



# Scouting in a Digital Age: why our method matters more than ever

Think Piece #1

World Scout Bureau  
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# Scouting in a Digital Age: Why our method matters more than ever

*This briefing summarizes the discussion held during the World Scouting Think Tank's opening session on 3 December 2025, reflecting on how young people are growing, what pressures shape their lives, and how Scouting can respond with clarity and purpose.*

## The real question

The question facing Scouting is not simply whether it should become more digital. Digital tools are already part of how people communicate, organise, learn, and connect. They can support volunteers, improve communication, reduce administrative burdens, widen access, and help organisations work more effectively. Used well, technology can strengthen Scouting.

The deeper question is what digital life is doing to young people, and how Scouting should respond without losing what makes it distinct. Digitalisation is not only changing how young people spend their time. It is shaping the conditions in which they grow up. It influences what they notice, how long they focus, who they listen to, how they compare themselves to others, and how they understand truth, trust, identity, and belonging.

This wider context matters because Scouting is an educational movement. Its relevance is not measured only by whether it uses the newest tools, but by whether it continues to meet the developmental needs of young people. In a world that is becoming faster, more personalised, more reactive, and more artificial, Scouting offers a different kind of experience: one based on real relationships, first hand experiences, shared responsibility, learning by doing, time in nature, service, reflection, and values lived in community.

These elements can sometimes appear traditional or slow when compared with the speed of digital culture. Yet they may be exactly what young people need most. The challenge for Scouting is therefore not to imitate the digital world, but to understand it well enough to offer a meaningful response.

## Information is everywhere, but judgement is harder

Young people today have access to more information than any generation before them. A question can be answered in seconds. A video can explain almost anything. Artificial intelligence can summarise, translate, generate, and recommend. Knowledge appears to be instantly available.

But access to information is not the same as understanding. The digital environment is crowded, noisy, and often manipulated. Algorithms influence what people see, what they are encouraged to watch next, and which views are reinforced. Platforms reward attention, emotional reaction, novelty, and outrage. Misinformation spreads quickly, and opinions can harden inside echo chambers where people are repeatedly shown more of what they already believe.

The risk is not only that young people may encounter false information. A deeper risk is that they may lose the habit of questioning, comparing, listening, and changing their minds. When information is constant and confidence is rewarded more than curiosity, the ability to pause and judge carefully becomes harder to practise.

This is a profound educational challenge. Critical thinking is not developed through information alone. It is developed through experience, dialogue, reflection, and decision-making. Young people need opportunities to ask better questions, test assumptions, listen to different perspectives, weigh evidence, and make choices in situations that are not always simple or clear.

Scouting has a strong role to play in this environment. At its best, Scouting does not tell young people what to think. It helps them learn how to think, how to act, and how to live with others. Through the Scout Method, young people practise judgement rather than simply consume information. They learn by doing, reflect on experience, take responsibility, work with others, and make decisions guided by shared values.

This is increasingly important in a digital world where attention is captured, information is filtered, and beliefs can be shaped invisibly.

### **The value of slower learning**

Much of digital life rewards speed. Notifications ask for immediate response. Feeds refresh endlessly. Entertainment is available on demand. Personalisation reduces friction. Waiting becomes unusual, and boredom becomes something to escape as quickly as possible.

Scouting often works differently. It asks young people to wait their turn, try again, cook a meal together, listen to others, build something with their hands, follow a trail, prepare for a camp, lead a group, make mistakes, and learn over time. It asks them to stay with an experience even when it is difficult, awkward, or slow.

This slower rhythm should not be seen as a weakness. Healthy development takes time. Confidence is built through repeated experience. Trust is built through shared responsibility. Leadership is built through practice, failure, feedback, and growth. Resilience is built when young people face manageable challenges and discover that they can overcome them.

A patrol learning to cook together, a group hiking in difficult weather, or a young person gradually gaining confidence by helping others may not look innovative in technological terms. Yet these experiences are developmentally powerful. They build focus, patience, executive functioning, self-regulation, cooperation, problem-solving, and agency.

They also help young people experience themselves not as passive consumers, but as capable participants in the world. This is one of Scouting's most important contributions. It offers young people the chance to do real things, with real people, in real situations, where their choices and actions matter.

In a culture shaped by instant gratification, Scouting's slower educational process can help young people develop the patience, confidence, and inner discipline they need to grow.

## **Real connection in a connected age**

Digital life has made it easier to stay in contact, but not necessarily easier to feel connected. Young people can be surrounded by messages, images, games, comments, and updates while still feeling isolated. They may interact constantly without experiencing belonging. They may have followers, groups, and chats without having a community where they feel known, needed, and trusted.

Human connection requires more than contact. It requires shared experience, responsibility, recognition, trust, and time. These are difficult to build through screens alone. They require repeated interaction, physical presence, and the experience of doing things together.

Scouting creates these conditions in a distinctive way. It brings young people together in small groups and gives them shared responsibilities. They plan, build, serve, explore, disagree, repair, and try again. Through this process, relationships become real. Belonging is not only talked about; it is experienced through action.

This does not mean that Scouting should reject young people's digital interests. A young person who loves gaming, online communities, or digital creativity does not leave those interests behind when they come to Scouts. Those interests are part of who they are. The value of Scouting is that it places those interests within a wider human context, where young people can talk about them, share them, and connect around them while also experiencing nature, friendship, service, and teamwork.

Scouting does not need to compete with digital culture by imitating it. Young people already have platforms, games, feeds, and personalised content. What they may lack are spaces where they can be physically present with others, build friendships face to face, resolve disagreements safely, contribute meaningfully, and experience belonging through shared action.

The aim is not to pretend the online world does not exist. The aim is to ensure it is not the only world young people know.

## **What AI clarifies about being human**

Artificial intelligence makes this conversation sharper. AI can already write essays, generate images, compose messages, summarise meetings, plan schedules, answer questions, and produce creative work in seconds. It can also support adults and organisations in useful ways. It can reduce workload, improve communication, and help volunteers focus more time on young people.

At the same time, AI forces Scouting to clarify what is uniquely human in its educational offer. AI can provide information, but it cannot make someone a learner. It can describe friendship, but it cannot build friendship in the full human sense. It can simulate empathy, but it cannot share responsibility in a community. It can generate a story about a campfire, but it cannot replace the lived experience of being there with others, or the warmth of the fire.

It cannot replace the confidence that comes from leading a group for the first time. It cannot replace the lesson learned when young people solve a practical problem together. It cannot replace the growth that comes from service, reflection, responsibility, spirituality, friendship, and belonging.

This does not make AI an enemy of Scouting. On the contrary, AI and digital tools can help adults become better supported, organisations become more effective, and volunteers spend less time on repetitive tasks. But these tools should serve the educational mission rather than define it.

The danger is not that Scouting uses AI or digital tools. The danger is that, in trying to keep up with technological change, Scouting forgets what cannot be digitised. Its distinctive contribution lies in authentic experiences where young people learn by doing, socialise for real, encounter nature, practise responsibility, and develop the human skills needed to navigate an increasingly artificial and uncertain world.

### **Adaptation without losing identity**

Scouting must adapt. Young people's expectations are changing. Families' needs are changing. Communities are changing. Volunteers' availability is changing. The movement must remain responsive, inclusive, and relevant.

However, adaptation should not mean dilution. One of the risks facing Scouting is that, in seeking to be recognised, modern, or accessible, it may lose clarity about what makes it distinct. Formal education increasingly uses experiential learning, leadership language, teamwork, outdoor education, and life skills. At the same time, Scouting often seeks recognition for the learning young people gain through badges, leadership roles, service, and community engagement.

Recognition can be valuable, and partnerships with schools, public institutions, and other organisations can extend Scouting's impact. But Scouting must be able to explain clearly what makes it different. The Scout Method is not simply a way of delivering activities. It is the core educational process. Small-group life, learning by doing, personal progression, symbolic framework, adult support, nature, community involvement, and the Promise and Law work together to create a distinctive form of non-formal education. If this process is weakened, Scouting may still run activities, but it risks losing its essence. The challenge is to be flexible about tools and formats while remaining firm about purpose and method. Digital platforms, new programme themes, and external partnerships can all strengthen Scouting when they deepen the educational experience. They become problematic when they replace the very process that makes Scouting effective.

The guiding question should not be whether something looks modern. The guiding question should be whether it strengthens the Scout educational experience and helps young people grow.

### **Scouting in a polarised world**

Digitalisation is closely connected to wider social trends, including polarisation, declining trust, loneliness, and pressure on civic life. Online platforms can intensify these patterns, but the problem is broader than technology. Many societies are becoming less comfortable with nuance, compromise, and difference.

This matters for Scouting because non-formal education forms people, not only informs them. It gives young people opportunities to practise cooperation, responsibility, leadership, service, and dialogue. It helps them learn how to live with others across difference.

In polarised environments, this work becomes both more necessary and more demanding. Scouting does not fit neatly into ideological camps when it is true to itself. It brings people together across backgrounds. It asks young people to work with others who may not think exactly like them. It creates shared experiences before fixed opinions. It builds bridges through action.

Citizenship cannot be developed only through lessons about democracy or values. It must be experienced. Young people learn participation by participating. They learn responsibility by being trusted with responsibility. They learn empathy by encountering others. They learn cooperation by having to cooperate.

In a world where digital systems can sort people into bubbles, Scouting can create spaces where young people practise belonging to something larger than themselves. This may become one of its most important contributions to social cohesion.

### **A clearer public case for Scouting**

The opportunity before Scouting is significant. Families, schools, and communities are increasingly concerned about attention, wellbeing, loneliness, misinformation, social fragmentation, and the loss of practical life skills. These concerns are visible in everyday life, and Scouting can speak directly to them.

To do so, the movement needs clearer language and stronger evidence. It needs to explain how outdoor experiences support wellbeing, how small-group life develops cooperation and leadership, how learning by doing builds confidence and agency, how service strengthens civic responsibility, and how reflection supports values-based decision-making.

Scouting should not assume that society automatically understands its value. Many people see the activities but not the educational process underneath. They see camping, games, badges, uniforms, and events. The movement needs to help them also see development, community, citizenship, resilience, and human growth.

This does not require inventing a new purpose. It requires expressing Scouting's purpose in language that speaks to the present moment. Scouting should not present itself as nostalgia or as an escape from modern life. It should be understood as a practical and meaningful response to the realities young people face today.

In a digital age, the case for Scouting can be made with renewed confidence. Its methods support attention in a distracted world, belonging in a lonely world, cooperation in a polarised world, and authentic experience in an increasingly artificial world. Its value lies not in being separate from modern challenges, but in helping young people develop the capacities they need to face them.

### **Remaining deeply human**

The digital age does not make Scouting less relevant. It may make Scouting more necessary. This will only be true, however, if the movement is clear about what must change and what must remain constant.

Scouting should use technology where it helps. It should adapt to young people's realities, support volunteers with better tools, engage thoughtfully with AI, and modernise its language, evidence, and systems. But it should not confuse modernisation with imitation.

The future of Scouting will not be secured by becoming more like the digital world around it. It will be secured by offering what that world often cannot provide: real experience, real responsibility, real community, and real opportunities for young people to grow.

The task ahead is not to make Scouting digital for its own sake. It is to ensure that Scouting remains deeply human in a digital age.

### **About the World Scouting Think Tank:**

The World Scouting Think Tank brings together a select group of individuals with significant Scouting experience to serve as a sounding board for the World Scout Bureau's leadership. Their insights and experience are considered very valuable as we reflect on how Scouting can evolve to better meet the needs of young people and society throughout the implementation of the new Strategy for Scouting.

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