

York College of Pennsylvania

The Veracity of Reality Television in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*The Amish Mafia Conspiracy*



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“I play all over the United States and can say ‘Lancaster, Pennsylvania’ anywhere and they will know where you are talking about. Isn’t that amazing?!”

~Suzanne Westenhofer

Conspiracy and secrecy generally move hand and hand. The two traits are necessary for a secret organization to exist. What this paper will examine is the result of technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to reveal what was once an esoteric organization to consumers of cable television programming. In an area of the world that once went unobserved, people are tuning in to view what mass media releases as the shocking esoteric lives of persons involved in a secret organization.

It is safe to assume that across the county, and often world-wide, Lancaster, Pennsylvania is a town people have heard about and even traveled to visit. What the world did not know about is the secret society within this tight-knit, quiet community that places God above all. The secret organization, known now as the Amish Mafia, has come out of hiding after organizing in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The ease of a religious secret society to hide in a closed community is reasonable as the Amish have little interaction with those outside of their religion. They chose to live without what most people consider the basics in life, having their own moral beliefs, rules, rituals and history to live by in addition to the traditional commandments upheld by those of the Christian faith. This paper will exam the traditional beliefs of the Amish community, the reality program produced by the Discovery Channel titled,

*The Amish Mafia*, and the veracity of the televised program portraying the conspiracy of a secret organization hidden in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The focus of this paper is to determine the factuality of this programming and the claim to represent the lives of members with esoteric knowledge and secret organizations within the hierarchy of the group.

### **Amish history-from Europe to the United States**

In this quiet Pennsylvania town, live the ancestors of those who traveled from Europe to escape the persecution of their Anabaptist faith. "The Anabaptists, primarily Swiss, migrated to southern Germany, France and Pennsylvania...in 1683 the Mennonites settled in Germantown, PA, which is today a municipal division of Philadelphia." In the mid 1600's "A secret police force of 'Anabaptist hunter' was organized to spy, locate, and arrest Anabaptists for their nonconformist beliefs." (Hostetler, 50-51) The secret organization consisted of Anabaptist men that intervened in the name of religion within their own sect. This recorded organization of secret members spoke in foreign tongue and took justice within their community personally. This organization fits the description of individuals cast for the portrayal of *The Amish Mafia*. This is strengthened by the fact that in 1693, the Dutch Anabaptists, a "...group leaving Southern Germany spoke the Palatinate dialect known today as Pennsylvania German or Pennsylvania Dutch...an estimated three thousand [immigrants] left Europe to come to Pennsylvania." (Hostetler, 52) In 1720 the decedents of this sect, led by Jakob Ammann, settled in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and became known as the Amish or Pennsylvania Dutch. In the program much of the conversation is in Pennsylvania Dutch and is translated at the bottom of the screen.

The prime farming land in Lancaster may have been a likely reason for the original Old Order Amish sect to settle in this area of Pennsylvania. The geographical location and size of Lancaster County secluded the sect from the outsiders, referred to as the *English* by the Amish, creating a clear separation of Amish from the non-Amish. “The Old Order Amish, who arrived on American shores in colonial times, have survived in the modern world in distinctive, viable, small communities. Each Amish community exhibits a local culture, though in its basic orientation it is like other Amish communities. Organization, role, authority, sanction, facility, and controls governing relations with the outside world are much alike in all Amish communities.” (Hostetler, 3, 13) Today, the Amish continue to practice their faith as they have for centuries in the past. They seek to live a pure life, avoiding outside contact with the English. The sect has living in Pennsylvania and can be seen daily in the fields, traveling by horse and buggy and selling produce outside their home. “Any society that is perceived as ‘standing still’ will soon become a tourist attraction” (Hostetler, viii) The English are fascinated by the Amish because their religious tradition practices active dissimulation, deliberately concealing themselves from outsiders. (Urban, 210) In response, the English seek out Amish community members for a glimpse of them functioning in daily life without the amenities the English take for granted.

### **The Attraction of Conspiracy Television**

Unexpected by both the Amish community and the English, an intentional release of historical Amish past have exposed the long kept secret of a mafia-like organization. The Discovery Channel televises a cable program titled *The Amish Mafia* revealing the actions,

events and conspiracies within a secret organization. This type of conspiracy and secret organization is categorized as an urban legend. “‘Urban legends’ belong to a subclass of folk narratives, legends, that—unlike fairy tales—are believed, or at least believable, and that—unlike myths—are set in the recent past and involve normal human beings rather than ancient gods or demigods.” (Barkun, 11) *The Amish Mafia* is an urban legend as defined by Barkun, and the desire of viewers is verifiable proof of such an organization did exist in the past. The human fascination with urban legends of any type combined with a secret organization conspiracy guarantees a viewing audience. The program is presented as “the truth, though the Amish deny the existence of a mafia organization.” The layers of conspiracy surrounding this program are nearly endless.

The Amish community continues to live as they have regardless of the Discovery Channel program recent claim of conspiracy and chaos within their midst. The program has enlightened viewers with information of their religious practice. “The Amish have changed, world society has changed, and Americans generally have shifter their thinking about culturally diverse peoples with their borders.” (Hostetler, x) As media releases information about the activities of Amish community members, outsiders become aware of some of the Amish’s sinful nature. “A century ago, hardly anyone knew the Amish existed. A half-century ago they were viewed as an obscure sect living by ridiculous customs, as stubborn people who resisted education and exploited the labor of their children. Today the Amish are the unwilling objects of a thriving tourist industry on the eastern seaboard.” (Hostetler, 5) According to reporting Lancaster newspapers, the discovery of this secret Amish organization has increased the sales of home grown and produced Amish products as tourist travel to see the location of the

programs filming. This production often depicts the face subjects of the program in a blur to retain their faith against graven images and their identity from the English. (Hatmaker, np)

“The most conservative churches view photographs of individuals as graven images...the taboo on face-on photos of members are strongest among traditional groups, such as the Amish, that emphasize a high level of communalism over individualism. Taboos on television, video, and film by most traditional groups are designed to limit the influence of the outside world as well as reflect the restriction on graven images.” (Kraybill, 166) This belief has been blatantly ignored in order to produce *The Amish Mafia*. The secret organization portrays a boss character in charge of the Lancaster Amish community. “According to his biography on the show's website, Levi Stoltzfus, known as ‘Lebanon Levi’, “is the protector, the judge, and the jury in the Amish community. He calls the shots for his crew of Amish and Mennonite soldiers.” (Discovery, np) Levi and his crew are not baptized members of the Old Amish Order and he shrugs off their portrayal of secret and often violent activity committed by his mob members. The reality is all of the events are staged and scripted, a fact revealed at the beginning of every episode and stated on the Discovery Channels website.

### **Consuming the Conspiracy**

The program voluntarily acknowledges the filmed events are staged, but is firm in the veracity of the events, pasted on orally by the elders, as having in fact happened. Little is known about the members of this secular community. Discovery Channel relies on repackaged content and releases it as the secrets lives of an Amish organization, presented it to viewers as fact. “‘Repackaged Content’, referring to the opportunities for engagement with variations of

core program content produced and distributed as repackaged/reorganized program content.” (Askwith, 98) Because humans will intentionally modify its’ behavior when being observed and in this example filmed, the viewer is deceived. The Discovery Channel modifies the content to depict the characters in a way that the audience may connect with emotionally, at a personal level despite the reality that the “real people” in the Amish Mafia are not a renegade crew, calling the shots for the entire community. This is when the life of the Amish mafia becomes complicated in their daily lives. “Privacy and secrecy overlap whenever the efforts at such control rely on hiding.” (Bok, 11) The organization cannot hide from any person with the technology to access television and social media creating a sudden hype in the Amish community. Discovery Channel blends the past activities of men enforcing the Amish devotion to simple life, with modern characters.

This blend of programming hangs on the public’s response as the final decision maker for Discovery. Will viewers find this re-creation of formally concealed secrets entertaining? Indeed, people are drawn into the program and desire more information about the characters. Twitter has become a meeting place to interact with the cast and other fans of the program. “‘Social Interaction’, referring to the opportunities for engagement that positions the television text as the basis or pretense for interaction with other viewers, the show’s creative professionals, or the narrative’s characters.” (Askwith, 98) The tremendous growth in interest, much attributed to cable network programming featuring Amish characters, has caused a demand to interact with the Amish Mafia members. “For many viewers, then, active investment in a specific television program may reflect a desire for social connection with viewers who share similar feelings, with the act of viewing or investing in a program serving as

the basis for membership in an imagined community.” (Askwith, 103) Reality program has opened the door for outsiders to reach out and react to program creating a large following similar to a Amish cult of persons fascinated with the portrayal of a submerged population, content in mind their own members and dismissing the created technology that reveals information concerning nearly every topic researched. Viewers begin to immerse themselves into the created lives of the Amish Mafia members. “‘Immersion’ describes a mode of engagement that satisfies the viewer’s imaginative or emotional desires to be “surrounded” or “subsumed” by a television program.” (Askwith, 109)

Supporting the immersion of viewers into the program, social media has become a virtual meeting ground for fans to reach out to what has developed into a window of the character’s real lives off screen. According to Twitter, the reality stars of the program each have over 20,000 followers. Esther Schmucker, one of the stars, tweeted, “I’m in shock. I’m just a small town Amish girl.” During a phone call with Lebanon Levi, he confirmed his surprise at the attention the show has brought to each of them personally. We discussed the show and the veracity of the episodes. I said, “While I don’t want to hear people are running around with guns shooting watermelons up, it was great to see Jolin do it on TV.” Levi laughed, “Yeah, it is great for TV. I’m glad people like it. We really do shoot up watermelons patches to make a point.” (Crider, np) We were referring to a scene which Jolin, Levi’s “strong arm man” destroys a watermelon patch with an AK-47. Esther further explained that the activities of the Amish Mafia and the cast members know prior to filming what “drama” will be depicted. Based on her explanation, the revelation of secret events are secretive only to the viewers. Though the program depicts the scenes as happening at the moment, the only surprises to the entire cast



and crew is when the Discovery Channel splices all the footage together to create the drama that successfully draws in immersed viewers. (Crider, np)

### **Consumer Reaction to *The Amish Mafia***

The reality television the Discovery Channel delivers is repackaged content intended to shock an audience. This effectively heightens the secret Amish activities and maximizes the depicted power of the Amish Mafia. The scripted language used in the program is intentional and intended to provoke a response. Urban stated in *Torment of Secrecy*, “the deliberate use of shocking or offensive imagery...works very effectively to intensify the symbolic value of a given piece of secret information: it maximizes the aura of danger, the ‘sexiness’ and power that surrounds a particular statement, making it appear all the more awesome, mysterious, and even potentially dangerous.” (Urban, 204) *Amish Mafia* blends the urban legends passed down through generations of Amish people and presents the members as dangerous criminals hiding in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The viewers have voiced their opinions online and the comments range from disgust aimed at Discovery Channel, to praise and proclamations of love to cast members.

**Esther(Amish Mafia)** @greencorn04 27 Apr

“@damagedgoods13: @greencorn04 you should be the leader of Amish mafia it would be awesome” I love you ☐

**PennLive.com** @pennlive 27 Mar

'There is no #AmishMafia,' Amish expert claims <http://ow.ly/jtmTP>

**Julia Hatmaker** @JuliaHatmaker 26 Mar

Updated my story on #AmishMafia star Lebanon Levi's appearance at a local library to include total raised - \$5,000! (Twitter, np)

The disgust at Discovery Channel stems from the mention of a tragedy at the opening of the program claiming the Amish Mafia were needed to protect the children in the community. “Reality TV doesn’t get much cheaper or crasser than this, and just to clinch its rock-bottom status, the show fills out its picture of rural menace by momentarily citing the 2006 mass shooting at a Lancaster County Amish school.” (Hale, np) “*Amish Mafia* actually manages to employ a real-world massacre and string of hate crimes – re-victimizing the already victimized – for what’s ultimately comedic value. Millions watch, but nobody seems to care. If the show’s characters were actually in the business of guarding Amish schools, it might make sense. But not even the NRA’s Wayne LaPierre could make out whether these were the good or bad guys.” (George, np) “The only thing that makes this endeavor [*Amish Mafia*] a ‘first-ever’ is that it’s perhaps the most offensive production yet from Hollywood regarding Amish people...unfortunately, this tread of Amish and Mennonite mockery is nothing new.” (Shank, np) The comments may cause Discovery Channel to delete the 2006 mass shooting mention from the programs’ opening. The Amish community has little or no comment about the program. Their faith keeps them from watching the exploits of their ancestors, re-orchestrated for maximum impact on the viewers. The producers intentionally dissolve the boundaries between the Amish and the English within the program manipulating both the past and the present. This process is generating intense interest and opinion due to the depiction of Amish in acts of impurity, sexuality and violence. (Urban, 216)

The Discovery Channel’s program *Amish Mafia* recreates a secret organization of the past into the present, casting locals from the Amish community to complete a hierarchy structure within the group. The finished program supports Urban’s statement of a “particular

social arrangement or hierarchy of power, to mystify or naturalize their own status—in short, ‘not to disrupt order and conformity, but to reinforce it.’” (Urban, 222) Discovery, based on the popularity of former Amish reality programs, banked on the allure of a renegade Amish character that is empowered to handle community problems from within. In the program, Lebanon Levi heads this organization and while often termed “fake,” Levi vows to the authenticity of each episode’s roots. The viewing audiences, knowledgeable of the re-creation of scenes, become drawn to the people acting as mafia members. The research determined regardless of the factuality of the program, the conspiracy of its existence is sufficient to gain a loyal following of viewers. All conspiracies, real and imagined, are eagerly consumed by cable television viewers.

The existence of an underground organization to protect the Amish community is no longer a secret from the English. The productions’ success has taken the local actors to a quasi-celebrity status. After much research and conversations with the mafia members the true secret has been revealed. That secret is the Discovery Channel’s conspiracy to present viewers with little facts, but the ingredients of secrecy, religion, violence, sex and revenge, to immerse them into the lives of a vigilante organization.

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