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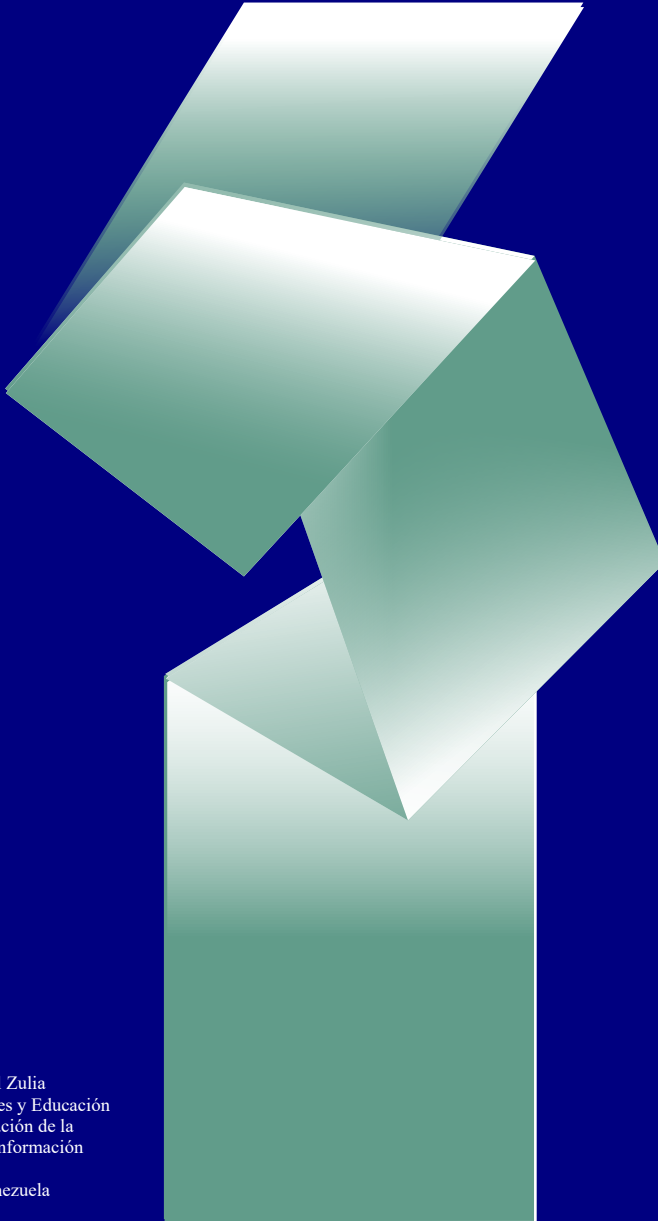
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Educative television during COVID-19 pandemic in Spain

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Abstract

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, educational broadcasting for children and adolescents returned to the headlines to show the huge gaps that exist in the apparently developed world. In a few days, the Spanish public television put together a series of educational contents, in an effort to make up for school closures and support students from low-income households – 300 broadcast hours in two time slots and for two public television stations, La 2 and Clan. The research includes an overview of educational television, an assessment of its relevance today, a review of the educational contents put together by the Spanish public television service and the Ministry of Education, and a discussion of the criticisms advanced by education associations and ordinary citizens, followed by a diagnosis of the situation.

Key Words: Education, communication, television, transmedia.

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Televisión educativa durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en España

Resumen

La programación educativa para niños y jóvenes vuelve a ponerse de actualidad en un contexto de pandemia que evidencia las inmensas brechas existentes en un mundo aparentemente desarrollado y privilegiado. En plena crisis del Covid 19, la Radiotelevisión Pública española ha emitido una programación educativa diseñada en pocos días para ayudar a estudiantes sin recursos, en una acción pretendidamente compensadora. En este estudio, se hace una introducción al fenómeno de la televisión educativa, se valora su vigencia, se analiza la propuesta de programación de TV para la educación propuesta por el MEC español y por RTVE. El análisis de las opiniones de algunas asociaciones educativas y ciudadanía sirve para realizar un diagnóstico de la situación.

Palabras clave: Educación, comunicación, televisión, transmedia.

1. Introduction

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, educational broadcasting for children and adolescents returned to the headlines, albeit fleetingly, to show the huge gaps that exist in the apparently developed world.

Starting in March 2020, following the outbreak of Covid-19, the Spanish public television service (Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, RTVE) produced educational content in a few days to be broadcast by channels La 2 and Clan under the general title *Aprendemos en casa* (Let's Learn at Home). According to RTVE sources, the content was aimed at helping underprivileged students with no access to electronic devices and no Internet connection.

This paper includes an overview of educational television, analyzing its current value and briefly going over the history of the educational broadcasting designed by the Spanish Ministry of Education (MEC) and offered by RTVE. The analysis is followed by a discussion.

What lessons have we learned in over 70 years of educational broadcasting in Spain? Why have the trends in educational television been so erratic and intermittent in the country? What would the role of education be in the media if they worked together with the public communication and information system conglomerate? What lessons can we learn from the responses of education professionals and the criticisms of the early broadcasts?

2. Background

The earliest analyses of television and education are more than 60 years old. The world's first experiences in educational television are in fact quite old. According to the Framework Report on Educational Television in Spain (García-Matilla et al, 1996), they date back to the 1950s and were followed by the gradual emergence of new initiatives throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

In Spain, television aired its first broadcast in October 1956. The first experience in educational television went from 1961 to 1963, showing a teacher from the waist up talking to the camera. MEC and RTVE first worked together in 1966, on a project titled *Imágenes para saber* and, later, *Imágenes para descansar*. In 1969, they broadcast *Cita para septiembre*, a program for students who had not passed their exams in June. In 1970 and 1971, there were shows for adults.

The earliest analyses of Spanish television associated it with novel learning methods (López-Riocerezo, 1966) or with the potential for indoctrination (García-Jiménez, 1965; Aguilera-Gamonedá, 1980). The early experiences were marked by the ideological bias of the Francoist dictatorship. However, they had some meaningful achievements, like the recruitment of naturalist Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente. A report by the Foundation for the Development of Communications (Fundesco) focused on educational television in Spain through the late 1970s (Fundesco, 1976).

Reflections on what educational television should be like came in 1980, with the Final Report of the MEC-RTVE Group – the first initiative for real collaboration between education and television professionals. The project stressed the need to set up groups of educators and media professionals for effectiveness in educational television. With the coming of the new political authorities, the project was abandoned.

The next significant initiative was *La aventura del saber* (1992). It involved psychologists, educationalists, teachers, and television professionals. The collaboration between them was the project's main contribution. The seed germinated in productions like *Del clavo al ordenador*, *El universo matemático*, and other popular documentaries broadcast in the time slot allocated to *La aventura del saber* as of 1997.

In 1996, the Framework Report on Educational Television in Spain [1] reviewed these shows and included a proposal for media education for the Spanish population based on best practices from around the world. A new change in government thwarted the plan.

La aventura del saber became the only educational program broadcast by the Spanish public television (Pérez-Tornero, 1994).

Regarding educational television in Ibero-America, mention should be made of the Ibero-American Educational Television Association (ATEI), established in 1992 and involving 250 organizations and 22 ministries from different countries in the region (Ojeda, 2002).

From the 1960s to the turn of the century, educational television was analyzed from various perspectives: production systems (Hancock, 1967); teaching-learning processes (Korte, 1969; Doerken, 1983; Pierce, 1978; Lazar, 1988; Duncan, 1984; Bates, 1984); historical accounts (Gordon, 1966); model analysis (Blakely, 1979; Ferrés, 1996); semiotics (Cebrián-Herreros, 1978; Pérez-Tornero, 1994); critical approaches based on ideology (Kaplan, 1983; Masterman, 1980); media analysis and meta-communication (Fuenzalida & Edwards, 1984); media education (Albero, 1984); cultural studies (Buckingham, 1986); education and reception (Orozco & Charles, 1990; Orozco, 1998); historical and prospective analysis of public television (Blumler & Hoffman-Riem, 1993; García-Matilla, 2003); children's television and violence (García-Galera, 2000); parents as mediators (García De Cortázar et al., 1998; Pinto, 2000); television and ICTs (Gutiérrez-Martín & Hottman, 2002); and television programs for children and adolescents (García Matilla et al., 2004; Pereira, 2007).

Educational television has traditionally been associated with supporting regulated learning in formal education. A fine example of this is NHK Educational TV, the educational television service of Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK, also known as Japan Broadcasting Corporation), which was the first to implement a classroom follow-up system in schools.

The experience of this kind of television at the service of education per excellence was *Sesame Street*, whose first episode aired in 1969. In the 1970s, the show was criticized for its perceived colonialist bias (Equipo Nueve y Medio, 1978). As a response, the producers added members to the production teams so that all the countries where the show was broadcast were represented, in order to adapt the show to local idiosyncrasies. Since 1969, the organization responsible for the production of *Sesame Street* and other children's educational programs, Children's Television Workshop (CTW), has been the leading workshop specializing in the production of educational content for children and adolescents. CTW's shows include *3-2-1 Contact* and *Ghostwriter*, among others (Lesser, 1974).

In Europe, the public television with the largest investment of material and human resources in educational television is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), whose most popular shows include *Tweenies*, *Teletubbies* and *Words and Pictures* in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

From 1998 to 2001, the Complutense University of Madrid offered a pioneering master's program in Educational Television at the School of Information Sciences. Three classes of students graduated. The knowledge acquired with the program was put together in the book *Educación para la comunicación, televisión y multimedia. Libro interactivo* (Rivera et al., 2002). 6000 copies were printed and distributed for free.

For public television to be at the service of education, it requires content design and production teams that are multidisciplinary and adequately coordinated. Successful initiatives around the world involve specialized teams whose members include psychologists, teachers, screenwriters, directors and producers with ample training in this area.

The finest experiences in educational television have moved away from teachers talking to the camera, making efficient use of the language of film and video, as well as multimedia resources, and taking advantage of the interactive nature of social media to engage interlocutors.

As to content design, successful experiences combine the various fields of knowledge in the school curriculum with more practical knowledge, useful in everyday life. In general, the television screen has been used to promote communication literacy or to develop media/digital skills (Ferrés et al., 2012; Aguaded & Romero-Rodríguez, 2018). Value education is also a priority in today's digital environment, bringing students into contact with the ethics underlying the challenges of education for democracy (De Andrés

et al., 2018) and education for uncertainty in a future world that is already here (Aparici & García-Marín, 2017), where the relational factor can be the key for a change of paradigm (Marta-Lazo & Gabelas, 2016) and the transmedia universe can be the background to rethink education with multi-screen strategies (Jenkins, 2015).

3. Materials & methods

In March-April 2020, a team was set up at RTVE to design a five-hour daily schedule for channels La 2 and Clan. The team began by analyzing the contents available at RTVE and then added productions by publishing houses.

In four days, the team, made up of ten specialists, put the contents together – 300 broadcast hours of varying quality to support students, especially those from low-income households, as they were locked down at home. The contents included everything from episodes of existing shows such as *La aventura del saber* and *Los Lunnis* to low-budget serials featuring individual teachers to previous productions by publishing houses based on textbooks and other learning materials.

The criticisms published by readers in the comment section of a daily newspaper were analyzed as a sample of a thread of public opinion that is critical of the emergency initiative.

Not a week had gone by since the first contents were broadcast when the first criticisms came. On March 17, 2020, the daily newspaper *El Mundo*⁵ published an article titled “Los matemáticos se quejan de los contenidos educativos de Isabel Celaá en televisión: ‘Anacrónicos y desastrosos’” (Mathematicians Complain About Isabel Celaá’s Educational Contents on Television: “They’re Poor and Obsolete”) (San Martín, 2020). Based on the assumption that media reinforce readers’ preconceived political opinions, the analysis was aimed at understanding how confirmation bias worked here.

The responses to the article on the newspaper’s website were analyzed within the framework of critical discourse analysis, in line with (Van-Dijk, 2003): “Discourses are interpreted as coherent relative to the mental models the users have about the events or facts referred to.” Taking confirmation bias into account, we identified the preconceived public opinion of educational

5 See <https://bit.ly/3bJXYgo>.

television, spelled out in a critical article published in a newspaper that is critical of the government policies. By unravelling these discourse relations, we identified the main lines of argument that are indicative of the orientation of public opinion on this issue.

4. Results

The article had 148 reader comments. The author quoted experts saying that the contents were “poor and obsolete”, included “procedural mistakes” and were not “part of the school curriculum.” As a matter of fact, the headline is biased, and we could ask the question of whether media news on education tends to be biased and thus conditions the views of readers. The answer to this question can be inferred from the chart below.

One of the board members at the Spanish Royal Mathematical Society (RSME) published a document where he shared the Society’s views on the contents broadcast by RTVE: “We understand that they did what they could, given the short amount of time they had, and we are grateful for their efforts, but the videos go against the Mathematics syllabus. They teach students, for instance, how to calculate a square root by hand – an operation that has not been taught in schools for the past two decades –, or they work with millions or billions in classes for first- and second-graders, which is absolutely out of the question.” Luis J. Rodríguez, Chairman of the RSME Education Committee.

Moreover, the document criticizes the contents for taking a rote learning approach, based on mechanical explanations, repetition and memorization, “quite contrary to what we, mathematicians, are trying to show of our area of expertise these days.”

According to the Chairman of the Spanish Federation of Mathematics Teachers’ Associations (FESPM), Onofre Monzó, the television programs reflected a traditional teaching model that was valid “40 years ago”, as opposed to the current skill-based approach. In addition, the television episodes taught Mathematics out of context, relying on memorization techniques.

Mathematics teachers made their voices heard in social media as well, where they considered the broadcasts “makeshift”, “inconsistent in terms of curriculum design,” and “anachronistic.”

Several regional mathematical societies, including those of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, wrote a manifesto in defense of Mathematics education. They agreed that the contents were “neither adequate nor consistent with the official curriculum” and reflected an “out-of-date mechanistic approach” to the learning of Mathematics.

Only one of the societies pointed out that “the RTVE archive contains quality educational videos,” wondering why the RTVE and MEC authorities chose not to use these helpful resources for their educational contents made in Spain.

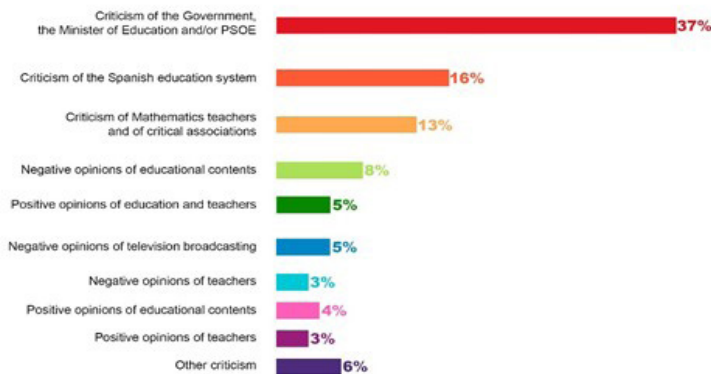
The broadcasts for the Mathematics classes showed a teacher in front of a board for minutes on end. At times, they were interspersed with episodes of *Happy Learning*, a serial featuring rather clumsy animated characters, audio problems, and a general sense of unpreparedness, despite the good intentions behind the project. Both La 2 and Clan offered contents that followed a certain logic, but many of them were second-rate. Given the conditions – no time and limited material and human resources –, doing better was no easy task.

There were broadcasts for Music, Art, Social Studies, and Science too. In these subjects, too, there were valuable contents, which would have been more useful in the context of a well-defined, well-structured syllabus.

The history of educational television in Spain is a constant on-and-off relationship that shows a lack of global educational policies and consistent projects. This leads to bewilderment, discredit, and exasperation in the members of the Spanish society, who show their most impolite side in social media.

Intended as a sample with no statistical significance, we analyzed the criticisms voiced in the reader comment section of the *El Mundo* news article mentioned above. Out of 148 total comments on the website of the digital newspaper, we cancelled duplicate comments and replies to comments by other users. This left us with 100 quantifiable comments. Only 15 percent of them are grounded in reasoned judgments, as the readers have seen at least part of the contents they are criticizing. On the other hand, 85 percent are value judgments on a variety of issues, listed in the chart below.

Graphic 1. Reader comments on a news article in *El Mundo*.



Source: Own elaboration.

Interestingly, a word is heavily repeated in the comments as a kind of mantra: “indoctrination.” Two comments clarify its use: “They just want to indoctrinate students like a flock of sheep. The more state-dependent they are, the greater the number of votes for them;” “A Stalinist pamphlet, in line with the rest of Podemos’s actions.” Some of the comments criticizing the Minister of Education and the Government at large are met with ironic replies: “Celaá’s square root, that’s it! It’s being used to poison our youths with the Government’s insidious ideology!” The criticisms targeted at the education system are very general in nature – “Education standards were higher 40 years ago” –, often transforming individual stories into general categories – “Senior students of Engineering who are unable to calculate the volume of a cone” – or laying the blame on teachers – “Teachers waste a lot of time instead of planning their classes better.” Some readers are more lenient – “It’s not that bad! They’ve put all this together on the spur of the moment!” –, or they seem to have a deeper knowledge of education – “The idea is good. The contents were selected by experts. In some cases, they got it right. In others, they just didn’t.” Others make attempts at neutralizing the critics by also criticizing Mathematics teachers in general: “In many schools, the teaching of Mathematics isn’t that good either.” The strongest criticism, however, has to do with the system itself. Putting its finger on

the problem, it reveals an education system that is “unable to raise creative citizens, who can learn by themselves in an environment that requires intellectual independence.”

The analysis of the criticisms shows that citizen discussions tend to neglect the educational potential of television and use education as a pretext in ideological confrontations that are far from constructive.

5. Conclusions

The MEC-RTVE experience in educational television during the Covid-19 lockdown is like a fractal image of the thwarted history of public television and education in Spain.

The criticisms put forward by associations, teachers, and ordinary citizens reflect the confusion over the potential of television as a tool in education. Today, this potential is greater than ever before, in terms of the development of multimedia and transmedia strategies to use television productions in teaching-learning processes.

Media professionals should be aware of the importance of dealing with information carefully and handling it adequately in order to contribute to the social debate about major issues in education while avoiding biased or partisan views. On the other hand, political leaders should be accountable for their use of education – and educational contents on public television – as an alibi throughout the history of Spanish television.

The thwarted attempt at educational television in times of Covid-19 in Spain shows that public television should be given time, material and human resources, and creative talent if it is to offer quality educational content – which tends to be absent from private (commercial) broadcasting.

In today’s digital environment, television executives and ministerial authorities should not drive professionals to rely on impromptu performance or practices that were left behind half a century ago. Instead, a robust project should be designed that makes proper use of RTVE’s quality documentary archive, with an adequate allocation of financial, material, and human resources.

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