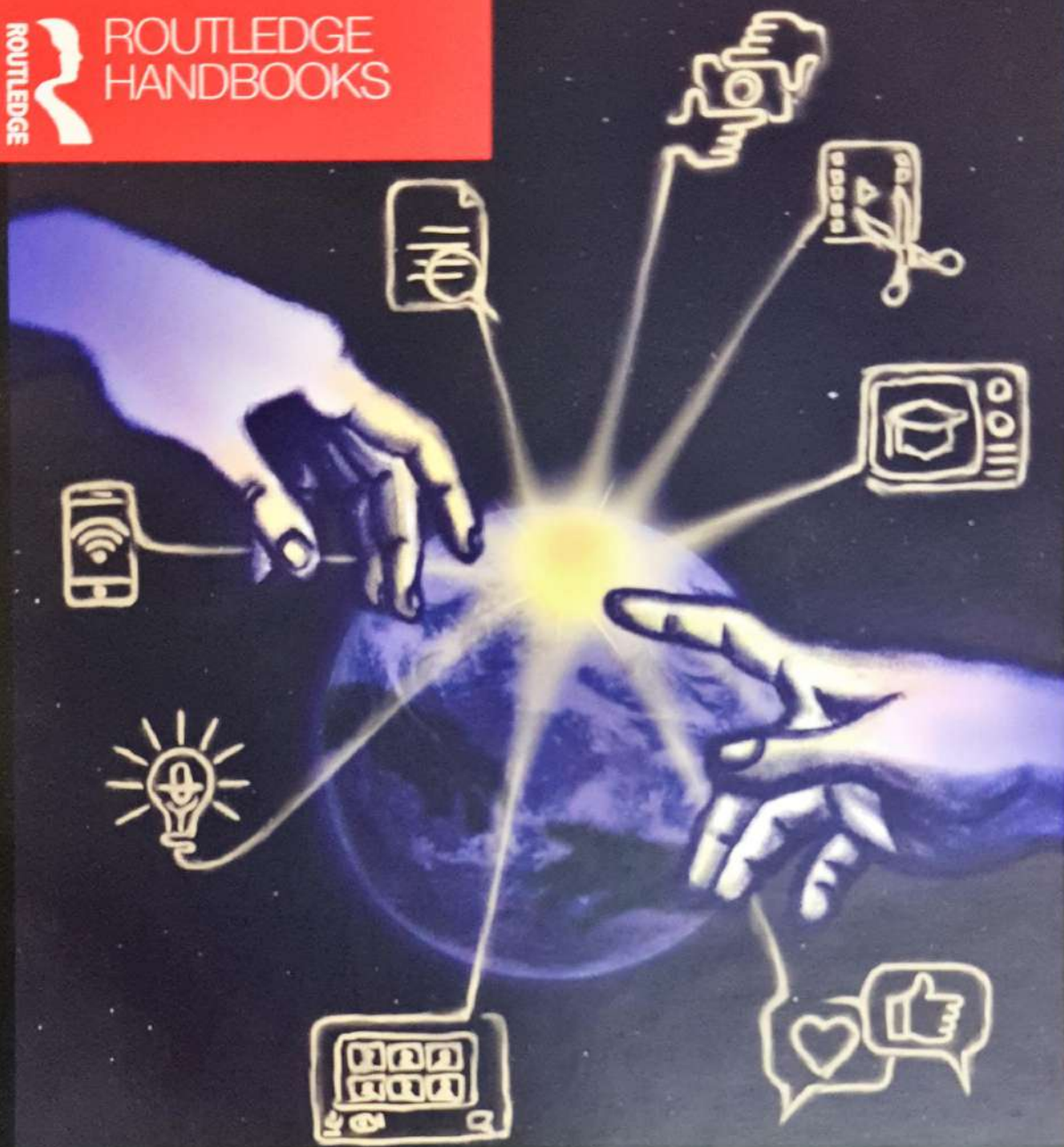


ROUTLEDGE
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HANDBOOKS



The Routledge Handbook of Media Education Futures Post-Pandemic

Edited by Yonty Friesem, Usha Raman,
Igor Kanižaj and Grace Y. Choi

THE ROUTLEDGE
HANDBOOK OF MEDIA
EDUCATION FUTURES
POST-PANDEMIC

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EDUCATIONAL TV IN MEXICO DURING COVID-19

The Case of the Show *Aprende en Casa II* and the Mix with Entertainment

David González, Juan S. Larrosa-Fuentes and
Magdalena Sofía Paláu Cardona

Introduction

The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Mexico on February 28, 2020. To mitigate the spread of the virus, the Mexican Ministry of Health implemented a confinement strategy that received the name “Stay at Home.” This strategy forced the closure of all schools and educational centers in the country on March 17.

In this context, the Ministry of Education designed the strategy “Aprende en casa II” (Learning at Home I), which consisted of broadcasting virtual lessons via three public television channels for elementary and secondary schools. Additionally, the Ministry opened an Internet website to provide instructional basic materials for students. This program ran from April 20 to July 3, 2020, with the idea that it would be a one-term initiative.

After summer vacations (July–August), the Ministry of Health decided that the conditions still did not permit the reopening of schools. Therefore, for the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, the Ministry of Public Education implemented a more ambitious strategy called “Aprende en casa II” (Learning at Home II). This strategy consisted of producing TV educational programs to broadcast on: (a) commercial television networks and (b) serve each grade from preschool to secondary school with specific “educational lessons” produced as TV shows.

Thousands of TV shows were produced in a range of subjects, to be viewed by all students via public and commercial television. To fulfill this ambitious project, hundreds of teachers and TV hosts were hired to instruct their lessons via a TV format with the form of entertainment education associated with the work of Miguel Sabido (2003) and *Sesame Street* (1969) and the work of public education format known as *Telesecundaria* (1960s). This study examines “Aprende en casa II” around two thematic areas—“the program as television” and “the program as education”—since we believe that this show presents not only influences from a traditional, but also an innovative format of television. The analytical example is taken from the factual television format, transmitted through open-air channels of Televisa, TV Azteca, Imagen (three major TV corporations), and the public television channel—Canal Once. Our approach will be at the TV format level, often studied as a genre or a series of standardized production practices and narrative codes.

The challenge of migrating the public education system to a new model structured by television was enormous because of the size and scope of the project. In Mexico, the State is obliged to offer the population free education at the preschool (two grades), primary (six grades), and secondary (three grades) levels. These 11 years of training are considered as basic education and are offered in 226,188 schools across the country (INEE, 2018 p. 47).

The government chose to rely on terrestrial television, among other reasons, because Mexico is still far from having universal access to the Internet. On the other hand, television reaches almost the entire population. According to the 2019 statistical yearbook of the Federal Telecommunications Institute (2019), the broadcasting media system is made up of 858 open television stations and 2,003 radio stations. Eight commercial television channels reach 96% of the population, and, in a recent survey, 93% of Mexicans reported owning a television set (Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2018). In contrast, 45 out of every 100 homes in Mexico have computer equipment with fixed Internet access (Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2019, pp. 15, 141). For national coverage, commercial television networks charged each student five pesos per month (25 US cents) with a total investment of USD 22.6 million (Uribe, 2020).

Educational Television in Mexico: Toward a Mixed Form of Edutainment

The practice of educational television in Mexico is not new. Since the last years of the 1960s, the Mexican Ministry of Public Education designed a distance learning system based on content distributed through television. During the first two decades of this learning system, the contents were broadcast on terrestrial television and, later, through the Educational Television Satellite Network (EDUSAT). This project, which received the name of Telesecundaria and continues operating in 2021, was created to reach rural and indigenous communities that are mostly located in remote territories (Wolff, et al., 2002, p. 146). There is no doubt that this pedagogical experience aided the development and design of *Aprende en casa II* during the COVID-19 confinement.

In this chapter, educational television¹ is defined as a popular form of mass media communication (Vicente and Lucas, 2020) systematically designed to promote learning of academic curricula and prosocial content, either inside or outside the classroom (Fisch, 2004). Its origins can be traced in Europe, to the educational media content produced by the UK's BBC as a national radio broadcast to schools in 1924. As such, education through the media is closely linked to the emergence of the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) model, a model-free from political and commercial interference. By the 1950s, educational television is considered to have begun in major public organizations such as the BBC (United Kingdom), the Public Broadcasting System (United States), and TV Ontario (Canada). Still, in later years, several of the most popular educational productions resulted from coproductions between private broadcast companies and the public sector (Vicente and Lucas, 2020). This is similar in the case of Mexico's television production and transmission during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A significant development in educational television is *Sesame Street*, a program produced in the United States and by far the longest-running children's television program ever made. Since its debut in 1969, more than 4,400 episodes have been produced. The show has been broadcast in over 100 countries worldwide (Buckingham, 2019). As a television format, *Sesame Street* combined commercial television production elements, such as music, live-action sketch comedy, animation, puppetry, and a strong visual style (O'Dell, 1997) with educational techniques based on curricula stated in measurable outcomes (Morrow, 2006).

This format was adapted in 1971 for Latin American audiences, called *Plaza Sésamo*, and transmitted by Televisa, the main commercial television network in Mexico, from 1972 till 2013. GrupoTelevisa is the major contributor to the Mexican government educational and cultural plan (Rojas, 1985), using the approach of entertainment education developed by Miguel Sabido (2003). A strategy “addressing problems of development. *Entertainment education* is defined as the process of putting educational content in entertainment messages in order to increase knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior concerning the educational issue or topic” (Singhal, et al., 2003, pp. 1–2). According to Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, et al. (1976), educators and psychologists cooperated to help the producers develop *Plaza Sésamo*, a program that was transmitted across Latin America.

The perspective here on educational television deals with a project capable of functioning in circumstances where access to formal schooling facilities is restricted. In low-income contexts, “educational television material could be delivered through videos played in schools that are supported by corresponding teacher guidance (e.g., the Mexican school-based *Telesecundaria* program), or broadcast on public channels” (Watson & McIntyre, 2020, p. 4).

The Case Study: Aprende en Casa II

At the end of March 2020, the Ministry of Public Education had announced the “Aprende en casa I” program in which educational content would be transmitted via the public communication system (three public television channels and a webpage) during the National Campaign of Social Distance. The Ministry of Public Education relied heavily on Canal Once and began transmitting *Plaza Sésamo*, among other educational programs (April 20–July 3, 2020). *Aprende en casa II* extended the argument about the need to include commercial television to function in the “public interest.” The new television program for the 2020–2021 school year heavily relies on the *Sesame Street* format, the United States children’s educational television show but with actual teachers as co-hosts interacting with puppets. By August 2020, the Ministry revealed that they would produce educational content for 17 weeks and 4,550 programs for the 2020–2021 school year under his supervision. Although *Aprende en casa II* displays significant continuities with past children’s programming, it also represents something distinctively new: real teachers on television instructing classes

For this study, we examined one week of production out of the 17 scheduled. This included all the broadcast programs on the national Mexican free-to-air channels in Mexico (Televisa, Canal Once, TVAzteca) for the week beginning from Monday 24 September and ending on Friday October 2, 2020. This week was selected to allow examination of a representative week from the entire 17-week production. Recording was done during the proposed “class-hour” times for students, i.e., between 08.00 and 19.00 hours on all weekdays. It should be noted, however, that the *Aprende en casa II* is broadcast through the day (24 hours) with repetitions (Table 37.1).

The program attributes were categorized as “course,” “minutes of production,” and “grade.” Since the focus of the research was educational television, the “course” category was further subdivided into “teacher” and “host.” Both these categories considered gender (female and male) and age group (20–30, 30–40, and 40–60 years) for the purpose of the casting analysis. Further, we used textual analysis to examine the *Aprende en casa II* series, which was set over four, half-hour shows, including two programs of Spanish and two of Mathematics lessons; of course, there were more transmitted shows for every grade. For analytical purposes, each program was viewed as a unit. Data were recorded using a coding grid which enabled descriptions of the show in terms of structure (segments), casting (teachers,

hosts, and puppets), visual data (camera use, edition, and lighting) along with sound, and verbal data (music and dialog). We focused on the television form or structure (segments, class-teaching, and videos); the second line of analysis assessed the key "teaching techniques" or the program's educative side. This type of coding was not restrictive and did not prevent the noting of additional and interesting production elements within the program. This approach enables an empirical interrogation of the Mexican Ministry of Education response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Aprende en casa II produces 205 hours of programming per week (410 TV half-an-hour-long programs). Canal Once, Televisa, and TV Azteca accounted for 75% (155 hours) of the transmission time (Table 37.2). Table 37.3 shows the total minutes per grade (ten grades) and course (16 courses) devoted to each category. Spanish, Math, Arts, and Civics occupied 49.6% of total production time. The show featured teachers with adult hosts interacting with puppet characters, although most teachers' cast was significantly more extensive and diverse.

Of the 104 teachers facing the camera across the content we analyzed, 71.1% were women as opposed to 28.9% men.² The findings support an almost equal gender representation, with the female TV host variable relatively prevailing at 52% (Tables 37.4 and 37.5). In terms of age group, ages between 30 and 40 years were the dominant voice. This means that the value of the teaching experience was established as a significant casting feature. The presence of young adults as TV hosts is very common in popular TV shows, but sharing a screen with mature teachers creates collaboration very similar to the master-apprentice dynamic.

As we stated, we examine "Aprende en casa II" around two thematic areas, i.e., "the program as television" and "the program as education," since we believe this show presents not only influences from a traditional, but also an innovative format of television. The most common format using puppets was *Sesame Street*, a studio set show in which adult hosts would interact with children and puppets characters using methods of television commercials, such as repetition, sketches, animation, and musical jingles or songs to transmit educational content.

Aprende en casa II makes use of a single studio setting that enables camera movement. There is sufficient area for the floor cameras and for a blackboard on the teacher's stage. The scenography of the studio conveys a classroom environment. Every *Aprende en casa II* program has its own specific setting according to the grade level, with particular color schemes and visual props such as blackboards, big crayons, maps of Mexico, book shells, small work desks, and world globes, among others. Every program operates around two camera positions in the studio, and both are combined in diverse ways, using long shots, medium shots, and close-ups. Most of the camera movements and shots are directed toward the textual elements that make up a classroom in a studio setting with optimal lighting: teacher, host, blackboard, table-desk and presentation clips, and digital graphics. The show consists of 30 minutes of transmission, leaving no time for commercials or advertising time. As this TV program does not have commercials, the Mexican audience could see the duet between the host and the teachers in the first block, and a more than ten-minute-long-segment "class lesson," where the teacher instructs educational content and presents sketches or animations.

Findings: Aprende en Casa II, the Four-Segment Structure of Educational TV

Despite *Aprende en casa II*'s innovative approach, it can be understood in relation to the format of educational television and entertainment. While these formats overlap, the interplay can be detected in this program as several blocks with a number of different segments or "small sequential unities of images and sounds... with its own internal structure" (Ellis 1992,

p. 112). It is possible to identify four blocks of the program structure, which can also be applied to other *Aprende en casa II* programs.

- *Introduction.* Opening credits, greetings from TV hosts to the teacher and puppet, public service announcement.
- *The class lesson.* Teacher takes over and instructs the content using several educational techniques.
- *The Q&A section.* TV host asks questions to the teacher after the class lesson. Sometimes the teacher asks questions to the viewers at home.
- *Closure and ending credits.* A summary of the instruction, this block includes a segment called "exercise at home," and end credits.

1 Introduction

The sequential structure is driven by the unfolding of a class lesson: introduction, class lesson, sketch or animation, and conclusion. The introduction block is divided into two segments. In the first segment, the host introduces the teacher. They salute each other by bowing with their hand placed on their hearts, hence demonstrating social distance in front of the camera.

The host connects the program's segments, which in themselves have a lot in common as a lesson, thus forming a coherent narrative. Most of the time, the host enables a dialog with the teacher. The functional aspect of this allows more flexibility to the format since it is more spontaneous to have a conversation between two persons talking away at the start of the show—the same as in the entertainment productions.

The segment achieves its conclusion when the teacher thanks the host. All these textual premises lead to the "Washing our hands" segment narrated by a puppet named "Ajolisto" (based on the axolotl, also known as the Mexican walking fish). This segment shows safety tips to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 using animation.

While this segment is a relatively small element of the show, it functions as a public service announcement, particularly for educational television. It indeed broadens the intention to combine entertainment with education.

2 The "class lesson"

In the second block, the "class lesson," often places the host and the teacher standing at the center of the stage in the studio, parallel to and facing the viewers. The stage is in the classroom style, used for direct camera access to the teacher and host. This direct address use subsequently makes the camera work static, a code for seriousness and authority—similar to news TV shows (Ellis, 1992). The program teacher is of paramount importance for the *Aprende en casa II* show, as an identifying characteristic of educational television. Thus, the show is entirely built around the curriculum with the teacher also playing a key role in the construction of a lesson.

The main device used by the teacher to deliver content is the direct address into the camera.

This practice suggests talking to and engaging with the individual viewer. The program teacher has a specific authority in defining the interaction with the audience, deriving from their knowledge about the practice of teaching, and associated instructional and rhetorical techniques. The teacher delivers a pre-planned and rehearsed lesson (without stumbles or mistakes), contributing to the sense that what is happening is an instruction. A technique often employed in *Aprende en casa II* was for the teacher to instruct using the blackboard in both math and Spanish lessons, as

this made the segment more realistic. This might present to the television viewing audience as a close-up look achieved by the camera during a math operation or solving a grammatical problem.

3 *The "Q&A" section*

Most of the time, in an associated technique, the host played the part of a student/learner, asking questions to the teacher during and after the lesson trying to be as spontaneous as possible: apparently an act that conveys immediacy, designed to have an impact on the viewer.

This segment is designed linguistically, modeled on the Q&A structure of speech communication.

4 *Closure and ending credits*

This segment ends by summarizing the instruction or sharing a mini-documentary featuring videos of children learning through play—sometimes singing and rhyming, thus reaching narrative closure as the program shifts to the final five minutes of video: exercising at home during pandemic confinement. In many ways, this block is similar to the narrative structure of a workout TV program. Usually, this features a well-known Olympian athlete or a child doing simple exercises that the audience can do while watching television, such as lunges, sit ups, jumping jacks, and planks. The exercise segment ends the program, and closing credits appear on the screen, the cast and crew list, and additional contacts regarding the Ministry of Education and Covid-19 pandemic hotline. As can be seen, the *Aprende en casa II* program has a varied set of segments structured around lessons and the Covid-19 pandemic health information. Except for the class lesson itself, all other elements address advice and guidance about how to stay safe and healthy during confinement, as in "washing our hands" and "exercising at home."

Although storytelling overlaps with educational techniques, we can also identify "realistic" emphasis in this program with the class lesson and documentary sequences. Frequently realistic, this program speaks more directly to rationalization: episodes featured teachers, repetition, and no-nonsense information in every subject; variation between them was minimal since the format structure of four blocks appears to be pervade all episodes in the program.

Conclusion

Aprende en casa II serves as an educational television agent for developing programming for all public school grades suited for the pandemic times. Our study demonstrates that the program was designed following popular TV educational and entertainment shows aimed to deliver socially and pedagogically appropriate content to Mexican students. Following our analysis, we conclude that the Covid-19 pandemic and *Aprende en casa* created an opportunity to address the educational challenges via television by producing shows and providing teachers with materials. Although the trend in other countries has been similar in using public service media to support education initiatives, Mexico was among the few to rely on an open-air commercial broadcasting system. The collaboration between commercial television networks (the media monopolies) and the Mexican government has consolidated educational television production expertise that may partly explain the rise of this new mixed format, from public service education production (telesecundarias) to commercial television entertainment. Mexican president López Obrador described this initiative as an ambitious "emergency plan like no other" (Domínguez, 2020); he already has ordered an evaluation but at the time of writing the terms were still to be defined.

Although this strategy was perceived by the government as an effective educational tool for learning across the low-income population, the initiative was very centralized. Very few teachers, educators and policy makers were consulted about the numerous limitations and needs for children to learn via television. If we assume that *Aprende en casa II* was inspired in the Sesame Street format, we can say that the curriculum drew heavily on the development of cognitive skills as a pedagogic style, relying on repetition, and fast-paced techniques taken from television commercials, thus encompassing forms of logical classification, visual discrimination, and reasoning skills. The purposeful and painstaking process of creating TV programs calls on teachers, parents, students, and policy makers to participate in the production of meaningful content not only by designing educational tools, but also by adapting cultural references and ideas into the final product.

For the *Aprende en casa* initiative, teachers have had to adjust to meet the challenges; most of the teachers were not familiar with technology or pedagogical techniques. Attitudes toward the initiative, especially regarding the TV show and its contribution to children's education, were just barely positive. According to a survey carried by Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City, teachers gave a 7.2 grade to the program, and 38% used *Aprende en casa II* to teach materials (Xantomila, 2021).

In addition, during the fall of 2020, a series of opinions in the media (Fernández y De la Rosa, 2020) drew attention to the educational inequalities between the have and the have-not or the private and the public. Public school students are perceived to be some years behind private school students. Other opinions (Orozco, 2020) placed the blame for this situation, not on the shortcomings of the schools, but on the inadequate preparation provided by lower-middle class parents. In most cases, parents were forced to accompany their children in daily educational activities to replace teachers. One news report painted a picture of poor families struggling with school. Parents (often single mothers) were found to be lacking in the expertise of teaching and technological skill to help their children to learn.

In summary, examining the Ministry of Education's active response to the pandemic, specifically the production of *Aprende en casa* overall program, and thousands of TV shows demonstrates a change in Mexican Media and Educational system. However, this change has been leveraged from a top-down perspective without involving teachers and parents as participants. Moving forward, it would be ideal to involve them to a national dialog to develop and produce educational materials considering the shortcoming and limitations of the initiative such as media and digital literacy education to enhance distance learning at home.

Aprende en casa II needs to be understood, firstly, in the historical context in which it was created. Toward the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government turned its attention to disadvantaged children and their families in general. The edutainment format sought to compensate for the shortcomings of the formal school system rather than address educational needs. Although with several flaws, *Aprende en casa II* used a multimodal format, it was a visually simulated classroom, but it also included sounds and music in different ways. The program had a linear storyline, with a model of teaching and learning through its human and puppet characters in a style that was gentle rather than authoritarian, following the benevolent tone and tradition of Sesame Street. *Aprende en casa II* showed Mexican students to be active, and teachers were regarded as friends and helpers in a time of crisis.

Notes

¹ A distinction is usually made between *educational television* and *instructional television* "the first encompassing a vast latitude of broadcasting formats and the latter gaining its meaning from the specific and more formal use in teaching-learning situations (e.g., the classroom) as a part of an instructional program developed in an institutional context" (Vicente and Lucas, 2020, p. 527).

- 2 This dominance can be understood from the large presence of women in the Mexican education system. Of the total number of teachers working in basic education, 71 out of every 100 are women. In preschool, the corresponding proportion is 94 out of 100. There is less difference in secondary education according to gender since 57 of every 100 teachers are women, and 43 are men. Moreover, 80% of basic education teachers in the system work in public schools and 20% in the private sector (INEGI, 2019).

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Appendix

Table 37.1 Channels and television schedule

Level	Canal 11	Televisa	TVAzteca	Grupo Imagen	Grupo SPR
	Option		Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Preschool	08:00-09:00			15:00-16:00	
First grade	09:30-11:30		12:00-15:30		
Second grade	11:30-13:30		15:00-17:30		
Third grade	13:30-17:00		17:30-20:00		
Fourth grade	16:30-19:00		19:30-22:00		
Fifth grade	19:00-21:30		07:30-10:00		
Sixth grade	21:00-23:30		09:30-12:00		
Seventh-grade secondary school				16:00-19:00	21:30-00:00
Eighth-grade secondary school				08:00-11:00	18:30-21:30
Ninth-grade secondary school				10:30-13:30	15:00-18:00

Table 37.2 Number of programs and hours transmitted per day and total per week for each channel

	Canal 11	Televisa	TVAzteca	Grupo Imagen	Grupo SPR
	Option 1		Option 2	Options 3 or 4	
Number of programs transmitted per day	32 (160 programs per week)		30 (150 programs per week)	20 (100 programs per week)	
Total hours of transmission per day	16 (80 hours transmitted per week)		15 (75 hours transmitted per week)	10 (50 hours transmitted per week)	

Table 37.3 Total minutes per grade and course

Courses	Preschool Elementary					Secondary School					Total
	Pre-K	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade	Sixth Grade	Seventh Grade	Eighth Grade	Ninth Grade	
Spanish		120	120	120	120	120	120	120	150	150	1,140
Math	60	60	120	120	120	120	120	120	150	150	1,140
Arts	30	60	120	120	60	60	60	60	60	60	690
Natural sciences				120	60	60	60	90	120	120	630
Physical education	30	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	570
Healthy life		60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	540
History					60	60	60	90	90	90	450
Civic formation		30	30	30	30	30	30	60	90	90	420
Socioemotional education	30	60	60	60	60	60	60				370
English	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	300
Geography					60	60	60	90			270
Civics and ethics in dialog		30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	270
Environmental knowledge		120	120								240
Technology								90	60	60	210
Language y comunicación	60										60
The natural and social world	60										60
Total	300	630	750	750	750	750	750	900	900	900	7,380

Table 37.4 Gender representation in Aprende en casa II

Gender	Teachers	TV Hosts
Female	74 (71.1%)	51 (52%)
Male	30 (28.2%)	47 (48%)
Total	104	98

Table 37.5 Age representation in Aprende en casa II

Age	Teachers	TV Hosts
20-30 years	4 (4.4%)	13 (13.2%)
30-40 years	32 (45.1%)	76 (77.6%)
40-50 years	38 (50.5%)	9 (9.2%)
Total	104	98

This handbook showcases how educators and practitioners around the world adapted their routine media pedagogies to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, which often led to significant social, economic, and cultural hardships.

Combining an innovative mix of traditional chapters, autoethnography, case studies, and dialogue within an intercultural framework, the handbook focuses on the future of media education and provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and affordances of media education as we move forward. Topics range from fighting disinformation, how vulnerable communities coped with disadvantages using media, transforming educational TV or YouTube to reach larger audiences, supporting students' wellbeing through various online strategies, examining early childhood, parents, and media mentoring using digital tools, reflecting on educators' intersectionality on video platforms, youth-produced media to fight injustice, teaching remotely and providing low-tech solutions to address the digital divide, search for solutions collaboratively using social media, and many more.

Offering a unique and broad multicultural perspective on how we can learn from the challenges of addressing varied pedagogical issues that have arisen in the context of the pandemic, this handbook will allow researchers, educators, practitioners, institution leaders, and graduate students to explore how media education evolved during 2020 and 2021, and how these experiences can shape the future direction of media education.

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MEDIA STUDIES / EDUCATION

ISBN 978-1-032-22503-6



9 781032 225036



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