

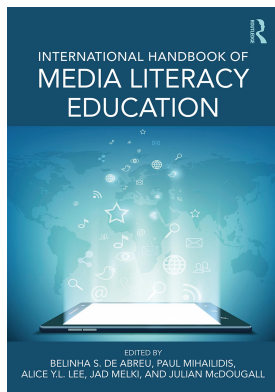
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Belinha S. De Abreu, Paul Mihailidis, Alice Y.L. Lee, Jad Melki, Julian McDougall

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Roxana Morduchowicz

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Media Literacy in Latin America

The Argentine Experience

Roxana Morduchowicz

A Democratic Culture

Argentina, known as a “new democracy,” was governed by a strong military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. Without freedom of expression or access to media and information, the Argentine people lived under strong censorship. The military created black lists for singers, writers and film-makers whose works were completely prohibited. No public demonstrations were allowed and no one could openly express his or her opinions. Military personnel in civilian clothing were present in most university classes to carefully monitor what was being said and by whom. People did not trust each other and fear was a common feeling throughout Argentine society. After the Malvinas War against Great Britain, and the loss of more than 1,000 young Argentine soldiers, the military had to relinquish its position of power. Subsequently, in 1983, democracy returned to Argentina.

Since the early 1980s, the process of re-democratization across Latin America has sparked considerable interest in how to consolidate democratic institutions in the region. Particular attention has been paid to citizenship education, as it is recognized that new institutional arrangements do not necessarily alter the political culture. Many of the so-called “new democracies” of Latin America govern societies with less political tolerance or democratic participation.

In newer democracies, automatic transmission of democratic values from one generation cannot be assumed. A democratic government is necessary for a democratic system to exist, but it does not guarantee a democratic political culture. The problem with building a broadly democratic citizenry is especially acute in countries where the transition to democracy has resulted in high expectations—especially for economic growth and redistribution—that many democratically elected governments are unable to meet. Ordinary results in the context of extraordinary demands generate feelings of inefficacy and distrust toward democratic institutions (Catterberg, 1989).

Hence, citizenship education in Latin America is crucial for the consolidation of democracy in this region. In new democracies, as mentioned, transmission of democratic values from one generation to the next cannot be assumed (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995). As a consequence of this absence of “natural” socialization of democratic attitudes by the older generation, or the automatic teaching and learning of such values in the classroom, scholars in new democracies have long been concerned about citizenship education. Programs intended to promote the learning of democratic values, attitudes and knowledge, have been viewed as essential, and even urgent, in the new generation’s political socialization.

Political socialization is the process by which children and young people build their civic and social culture, acquire information, incorporate values, and develop capacities that allow them to function in and improve everyday life within their community and to participate as effective members of society (Ichilov, 1990).

In 1982, during the Malvinas War between Argentina and the United Kingdom, the media in Buenos Aires, strictly controlled by the military government, fostered strong feelings of triumphalism and victory. “Argentineans, to win” was the slogan used in all television campaigns during the conflict. Throughout the Malvinas War, the media campaign was based on three main themes: confidence in winning, rejection of all symbols of the British culture and nationalistic sentiments. Only British casualties were broadcast on television, and calls were made to exclude Shakespeare from school curricula and the Beatles from record stores. After 60 days of intense battle, the same media that silenced hundreds of Argentine casualties suddenly announced that Argentina had been defeated.

Thousands of kilometers away from the capital city of Buenos Aires, the British media were also covering the Malvinas War. In a matter of days, they had convinced the people of Britain that it was worth giving their lives for the future of a few islands that they had only first heard of a few weeks before. Tremendous ideological work was required to persuade the British public opinion of the righteousness of their government’s cause (Masterman, 1993).

The experience of the Malvinas War, in both a democratic country and in a military dictatorship, confirms the need to develop a critical understanding of media through teachings that, without a doubt, should start in elementary school. The media construct the public agenda. They influence what society debates. They discuss select topics and avoid or ignore others.

Media literacy teaches students to understand the way that the media and technology construct this agenda. Only those who can make use of media messages are ready to participate effectively in the community, because they are able to analyze, interpret, evaluate and use this information. Media literacy contributes to the strength of students’ public awareness, allowing them to effectively participate in society and discuss issues that affect their daily lives.

Information for information itself, however, is not enough. Information can also often contribute to de-politicizing the social and de-socializing the political (Landi, 1984). We value information within a democratic political culture, in which the information has a meaning and its critical analysis promotes participation in society without restriction. Teaching about the media during the Malvinas War (unthinkable in Argentina’s dictatorial context at the time) would have allowed the society, in Argentina and in Britain, to understand the way that the media operated. It would have also revealed the media’s manipulation and how it was used to manipulate both British and Argentinean public opinion.

Media literacy—especially in new democracies, such as in Latin America, but also in those with long-standing democratic traditions—is education for citizenship. This is precisely why it would have never survived under an authoritarian regime. For that very reason, media literacy cannot be left out of a democratic society.

Media literacy involves the way that the media construct meanings and legitimize discourses. Media literacy constantly questions the way that the media represent the world and the way we—as their audience—understand these representations (Ferguson, 1994). Exploring how the media and technology represent reality allows people to critically understand the world, such that they are better positioned to participate and make decisions concerning their everyday lives. Only by asking ourselves how the media produce meanings can we understand to what extent they influence our perceptions of reality, as they did during the Malvinas War in both countries.

To make use of media messages means to know how to analyze, interpret, process and evaluate these messages. Media and information literacy should reinforce students’ democratic culture and public awareness. It needs to teach young people how to avoid any limitation to their participation in society. Media and information literacy is based on an expanded definition of literacy, one that

includes print, screen-based and electronic media. It is concerned with analyzing and understanding how the media operate, how the media construct meaning, how the media can be used and how to evaluate information presented by the media (Wilson, 2015).

Media literacy then—in new democracies, such as in Latin America, but also in those with long democratic traditions, such as in Europe—should be education for citizenship, for civic awareness and for participation in the public sphere. It is in the commitment to democracy that media and information literacy is justified, whether in wartime, under an authoritarian regime or in any democratic society.

Bridging the Gaps

There is another reason why we need media literacy worldwide—the technological world in which children and adolescents live today. Youth under the age of 18 comprise the first generation that has been surrounded from birth by an extremely diversified media-based and technological world. Any distinction between modern and traditional media—so frequent among adults—is meaningless for the children and adolescents of today. Young people live a different cultural experience—new ways of reading, learning, feeling, talking, listening and seeing. Their perception of the world is also different. Their idea of space and time has been transformed. Their own identity is defined and influenced by their relationship to media and technology.

However, in Latin America, the social conditions that construct identities are not the same for all youth. There exists a strong economic and cultural gap between children and adolescents from different social groups, such that those from families of lower economic status are often excluded from culture, media and technology. Media literacy in Latin America faces, then, an additional challenge—to narrow these social gaps and to promote more equitable access to culture, media and technology for all, giving everyone access to the daily newspaper, the Internet, books, magazines and comics, cinemas, museums and theaters. The main problem of this limited access to culture, media and technology is its direct correlation to their use. A reduced access results in a much less diversified use of media and technology (Morduchowicz, 2013).

Adolescence is not a homogenous category. Personal lives are conditioned by social contexts and can only be understood in reference to the world in which the singularity is built. Young people's perception of reality is influenced by the social and cultural groups to which they each belong (Morduchowicz, 2001).

Appropriation of media and technology takes place only if these technologies are naturally integrated into one's everyday life (Winocur, 2006). When life experiences and social contexts are so unequal between members of the same society, this appropriation becomes strongly uneven.

Social fragmentation is also reflected in the different uses young people make of media and technology (Wolton, 2000). If an adolescent who lives in a very poor neighborhood uses the Internet primarily to go on Facebook and watch YouTube videos, whereas one who grows up in a middle-class family and professional environment goes online to look for information about movies, photography, music and to do his or her homework, it is clear that the gap between these two adolescents is not technological but social and cultural. This gap is extremely wide in Latin American countries.

There exists a certain misconception based on the idea that technology itself generates positive effects without measuring the cultural context in which this technology is being used. This misconception only reflects an uncritical enthusiasm (Buckingham, 2008). When a child or a teenager turns on the computer, television or tablet, their cultural capital affects their use of technology. The division between youth from different social backgrounds results in different starting points (Morduchowicz, 2008).

A solid cultural capital allows youth to find different meanings in all discourses that affect their everyday lives and their perception of reality. The challenge in Latin America is to provide every child and teenager with all of the necessary skills to allow them to diversify their use of media and technology.

Social classes are not exclusively defined by economic conditions, but especially by symbolic dimensions. Inequalities are not generated only by what someone has, but by what someone is: access to culture, education and all of the competences they need to obtain better educational and professional opportunities in the future (García Canclini, 2009). The less diversified use of the media and Internet among students from poor families shows that inequalities are generated by a social and cultural context and cannot be solved exclusively with the provision of more sophisticated technology.

Social division occurs between those for whom the use of media and technology is rich, diversified and creative, and those for whom the Internet is a limited resource, poor and tangential to their lives (boyd, 2014). The need to bridge these gaps depends less on technology than on cultural capital. What really makes a difference is *the ability to use media and information, to understand its social effect and credibility, to be able to read texts and discourses in a reflexive way, to generate new content and to actively participate in the community.*

The main challenge for media literacy in Latin America is that youth from the poorest social groups perceive media, the Internet and technology not just as entertainment—as happens today—but as an opportunity to read, understand and transform the world in which they live. Education becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire, 2009). If inequalities are defined in terms of access, state policy will always be focused on the equipment and the resources: more technology and more sophistication. However, if society defines the gaps as a cultural problem, in terms of practices, uses and appropriations, state policy will focus on competences and new literacies. This is exactly what is needed for media literacy in Latin America.

Public policy on media and information literacy in Latin America needs to provide technology with a social meaning, especially considering that the least privileged children and adolescents are far from being “digital natives,” despite often being referred to as such due to their age. Unequal starting points and cultural fragmentation in Latin American societies do not allow for youth of the same age but from different social contexts to be unified under a common category (e.g., “digital natives”). The concept of digital nativity serves as a mere distraction from the uneven distribution of competences and uses that exist among young people (boyd, 2014).

By describing youth as “digital natives,” adults cast aside their responsibility to teach children and adolescents the necessary competences required to understand media and technology, and their social significance in daily life. Labeling today’s youth a “digital generation” puts all young people in the same category as a result of their age. However, doing so ignores the inequalities and differences that exist between them (Buckingham, 2006). Only when all children and adolescents are able to make a reflexive and creative use of media and technology, and are provided with a solid cultural capital and skills that allow them to actively participate in their community, will we be able to talk of “digital natives” or a “digital generation.” What is really needed is meaningful access to media and technology that will help youth make sense of the world.

Cultural exclusion is strongly related to social exclusion, as it condemns the poorest youth to limited educational and professional opportunities. Media and information literacy—if considered as a state policy—can promote a meaningful and qualitative access to media, culture and technology, and in doing so will help youth to build their present and their future.

A Public Policy Program

The Ministry of Education of the City of Buenos Aires created the Media Literacy Program in Argentina for all municipal schools in 1984, one year after democracy had returned to the country.

The Media Literacy Program was thus a result of a political decision to re-democratize new Argentine generations. The main challenge was to teach children and adolescents, who had lived all of their lives under a dictatorship, what democracy was. Media literacy was born in Argentina as a program meant to reinforce citizenship education. It was created to teach the meaning of freedom of expression, free press and the right to free access to information, to children and adolescents who had never experienced these freedoms before. To take the daily newspaper into the classroom and discuss the representation of reality in the media, to compare different television news programs and the way that they addressed social issues, and to write a news story for a school magazine, were new experiences for all children and adolescents in Argentina in 1984.

These initiatives met some resistance by teachers for many reasons. During the first years of democracy, many found it easier to talk about the past than about the present. Freedom to discuss current politics in Argentina was restored with the transition to a constitutional government in 1983. However, the right to speak openly and freely did not guarantee that these discussions would take place in the classroom. Teachers had not been trained to lead such discussions, as there was no tradition of media debates in the schools and the lingering memory of the military dictatorship discouraged open expression of ideas, feelings and opinions.

Most importantly, teachers were initially apprehensive about, or even fearful of, discussing current events and their representation in the media. The recent history of the country was such that it had been dangerous to talk about media and information. To discuss social issues openly and to raise critical questions about the media was, during the first years of democracy, still very difficult.

Second, teachers found it much easier to teach from textbooks than from newspapers or television programs, as few controversial issues were presented in most textbooks (or were at least presented in ways that minimized controversy). Teachers often found themselves uncertain about how to answer the students' questions, reporting: "When we work with the media, we know where we start, but we never know where we will finish." Teachers were concerned about how to contextualize facts and how to interpret media representations of the world.

As a consequence, teachers often used information just as material for mathematics or language problems. For example, adding numbers or underlining verbs or nouns, but ignoring the analysis of how the information and reality were represented in the media. Many teachers avoided engaging the students in real discussions as much as possible. Media literacy during the first democratic years in Argentina faced big challenges: it had only taken eight years to instill fear in the society, but it would take much longer to regain freedom in the schools.

Teacher training, workshops and special initiatives targeted at students were developed during those years. Media literacy was meant to teach democratic values and public rights, and it became a main priority for the government of the city of Buenos Aires. The path was certainly difficult and some teachers' resistance was still strong. However, after a few years, the Media Literacy Program showed promising results—teaching with and about the media helped students to develop political communication skills, stimulated the articulation of personal opinions, increased interest in participation, fostered pluralistic orientations and enhanced support for democracy (Chaffee, Morduchowicz, & Galperin, 1997).

In 2000, following the city of Buenos Aires' experience, the Argentine Ministry of Education decided to launch the Media Literacy Program nationwide. Almost 20 years after the end of the military regime, strengthening democracy remained the essential goal and framework for all of the initiatives. However, new objectives were incorporated as social democratization progressed:

- 1 To promote media literacy nationwide for all primary and secondary schools in Argentina.
- 2 To strengthen citizenship education and to teach the value of freedom of expression, pluralism and social participation.
- 3 To break the cultural gaps between youth and to provide students from low socioeconomic conditions with opportunities to improve their cultural capital.

- 4 To teach how the media construct meanings and legitimize discourses, and to analyze how the media represent the world and the way that audiences understand these representations.
- 5 To challenge the way that children and adolescents are often portrayed in the media, by offering students new channels by which to express themselves and by promoting discussion.
- 6 To provide parents and families new tools for understanding the relationship between youth and the media and technology.

Once the goals were defined, the focus was the organization and structure of the national Media Literacy Program. The first decision concerned the partners. Two fundamental actors were invited to join the program: *the national media associations* (television channels, newspapers, movie theaters and magazines) and *all Internet companies* (Microsoft, Google, Intel and telephone companies). It is hard to promote media literacy without a fluent dialogue with the media associations and companies within the technology industry. It is also difficult to transform the way that young people are portrayed in the media without the media itself. Both of these reasons support the decision to invite the entities referred to above as partners in the program.

Working with the industry entailed engaging the media and the Internet companies in frequent conversations, meetings and debates with the Ministry of Education about issues related to youth: media and Internet use among adolescents, initiatives that could be carried out to improve their representations in television programs or news stories, and media campaigns to orient families on the safe and responsible use of the Internet among young people.

Such a dialogue between the Ministry of Education, media associations and the Internet industry, is uncommon and it could only be achieved if all of them were invited to be part of the national Media Literacy Program. For all of these reasons, the program initiated by the National Ministry of Education decided to work jointly and systematically with all media associations, and organized with them the different initiatives and actions for schools and families.

The Content of the Media Literacy Program

The content of the Media Literacy Program in Argentina reflects the principles mentioned previously. To reiterate, media literacy involves the way that the media construct meanings. Media and information literacy is concerned with analyzing and understanding how the media operate. Only by asking ourselves about the way that the media produce meanings can we understand the extent to which they influence our perceptions of reality. Exploring how the media and technology represent reality allows people to critically understand the world and to participate and make decisions in everyday life.

The 21st century requires the development of new competences that allow students not only to access the media, information and technology, but also to understand their social effects. Young people need to learn how to look for information and how to process, analyze and evaluate it. Media literacy needs to teach students how to contextualize, compare and interpret media and Internet content, and analyze its credibility and origin to form and articulate their own opinions.

The media and digital competence is the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, such as abilities, strategies, values and awareness, that are required when using media and technology to perform tasks; solve problems; communicate; manage information; collaborate; create and share content; and build knowledge effectively, efficiently, appropriately, critically, creatively, autonomously, flexibly, ethically, reflectively for work, leisure, participation, learning, socializing, consumption and empowerment (Wilson, 2015).

A media and information literacy program includes key questions on any media and Internet content that all students need to explore, investigate and be able to answer:

- How is this text presented?
- Who produced it?
- How does the text transmit its credibility?
- Why do you think the content is reliable?
- What are the author's intentions?
- What sources were used to build this text?
- How many points of views are reflected?
- To whom do they belong?
- What values are being expressed?
- What language does it use?
- What audiences are addressed?
- How do audiences perceive and re-signify this text?
- Would you be able to build different content on the same subject?
- If so, how would you do it?

Access, critical analysis and production are thus the three main pillars of the Media Literacy Program in Argentina. All students need to have *access* to media, culture and technology. They should be able to *analyze, interpret and evaluate* media and Internet content to form their own opinion, *express themselves, produce new texts, make creative use of the media and the Internet*, and develop a new image in the media and on the Web (Morduchowicz, 2004).

Media literacy competences are essential for reinforcing democracy and citizenship education, as all of these abilities focus on a critical understanding of the world represented in the media. Furthermore, they promote the active participation of youth in society.

The Initiatives: From Sensitization to Action

The different initiatives promoted by the Media Literacy Program in Argentina can be grouped by the goals they pursued:

- 1 Teacher training: courses, workshops and teacher training materials (hardcopy and online).
- 2 Special activities for schools: contests and festivals promoting analysis and creative use of the media and technology. The activities include projects targeted at students that promote their participation, expression and public perception.
- 3 Projects for the community: initiatives targeted at parents and families to help them understand the media and Internet use among youth and how to orient them when they are online.

Below some examples of these projects are described. The Argentine Ministry of Education runs all of the projects with the joint participation of the media associations and the Internet industry. All of these initiatives integrate *critical analysis and creative production*. The main goal remains the same: to reinforce democratic values and to bridge the cultural gaps that separate poorer students from their more economically advantaged peers.

The "School, Camera . . . Action" Festival

Every year, since 2000, secondary school students (ages 13 to 15) are invited to write a fictional story. A panel of well-known Argentine scriptwriters and movie producers selects three stories to produce as short films. A prestigious Argentine film director shoots the short films and the students take part in the production. The three short films are shown for a month in every movie theater in Argentina, before the programmed movie.

Thousands of people going to the cinema during that month are able to see a short film written by public school students. This project allows adolescents to write their own stories using their own views and to share them with the whole society. In this way, the initiative challenges the traditional and often negative representations of adolescents in the media.

Simultaneously, when the students write their cinema story, they learn about genres, languages, and how movies are written and produced. They also need to think of the audiences, and they have to analyze and make decisions on how to transmit their message and construct meanings. The festival is sponsored by the Argentine Association of Cinemas and the Association of Movie Producers.

The “Journalists for a Day” Contest

Every year, 16- and 17-year-old students write an in-depth report on a topic of their choice that is important to them. Editors of the 90 daily newspapers across the entire country select the articles that they want to publish. One Sunday in November, every newspaper in Argentina publishes the students’ stories. They are printed just as they were written.

This way, millions of newspaper readers all over the country can read articles written by public school students. This project gives youth a different image and challenges many stereotypes and negative representations. Instead of being adults and journalists who write about youth, it is adolescents, in their own words, who write about teenage pregnancy, music, school violence, addictions, sports, unemployment and social issues that affect them.

While writing their story, students learn how journalism functions, how the print media construct meanings, how to use language to give credibility to what they want to say and how to address their audiences. Analysis and production are integrated into the same project. The “Journalists for a Day” contest is sponsored by the Argentine Newspaper Association.

“First High School Magazine”

This is the first printed magazine distributed at no charge to high school students. This monthly magazine gathers news, articles, stories and interviews on different issues (e.g., music, sports, economy, social themes, ecology, international information, etc.) that have been published in Argentine newspapers and magazines during the preceding month. Each article is reproduced literally, including the source, the author, and the newspaper or magazine’s website.

Through this project, students discover newspapers and magazines they had never seen or read before. For many young people coming from poor social groups, it is the first time in their lives that they can take a magazine home and share it with their families.

At the same time, the magazine includes a special section on media literacy with questions that allow students and teachers to explore how the information is presented, what sources have been used in each story and what interests the authors had when they wrote it. Students learn and debate the way newspapers and magazines present the story, the message they transmit and the meanings they construct. This project is meant to narrow the cultural gap by providing new resources to the least advantaged students. The monthly, 24-page color magazine circulates free of charge to over 100,000 students. The “First High School Magazine” initiative is sponsored by the Argentine Association of Magazines and Newspapers.

“Internet in the Family” Handout

This is a handout addressed to parents and families, allowing them to orient the children when they go online. The text explains Internet use among youth and includes special recommendations for responsible and safe Internet use.

One of the main aspects of this initiative concerns its distribution to families. The handout comes out once a year for free *with all newspapers* in Buenos Aires. It attracts an extensive audience, as all newspapers advertise the handout every day for two weeks before it is released. Millions of readers get the booklet, with the regular newspaper, for free.

This project is organized by the Buenos Aires Newspaper Association.

“Cinema Week” for High School Students

This initiative is meant to narrow the cultural gaps that affect youth from poor families; many of them who have never seen a movie in a cinema before.

Every year for one week, high school students from disadvantage families are able to see Argentine and international films (e.g., Latin American, European and North American) free of charge. A selection of movies specially chosen by the Media Literacy Program enables over 30,000 students to discover the big screen through films they would not usually see. Teachers receive handouts and special materials to teach film literacy at school, after the students watch the movie. This initiative is sponsored by the Movie Theatres Association.

The Challenges

The Media Literacy Program in Argentina has achieved promising results in terms of strengthening democracy among students, many who had never experienced freedom in their lives. Media literacy has also allowed for debates and analyses of the media, which had been absent from schools for many years. Teachers who were resistant in 1984, when democracy returned to the country, became more open and ready to incorporate media literacy into their classrooms.

The path, though, has just started. There are still many challenges for the Media Literacy Program in Argentina and in Latin America as a whole. The first challenge still concerns the main goal of media literacy: *to reinforce democracy*. As explained before, media education is education for democracy. It needs to promote and strengthen a democratic political culture so young people understand the essential democratic principles. Students need to learn and value the right to freely express themselves and the right to free access of information. In a region that includes many “new democracies,” this goal is still a big challenge. Teachers lived for many years under a strong military dictatorship and this may have left some scars. Although a democratic government is necessary for the development of a democratic culture, it does not guarantee a democratic culture. Media literacy in Latin America must strengthen its main goal of reinforcing democracy among new generations.

The second challenge for the Media Literacy Program in this region is to *narrow the cultural gap* that still separates youth of different socioeconomic groups. Media literacy in Latin America needs to improve access to media, technology and culture, especially for those that are less privileged. Many such children and adolescents are excluded from cinema, theater, museum, newspaper, magazine and Internet access. The nature of social division in Latin America involves both traditional and digital media. One of the main challenges that the Media Literacy Program faces in this region is to bridge these gaps and promote more equitable access to culture, media and technology among youth from the poorest families.

Cultural exclusion reinforces social exclusion and reduces the educational and professional opportunities these children and adolescents have access to in the future.

The third challenge for the Media Literacy Program is to integrate and *value the students’ culture*, their audiovisual and digital universe, by incorporating them into the classroom and by preparing all students to use them in a critical and creative way. The school was born with Gutenberg, when a new institution was needed to teach individuals to read following the creation of the printing press.

These origins speak to why so many teachers may still value and prioritize the printed word over the visual and digital languages children and adolescents use every day. To integrate the new literacies into the school curriculum is, then, the third challenge for media literacy.

How can these challenges be overcome? The main step is to consider *media literacy as a public policy*, as part of the state's engagement of education and democracy. Fortunately, there have always been teachers who have taught about the media. However, when media literacy becomes a public policy, it moves beyond individual initiatives and transforms isolated efforts into a state commitment. This is the key to a solid and systematic Media and Information Literacy Program. This is the only way to overcome the obstacles and challenges that are faced in Latin America and in the entire world.

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