

Children, COVID-19 and broadcasters: how traditional media bridges the digital divide

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF HOME SCHOOLING AND TV STUDY-FROM-HOME PROGRAMMES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The author summarizes approaches of home schooling in selected South-east Asian countries and shows how TV broadcasting is used as a means to fill the digital gap.

Rumours began to swirl of a lockdown when the Malaysian Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, candidly told reporters after a routine press conference on COVID-19 that he will be announcing something significant later in the evening. It triggered panic buying all over the nation as people were expecting stringent measures to be announced by the government as new cases of corona infection began to rise. Most of it is linked to a religious gathering which took place about 2 weeks before which spurred exponential growth for locally transmitted cases. On the evening of the 16th of March, the Malaysian government declared a "movement control order," a form of cordon sanitaire which will be implemented for 14 days with the Prime Minister citing the Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease Act of 1998 which essentially enforces a nationwide lockdown. Since then, the Malaysian government has mobilised the armed forces to bolster the movement control order (MCO) and has extended the

lockdown twice till the end of April. Such a drastic measure is not unique to Malaysia; Thailand has been under the state of emergency since the 24th of March, the country heavily restricts international travel in and out of the country, a significant move seeing how tourism contributes about 20% of the nation's GDP.

The response towards the pandemic varies throughout Southeast Asia, from the relaxed but cautious approach of Brunei which bans public gatherings and promotes social distancing, to the heavy-handed approach of Rodrigo Duterte, the infamous gun-toting Philippine President, who threatens to shoot curfew violators, throughout the region travel is highly restricted, and businesses shuttered. As of April, every single ASEAN country, with the

exception of Timor Leste, implemented some kind of curfew, lockdown or travel restriction to flatten the curve of the COVID-19 infection rate.

Though the response varies from country to country, the similar stance that each took in combatting the pandemic is the shutting down of schools. From declaring an extended school holiday period to suspending tests and exams to a later date, children across Southeast Asia and even Asia find themselves locked and facing an unprecedented situation. Parks, playgrounds and outdoor activities are banned, and even for countries that took a more relaxed approach, outdoor activities are highly discouraged. While certain better off communities with good internet access manage to transform their children's education and activities to

be more digitally oriented (web), rural and urban low-income families are facing the lockdown in harsher conditions especially with crowded families living in small apartments and tiny flats. Parents all across Asia are finding ways and means to ensure that not only will their children's education continue uninterrupted, but are also finding ways to help them adapt to the confined surroundings.



Ill. 1: Nurul Izwa and J Shamsul demonstrating *Class Dojo*, a home schooling app from Singapore

HOME SCHOOLING

For J Shamsul and Nurul Izwa (Ill. 1), ensuring that their 7-year-old daughter Lana's first year of schooling continues uninterrupted, technology plays a key role in her daily activities. [Singapore](#), a highly developed city-state with one of the best broadband penetration and mobile data speed in the world, implemented a full-fledged home-based learning module on the 8th of April. As schools are closed, teachers in Singapore began using the internet to conduct lessons from home, and for Izwa, as a parent, this isn't much of a big shift for her. "We have been using *Parents Gateway* all this while to get updates on her schooling. It's just that with the 'circuit breaker' [Singapore's version of social distancing measures] schools are enhancing its usage to include lessons, schedules, etc."

Parents Gateway, an app developed by Singapore's Ministry of Education, was primarily used as an information hub and interaction tool between schools and parents. Announcements, letters and notifications are pushed through the app to inform parents of their children's activities and administrative matters. Developed in 2019, the timely launch of the app is now the backbone of Singapore's effort in ensuring that children continue their education and activities at home: "A mix of *Parents Gateway*, *SLS* [*Student Learning Space*] and additional apps like *Class Dojo* ensures that Lana's day is fully occupied."

The same goes for neighbouring [Malaysia](#), though not as high tech as their counterpart in Singapore, Malaysian schools and teachers began using mobile messaging apps and video conferencing tools as a way to continue their lessons. "Every day, my 8-year-old daughter's teacher would send in her class schedule via WhatsApp. There would be the daily task that she has to do which will include the pages of the textbook where she would have to refer to; meanwhile, her older brother

and sister (who are high school students) will have daily scheduled Zoom or Skype class conferences." Shukri Ahmad, father of 3 children and based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, also says that by now all of his children are accustomed to the home learning system that is being implemented. "Their weekdays are occupied, so that's a good thing, although class time is always better as they get to mingle with their friends, I think that this will do while we are under the MCO."

DIGITAL DISPARITY

While families like those of Shukri Ahmad, J Shamsul and Izwa who live in an urban setting are more accessible to broadband services and 4G network coverage, many children in rural areas across Asia do not have the same privilege for digital home-based learning. [Indonesia](#), for example, a country whose border consists of 3 different time zones and stretches beyond the United States from end to end, only has a 44% internet penetration throughout the population. The vast island archipelago nation has varying internet infrastructure. While the island of Java may have developed a robust network of broadband lines and high-speed mobile coverage, in places like Kalimantan and Papua much larger in size and more sparsely populated, migrating to an entirely digitised home learning experience is not feasible.

Geography and infrastructure aren't the only issues that divide access to education; economic disparity plays into it as well. Take, for example, Singapore that was highlighted earlier. An article published by *The Straits Times* highlights how home-based learning differs starkly for families of different economic background. Though the Singaporean government loans out tablets and laptops to underprivileged students, factors such as home environment, space constraints and even household

appliances (printers, Wi-Fi routers and high-speed internet subscription) put a strain on children of lower economic background. Little things like video lag in a group conference or the inability to print out their homework point to a drop not just in the quality of education but also add on stress to underprivileged children who are trying to cope with the ongoing lessons.

BROADCASTING AS A BRIDGE

For countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, broadcasting is used as a means to fill the digital gap in ensuring that children who do not have access to the digital infrastructure get the education they need.

Televisi Republik Indonesia or TVRI, [Indonesia's](#) state-owned public broadcasting service, began airing a full-day educational study-from-home programme throughout their social distancing measures to help students catch up on their educational requirements. The broadcast programming is designed to cover all levels of schooling, and the shows are designed to incorporate lessons, homework and activities. Ahmad Zakaria, a producer with TVRI, explained that they are pairing with the government on the "Belajar Dari Rumah" (learn from home) mission. "We do programmes for students at all levels, SD (Elementary School, Ill. 2), SMP (Junior High School), SMA (Senior High School), it [TVRI] broadcasts on a daily basis every week." They start with a program for preschool students in the morning, followed by elementary lessons till noon, and it continues with classes for the junior and senior high students. The schedule ends with a specific programme for parents and teachers so that both parties can monitor the progress.

[Malaysia](#) too is taking a similar approach as its immediate neighbour. Though not as vast as Indonesia, there are areas in which broadcasting is more feasible in reaching out to children.

Radio Television Malaysia or RTM, Malaysia's public service broadcaster, began airing lessons on "TV-Okey", a free channel operated by RTM. Under an initiative dubbed as "TV Pendidikan" (Education TV), the public broadcaster is working with the Ministry of Education in delivering lessons to students; their daily broadcasting schedules are designed to fit segments of schooling so that students and parents can schedule their daily activities around the programmes.

A statement from the Ministry of Education highlights the goal as a measure to bridge the digital divide: "The TV Pendidikan Programme is introduced to enable pupils to gain access to learning materials through alternative platforms, especially during the movement control order."

COPING MECHANISM

Home lessons or schooling isn't just a method to ensure that children do not skip on their homework or that their scheduled school calendar continues, it serves a higher purpose as a means of coping to many of the children affected. For countries like Malaysia that imposes strict movement control orders, children are practically indoors throughout the entire time. As the restriction order is extended to over a month, parents must keep their children busy throughout the day. "We don't live in a landed property, so the constraints of an apartment sometimes get to the kids, so their schoolwork scheduling is important for them to have some sense of normalcy, fills in their day," Shukri Ahmad on how the home schooling helps his children cope on the extended lockdown. All across Asia governments are turning to their broadcasters not just to assist them in educating the public on the necessity of social distancing



Ill. 2: An episode of TVRI's *Belajar Dari Rumah* (Learn From Home), shown here is an episode featuring lessons for elementary school students

or to combat the spread of fake news, but also as a way to help children understand and adapt to the new reality. It is not just airing educational programmes or scheduling lessons. Examples of children content which helps kids understand the necessity of the lockdown are popping out across the region, from the Vietnamese catchy animated "Washing Your Hands" song that became a global sensation to a kids TV show called the *Reading Hero* in Thailand that conducts quizzes and gameshows like challenges to educate children in the matter of social distancing. Broadcasters across Asia are scrambling not just to provide news and information on the pandemic, but are finding themselves playing an essential role in filling in the disparity and divide in regards to access to information and education.

A UNIQUE ROLE

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity for broadcasters to go beyond their traditional role of distributing information and airing entertainment for the masses. More and more TV channels are finding themselves in a position of playing an essential role in assisting their respective nations in dealing with the outbreak. From educating

the public on the need to adjust social norms and old habits, broadcasters are also playing a pivotal role in bridging the digital divide. The most apparent need in bridging this divide is in regards to delivering equal education to children across the economic and geographical spectrum. From home school programming to the creation of content for children, broadcasters,

now more than ever, are stepping up their game to help children cope with this new reality. Not all children have access to high-speed internet, and not every family can afford a computer or a mobile phone for each child; thus it is up to the TV producers and broadcasting managers to come up with means and ways to help them in this regard. Home schooling, children's programmes and delivering lessons isn't just about ensuring that they can continue schooling, more than that, it's about making sure that they have something to do, something to look forward to and more importantly something to depend on in these trying times. ■

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