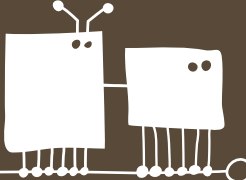


Digital media and latino families

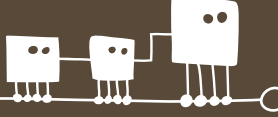
New channels for learning,
parenting, and local organizing



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Executive Summary

This review takes stock of how Latino children and families utilize a variety of electronic devices to access a colorful array of content. This is not a new trend: television and video games have long shaped the nature of play and entertainment in American households. But the fast spread of personal computers and mobile devices hosts a breathtaking range of games, educational programs, and countless apps that aim to engage youngsters and their parents. The potential benefits for children's learning are vast, as are the risks of dumbing-down what passes for meaningful knowledge or weakening the socialization of our offspring.

This revolution for Latino families may be jarring in how information, norms, and passive messaging, along with social ties now mediated by digital tools, take root in the household. Many Latino parents already struggle to raise their children in a foreign, even threatening context. But are such concerns warranted? Do digital platforms and content wield telling effects? We broke down these big issues into four specific questions, then set about gathering evidence on what's being learned about each:

- Which Latino adults and children—across this vast and diverse population—utilize what kinds of digital devices and for what purposes?
- Who produces digital content aimed at children and parents, and how do these for-profit and nonprofit organizations conceive of Latino customers and clients? How do curators of digital content help separate educational apps and programs from relatively mindless entertainment?
- What's known about the effects of digital tools on the learning and wider socialization of Latino children and youths? Do these electronic devices and the content they deliver hold spillover effects on the cohesion and vitality of Latino families?
- How do community organizations deploy digital tools to lift children and families, or to spur civic action?

This review of evidence is arranged in four sections that correspond to these motivating questions. We emphasize throughout how there is so much more to learn about the benefits and risks of this explosion in digital communication, especially when it comes to the conditions and cultural tenets of many Latino parents. That said, here's what we found:

Plugging-in: SECTION 1 details how Latino households increasingly purchase and utilize a mix of digital devices. Television remains the dominant electronic tool in the lives of children, including but not limited to Latino youngsters. The increasing use of smart phones as the primary portal to the Internet is shared by Latino children and their parents nationwide.

Rightful worry over a “digital divide” may ease as Latino parents approach middle-class whites in their propensity to purchase and use mobile devices, including smart phones and tablets. Yet ethnic and class disparities persist in how these tools are used in the home, with low-income parents reporting less frequent use of computers, smartphones, or tablets for educational or school-related purposes.

A digital blizzard. SECTION 2 delves into the interests of digital producers—pursuing both market and educational agendas—as they attempt to engage children and youths. The border between education and entertaining content has long been blurry, especially as game designers help to shape engaging learning packages, apps, and networking sites. The massive volume and range of digital content available to children and families has sparked the creation of curation services, now offered by big for-profit companies as well as more discerning nonprofit organizations.

Major Latino outlets, such as *La Opinion* and *Univision*, now experiment with various platforms to broadcast news, speak directly to parents, and even mount pro-education campaigns. Few other producers in for-profit or nonprofit sectors have created games, programs, or apps tailored to diverse segments of the Latino market. We detail how Latino-serving community organizations think carefully about which digital platforms best connect with what slices of this diverse population. We also review inventive educational games that encourage collaborative learning between children and parents, which fit well with the pro-family values of many Latino families.

Hazy evidence on learning gains and family risks. Our review of the empirical literature finds very few studies that examine even short-term learning effects of digital media for Latino children and families. Old-fashioned learning theory, which focuses on the individual child’s cognitive stimulation and processing, tends to constrain how we conceive of learning and socialization within the family or among young peers.

Overall, an unsettling irony emerges from this review. We know that digital tools increasingly shape the daily activities, learning, and upbringing of Latino children from toddlerhood forward. Yet we know little about the benefits and risks of online activities, games, and networking platforms. We have little evidence on the cognitive growth or social norms acquired by the individual child. Nor do we understand how the child’s or teen’s relations with family and kin may be altered.

We sketch an analytic framework that recognizes how many Latino children grow up in thick social contexts and daily activities, which lend order and routine to life inside the household and with peers. This requires understanding learning effects on the individual child, as well as how digital knowledge and social norms may upset (or strengthen) authority and expertise among parents and children. That is, the rise of digital communication and networks likely holds social, not only individual-level, effects inside Latino households. Early research also points to differing effects based on the child’s gender and age, along with the family’s social class and language.

Future research might be grounded in clearer theory about the Latino child’s everyday social contexts, the kinds of digital tools taken-up, and the facets of learning and socialization that we hope to strengthen. Earlier work on the motivating mechanisms and effects of video games did yield important findings on the psychological and social rewards experienced by children and teens. These foundations are too narrow, however, to fully capture the socialization agendas of diverse Latino parents, the *a priori* forms of authority and social ties that operate, and the kaleidoscopic range of digital material coming at families.

This report aims to inform the producers of digital material, those who hope to engage Latino children and parents, along with the growing range of nonprofits, schools, and funders that hold faith in digital technologies. Despite these high hopes, we continue to work in empirical darkness. Digital tools obviously engage—even rearrange—the everyday activities and ties enjoyed by Latino children and teens. Yet we have much to learn about the long-term effects of these versatile tools on the learning of individual children and the vitality of their families.