Technology in Scouting: Advantages and Disadvantages Observed by Long-Time Scouters

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Introduction

When writing "Scouting for Boys" in 1908, Robert Baden-Powell used his knowledge and experiences to develop a program that would teach young men to be good citizens and self-reliant in the outdoors, a skill that was very important at that time. During the rest of the twentieth century, the Boy Scout program in the United States peaked at 6.5 million members in 1972, then saw a dramatic decline of 26% to end the first eighty years of the Boy Scouts of America (PBS). With these changing times, so did the way the program was delivered. As many areas of our country became industrialized since the founding of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), our Scouts and leaders have had to adapt to what was relevant to teach young men. Today, there are numerous merit badges that involve technology that early Scouts could only dream of. Digital Technology, Electronics, Graphic Arts, Moviemaking, Programming, Robotics, and Space Exploration are all merit badges that have come to existence in the age of technology. The world around us has become reliant on computers and digital technology. I will discuss how technology has both helped and hindered the way we as Scouters deliver the scouting program in the United States.

Electronic Mail

Electronic mail (email) was first created in 1972, however, it was not widely used until the late 1990's when the internet became popular nationwide (Phrasee). Nearly all Americans have at least one email address they use to send and receive instant messages at work and home. This technology has made communicating with leaders and older Scouts much easier than at any time in history. Things change in life and having the convenience of sending an email to leaders and the senior patrol leader as soon as that change happens has made keeping people up to date much better. Parents are often one of the last people to know about what goes on in scout meetings. Having the ability to ask questions at any time of day or night through a quick email has made communication between the unit and the parents better in almost every way.

One benefit to being able to create custom email addresses is that units can create emails designed for use with their unit that can be passed on after leaders rotate in and out of positions and units. In the case of Scouts BSA troops, some choose to have custom email address for positions such as historian, scribe, and librarian where people can send information regarding that specific position to those youth leaders to use in their role. For example, in one troop in my district, the historian asks leaders that have taken pictures at campouts and events to send them to the historian email so he can combine all of the pictures and make a slide show presentation for the next court of honor.

With everyone sending out emails non-stop, some people have a hard time keeping up with the many emails they receive every day. This causes them to take days and even weeks to respond, delaying the communication. On the other hand, some people are either too busy, or just forget to check their emails, therefore not seeing some of the important information that is being

communicated. One other drawback to email is most Scouts don't start using email until high school, therefore only the older Scouts often use this method of technology.

Cell Phones

Cell phones have a tremendous impact in the way people can communicate no matter where they are. In the last twenty-five years alone, we have seen a huge transformation in the number of people that own cell phones and the size and capabilities those devices can do. Many people began using cell phones in the mid 1990's when they were called "bag phones" because they were large and came built in to their own carrying case. This gave leaders the ability to call parents if there was a change in plans during a campout, or if there was an emergency and the leader needed to call 911, or the parent to come pick up their Scout from the event.

Throughout the turn of the millennium and into the first decade of the 2000's, cell phones became smaller and more capable every year. Soon, users could play games, add an email account on Blackberry devices, and it wasn't long before we started to see them become primitive computers that we could fold up and put in our pockets. With technology advancing at such a rapid pace, the prices of cell phones were driven down, so more consumers were able to purchase them. Soon, many high school aged youth carried them everywhere they went.

Parrish, a scoutmaster during the mid-2000's, said that's when he started having problems with Scouts bringing their cell phones to meeting and campouts, spending more time on their phone, and less time participating in the activities. It didn't take long for some units to start banning phones at meetings and activities. Cell phones are not only distracting when they ring during the middle of a meeting, but they distract the youth from learning, socializing, and participating with activities, therefore causing the Scouts with phones to not learn the material.

With the price of phones continuing to drop for basic phones, the number of youths that carry cell phones increases every year. In many cases, the age Scouts receive their first cell phone gets lower every year as well. There are many Cub Scout packs that have elementary school aged Scouts bringing cell phones to meetings, and consequently, having to set usage boundaries during den and pack meetings. Scouts having cell phones is not entirely a bad thing, as they allow instant communication in a variety of ways.

Parents have become dependent on being able to contact their children at a moment's notice. For many of those parents that drop their kids off at meetings and events, then leave, they tell their kids to text or call them when they are done, and they'll come back and get them. During meetings, if a Scout has a question for their parents, they can ask to use their phone and get an answer instantly. This is helpful if the unit is planning something and needs an answer that day. For those that are allowed, texting between members of the patrol, troop, or crew can be very helpful in between meetings. Texting has provided Scouts the opportunity to plan and discuss things before the next meeting without having to meet early or hold excessive meetings throughout the month. It must be noted that two-deep leadership must be implemented in electronic communication. Any adult over the age of 18 that sends an electronic message must include that Scout's parent, or another leader over 18.

Cell phones today have many features that benefit Scouts in their skills and help them solve problems they would have to have many resources for in the past. Technologically advanced phones have applications (apps) that can perform many functions including a compass, knot tying instructions, a calculator, notebook, flashlight, camera, and even an app to find the weather forecast just to name a few. When used responsibly, cell phones can be a fantastic tool

in the field and can produce results much faster than reading through books to find the right answer.

Nearly all adults have a cell phone of some type. This allows them to stay in contact with the world around them no matter where they go. There are many benefits and drawbacks to using cell phones and relying on them to perform our everyday tasks. Besides keeping in contact through email, text messages, and using apps, having a phone with internet capabilities has dramatically improved the speed and accuracy in which leaders can run their units. When helping youth leaders come up with an event calendar, adults can use the internet on their phone to find an enormous amount of information including distances to destinations, prices and hours of operation to most places around the country, and satellite maps of areas of interest.

Older youth members in Scouts BSA and Venturing are more likely to have a cell phone on them all the time and know many of the capabilities it offers to make communicating and using it as a tool, not just a gaming device. Alpsteg explained that cell phones are a necessity for the leadership and the crew to communicate. Because they only meet twice per month, they often rely on texts and emails to coordinate events and communicate throughout the month. She explained that rules were set up concerning when and how cell phone use is appropriate during crew functions and for the most part, the youth Venturers abide by those rules. She explained that before cell phones were prevalent, leaders had to rely on Scouts taking good notes during meetings and calling landlines using a calling tree to try to track down those Scouts between meetings.

Adults often rely too much on their cell phones and have a strong urge to pull them out at inappropriate times, especially in social settings instead of socializing with the other adults in the room. When visiting some Cub Scouts packs, I often see parents sitting scattered around the

room staring at their phones instead of getting to know each other or helping the den leader give

instruction and keep the young Cub Scouts focused on the task at hand. With all things

considered, cell phones are a tool that makes many things not only possible, but incredibly

convenient. With the right policies in place, adults and youth will be able to use their cell phones

to make the scouting program better.

Internet Search Engines

Shortly after the invention of the internet, search engines became a popular and

convenient way for people to find pertinent information quickly. Websites such as Google and

Bing allow Scouts to find answers to anything they may have a question about. In a fraction of a

second, Scouts can learn the history of the scouting movement, first aid skills, step-by-step

directions on how to tie a round lashing, or any other task or question that may come up while

they are working on rank advancements and merit badges. Although it takes some practice to

master the skill of searching using the right keywords to get the results you want, search engines

makes it easier because a Scout could type an entire question into the search box and the website

will pull out keywords and return thousands of responses based off that question.

Once searching skills are developed, Scouts can find information much faster than their

predecessors that had to manually search for answers in books and periodicals. Leaders can use

these search engines to find information that they may not be familiar with and feel more

confident in mentoring Scouts and providing the correct information. I have used Google to find

color guard demonstrations and flag folding instructions before I teach a lesson to Scouts. As

technology advances, search engines will continue to get smarter and more advanced. After

speaking to other leaders about search engines, the only downside I can see is there is no limit to

the information that can be found using them. At times, Scouts intentionally and unintentionally

come across inappropriate material. Most search engines allow parents to block adult material from being shown, but adolescents are often smarter than their parents with digital technology and find a loophole. It is important for Scouts to take cyber chip training every year and abide by the pledge that goes with it.

Global Positioning Systems

No one will argue the fact that Scouts need to know where they are on a map at all times. For many years, a traditional compass was used to determine current location as well as finding distance and direction to another location. The use of a compass has become nearly obsolete due to modern technology, especially global positioning systems (GPS). GPS devices have become extremely small and accurate, while also dropping in price to make them affordable by everyone. Sikes stated that he prefers to teach scouts to use a compass and not a GPS because "a compass never loses reception". The BSA still backs Sikes's claim by requiring Scouts to demonstrate compass proficiency in 2nd Class rank requirements 3a and 3b, as well as 1st Class requirement 4a in the Scouts BSA handbook. However, 1st Class rank requirement 4b requires Scouts to demonstrate how to use a handheld GPS unit, making GPS devices a necessary part of the scouting program.

An activity using GPS devices have grown in popularity with Scouts called geocaching. Using a handheld GPS device, Scouts hide and seek caches all over the world by following map coordinates. Geocaching is not restricted to the BSA or any scouting program, therefore making it a fun activity for everyone to do. A benefit to geocaching being so popular is that people hide some neat "caches", usually in a cylinder or other weather-resistant container. Not only is it fun for Scouts and leaders, but it teaches them how to use a GPS receiver and to read coordinates on a map as well as finding direction and judging distances. Most smartphones have GPS receivers

in them to allow mapping, weather, social media, and many other apps to function and track your location. This feature makes finding your way through an unfamiliar city or finding best routes on a road trip much easier, however, Scouts need to learn that allowing their phones to track their location can be dangerous because it could allow undesired people know where they are at all times.

<div align="center">Advancement Tracking Tools</div>

As technology makes its way through into our everyday life, as Scouters we now have a host of advancement tracking tools such as ScoutBook, TroopMaster, and PackMaster. Before internet-based advancement tracking tools, unit advancement chairs spent a great deal of time and effort tracking every Scout in the unit and filing paperwork with the council office to track their achievements and advancements. These internet-based advancement tools make data collecting and organizing large numbers of Scouts easier for committees. These tools have been so successful that the BSA purchased ScoutBook in 2018 and made it a free service for all units on January 1, 2019 (Wendell, 2018). For those units that take advantage of ScoutBook, the amount of time and personal sacrifice required by advancement chairs has been significantly reduced. ScoutBook organizes each unit into subcategories such as patrol and dens to make data entry more efficient. The designers of ScoutBook, listen to leaders in the field and frequently update their website to streamline the advancement process. One feature I appreciate as a leader is how ScoutBook creates a "needs purchasing" and advancement report that has all the data already filled in. This technology allows leaders more time to mentor youth and less time worrying about filling out the correct forms.

<div align="center">Online Rechartering and Journey to Excellence Reporting</div>

Before the BSA switched everything to an internet-based system, the whole rechartering process was done manually with the help of the whole unit committee. This placed a tremendous amount of work on council registrars and unit committees to update and make changes to unit and member's information each year. Not only was this a tedious administrative task, but it took a great deal of time for the registrar to complete every unit in the council. Although some units, especially those with new and/or untrained leaders, find the internet rechartering process a hassle, most units are able to assign one committee member to do it from home in their spare time and reduce the amount of personal sacrifice required from years past.

Journey to Excellence (JTE), the planning, performance, and recognition program of the BSA according to their website, allows units, districts, and councils to plan an effective and active program. This internet-based program is designed for all levels of the BSA to keep track of their performance throughout the year and provides updates as data is entered. This program gives the Key 3 at all levels the information they need to meet all areas of the JTE scorecard, and ultimately provide the level of performance the BSA is striving to achieve. One important feature is the ability for units to log service hours throughout the year so at recharter time, the committee member designated to update and file the paperwork does not have to scour for attendance and service hour records for the entire year.

<center>Internet-Based Leader Training</center>

Having trained leaders is necessary to have a successful program. There is a common saying in the BSA that has been around for years "every Scout deserves a trained leader". Since the founding of the scouting movement by Lord Baden-Powell in 1908, the program has placed an emphasis on having trained leaders. For over a hundred years, the BSA taught leaders in person to ensure they understood the responsibility they had in teaching and mentoring boys

aged 6-18. With the advancement of the internet and the ever-busy schedules of parents, the BSA chose to make much of their leader training programs available for parents and leaders to do online while in the comfort of their home. According to Ernst, many leaders preferred to continue taking leader training in person until the last decade when internet speeds and material from the BSA improved.

Today, all position specific training is available online for volunteers and many other supplemental trainings such as Safe Swim Defense, Hazardous Weather Training, Youth Protection Training, Merit Badge Counselor, and NOVA Counselor/Mentor to name a few. Many units continue to struggle getting volunteer leaders to become trained in their position, mainly to busy schedules and lack of interest. Unit Commissioners often report to unit committees with a trained leaders report documenting those leaders that have yet to take the time to complete their position specific training. While a majority of leader training is done online, there are still some courses that must be taken in person. Woodbadge, Introduction to Outdoor Leader Skills (IOLS), and BALOO are all examples of courses that leaders learn using hands-on methods that cannot be taught using the internet.

Commissioner tools is an internet-based program the BSA designed to be used by all levels of commissioners to report unit visits, roundtable information, and provide commissioners reports that are helpful for them to manage their units, districts, councils, areas, and regions. Being able to pull information up during a unit visit if needed, means commissioners are better equipped to serve units when it counts the most. Commissioners that served units before the BSA went digital with all their systems, used paper forms for recording unit visits, and like everything else during those times, became accustomed to that method of administration. Many older commissioners have trouble navigating the commissioner tools website to include finding their

units and recording unit visits. Luckily, the BSA still allows another commissioner or professional to record unit visits under another commissioner's name. In time, younger generations of Scouters with a background in computer usage will take over as commissioners and this feature may become obsolete.

Boy Scouts of America Websites

Throughout the entire BSA program, there are many webpages to help Scouts, parents, volunteers, and professionals find information, create event registrations, and provide calendars of events to use for program planning. The BSA operates websites for the use of all members, those that want to become members, and the general public. For information about BSA programs in the United States, www.scouting.org is the primary location people can visit to find answers to their questions. Staying current with technology trends, the BSA has also developed a blog page, podcast, and an online retail shop for members to order uniforms, apparel, gifts, and countless other items to meet the needs of the national program.

All councils within the BSA operate a separate website that contains pertinent information for their location. On these sites, councils post a calendar that lists important information for units. Sikes said that having the ability to pull up information on the council site at any given moment has made event and program planning so much easier than in the past. Before, he would have to call the council office during business hours to find out information about events and wait to relay the message at the next troop meeting. Ernst pointed out that his troop committee can pull up the council calendar during committee meetings and register Scouts for events on the spot. "Being able to make online reservations and payments via the website has opened up a lot of opportunities that didn't exist twenty years ago" (Ernst).

Many units have created websites that allow leaders to post pictures of their units to show off what they are doing to family members and use it as a recruiting tool to show prospective youth what they do. Most websites allow a unit calendar so events can be updated, and parents can find information at any given moment. By having their own website, units can customize their marketing material and even promote things for their chartered organization. Parents can share unit websites with family members that way extended families can keep track of the progress their Scout makes and the adventures they go on.

Social Media in Scouting

Social media in America has developed into an extremely popular digital platform for all ages. With the development of Facebook in 2004, customizable social media accounts continue to dominate young people's lives. As other platforms developed later such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, more and more people began creating accounts and staying connected with the world. It was no accident that group pages started to develop based on shared interests of its members. Today there are numerous pages dedicated to scouting programs in the BSA that has members that extend past our borders and include people in foreign scouting programs. These group pages allow leaders and parents to communicate and share ideas with the intent to make volunteering easier and programs better for the youth. One major downside to these groups are the people themselves. All pages have strong willed leaders that point out when someone is breaking a BSA rule or simply stating their opinion that often causes a discussion, and at times, arguments between members. Most group pages are beneficial for the good of the majority and it takes an admin to warn, suspend, or even block members that don't follow general guidelines, or who are often rude to other members.

Even more popular than unit websites; unit, district, and council social media pages are developed and maintained by any one of the registered leaders and can be easily past on from one leader to another as Scouts cross over, quit, and age out of the program. Since most leaders and parents have at least one social media account, many units post pictures and information about events and activities the unit participates in. Yendra said "it's nice to be able to take pictures and upload them to Facebook to show relatives and friends we are involved in a variety of fun events and service projects around the community".

Since social media is so popular, combined with the fact that a lot of the youth members have cell phones and social media apps on them, it is important for parents to monitor what their children are looking at and who they are talking to. Many of the social media sites have private messaging, and that is a concern for not only parents, but also leaders. The BSA's policy on two deep leadership needs to be adhered to in electronic communication as well as in-person. Therefore, it is never okay for a leader or other parent to private message any youth that is not their own child.

Conclusion

Advancements in technology are only growing better and faster every year. How the BSA operates as an organization will become more advanced, and unavoidably more internet based. Parents and leaders continue to purchase and use high-tech devices to help with their everyday lives, therefore finding new and more convenient ways to make their scouting responsibilities more manageable. Hoefs said that social media, emails, and text messages are the best way for her to get information to parents in her units. However, the drawback to that is some parents don't check their messages on a regular basis, or at all, therefore the messages sent out by Hoefs never get read. I am confident the BSA will do their best to streamline the program for the future

of its members because the available time dedicated to scouting for parents is dwindling all the time. In time, those more seasoned leaders that have dedicated many years to the scouting program will be gone, and all volunteers will be of the digital age where it is easier to send someone a text message than it is to pick up the phone and make a call, or meet over coffee and discuss how the unit is doing. Whether we like it not, technology in scouting is not going away, and we need strong advocates to ensure hands-on trainings for leaders and youth do not become something that can be done over the computer, otherwise, are we as Scouters doing the youth justice in teaching them an outdoor program on a screen?

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