology into developing places as a designer.

8. Technology which have specific limits are more likely to be adopted by the Amish than those which have open-ended usage. As things leave the physical realm, they also lose inherent boundaries that limit their use. (e.g. battery power, physical distance, accessibility, time limits, etc.)

- 9 & 10. Technology like phones and the internet connect us to other people, media, different cultures,

and larger entities. Multiple voices and perspectives enter our lives.

11. Technology enables us to have a wider network of connections, thus deteriorating the strength of small, tight-knit communities.

12 & 14. We live in a consumptive culture where what we buy, wear, use, and carry defines who we are.

We use items as status symbols, and as more technology becomes commodified (divorced from function and equated with status), the more the brand of technology you use will rise to prominence.

13. Technology enables scale; scale inhibits the values found in staying small.

To many of us, these by-products and effects (or even goals of technology) are seen as positives: technology allows me to connect to more people in more places; it increases my access to more of the world with fewer constraints; it empowers my individuality and helps me to show off my progress in the world to the world.

As with all things, however, there are trade-offs. We give up certain things when we embrace the connectivity of technology in today's globalized world: solidarity, community, time, and control. We are trying to adapt and find replacements for some of these losses, but we have only found shallow substitutes. For example, we seek out online "communities" and make ourselves feel better by evangelizing the idea that the internet actually fosters community through simplifying the process of finding others with like interests and worldviews. Besides being a counterproductive idea of community (I should only hang out with those who are just like me?), an online "community" loses many of the human connection of a physical community.

If we play this out, it looks something like this: My human need for connection stays the same. Because technology has eroded some of the channels for connection in my analog life, I seek them out in my digital life (since many of us now lead digital lives by default).

Feeling unfulfilled by the lesser quality of connection I find in my digital life, I add quantity of interactions to compensate. This instead leads to information overload, while I still feel unfulfilled about my quality of connections — although I still may not know why. I attribute my unfulfillment to my information overload in my digital life. I may try to unplug and get offline for a little while and have some analog experiences. Maybe this helps, maybe this makes me feel better, but unless I get lucky and come across some quality human connection in my analog experiences, I'm in the same boat when I replug. I have treated some symptoms, I may have even treated some co-occurring factors, but I still don't know what's truly bothering me. And instead of spending my time on asking the right questions, I have spent my limited resources focusing on the wrong problems. My technology usage and even my coping mechanisms for technology overload are distracting me from answering important life questions, as Postman alluded to.

## Perfect Storm

We now live in a culture where community (and all the inherent support structures community entails) is harder to come by. It's also now easier than ever to both plug into and become involved in online networks of information sharing; the barriers to sending information online are becoming more and more minimal (thanks to the legions of professionals and designers who are working to ensure that very goal). It is problematic, however, when what is being sent involves negative or malicious information about other human beings—if the sender does not have enough judgment, empathy, or technological understanding to fully comprehend the consequences. And the problem is compounded since we all live with more distractions, eroded support systems, and less awareness; the target of that malicious information does not have enough judgment, support, or technological understanding to fully deal with the consequences. It's a perfect storm for phenomena like cyberbullying to emerge.

## Cyberbullying

A recent Time Magazine article called "Bullied to Death?" (October 18, 2010) resonated with me because I have been thinking about many of its themes: technology, privacy, community support. But upon rereading the article, it doesn't actually say much about any of its themes. It definitely glosses over what cyberbullying actually looks and feels like; as a reader, I don't get a sense of the viciousness and intensity of cyberbullying that could drive a teen to suicide. And the article ends with a complete dud in terms of action items, movement toward solutions, or even a good resolution for an article spurred by four recent suicides:

"For parents, a good strategy is to show no fear—not to be bullied, in effect, by new technology. 'I tell parents all the time; the machines are not the issue. The behavior is the issue,' says Jennings of the Obama Administration. 'Hateful behavior is never appropriate, no matter whether it happens online or in person. The idea that one is different from the other is the major problem. In short, it is incivility, wherever it occurs, that launches what can become a vicious bullying cycle.'"

The interesting thing for me is if we probe this further in a few different directions:

- Role of Technology
- Role of Research
- Role of Design

## Role of Technology

I think to start to judge the role of technology in an issue such as cyberbullying, one must look both:

- 1) into the details of how technology implicitly enables a more vicious type of bullying and gossip-mongering, since it is built on the principles of connectivity, speed, and networks, and
- 2) at the larger question of how technology has changed our culture, the way we interact with each other,

and how we communicate that has pushed us into changed social structures where support for targets of bullying have eroded even further.

## Technology's Inherent Features/Faults

Our computer and mobile technologies exacerbate and scale (publically) the effects of bullying on a target. Before the days of Facebook and text-messaging and exponential social networks, maybe a piece of gossip or a videotape might have been passed on a handful of times, dozens at worse. For the target, this still sucks, but it's human-scale and manageable; you can regain your privacy over time as the gossip news cycle moves on to other things. In this day of cyberbullying, one carefully-planned or one careless push of a button can release the same piece of gossip to hundreds, thousands at worst. And it's much easier for the information to jump from person to person because our technology is built to allow for easy sharing and re-tweeting and linking. And there can be high-fidelity pieces of evidence attached. And everything lives on in the memory of the internet to be potentially dredged up again and again. For the target, this has grown out of control; it's completely overwhelming and no longer manageable, and any semblance of privacy has been shot to hell.

It's already invasive enough when roommate is spying on you with a video camera, but at least that's human scale. You have options in dealing with your roommate, and that piece of tape. But when it's a webcam and that video gets posted online, the problem explodes into tech scale. You don't know who's seen it, how to get rid of it, where it lives, and how long it will live on. You don't know what recourse you should take to deal with so many unknown variables in an increasingly complex and opaque world. If the question these days is how do you manage your information?...the targets of cyberbullying are dealing with an extreme case of how do you manage your information overload when it's defining who you are in a negative way that makes you want to literally kill yourself?

Here's the tricky part as designers who have some responsibility in all of this: The same things that we design to make a user's experience quicker, or easier, or simpler...make a cyberbully's job quicker, easier, simpler. Of course as a designer for say, a social networking website, I'm going to make it easier for friends to repost their friend's links of interest. And of course neither the designer nor the social networking site are directly responsible for how a cyberbully chooses to use these built-in features. The feature will not be removed because it is "neutral" and because removing it would punish all the people who were using the feature for perfectly acceptable reasons.

The feature may be considered "neutral" in that it did not cause the cyberbullying, but I don't think the technology is neutral. If we take a step back and look at how technology has played a role in shaping our current lives, it becomes very suspicious (and the Amish would agree). Because of the technology in our lives and the inherent qualities that they bring to our interactions—which has molded the ways we think and the ways we act—we now live more quickly (in that we have less time to think about the actions we need to keep making), more easily (in that we avoid difficult things), and more simply (in that we can ignore and struggle less with gnarly problems). People automatically assume these are good things, but it's time to take a step back and have critical discourse about where we want to fall on the following spectra, instead of just barreling toward the right along with everyone else:

Slow <-----> Fast

Local <-----> Global

Disconnected <-----> Connected

Collective Good <-----> Individual Good

Depth <-----> Breadth

For instance, I get the sense that because of the speed and access we have to so much information, many of us

tend to operate in a constant state of information overload. This information overload has numbed our sense of connection with true experiences, and we're now immune to deeper feelings. Therefore, on some level, we're just conditioned to be on the lookout for the next laugh, the next thrill, the next spike in our now ho-hum days. This certainly adds fuel to bully-like behavior: how can I release what information that will get the most reaction out of the people I'm trying to impress? This becomes the goal of the action rather than the added value to the overall community.

### The Possible Role of Research or Design

The *Time* article talks about how there aren't good numbers about how common bullying is, or not having "great data" to recognize warning signs in bullying cases. Even if we did have these numbers, how would that help us prevent bullying? Having more psychology research about who is more likely to become a bully won't cure the problems of bullying—now or in the future. Even diagnosing cases of "bullying" is fraught with uncertainty (since both bullies and targets can be very good at hiding what's really going on)—and doesn't do much to help the target(s) in the meantime.

I am not suggesting that design research would be the only good answer here, but I do think it is a viable option. If we treat cyberbullying as a design problem, we would immediately start to ask whether we are asking the right questions. Typical responses to cyberbullying these days involve a combination of statistical research, awareness campaigns in schools, counseling for targets, and trying to remedy the technological aspects of the problem. These are pretty much the same methods that have always been employed to deal with school bullying, and obviously they are not working if bullying is still a problem—and getting drastically worse with the addition of technology into the fray. Design thinking and design research methods could help us tease out some of the root causes of the problem; to identify opportunity areas for technology to help create community and

support structures rather than deteriorate them; to bring together experts from across a variety of related fields (tech, schools, psychology, sociologists, students, parents) and to get them talking.

### Why is it so hard to 'be a friend'?

A core message of the "Courage to Stand" interactive performance is that as a courageous bystander, one of the more powerful acts of good you can do in a bullying situation is to befriend the target.

It sounds so simple, and yet why is it so difficult? It's not the single cure for bullying (and definitely not the cure for suicides due to bullying) because there are many other factors involved in any person's psychology. And while one could argue that technology is playing some role in making this harder (since technology is making it easier to connect with and only connect with those who are already similar to you), I'm not going to go there because the causality is tenuous.

But here's a radical idea: what if design education in K-12 schools also taught empathy as well as critical thinking and problem-solving? If we stipulate that part of the design process involves ethnographic research (such as contextual inquiries and participatory interviews) where you have to actually get to know and try to understand other people around you, that automatically forces you to put yourselves in someone else's shoes. You're constantly forced to reframe the world from another person's eyes, and maybe all of those small acts of looking and insight build up character muscles as well as brain muscles.

Something like cyberbullying is a complex problem. I'm not sure who is responsible for what actions to mitigate this problem, but here is what my gut says:

- Communities need to redefine, establish, uphold, reinforce social norms, civility, respect, empathy — in both physical communities + online communities, in real life + online. They first need to understand technology to define its norms and civility codes.
- Even though kids are growing up with technology, they need to learn about technology, its inherent qualities, how technology shapes their lives, and the consequences of their online actions. Design as the “new liberal art of technology,” anyone? (Buchanan)
- Since true learning comes with experiences over information (Dewey and Borgmann's return to focal activities): Less tech, more real-world quality experiences, more conversations = more empathy, more learning, more better.
- Designers need to create frameworks in which to judge the impact of their technology. Whether this is a list like the Amish's cultural regulators, critical discourse among their peers and non-peers, or just increased transparency and awareness and follow-through of their designed artifacts...doesn't matter as long as they can step back and question their own assumptions, neé society's assumptions which they have inherited as their own: do we really want our information faster, more profitable, more connected, more accessible? It's not a yes or no answer, but it's a question that should be asked more often.