

TBI Television Business International Special Report

Content Creation In A New Era



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Adapting production during
lockdown & beyond



An uneasy outlook

Screen production has been among the hardest hit sectors from the Covid-19 pandemic, with freelance workers in particular suffering badly. Mark Layton explores how some businesses have adapted and evaluates lockdown's lingering effect

It is hard to understate the impact that Covid-19 has had on communities around the world. First and foremost, of course, is the human suffering, but the impact on economies has also been immense and, in many cases, is only beginning to be felt.

The content business finds itself in something of an unusual position. With hundreds of millions of people around the world trapped in their homes under lockdown, streamers and broadcasters are finding their services soaring in popularity. For SVOD's, this is largely unreservedly good news – Netflix added almost 16 million subscribers in its most recent quarterly results. For advertising-supported

broadcasters, translating bigger ratings into bigger revenues is all-but impossible as brands clamp down on marketing spend. Networks from Israel to the US have all enforced pay cuts and slashed programming budgets to deal with the decline.

At the same time, many of the producers who provide these services with their content are finding life harder than ever. Shows that were part-way through production have been halted mid-shoot, financing has been put in a holding pattern and, most importantly, the people working on programmes have been left with exceedingly uncertain futures.

The US pilot season, a staple of the production calendar, where broadcast networks order a slew of scripts for development, has barely happened.

Wrapping up & working out

A large part of the problem facing producers has been the sheer speed at which the crisis has unfolded.

New Metric Media's Canadian comedy hit *Letterkenny* (above) is still on course to shoot its ninth season in July

Jacqueline Hewer is co-CEO of UK-based Brown Bob Productions, which was poised to wrap filming on its factual series *Inside The Ambulance* for UKTV when the pandemic hit.

The show had almost got to the end of its filming schedule, she tells TBI, so the hope is that post-production can ensure a series can still be delivered. But another show, which was just about to go into filming in an A&E department, had to be pulled. “So we had dozens of people lined up to work on that who just had to stand down to further notice.” That scenario has been replicated on hundreds of projects around the world, with untold effects on the production community, many of whom work on a largely ad-hoc, freelance basis.

For other prodcos, the timing of the crisis has stunted the pain to some degree. Mark Montefiore is president and executive producer at LA and Toronto-based New Metric Media, which is behind hit Canadian comedy *Letterkenny*. He points out that for most producers, the majority of the year is not spent actually in production but rather in development and administration.

“*Letterkenny* is still scheduled to shoot in July at this point, on season nine, but I have to say as a company we are in an incredibly fortunate scenario,” because he wasn’t mid-production. Some now will be carrying tens of millions of dollars worth of loans for shows that can’t be completed, and as Montefiore put it, “who knows when that is going to happen? It’s been a really interesting couple of weeks for us, but it’s been a lot scarier for some other companies.”

Production sources tell TBI that in most cases, the commissioning side is adapting expectations and financing is being worked out, with extensive legal assistance on the side. But there have also been concerns around future productions, with insurance often not covering the risks caused by a pandemic.

Richard Tulk-Hart, the recently appointed co-CEO of *Marcella* producer Buccaneer Media, found himself in a similar position to Montefiore. “We weren’t due to go into production on a show until September/October, so we haven’t had to close down a production and work out the finances,” he says.

But he highlights the less immediate impact of the virus on production – namely the uncertainty and delay that it is causing to the entire process. “We’ve been on a big round of pitching – both on this side of the pond and over in LA – and we’ve had some successes. We’ll see what the impact of the Coronavirus is on those shows.

“We’re also in a writing and developing phase at the moment, but there again, we don’t know how long this will go on for so it’s very hard to say if



we’ll be able to go into production come September/October. There’s lots of guessing going on.”

Moving to remote post & tapping tech

With filming grinding to a halt in many cases, there has also been an almighty scramble to ensure any show that has filming wrapped – or nearly wrapped – can move into post-production and help fill some of the looming gaps emerging. More than that, perhaps, is the realisation that much of this work can be completed remotely relatively easily.

Chiara Cardoso, head of development at BlackBox Multimedia, says that the lockdown has not drastically changed the way that the international prodco operates, describing the situation as “business as usual” for a company used to working remotely and keeping in contact with partners the world over.

“What has changed is the fact that now a lot of people are beginning to see how efficient this way of working can be. The hope is that, once we have returned to the new normal, more producers and partners will see the bounty of opportunities that can stem from co-productions with partners in different territories – technology has made it easier,” she says.

Hewer adds: “Our post-production house has been fantastic in setting up our editors working from home, so we’ve still got an *Inside The Ambulance* edit running and we’re hoping we can deliver that through final post.”

Steve Oemcke, co-founder and director of content at Australia’s WTFN, faced a different sort of issue. His crew were working on *Mega Zoo* for Nine Network when the crisis hit. “The zoo had to close to

Marcella prodco Buccaneer Media were not producing when the Covid-19 pandemic hit

\$310m

Covid-19’s impact on revenues at British indies
(Source: Pact)

“We’re in a writing and developing phase but we don’t know how long this will go on for – there’s a lot guessing going on”

Richard Tulk-Hart,
Buccaneer Media



Mega Zoo (below) and *Balcony Stories* (opposite) both completed filming without the use of traditional camera operators

the public, and our production temporarily stopped. As the zoo team took a breath and worked out a new set of protocols for caring for both staff and animals, we caught our breath too and had a think of what we could do.

“We had developed a great relationship with the zoo, so our contacts were keen for us to complete the series. In collaboration with them, we split our crew into A and B teams, mirroring the zoo’s workforce protocols to prevent cross-contamination. We deployed strict social distancing, so boom mikes and zoom lenses came into their own.”

Existing fixed-rig cameras were also used, but the prodco also turned to zookeepers to take on crew roles, wearing harness-supporting mounted rigs that shoot over their shoulder. “These workaround examples are giving us the intimate footage we want – but with new perspectives that will really add to the finished series.”

Elsewhere, its docu-soap *Teen Mom* for MTV faced similar problems. Crew sizes were shrunk to reduce possible infection and the shooting schedule was collapsed – “all while rigorously adhering to new health and safety protocols,” Oemcke says.

“Most people’s homes do not allow for social distancing in the same room, so we have made great use of monitors and two-way communications for directing. We’ve also relied more on diary cams

for top-up footage and, for the first time on this title, we’ve deployed drones and have captured some wonderful ‘hero’ shots of our families in their gardens or on the beach.”

Laura Marshall, CEO of Icon Films, says her company has in some ways never been busier. “We do a lot of international travel and adventure shows. Obviously we’ve got a lot of those stood down at the moment because we’re not able to travel,” she explains. “But we’ve also got a load of those in the edit and because we have a fully comprehensive post-production set-up, we have been able to arrange for our teams to work remotely and those edits continue. That’s really good for a company like ours – to be able to keep things going.

“We’ve got something like 12 edits working remotely and finishing remotely,” she continues, adding that the company’s “spacious” offices in the UK city of Bristol mean that with 90% of staff working remotely, there’s plenty of space to social distance. “It’s incredibly busy at the moment.”

Animation is also experiencing an uptick in demand, with remote workers able to perform more or less as they had previously. Caterina Vacchi, EP and head of production and distribution at Italian producer Atlantyca Entertainment, says that having been forced to work from home since the 25 February meant a rejig to the post-production work





on its new animation *Berry Bees*.

“Our script producer, for example, was handling the final Italian dubbing and once the lockdown took place, did so from home. But, it meant implementing a system of internal co-ordination for the production team. There were several final episodes that were in the full throes of completing the animation: some required audio post production while other scenes had to be finalised in master.

“The impact was not as traumatic as it could have been because we do typically work with a group of international partners and always have to coordinate our work objectives and deliverables. For *Berry Bees* the production is split between Italy, Ireland, India and Australia so conference call platforms are typically part of our everyday life, together with managing the time difference.”

The result is that Atlantica has delivered *Berry Bees* to Nine in Australia and Rai in Italy as planned and on time, which Vacchi says was “extremely critical for us.” Challenges remain of course, not least voice-recording with actors and managing dubbing, but the availability and accessibility of software means the ramifications of lockdown are less.

She adds: “We are still able to finalise distribution deals, even with the recent cancellation of markets such as MIPTV and we are working on three new developments for our brand new series.”

Driving development

Indeed, one of the numerous takeaways from speaking to such an array of producers is the concentration on development. Lucas Green, head of content at Banijay Group, says the focus for his company – which is in the midst of acquiring Endemol Shine Group – has been to ensure its myriad production firms remain connected.

“Like everyone across the world, in every

industry, we’ve all had to adjust to this new way of living and working. But remarkably, it’s happened very quickly, and seamlessly at Banijay. From day one, we looked at ways to unite our teams more regularly and drive creativity and best practice through collaborative video conferences, which inspired idea sharing and briefings, and provided solutions to the problems everyone was facing.

“Early on we explored our catalogue, finished tape, archives and third-party materials, in addition to focusing development on establishing new IP to fill the gaps in the schedules our clients faced.”

Icon’s Marshall says her development teams are “going full steam ahead and continuing to have calls” and make pitches, while Tulk-Hart at Buccaneer, says he too is focused on hitting the ground running when lockdown ends.

“We’re going to get on with projects that we might not have done ordinarily at this point and we’re looking for new IP that fits and balances out our slate,” he says, identifying “where we feel we might have any gaps, be it for free-TV, the SVODs or other genres. We’re looking to fill those gaps.”

And pushing production

It is also worth noting that commissioners are still ordering series, as Banijay’s Green points out. Germany’s ProSiebenSat.1 has ordered shows such as fixed-rig series *Luke, Alone At Home* from Brainpool in Germany and the *Free European Song Contest*, while Nordisk Film TV has snagged an order from TV2 for Denmark Stands Together.

Elsewhere, BBC Two in the UK has commissioned shows such as *Hospital: The Covid-19 Frontline* from Label1 Television and Channel 4’s slate includes *Grime Gran On How Not To Be A Dick In A Pandemic*.

ViacomCBS International Studios and Fremantle have begun production on *Balcony Stories*, a series of short-form shows that celebrates the “positive and creative ways” people are coping with the current global lockdown.

“We’ve had a lot of conversation with the commissioners that we work most closely with and everybody has been really supportive,” says Hower.

“We’ve had some very positive conversations about new shows we can do for them, which are either nothing to do with Coronavirus but which we think we can make in lockdown, or something to do with Coronavirus but not depressing – and makeable,” she adds. And, perhaps in the short term at least, that is the main focus for a large swathe of the production community. **TBI**

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Laura Marshall,
Icon Films



15.77

Netflix subscriber growth
since January, in millions