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## Linking 4-H to Linksters

### Abstract

Advances in communication technology and associated social changes have provided opportunities as well as challenges for 4-H. Historically, the 4-H club model was predicated on a community's coming together to provide youth members opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of their respective projects. The paradox is that as communities have become more connected through cell phones and social media, face-to-face, person-to-person interaction has decreased. To stay relevant for the next hundred years, 4-H must adapt to this circumstance. This article explores the importance of leveraging technology to bring young people together, foster a sense of community for them, and instill self-efficacy within them, all through the 4-H club model.

**Keywords:** [hashtags](#), [social media](#), [teens](#), [Extension education](#), [positive youth development](#)

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## Introduction

With literal and figurative roots in agriculture, Extension agents have historically connected citizens to land-grant universities by identifying research problems and communicating the research findings through their local Extension offices (Garrett, 2001). As times have changed so too have the programs Extension offers young people. But one constant is the notion that young people are the roots of 4-H. Whereas yesteryear corn and canning clubs dominated the 4-H focus, today 4-H members are engaged in programs as diverse as their interests. Within Extension, a movement is underway to identify issues relevant to today's young people and work with young people to solve those issues (Hoorman, 2002). This course is being carried out in an ever-evolving technological landscape. Although there remains some preference for traditional face-to-face Extension instruction compared to distance learning (McCann, 2007), today's 4-H youths are members of the "linkster" generation, so named because "no other generation has ever been so linked to each other and to the world through technology" (Johnson & Johnson, 2012, para. 1). In short, today's 4-H member is connected, is "linked," to and through technology.

Indeed, never in human history have people been more connected. The Internet, smartphones, tablets, and

social media all contribute to making those with access to technology the recipients of knowledge and wisdom that would have been the envy of the fabled Library of Alexandria. But something is amiss. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "something is rotten." The breadth of connections available to people in this the year 2019 is enough to stagger the imagination. The depth of these connections, however, can perhaps be shallow. Furthermore, as young people lack the maturity and context to differentiate between helpful and harmful content, the opportunity exists for unsavory characters with predatory intentions to exploit them. Pandora's box has been opened, and there is no going back. We are thus at a time and place where Extension 4-H youth development programs are uniquely and strategically positioned not only to provide members research-based education but also to assist them in learning how to use technology prudently and to instill in them a sense of self-efficacy within their communities, all in a safe environment that promotes the concept of using technology through a responsible and critical lens. In this article, I present evidence-based recommendations to guide Extension personnel in applying technology to engage young people while also promoting within youths a sense of community self-efficacy and encouraging the use of technology to enhance, not replace, face-to-face communication.

## **Young People Today—Linksters and the Internet**

Those born after 1994 are referred to by some as members of the linkster generation (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Unlike the millennials before them, linksters did not have a transition period into the age of the Internet; they were born into it. Those born before 1994 remember watching the Internet become a part of their lives, and the prevailing thought in those early days of the Internet was that access to the worldwide web would transform education. Though a transformation most assuredly took place, the change has come at a cost. Educators today walk a tightrope. They must find a way to capitalize on the amazing resources of technology, all the while mitigating the distractions (at best) or harmful consequences (at worst) of having the world at one's fingertips (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

Furthermore, young people are left more and more to their own devices (literally and figuratively). In the past century, through a shift from rural agricultural to urban industrial communities, the segregation of youth from adults has become more pronounced (Steinberg, 2011). Through no fault of their own, separated from adults who could guide them, linksters are heir apparent to technologies they had no hand in creating. Thus, many may lack the required discipline to understand the inherent danger at (and in) their hands.

## **Using Technology to Engage Young People in Promoting a Sense of Community Self-Efficacy**

Despite evocative language to the contrary, I do not feel a sense of foreboding doom and gloom. Created at the beginning of the 20th century, the 4-H movement was charged with both spreading hard science and shaping character in young people all over the United States. The challenge and opportunity presented to Extension today is to create new ways to build on these valued traditions. The sense of belonging to a community, mastering skills, demonstrating generosity, and preserving independence may be even more important now, in an ever-connected technological society.

Young people enjoy being part of something bigger than themselves. Surveys have shown that 55% of teenagers enjoy volunteering (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2005). Furthermore, youths are an increasingly visible and active component in community development efforts (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007). In short, just doing what they have done for over a century (and have done so to great impact), 4-H youth

development programs are strategically placed to help youths use electronic technology in a responsible way that taps into young people's desire to be connected, to both their communities and their technologies.

Because of the technology habits of teens, interpersonal communication is becoming depersonalized. A higher proportion of teen communication is conducted through writing on electronic media (e.g., using text messaging or Twitter) than through face-to-face or even voice-to-voice (i.e., phone) conversations (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). With research showing that young people enjoy both being part of a larger community and using the very technology that removes them from interpersonal communication, what options exist for Extension 4-H professionals?

Enter the 4-H club. For better or worse, the Internet is a powerful instrument in bringing people of shared interests together. Over a hundred years ago, one's social network was limited to how loud one could yell. Then came the telephone, and with it an increase in one's ability to be connected with others. Today, with a few strokes on a keyboard (or, knowing teens, a few swipes of a touch screen), people of all backgrounds can find common interest groups. This can be particularly appealing to a young person (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). If youth development programs offered through 4-H can become easily searchable—can become "viral"—young people will more readily discover both a place to find others with shared interests and an outlet for participating in the community service projects they so want to be involved in. Indeed, recent work focused on the relationship between teen self-esteem and community service has shed light on the interests of linksters. Research has shown that teens feel better about themselves after helping strangers than after helping close friends and family members (Padilla-Walker, Carlo, & Memmott-Elison, 2018). Additionally, research has indicated that besides increasing feelings of self-worth, contributing to the improvement of a community correlates to teens realizing improvements in other aspects of their psychological and social development as well (Brennan et al., 2007).

One way to increase the discoverability and appeal of 4-H is via social media. Recent efforts by Extension professionals across the United States demonstrate the effectiveness of using this form of communication. For example, 4-H professionals have used Facebook to connect with 4-H youths and provide reminders of county programming and events (Hill, 2014), applied a standardized hashtag protocol for county 4-H programs (Davis & Dishon, 2017), and incorporated the very technology into club/county activities (Mains, Jenkins-Howard, & Stephenson, 2013). The Internet, social media, and hashtags are here to stay. Extension youth programs offered through 4-H can provide today's linksters the opportunity to delve deep into project areas with individuals having shared interests all while working on community service projects that serve a greater good.

## Conclusion

Given that electronic technology can bring people of common interests together, that young people value their contributions to the greater good of the communities they serve, and that one of the tenets of 4-H is "larger service," Extension youth programs are in a position to provide youth the very outlet they crave at a time when arguably they need it most. As imperfect an analogy as it may be, let us suppose for the sake of argument that today's smartphone is yesterday's cornfield. A hundred years ago while out in the cornfield, the young person may have found him- or herself pursuing a literal rabbit hole. The rabbit hole a young person can go down today on a smartphone can land anywhere on the spectrum from frivolous to frightening. Extension programs offered through 4-H have always been developed with young people in mind. At 4-H's founding, innovations in corn growing and canning were the cutting edge technologies young people gained greater working knowledge of. Today, they must gain greater knowledge about using technology responsibly and with respect. Working with and

through volunteers and the community as a whole, Extension professionals must become comfortable with today's electronic technology and understand the profound impact it can have in the lives of young people, young people who may have a deeply rooted understanding of how the technology works but perhaps not so much understanding of its potential cultural and societal impacts. Becoming comfortable with and comprehending the implications of today's technological landscape is an imperative for the Extension agent of the 21st century seeking to link 4-H to linksters.

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