Sinful Network or Divine Service: Competing Meanings of the Telephone in Amish Country

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The coming of the telephone to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, captured popular attention and prompted local journalists to marvel at the power of this new medium. The county was home to enthusiastic promoters who founded and developed fourteen Bell-affiliated and independent telephone companies from 1898 to 1912. Those boosting telephone service appealed to farmers particularly: "The telephone is one of the most profitable business agencies that a farmer can employ," wrote one journalist in a small town newspaper. In addition to keeping farmers "in constant communication with the markets," telephony "provides a sitting room for the community where families can assemble and discuss the events of the day without the inconvenience of travel or loss of time, and in sickness and emergencies, it renders a divine service."

This metaphor of divine service likely troubled Old Order Mennonite and Amish residents of the county. As farmers, they appreciated the potential benefits of telephone access, but they took measure of the telephone from a unique perspective. An anti-telephone tract that circulated throughout the region urged that while "the telephone seems to be handy in many ways for people to know everything quickly," such knowledge was a worldly thing, making the telephone "a sinful network." Despite the promises trumpeted by telephone promoters, Old Order Mennonite and Amish people had grave misgivings about the impact of telephony. One Mennonite man recalls an elderly father scolding, "There goes the devil's wires."

Divine service or sinful network? The contrasting characterizations of the telephone suggest that the meaning of telephony was disputed in the early years of the twentieth century within the particular contexts of Lancaster County. Accounts of new media often fail to acknowledge fully such disputed meanings. As Carolyn Marvin argues, the study of new media should approach media not as fixed objects with homogeneous effects, but as "constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication." The different responses of particular social groups
help to reveal “issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed.”

Marvin’s vocabulary of inside and outside, of authority and belief holds particular resonance when considering religious communities. This chapter describes the “telephone troubles” among the Old Order Mennonites and Amish. These painful, divisive debates about “who may speak [on the phone and] who may not” rumbled through the communities and severed some members from their churches. The “telephone troubles” provide a window into the dynamic interactions between new media and culture amid social and technological change. In particular, Old Order resistance to telephony, which emerged in the course of the troubles, demonstrates the role of new media in the ongoing formation of identities. On one level, telephonic communication put the religious community in jeopardy by remaking the practices of its separation from the larger world of which it was part. Old Order Mennonites and Old Order Amish certainly saw it that way when they decried a sinful network. On another level, however, the question regarding telephones formed only one part of an ongoing interrogation of the character and role of communication generally in the life of the religious community. The telephone helped mark but did not itself alone foment questions regarding the privileging of domestic, local, and oral communications, the habits of correspondence among far-flung groups of believers and their elders or leaders, or the much debated practice of excommunication as a form of social control.

If telephony in rural America was uniquely shaped by “the socioeconomic geography of agriculture, the strong cooperative tradition in many regions, the long-standing customs of visiting and sharing labor,” and “the gendered division of labor on the farm,” in Lancaster County these forces were themselves shaped by religious contexts. Mennonite and Amish people, whether they used, adapted, or fully resisted the new medium, acted in keeping with the identity of their community as a sort of switchboard, a crossing point, for identities that were at once deeply religious, necessarily local, and self-consciously rural and agrarian.

The Old Order Repertoire

By the 1880s, the Mennonites and Amish were distinguished by their German dialect, plain dress, and nonconformist practices and were respected as skillful and hard-working farmers. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Amish across the United States gradually divided into two groups, the Amish Mennonites or “Church” Amish (progressives who built meeting houses for worship) and the Old Order Amish or “House Amish” (traditionalists). Lancaster County’s Amish settlement, the oldest in North America, was a stronghold of traditionalism. The Amish maintained their use of the German language, social exclusion of excommunicated members (shunning), use of horse and buggy for transportation, and worship in homes.

The Mennonites also differed across a traditional and progressive continuum. In 1893, Bishop Jonas Martin led traditionalists out of the main body of the Mennonite church to form the Old Order Mennonites. To an outsider in 1880, Amish and Mennonite plain garb made them appear indistinguishable. But Mennonite adoption of Sunday schools and participation in mission activity, along with the adoption of the English language, reflected a fundamental shift in worldview to those who claimed a hold on tradition. My focus here is on two German-speaking, horse and buggy, Old Order groups who suffered divisions over the telephone and who thrive today: the Old Order Amish and the Old Order (Groffdale Conference) Mennonites.

Scholars analyzing the development of Old Order movements within the Amish and Mennonite communities at the dawn of the twentieth century argue that the notion of Gelassenheit captures the essence of Old Order social repertoire. Gelassenheit is a term used by early Anabaptists to communicate the ideal of yielding completely and unselfishly to the will of God. It means submission—yielding to higher authority—to God, the church community, elders, ministers, parents, and the tradition. In practice, Gelassenheit demands obedience, humility, submission, thrift, and simplicity. One “gives up” or “gives in” in deference to another for the sake of community. Gelassenheit is the standard for social relationships both within and beyond the group.

Faith, in the spirit of Gelassenheit, is not expressed in words. The church is not a set of doctrines. Rather, in the Old Order view, faith is expressed in the “way of life.” The community is the expression of faith in the world, and eternal life is attained through the maintenance of the redemptive community—small, rooted in the land, mindful of its traditions, nonconformist, and separate from the world. Membership in the church entails submission to the Ordnung, or code of conduct. Prior to joining the church, new members are instructed in the content of the Confession of Faith and the Ordnung. When they join, they promise to submit to the congregation and its Ordnung for the rest of their lives. They are reminded of the cost of breaking their vow: They can be excommunicated and shunned. The Ordnung functions as a means of regulating change while maintaining essential community values. When the congregation faces new issues, the leaders and members discuss it. As consensus develops, the position is “grafted into the Ordnung.”
At the turn of the twentieth century as well as today, communication among the Older Order Amish and Mennonites was infused with a spirit of Gelassenheit and practiced through community rituals of worship, silence, work, and visiting that were anchored in the home. Patterns of communication built and maintained strong, primary relationships within the circle of church life. Even when Old Order people interacted with their “English” neighbors, their dress, dialect, and church membership reminded them where they belonged. With the arrival of telephones, new ways of communicating threatened to change the face-to-face character of communication and orient communication away from the home toward the outside world.

**Telephone Service in Lancaster County**

Although Bell Telephone service was established in Lancaster in 1879, it was not until the expiration of key Bell patents in 1893 that competing companies were founded in Lancaster and the surrounding rural areas. By 1898, the Independent Telephone Company competed head to head for city subscribers and wooed rural subscribers who were already clamoring for service, but were underserved by Bell.

Rural areas were also served by a variety of smaller organizations both formal and informal. Farmers in some areas organized their own private lines, stringing wire from fence post to fence post, linking four to six neighbors on a single party line. In 1898, a village newspaper reported: “In many parts of the country farmers have established among themselves a telephone system covering eight or ten miles of wire, the wire used being barbed wire fences. The middle wire of the fence is used, and the farmers are able to converse with each other without difficulty, thus relieving a part of the lonesomeness which forms a chief objection to farm life.”

Hundreds of farmers’ lines were organized throughout the countryside in the early years. In some cases, groups of local farmers and businesses organized to build a local line and later petitioned for connection with a larger company. In other cases, local parties formally organized and chartered a company to provide local and long distance service.

By 1899, New Holland and the surrounding communities had access to Independent lines as well as Bell lines. During 1899, the Independent Company ran lines from Lancaster to Ephrata, Intercourse, Gap, Hinkletown, Blue Ball, East Earl, and Weaverland—towns in the heart of the Old Order Mennonite settlement. By 1900, Independent lines also extended into the Amish settlement in the southern part of the county. In response to vigorous independent competition in rural markets, Bell liberalized its interconnection policies. By 1910, more independent telephone companies were interconnected with Bell than remained outside the system. By 1912, ten different telephone companies provided service to Lancaster county. Competition for local subscribers was intense as companies vied for loyal customers through coverage and advertisements in the pages of local newspapers.

Lancaster County experienced rapid and vigorous telephone development in the years between 1900 and 1912. These local telephone companies were organized, not by outsiders, but by the leading farmers and businessmen in local towns and villages, including Amish Mennonites, Mennonites, and at least one Old Order Mennonite. In 1902, a majority of the organizers of the Conestoga Telephone and Telegraph Company to the east of New Holland were members of the Conestoga Amish Mennonite congregation. The Enterprise Telephone and Telegraph Company, also organized in 1902, included seven Mennonites and one Old Order Mennonite on its board. The Intercourse Telephone and Telegraph Company, founded in 1909 to compete with Enterprise, also included Mennonites on its board.

When the telephone debates came to a head within the Old Order Mennonite community between 1905 and 1907 and within the Old Order Amish community in 1909 and 1910, Old Order people had access to both Bell and Independent services for local and long distance service.

**Divine Service**

To proponents in Lancaster County at the turn of the century, telephone ownership served as a mark of the progressive farmer or the efficient rural businessman, doctor, or lawyer. The pages of one weekly village newspaper, the New Holland Clarion, hailed the telephone for providing efficient access to current information: market reports, weather reports, and transportation schedules. The telephone facilitated doing business by preventing unnecessary trips to town and handling emergencies quickly. Editors promoted telephone service for its potential contributions to the growth, profits, and efficiency of local businesses.

Telephone company advertising in the village weekly newspapers amplified these themes by emphasizing the value of the telephone in times of emergency: accidents, fires, illness, stolen horses, mad dogs, robbers, and threatening weather. One Enterprise Telephone Company advertisement provided nine reasons that readers, both men and women, need a telephone. “Some of the Reasons You Need a Telephone” begins with “So your wife can use it daily, to order her meat and groceries. You can get at once in-
communication with your home when you are away. . . . If every clock in the house stops, you can get correct time from central.” The list includes summoning help in cases of illness, fires, or accidents, facilitating social arrangements, and obtaining market prices. The copy also claims, “You can increase your circle of desirable acquaintances as a telephone in the home gives you a social distinction in the country.” Indeed, one writer claimed that the telephone could actually lengthen life: “By use of the telephone, more work can be crowded into one day, . . . increasing the length of one’s life, as after all, what really counts is what we actually accomplish.”

As telephone promoters realized that women were an important market, illustrated advertisements began showing women enjoying the "wonderful comfort and pleasure" of rural connections. "I just called up to ask you over this evening," the copy reads. Not only did the telephone help this farm family save money, it also makes it possible to be in contact with friends “only ten seconds away” (figure 6.1). Another advertisement models visiting by telephone. The copy reads, “How pleasant it is to make a telephone visit to relatives or friends. The distance only adds enchantment to your chat.”

For its proponents, the telephone was associated with profit, comfort, and pleasure. It widened the world for rural people, providing potential connections to centers of power, information, and culture. The telephone was an instrument of pleasure and progress, a mark of success, and even, on occasion, a medium of divine service. One telephone advertisement sums up its meaning: “The old order of things has passed. To be modern is to have a Bell Telephone. To have a telephone is to live” (figure 6.2).

Old Order people were not blind to the practical benefits of the telephone, but they were deeply suspicious of its social and spiritual implications. What really counted for them was not defined in terms of the modern world or personal accomplishment. And to characterize the telephone as divine was unthinkable.

**The Sinful Network: The Old Order Mennonite Debates**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Bishop Jonas Martin was the acknowledged leader of the Old Order Mennonites in Pennsylvania and had wide influence among Old Order
Mennonite groups across North America. His correspondence with other conservative bishops and ministers in Ontario, Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, and Pennsylvania reveals the heated and sometimes personal terms of their debates. An antitelephone tract circulated among them at the turn of the century characterizes the telephone as a “sinful network” that leads to association with “unbelievers.” The anonymous writer claims that telephone conversations amount to “vain jangling” or “useless talking” that detract from “spiritual” activities. Finally, the writer exhorts, “Do you trust this network to save a life? . . . Look to Jesus for all you need.”

Old Order rules of separation limited members’ associations with persons from outside the church, lest they be tempted to behave as worldly people behaved and to adopt worldly values. Rules preventing business associations beyond the church protected members from the tensions of divided loyalties and from participation in the legal system. Amish and Mennonite church disciplines of the day also prohibited members from swearing oaths, but State annual reports on telephone company activity required company directors to “swear” to the truth of these reports by their signatures. This presented an ethical problem for church members. Directors of the Enterprise Company crossed out the word “swear” and wrote in the word “affirm” to address the conflict between church rules and business expectations. Many Mennonite and Amish congregations discouraged or prohibited stock ownership.

Not only were business associations potentially tempting, but the private nature of communication by telephone appeared to hold temptations as well. “Spooning” and “listening in” were socially recognized practices associated with telephone use, particularly among young people and women. Neither practice conformed to Old Order expectations of humble and submissive speaking and living.

But perhaps the greatest temptation of the telephone was its challenge to faith in God. To place trust in a machine for protection, as the telephone proponents advocated, seriously undermined recognition that faith in God alone was sufficient. In Ontario, Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa, ministers were divided over whether to permit their members to own telephones and telephone company stock. In the years 1905 to 1909, some Old Order Mennonites had telephones in their homes and owned stock in telephone companies. In Lancaster County, for example, Old Order member Noah Nolt owned stock in the Enterprise Telephone Company of New Holland and served on the board of directors in 1905. Nevertheless, Bishop Jonas Martin preached from the pulpit against telephone ownership. The letters from the ministers who sought his advice reflect the great tension generated by the issue of the telephone. In some congregations in the Midwest, members...
who had telephones were prohibited from taking communion, an action just short of excommunication. In other congregations, members were expected to remove their telephones before they could participate in communion.

In March 1905, Bishop Martin received a letter from Lancaster County natives who had moved to Iowa. In addition to descriptions of health, crops, and weather, the writer mentions difficulties in the local congregation over the telephone. He reports that the congregation had not held communion for two years because of dissension over the telephone. Ministers in Iowa were against telephone ownership, but some of their members were in favor of the new technology.

Although Bishop Martin preached against telephones, the Pennsylvania churches had not ruled them out completely. Martin did take a stand against the ownership of telephone stock, but his position was confusing. Those on both sides of the issue pressed Martin for clarification of his position. In August 1905, Martin wrote to Ohio leaders that he was "very sorry that the things are so badly understood." He reports, "I am a witness against them. But we have not cut them off." Martin explains that he hopes that by exercising love, rather than drastic measures of separation, members could be convinced to give up their telephones. Thus he did not prevent telephone owners from joining the church or taking part in communion in his district.

The bishop's extensive correspondence illustrates the dynamics of the debates taking place. Both sides appealed to the faith of the fathers in support of their arguments. Proponents argued that maintenance of peace and forbearance were the highest goals. Furthermore, they resisted younger leaders who ignored the counsel of their elders in the church. Those opposed to the telephone felt just as strongly that they were protecting the tradition of the fathers by rejecting an "instrument of strife" that brought pride and worldliness into the church. Advocates of toleration diagnosed the problem to be lack of commitment to love and peace within the community, while opponents of compromise saw the telephone itself as an instrument of discord. Old Order Mennonites were thus torn between peace and purity.

The Pennsylvania churches tried to find a middle ground. Bishop Jonas Martin continued to preach against telephone ownership, and his public desire was to make telephone ownership a test of membership. But unlike his Indiana cousin, Jonas Martin was unwilling to override the judgment of his elders in church leadership. At the spring ministers' conference in April 1907, Martin finally made a formal concession to telephone ownership after the eldest and most conservative deacon in the district pleaded with him to avoid a church split. Deacon Daniel Burkholder himself opposed telephone ownership and agreed with Jonas Martin's position. But Burkholder argued that Martin had led one division (over Sunday schools) and that was enough for one lifetime. Judging from the developments in Ohio and Indiana, Burkholder felt that taking a strong antitelephone position would split the Pennsylvania churches, and so the Pennsylvania conference crafted a compromise.

The ruling announced on April 5, 1907, tried to satisfy both the progressives and the conservatives by establishing specific conditions for telephone use: 1) church members could not enter hotels to use telephones, 2) church leaders could not own telephones, and 3) those nominated for leadership positions in the future could not own telephones. The agreement stated that while the leaders did not support telephones and felt members were better off without them, members who owned telephones could participate in communion and would not be excommunicated. In effect, the ruling limited the pool of potential leaders to those who were most conservative, or at least those who were willing to give up the telephone if called to ministry. Church leaders hoped that the telephone could be "preached away." In order to keep all members connected to the community, membership had to be defined to include those who had fallen to the temptation of telephones.

The Pennsylvania Ruling, as it is called, proved confusing to many. Jonas Martin's antitelephone attitude was well known, and those who expected him to support a hard line were disappointed. Others took comfort in the compromise. By submitting to his elders, against his personal feelings, Jonas Martin had averted a major division in his own district. One local minister, Jacob B. Weaver, wanted to exclude completely the telephone, believing that members should not be allowed to "partake in such a worldly thing." Weaver was so distraught over the compromise that he never preached or attended church services again. On the other hand, an Old Order Mennonite called "Gentleman" Harry Martin refused to sell his telephone stock. As a result, he was expelled and later joined a nearby Lancaster Conference Mennonite church.

The Ohio and Indiana groups suffered a major division over the telephone a month later on May 17, 1907. John Martin, along with ten ministers and four deacons, walked out of the spring meeting of the Ohio and Indiana Conference in 1907. While the majority of the leadership followed John Martin out of the conference, two-thirds of the Indiana laity followed those elders in favor of toleration.

Some Old Order Mennonites were willing to risk church division over their understanding of the telephone. They worried over the influences the telephone might bring into the home and the church. Accommodating those who wanted the telephone out of
personal weakness was tantamount to leading them into temptation. The purity of the church and the home was at stake. Strong desires for purity clashed with desire for "bearing one another in love." John W. Martin defied the elders in Indiana for the sake of purity. His cousin, Jonas Martin, submitted to Pennsylvania elders for the sake of peace.

The Pennsylvania Ruling was observed by the Groffdale Conference of the Old Order Mennonites for eighty-seven years. In 1994, after three years of debate, Old Order Mennonite leaders declined to enforce the telephone prohibition for clergy in the 1907 Ruling. A small group who objected to the change left the conference and formed new congregations. While the main body of Old Order Mennonites no longer observes the Pennsylvania Ruling, smaller groups in Pennsylvania and Missouri remain committed to the 1907 guidelines today.

"Putting Away" the Telephone: The Old Order Amish Troubles

Among the Old Order Amish, the telephone played a similar role to the one it played among the Old Order Mennonites. The Old Order Amish believe that the telephone was a principal issue behind the 1910 division of the Amish church that resulted in the loss of one fifth of its membership. Prior to 1910, Amish leaders had taken no firm position on the telephone, and some Amish families had telephones in their homes. According to oral sources, these farmers were linked to families in the immediate neighborhood by party lines, and possibly were not connected to organized telephone companies.

The Amish kept few written records of church matters, since information was passed down from generation-to-generation through face-to-face encounters. Thus, the story of the telephone debates comes primarily from the Amish oral tradition. Two themes are present in the oral accounts. One theme describes differences in willingness of Amish men to "put away" the telephone. Some church members were willing to give up their telephones in submission to the decision of the church leaders; others were not. The other theme features an account of difficulties that arose when women gossiping on a party line were overheard by the object of their gossip who was listening in on the conversation. "This made quite a stink," writes an Amish man; "then the Bishops and the ministers made out if that is the way they are going to be used we would better not have them."

Whether the catalyst was the gossip of the women or the stubbornness of the men, the dissension within the community had to be addressed before communion could be held. The telephone became one of the issues for examination at the fall 1909 ministers’ conference prior to communion. When local ministers could not come to consensus on several problems on the agenda, ministers from Mifflin county were brought in to moderate. In addition to the telephone question, oral sources suggest that disagreements about shunning and meeting houses were also on the agenda.

After joint consultations, the ministers announced their intentions to hold to the "old order" followed by their forefathers. Their statement at the fall 1909 meeting reiterated their commitment to the "old order" of the Lancaster Ruling. A small group who objected to the change left the conference and formed new settlements, announcing their intentions to withdraw if their more moderate views on shunning were not respected. According to an Amish publication, the telephone ban suggest that the telephone was not a necessity. The telephone was of "the world" and led to association with outsiders. Personal ownership of the telephone contributed to individualism and pride rather than humility. Furthermore, women were tempted to use it for gossip, which disrupted social harmony. In general, the use of the telephone did not conform to the time-honored principles of nonconformity and separation from the world. By their decision, Amish leaders reaffirmed and reapplied the tradition of the past to a challenge of the present. In the course of affirming the "old order," they excluded the telephone from the home. At the same time, they reiterated the costs of unfaithfulness — excommunication resulting in shunning.

Historians of the departing group, now called the Beachy Amish, attribute the split to its unwillingness to adhere to the strict application of shunning, in particular, the obligation to shun someone who left the Amish church to join a nearby Mennonite congregation. In the fall of 1909, thirty-five families, representing one fifth of the membership of the Lancaster settlement, announced their intentions to withdraw if their more moderate views on shunning were not respected. According to an Amish publication, the dissenters’ position was communicated in the form of an unequivocal "demand." The new group began holding its own services in 1910. In the years to come, the Beachy group adopted the telephone, the tractor, electricity, and automobiles. They also began meeting in church buildings instead of homes. All these practices were prohibited by the Old Order Amish Ordnung. Today, both sides remember the split as a painful separation.

Given the contrasting perspectives, Old Order Amish historians maintain that the telephone was the "handle" on which the division turned. Whether the issue was the
I text, where the often silent discourse of community occurred, and replaced it with phone service into their midst at the time of the "troubles." In the summer of 1909, several progressive, non-Amish citizens of Intercourse, the village in the heart of the Amish community, organized a telephone company with considerable fanfare in the local press. Several months after it organized, the company entered into agreements with the Bell system to connect with Bell trunk lines, thereby affording connections to Lancaster city and points across the county. By the fall of 1909, it was possible to connect local family lines to the "outside world." That same fall, the telephone issue came before church leaders for debate. The telephone was at their door, and it was no longer just local.

The Amish approach to technology has been one of selective adoption, determined on the basis of whether or not a particular innovation preserves or threatens community life. In the 1890s, for example, the grain binder was readily accepted and the Amish were among the first to own the new machine.47 Rules governing use of the telephone set precedents that made rejecting the use of electricity and technologies such as radio and television much easier. Telephone use itself has not been banned, but rather the installation and private ownership of a telephone in the home. In the intervening years, the Old Order Amish have modified the rules about telephone ownership in the face of economic change. Today telephones are found in or near many Amish businesses, although the ban on telephones in the home persists.48

The telephone was perceived as a threat because it entered the home at the heart of Amish faith and life, in essence, sacred space. The telephone stood as both a symbolic and a physical connection to the outside world, and it opened the home to outside influence and intrusion. This new technology removed communication from a face-to-face context, where the often silent discourse of community occurred, and replaced it with the potential for individual links with sources of information from outside. These new links were unmediated or filtered by the style, rhythms, and rituals of community life. Telephone use decontextualized communication and, thus the Old Order communicators.

The spirit of the telephone debates also posed a challenge to Old Order authority structures. Oral accounts on both sides of the debates describe "unwillingness to submit" to church leaders as part of the problem. This challenge to Gelassenheit could not be overlooked. For the Old Order Amish, the linking of the two issues—the telephone ban and social avoidance of wayward members (shunning)—stands as a decisive corrective for anyone who were tempted to set their sights too far beyond the context of community. The order of community had to be preserved, even at the cost of losing some members. The telephone debates show how the repertoire of a religious community can be tested by the introduction of a new medium. Old Order struggles demonstrate how culture shapes the meaning of new technology within the dynamic contexts of cultural self-definition. And the resistance of the Old Order Mennonites and Amish communities illustrates the efforts two groups have made to adapt a range of communication practices to the service of community values.

Notes

1. I reviewed the Ephrata Review (ER) from 1900 to 1914 and the New Holland Clarion (NHC) from 1883 to 1914 for coverage about the telephone. The quote is from ER 6 (November 1914): 9. The antitelephone tract was published along with other papers and letters of Old Order Mennonite bishop, Jonas Martin (1839–1925), by Amos B. Hoover, ed., The Jonas Martin Era (Denver, Penn.: Muddy Creek Farm Library, 1982), 811–812. Warren Weiler recounted the story about the "devil's wires" in a personal interview. Weiler's ancestors founded the Enterprise Telephone and Telegraph Company in 1902. Old Order informants are not identified at their requests.

2. Carolyn Marvin, When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 8, 4. In contrast to those who approach communication as transmission, I take a cultural approach, defining communication as a process through which humans symbolically construct meaningful worlds to live in. James Carey, Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) advocates a cultural approach to communication "directed not at the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time, not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (p. 18). Claude S. Fischer's America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) is a comprehensive sociological analysis of the coming of the telephone and the automobile, and includes an extensive bibliography of telephone research. See Lana Rakow, Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992) for analysis of gender and the telephone.

3. Ronald R. Kline, Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 40–41. See especially chapter 4 "(Re)Inventing the Telephone." Kline mentions resistance to the telephone ("relatively short lived and passive") [40].


8. For a more complete description of how rituals of worship, silence, work, and visiting order community life, see Diane Zimmerman Umble, Holding the Line: The Telephone in Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), chapter 3.

9. NHC 11 August 1911, 5.

10. Oral sources on the Beachy side of the debate suggest that even the splinter groups may have prohibited telephones in the home. In two cases, descendants of those who left the Old Order to join the Beachy side share with us that, in their parents’ lifetime, the Amish were prohibited from having telephones in the home.


12. Brief histories of the companies founded in Old Order regions, including the Conestoga Telephone and Telegraph Company, the Enterprise Telephone and Telegraph Company and the Intercourse Telephone and Telegraph Company, are covered in chapters 5 and 6 in Umble.
Order recall that their families asked the bishop for permission to have telephones in 1916 and in 1923. Those who tell the Beachy story argue that few people had telephones in those days. See Aaron S. Glick, "Pequea Amish Mennonite Church Twenty-fifth Anniversary," Mimeo, 1987. See also Elmer S. Yoder, The Beachy Amish Mennonite Fellowship Churches (Hartville, Ohio: Diakonia Ministries, 1987).

30. Cellular telephones pose a new challenge for Amish leaders. Because cell phones are easily concealed, it is difficult to know just how many are in use among the Amish.

When Thomas Edison began demonstrating the phonograph to eager audiences in 1878, he promoted the machine—and the American public received it—as an invention that would revolutionize print. The "speaking phonograph" or "talking machine," as it was first known, was able to record as well as to reproduce sound. (It would not be widely adopted as an amusement device for musical playback until the mid-1890s.) Throughout 1878 and for more than the decade to follow, phonographs seemed to offer an unprecedented, excitingly modern connection between aural experience and inscribed evidence, between talk and some new form of text. The recording surface was originally tinfoil. Air set in motion by the production of sound acted upon a diaphragm connected to a stylus; the stylus indented the foil to "capture" what the inventor Thomas Edison called "sounds hitherto fugitive" for later "reproduction at will."

At demonstrations throughout the United States and abroad during 1878, audiences greeted the phonograph with both enthusiasm and skepticism. On the one hand, they marveled at the unprecedented phenomenon of recorded sound (a machine that speaks!). Many, however, felt disappointment when, after all the hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding the device, the early, imperfect phonograph produced only faint sounds obscured by scratchy surface noise. But however mixed their reactions may have been, audiences at the phonograph demonstrations regularly and eagerly took scraps of tinfoil home with them when the lectures were over. This chapter pursues those souvenir scraps of indented foil. Those primitive records were clearly meaningful to the women and men who sought them and who were probably asked at the breakfast table the next morning, "What does it say?" Without the phonograph for playback, the tinfoil records of course said nothing. Yet for the people who brought them home, the very same records clearly said something.

These sheets of foil were talismans of print culture. They were pure "supplement," in the language of literary study today, illegible and yet somehow textual, public and inscribed. Although themselves neither written nor printed, their apprehension became a