

COVID-19 and children's media in Latin and South America

RESPONSES ON TV SCREENS, PLATFORMS AND VIDEO CHANNELS

Beth Carmona

The author summarizes approaches how TV stations, content platforms and media networks for children in South and Latin America respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin and South America, which surprised the entire world with the urgency of radical measures of social isolation and quarantine, we found immediate responses on the TV screens, platforms and video channels that certainly influence the lives of thousands of children.

The behavior of these children, surrounded by screens of digital media, confirms some recent researches that investigate media consumption habits. Children in the whole world, the Alpha generation, daughters and sons of generation Y, known as the Millennials, are super connected, informed and know everything that happens around them. Born from 2010 onwards, they are involved in technological daily life, with greater or lesser intensity, depending on the country they live in and their socioeconomic situation. The children, over-stimulated by parents, schools or even via technology, tend to be connected and to express their opinions regularly. They want to be given a voice, they want to participate in and contribute to social life, and many of them have the talent to become activists for the most noble causes. Perhaps we can even say that children are more empowered in this 21st century than ever before.

In Latin America, where we still have countries with unmet basic needs and immense social and economic inequality, we need to reinforce children's education, include them in collective action plans and listen to them as much as possible. We have been through very delicate moments in this pandemic, with political instability in many countries, setbacks in governments' and public policies, and in this scenario, information, education and communication are of great value and utility.

The media routine inside people's houses certainly includes screens, i.e., TVs, cell phones or tablets that in many cases serve not only for entertainment but also as an educational complement. UNICEF estimates that in Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 154 million children, about 95% of students enrolled in the region, are temporarily out of school due to COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020). The closure of schools also implies the interruption of access to other important basic services such as school meals, recreational programs, extracurricular activities and pedagogical support.

When observing social networks, children's TV channels and other audiovisual resources like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook or TikTok it is evident that children from 4 years onwards are not only perceiving and understanding the situation we are going through, but they are also expressing their feelings, ideas and desires through the media with impressive clarity and speed.

Their perceptions not only come from what they hear from adults, but also through the media, which has never

taken the children's universe as much into account as it does now. Digital platforms offer apps, games, ebooks, animations for tablets and smartphones and regularly provide videos, music clips, children's testimonies, and information campaigns explaining and showing hygiene measures and attitudes to face the virus. Very quickly the children realized the need to stay indoors, to not attend school and to not meet grandparents, uncles and play friends. Anxiously they want to return to normal life and many express boredom and impatience in the face of the situation. On the other hand, it is worth noting that they enjoy spending more time with their parents and family, all together and indoors.

Children's channels redoubled their content efforts with a raising awareness for the small citizens, which is quite new. We haven't seen anything like that at other times of commotion or catastrophes, whether they were natural like earthquakes and floods or attacks like on the Twin Towers in 2001, which also left the children shocked and anxious. In moments like these there is a lot of doubt about how and what to communicate to children. However, this COVID-19 pandemic crisis is different. It seems that considering and listening to children has become mandatory and necessary, especially for those who intend to maintain empathy for the little ones.

BRAZIL

Brazilian TV channels aimed at children quickly moved into the informative

direction. On public TV, popular characters from *Quintal da Cultura*¹, such as Doro and Ludo, explain the virus and what precautions should be taken to prevent infection by the disease.

Globo's Channel "Gloob" launched *Ciranda da Limpeza*, a music clip on how to protect oneself from the virus. The channel also developed a new show with a famous doctor, Dr. Drauzio Varella, who talks about the topic with children.

In its science program *O Show da Luna*² Discovery Kids Channel airs an animation that reinforces the importance of care. Other characters, such as Peppa Pig, Doki and Luna, broach the issue of hygiene and health measures.³

Other global communication groups also took action, customizing the campaigns sent by the headquarters. Viacom's Nickelodeon adopted the global positioning #KidsTogether to keep parents and children informed and entertained during the pandemic with special videos.

On YouTube and YouTube Kids thousands of videos about washing hands flooded the screens. Some of them go beyond hygiene and show testimonies from the children themselves warning about COVID-19 with genuine videos made by young YouTubers in their homes.

But the most emblematic case was that of Mauricio de Souza whose company created *Turma da Mônica*⁴ 60 years ago. One of his characters, Cascão, who hates bathing and runs away from water, for the first time washes his hands with lots of water and soap (Ill. 1), an unprecedented fact, witnessed and accompanied by all fans.

Futura, the Roberto Marinho Foundation's channel, has been making a major mobilization for children's education during the coronavirus crisis. With social isolation and children out of school, distance education is a major challenge that changes the dynamics.

"This change has an impact mainly on students and teachers, who need to use technology to study. In the context of the pandemic,



Screenshot from Facebook © MSP - Brasil/Maurício de Souza

Ill. 1: Unprecedented for all fans: Cascão from *Turma da Mônica*, usually afraid of water, washes his hand with water and soap

the journeys take place at the same time for many families. A new hashtag adds to the mobilization, #EstudeEmCasa, and with it a series of tools designed for students, families, teachers to deal with the challenges of this new routine," explains José Brito, manager of Futura.

ARGENTINA

A special programming on quarantine was designed by Pakapaka⁵ with the National Ministry of Education. 4 special programs with different hosts, kids and teachers share educational content and activities with the audience (children from 4 to 8 years) as a way to accompany children and their families during quarantine and also to be shared at schools. The programs include also specialists in music, art, physical activities and other resources for education. They have a special slot where kids and their families from different parts of the country share their feelings, activities and thoughts by Skype. They can read a story, share a recipe or how they deal with the isolation. Cielo Salviolo, director of Pakapaka, says: "The impact has been huge, we are receiving daily thousands of mails, pictures, and drawings from kids all over the country."

They also create a special programming in their social networks that compli-

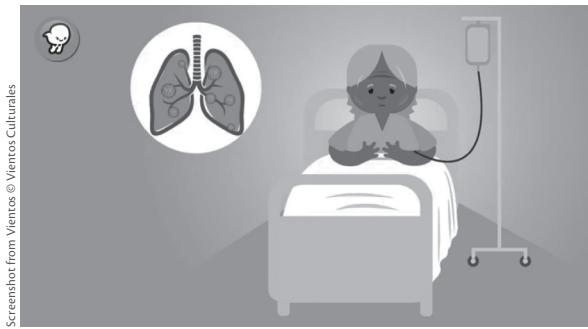
ments the rhythm of the day: In the morning, a post to wake up and start the day with energy; in the afternoon, activities and playful, physical and artistic prompts; at night, tranquil and relaxing content. Campaigns like "Stay home", "Home together" and "Windows to the world" were also designed. "Stay Home" proposes to raise awareness through illustrations that refer to the importance of taking care of yourself and staying home. "Home Together" was a joint initiative of Pakapaka and UNICEF in which artists shared videos with playful and artistic activities. "Windows to the world" attempts to break through fears and anxieties. With the help of artists, the children are invited to share paintings of what they see through their own windows. Happy with the results, Salviolo summarizes that the project had a regional presence across entire Latin America.

MEXICO

Thinking about children and families living in poor regions, rural and indigenous communities all over the country, the Mexican NGO Vientos Culturales⁶ decided to produce an animation campaign to inform about COVID-19.

The director Elke Franke explains: "There are hundreds of indigenous languages in Mexico and in many communities they are the primary means of communication. Many of these communities have decided to stay in lockdown. At the same time they face a serious dearth of helpful information about the pandemic in a language they can understand. It's a dangerous situation we address with quick action."

In an extraordinary "balancing act" they created animated videos for kids, from their perspective, which give all the valuable information about COVID-19 to their families as well (Ill. 2). They have developed these informational videos in Spanish and more than 20 indigenous languages. The main distribution of the campaign is via WhatsApp and Face-



Ill. 2: The NGO Vientos Culturales developed informational videos on the coronavirus and health measures in Spanish and more than 20 indigenous languages

book, “Once niños”, public TV and the educational TV channel are also airing the campaign. “The distribution success is based on sharing, sharing, sharing and free download for everybody,” says Elke Franke. Vientos’s creation of videos on the coronavirus in several languages is in line with its general practice of putting indigenous children, the group most in need, at the center of its work. Vientos Culturales produces weekly news for kids programs as an answer to systemic discrimination and inequality, and aims to change the narrative regarding the lives of Mexican children. The coronavirus has rendered this work more important as well, with children now being unable to go to school.^{7,8,9}

CHILE

In an unprecedented effort, the National Television Council of Chile (CNTV¹⁰) together with the Ministry of Education promoted an agreement between the main actors in the Chilean television industry to generate a children’s educational signal. This offer, that did not exist to date in the country, was inspired by the pandemic situation. In response to this agreement between national and regional TV stations, pay TV operators and providers of audiovisual content, the new “TV Educa Chile” signal began its broadcasts the week of April 13, 2020. Its purpose is to provide students with educational

entertainment, tele-education, training and cultural segments, considering that today there is a universe of 3.6 million children in Chile staying home and not going to school due to the COVID-19 health emergency.

Soledad Suit, director of CNTV Infantil, says:

“The role of the National Television Council from now on focuses on the provision of educational and cultural audiovisual content that it has developed in the last 20 years and that it will continue to produce and air all over the country.”

Other countries like Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay are doing their job with videos and many storytelling actions in the web. There is a storytellers’ network in Brazil where actors are ready to entertain kids via the web and help parents that need a moment to work in home office.

GLOBAL ACTIONS

An interesting global case was the creation of the YouTube channel My #QuarantineLife¹¹ by Jan-Willem Bult from Free Press Unlimited with unique stories of children during the lockdown.

“When the pandemic broke out I noticed that once again news media in general didn’t show interest in asking young people’s news, opinions, stories. And information was often confusing. As most of our international partners in the WADADA project couldn’t go out because of quarantine, we decided to ask young people to make stories themselves and share them on an international YouTube channel with the world”, says Jan-Willem Bult.

The projects invite children all over the world to introduce themselves, report where they are in quarantine and say what they want to say. The channel has already videos from 15 countries. Finally, the global brand Sesame Workshop created the campaign “Caring for

Each Other”¹² on its platform which aims at raising awareness for the situation among parents and children in quality videos that communicate through classic characters. The idea is to offer support during the pandemic with content filled with messages of love and kindness which help children to control anxiety. Playful activities and virtual meetings to play online are also part of the initiative and are offered in Spanish and Portuguese as well.

NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/quintaldacultura> [30.4.20]
- ² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAEQEnoo6BM&t=37s> [30.4.20]
- ³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8lpRR6Xw5E> [30.4.20]
- ⁴ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCV4XcEaB-swMCryorV_gNENw [30.4.20]
- ⁵ <http://www.pakapaka.gob.ar/> [30.4.20]
- ⁶ <https://vientosculturales.org/> [30.4.20]
- ⁷ https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLG0CvxNy1a6yFfTgHPfFq_-g-Ex72MFcc [30.4.20]
- ⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLG0CvxNy1a6xovtJUeXJ9H0fE4hj--wAj> [30.4.20]
- ⁹ <https://everychildthrives.com/in-a-pandemic-kids-tv-producers-keep-indigenous-mexican-voices-in-the-conversation/>[30.4.20]
- ¹⁰ <https://cntvinfantil.cl/> [30.4.20]
- ¹¹ <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/news/sharing-the-stories-of-the-youth-in-my-quarantinelife> [30.4.20]
- ¹² <https://www.sesamestreet.org/caring> [30.4.20]

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UNICEF (2020). COVID-19: More than 95 per cent of children are out of school in Latin America and the Caribbean. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/COVID-19-More-than-95-per-cent-of-children-are-out-of-school-in-LAC> [5.5.20]

THE AUTHOR

Beth Carmona is Head of Content Singular, Media & Content, Director at comKids Festivals and President of Midiativa, Brazil.

