

How North American children's TV and streaming services help children cope with the COVID-19 crisis

Kristen McGregor

The author gives an overview of what the US and Canadian TV and streaming landscape offers children in the coronavirus crisis.

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

– Fred Rogers –

Paywalls are down, and ratings are up across the board with kids and families turning to TV networks and streaming services in the United States and Canada for comfort, education, and a break from one another during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) health crisis. Almost everyone who creates media for kids in North America is doing something to help children cope. This article references a few of the many examples of work in this space (to date).

COVID-19 hit peak cases in North America later than in Europe and Asia. With this timing, Canadian and American broadcasters were able to witness effective efforts around the world and put those learnings into action as the virus spread. The handling of other significant events, such as the response to the Australian fires in 2019 by Australian children's media broadcasters, also inspired executives in the US and Canada to think more broadly about how to appropriately inform children about world events through television. Learning from what content creators and broadcasters are doing to

support kids in the midst of big news events is imperative for when the next big event occurs.

TOPICS AND PATTERNS IN THE AMERICAN AND CANADIAN CHILDREN'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Strength in public broadcasting

Public broadcasters in North America have had a quick and strong response to support children, since serving children's audiences is key to their mandates. Among other efforts, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's CBC Kids interstitial team was able to start responding to the situation immediately. Due to the rapid pace and fast turnaround with the team, they are able to pivot messaging as it comes (having hosts film their own segments) and retire messaging (such as segments with 2 hosts together when social distancing was mandated across Canada) as needed. In the United States, the public broadcasting service's PBS KIDS team and their subsidiary stations are stepping in to offer resources to kids across the nation – especially in areas where families may have no or limited access to broadband internet. They've also been connecting existing PBS KIDS episodes to other messages helpful to families during this time. TVOntario's TVOKids team has partnered with the SickKids Hospital to give answers to kids' questions via segments featuring

a puppet named Dr. Cheddar (filmed at the puppeteer's home and via video call with a doctor). The TVOKids hosts are digital media producers who now broadcast live from their respective homes (in self-made blanket forts). In British Columbia, Knowledge Network plays a video daily at 7 pm, reminding kids and families to go outside and make noise to celebrate essential workers; in Québec, Télé-Québec offers daily meetings for kids on TV and on the web.

Partnering for fast turnarounds to support kid audiences

Networks have partnered with shows in production for a quick way to get content to support children during this time, featuring characters that they already know and love. There are several examples of networks creating Public Service Announcements (PSAs) with fast turnaround utilizing their partners. PBS and member station WGBH collaborated with production teams to create media such as *Molly of Denali* PSAs and an *Arthur* Twitter party. PBS also partnered with Fred Rogers Productions and Sinking Ship Entertainment to create *Odd Squad* agent training videos that model practicing healthy habits. PBS is also hosting book read-alongs on YouTube and Facebook featuring books from PBS KIDS series (and the talent who make them), such as Marc Brown (*Arthur*), Chris Kratt (*Wild Kratts*), and Angela Santomero (*Daniel Tiger's Neighbor-*

PROGRAMME

hood). TVOKids has partnered with Big Bad Boo Studios to create animated shorts featuring characters from *16 Hudson*, and AppleTV+ worked with Sesame Workshop to create *Helpsters Help You* – a series of 6 new shorts from the makers of *Sesame Street* that provides emotional support for preschoolers and parents. Cartoon Network launched an initiative called CN Check In, a website for kids with resources featuring Cartoon Network characters for having fun and staying safe while at home.

Additionally, Sesame Workshop partnered with PBS and WarnerMedia in the US and Corus Networks in Canada to create a special entitled *Elmo's Playdate* featuring talent such as Lin-Manuel Miranda, Anne Hathaway, and the Muppets. They also partnered with HBO, PBS KIDS, Local PBS stations, Univision, the Ad Council, and YouTube to produce animated PSAs featuring Sesame Workshop characters like Elmo and Grover promoting good hygiene and healthy routines for quarantine. Disney Channel unveiled a series of informational messages from many of the actors who populate its programs. Family Channel took a similar approach in Canada by partnering with national charity Kids Help Phone to provide messages of support and tips for families to stay active, healthy, and happy at home, starring talent from shows such as *Holly Hobbie* and *Bajillionaires*. Due to the unique circumstances of COVID-19, broadcasters who may have at one time considered each other competitors, or previously had no need to work together, are now combining efforts to support children and their understanding of this pandemic. When Canadian preschool network Treehouse TV created a special based on their *Miss Persona* TV series entitled *Teddy Bear Kindergarten is Canceled*,

CBC Kids reached out to see if they could also share this programming with their audiences.

Renewed focus on kids' news in North America

Kids' news is a quick method to 1) give children and families age-appropriate updates about COVID-19; 2) keep them informed as medicine and government policies change; and 3) offer an opportunity to collaborate with high profile guests to share this information effectively.



Ill. 1: Sesame Workshop character Elmo explains in a special how masks help to protect against infection with COVID-19

The children's broadcasters of CBC Kids (English) and Société Radio-Canada (SRC) both have kids news (*CBC Kids News* and *MAJ*, respectively) and came together to produce a coronavirus special, where kids had their questions answered by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam in both English and French. When they reached out to their audience for question submissions, they received over 4,000 submissions in under 24 hours. SRC's *MAJ* also hosts *Ça Va Bien Aller*, a twice weekly series for children regarding issues surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, delivered in an informative and funny tone, which SRC believes kids from 8-12 need with their news. NBC4 Washington, based out of Washington, D.C., launched *News4 Kids*, featuring videos of First Lady Melania Trump and

Dr. Jill Biden answering questions from kids regarding the coronavirus.

Kids news has also come to fruition in the form of big specials. Nickelodeon, who between 1992 and 2015 produced over 150 episodes of *Nick News with Linda Ellerbee*, produced an hour-long special entitled *#KidsTogether: The Nickelodeon Town Hall* hosted by Kristen Bell featuring Dr. Vivek Murthy and celebrities such as Kenan Thompson and JoJo Siwa. An economics professor even weighed in about the safety of the supply chain and reassured families that there were no shortages of toilet

paper. Sesame Workshop partnered with CNN to do a town hall for children and families, featuring Dr. Sanjay Gupta (Ill. 1) and Dr. Leana Wen answering kids' questions, explaining why people are wearing face masks and other ways to interact with friends while practicing social distancing. Family Channel joined 120 other Canadian broadcasters, streaming platforms, and radio stations to share a special live

broadcast called *Stronger Together, Tous Ensemble* in a show of support for the frontline workers across Canada.

For-profit broadcasters and streaming services removing paywalls

With more kids at home, and families with more time on their hands, there is no doubt that content is being consumed at a much faster rate, at a time where unemployment is at a record high (meaning less room in a family budget for multiple content platforms). Many entertainment services for children are now being offered for free (at least temporarily). Amazon has opened up 40 of its most popular family shows to stream for free to all, meaning you do not need to be

an Amazon Prime member to watch. AppleTV+ is streaming Apple Originals kids and family programming for free. Family Channel opened the network to Canadians for a free preview. Netflix has provided its educational documentaries for free, and Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) has unlocked its Family Friendly & Kids shelf on APTN Lumi, the network's streaming platform, giving access to authentic indigenous content at no cost.

Importance of educational programming

As children's schooling has been interrupted due to COVID-19, there has been a focus toward educational programming – as both a complement and supplement to traditional education. TVOKids is hosting a “power hour” for teachers, where a selected teacher from Ontario comes on and teaches a favorite lesson for an hour. They are also hosting a series just for gym teachers, encouraging kids at home to stay healthy with physical activity. TVOKids and Sinking Ship Entertainment have partnered up to create Home4School, where kids can watch *Dino Dana*, *Annedroids*, and *Odd Squad Mobile Unit* on TVO, and then families can do educational activities online after watching. In the age of Zoom video conferencing, WGBH Boston is bringing back *Zoom*, the educational series for kids 8 and up, with online content such as *Cafe Zoom* and *Zoom Sci*, hosted by original *Zoom* talent, which parents and grandparents will recognize from their childhoods. CBC offers a platform called Curio.ca for educators, which is now being offered free as a resource for educators and families to use. SRC is offering a parent guide with over 150 resources targeted to different age groups. The Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network (HITN) has launched educational campaigns for focusing on helping keep their kids on schedule (avoiding an educational lag). Télévision française de l'Ontario

(TFO) has given families seeking French educational content access to Idello, a French educational platform used by teachers. Among other resources, PBS KIDS for Parents offers tips, resources, and an activity finder that enables parents to search for educational activities based on their child's age, favorite show, or custom topics. Resources to support healthy habits and conversations with children about coronavirus (among other issues) are also available on the site. Télé-Québec offers special educationally focused content for preschool and elementary kids in the mornings and high school students in the afternoons.

Production takeaways

While COVID-19 has been a time of stress and worry, it has also been a source of innovation for content makers trying to support kids. Among many other animation studios, Nelvana had to quickly figure out how to go from having 300 animators in one space to providing everyone with the tools and resources needed to work from home. Due to physical distancing, animation voiceover talents are recording their voices from home in portable studios, and live action content is being shot on cellphone cameras. The AppleTV+ series *Fraggle Rock: Rock On!* was completely shot on the Apple iPhone 11 – without a crew to adhere to the COVID-19 Safer at Home guidelines. As children video conference more, networks are coming out with custom video chat backgrounds featuring sets from animated series, such as WGBH's *Arthur* and Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*.

CONCLUSION

While television will always be an important source of escape for kids during a time of crisis, being able to help kids cope with content that is factual and appropriate (while being

shot safely) is critical. There is no rule-book for this unprecedented time, and networks are considering the reality of creating future segments to support children through more changes in routine, such as not going to camp or not starting a new year at school. Most US and Canadian content providers have become more nimble as they shift to creating supportive messaging about the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation (including age-appropriate medical information and the resulting public health response).

The fallout from COVID-19 has become an opportunity to try new things in the industry. At all levels, professionals are becoming more creative, experimenting with different mediums/messaging, and coming up with ideas to help support kids while utilizing the technology at our disposal that allows for the practice of physical distancing. Beloved characters that kids already trust are helping to usher in new information and comfort kids, while more and more quality programming can be found for free to help create added accessibility. Through it all, we have seen children's media professionals go above and beyond in their jobs to unite in a common goal of supporting children through this crisis. While the pandemic has been jarring on many levels, a key lesson to take away from this situation is the importance of innovation and creativity when communicating both good and bad news to children of all ages. This is a chance for children's content professionals to be the helpers we so desperately need. ■

THE AUTHOR

Kristen McGregor, M.A., is a producer, writer and director who aims to create content for kids with impact beyond the screen.

