

# India's coronavirus lockdown has put the spotlight back on television as an ed-tech tool

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In India, as in many countries across the world, schools are closed. To help ensure students continue to learn while out of the classroom due to Covid-19, the central government is promoting the use of its smartphone-based ed-tech platforms. Instead, the centre and states should follow Punjab's lead and spend more effort building out educational TV (ETV) targeted at early grade learners.

Compared to smartphone-based ed-tech, ETV is more accessible, easier to produce, and has more rigorous evidence to back it up. Targeting ETV at early grade learners would provide help to those students who need it most.

Teaching children when they are in a classroom is hard. Teaching children when they are at home is much, much harder. In response to school closures, the central government is encouraging the use of its existing online learning apps, DIKSHA and ePathshala, and has announced an initiative to crowdsource additional content for the DIKSHA platform.

This is a natural and understandable response to the challenge of remote learning. Yet, given limited smartphone ownership and the challenges of delivering content via smartphones, this focus on online solutions is unlikely to be effective.

High smartphone and SIM sales foster the illusion that internet access is ubiquitous yet true accounting reveals a different story.

Only a small portion of Indian households owns a smartphone. High smartphone and SIM sales foster the illusion that internet access is ubiquitous yet true accounting reveals a different story.

According to industry statistics, in 2017 there were over 400 million smartphone users in India. Yet, a household survey conducted by Intermedia a year later found that only 17% of Indian households owned a smartphone. Even if smartphone ownership has grown by 50%, as industry figures claim, that is still a small proportion of households.

In addition, delivering educational content over a smartphone screen is not easy. Some edtech programmes like Educational Initiative's Mindspark have led to large effects on learning. Yet, to our knowledge, all edtech programmes with proven effects have used computers or tablets and provided on-site support to students. We are optimistic that, with careful design, these results could be replicated on a smaller screen without on-site support but DIKSHA and ePathshala are likely still some ways off from that goal.

By contrast, many households own a TV and even more have access to one. According to the latest NFHS and IHDS surveys, about two-thirds of all Indian households and a little less than one-third of the poorest households own a TV. TVs are also easier to share. Thirty seven percent of households without a TV report that their children watch TV at a neighbour's house.

India has a long and successful history in delivering ETV and the central government is currently promoting its existing Swayam Prabha ETV channels. In addition, some states have added ETV content to Doordarshan in response to the crisis. Yet existing Swayam Prabha content and the new Doordarshan content is targeted at grades 9-12.

This targeting may have made sense pre-Covid-19 when ETV was accessed mainly by especially motivated learners but should be expanded to all grades now. Secondary school students are more likely to have access to books and other learning resources and less likely to need extra help. Instead, governments should follow the approach taken by Punjab, which has announced that all classes will be aired on Doordarshan.

Expanding ETV to target early grade learners would not be difficult.

A large amount of high-quality content already exists (such as Gali Gali Sim Sim, the videos produced by Planet Read, or perhaps even existing DIKSHA and ePathshala videos), and according to the World Bank new content could be produced by high-quality teachers without much additional training.

Finding content aligned to the official curriculum would be challenging yet we have known for over 25 years (since at least the publication of the Yashpal report in 1993) that the curriculum is overloaded and too ambitious. The pandemic may be a good time to reset these unrealistic expectations since the alternative, for many students, is no learning at all.

Evidence on ETV as a replacement for in-person instruction is thin (thankfully, we are rarely in the situation we now find ourselves) but, on the whole, positive. Evaluations of "edutainment" programmes like Gali Gali Sim Sim show a positive impact.

There is less evidence on the impact of lower-cost ETV lessons of the sort we advocate here (high-quality edutainment shows require a lot of time and resources to produce) but the few studies which have been conducted show a positive impact.

ETV is not a panacea for the challenges of educating children during the Covid-19 crisis. And governments and foundations should continue to search for other ways to help ensure students continue to learn while not in school. But ETV's low cost and high access mean that it a good bet to mitigate the effects of the crisis in the near future.

We welcome your comments at [ideas.india@qz.com](mailto:ideas.india@qz.com).

## ✦ What you need to know

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**As businesses around the world reopen**, workers can expect a host of half-baked design solutions in the name of stemming viral spread. These are the Dos and Don'ts of re-entering office life.

👉 **Do: Try new things.** Last month, commercial real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield introduced "The Six Feet Office," a set of guidelines that includes unusual new practices like requiring everyone to only walk in a clockwise pattern.

👉 **Don't: Close your mind to a less open office.** About 70% of US offices are now open-plan workspaces. Health experts are beginning to suggest that it might be time to return to the era of the cubicle.

👉 **Do: Consult experts.** The best solutions come from working with health experts. For example, architecture firm MASS Design has been working with doctors to publish guidelines (pdf) for designing healthier spaces.

👉 **Don't: Make hasty decisions.** It's important for businesses to set an appropriate time horizon before making potentially irreversible choices. Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff has estimated an 18-month "recovery phase."

A pandemic moves quickly, as do its impacts. That's why we made the coronavirus living briefing. Check-in every business day for regular updates on how Covid-19 is affecting major aspects of the global economy.

Want a calm, rational, even curious approach to coronavirus? We've got an email for that.