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Spanish TV Industry Adjusts to Harsh Realities of the Coronavirus Crisis

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The Spanish TV industry has been shaken by the dramatic impact of the coronavirus crisis, but it is fighting back.

Industry players have reacted fast, pushing forward with development, post-production and other business activities using online tools, and with the expectation of supporting funds from both public and private initiatives that will mitigate the effects of the crisis in production.

As has been the case in the local film sector, TV fiction production has been halted, with some 30 TV drama project shoots suspended.

Despite huge difficulties, the TV networks haven't stopped broadcasting live, operating as normally as possible. Live programming, held without the presence of audiences, continues. News programs, crucial in crisis times, are breaking ratings records. There is, though, a higher than usual presence of reruns.

The release of original TV dramas, a key content for VOD platforms, is being adapted to the exceptional circumstances.

HBO has postponed the keenly-awaited launch of "Patria," its first Spanish original TV drama production, created by Aitor Gabilondo at Mediaset España's Alea Media. It had been scheduled for a May 17 release in more than 60 countries.

Meanwhile, Movistar Plus, Spain's leading paybox, has advanced to April 8 the online premiere of its original series "La línea invisible." Mariano Barroso's drama, produced by Sentido Films and Corte y Confección de Películas, was originally planned to premiere on April 17.

The launch of season 4 of Netflix's super hit "La casa de papel" ("Money Heist"), produced by Vancouver Media, is scheduled for April 3. The release of Movistar original series "La unidad," produced by Vaca Film, is keeping to its scheduled launch in May.

"Anything that doesn't involve physical activity is absolutely underway," says Ghislain Barrois, CEO of Mediterráneo Mediaset España Group.

As has been said, the production sector has been hit hardest.

The state of emergency declared by the Spanish government on March 14, and later extended to April 11, has stopped all production shoots, taking in Movistar original series productions such as The Mediapro Studio's "Paraíso," season 2 of Portocabo's coproduction "Hierro," and season 4 of "Skam España."

One of Spain's most prolific production companies, Mediapro revealed last week it will temporarily lay off 1,200 employees and implement the country's ERTE program that covers salaries during the country's lockdown. Mediapro has suspended all production in Spain and abroad.

The biggest production players are used to working with a varying flow of projects and have solid structures in place. The halt in production is mainly damaging small- and medium-sized companies, often formed in recent years by talent, without enough financing muscle to withstand the crisis.

Geraldine Gonard, founder of industry events production outfit Inside Content, underscores the need for these companies to receive support from the government and bigger TV companies and platforms to maintain the high level of diversity and creativity in the industry.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced March 19 the mobilization of €200 billion (\$222 billion) as part of a stimulus package to meet the economic and social impact of coronavirus. What percentage of that figure will go to support the film and TV industry is still unknown.

Netflix unveiled last week the creation of a \$100 million fund to help with hardship in the creative community. Most of the fund will go towards support for the hardest hit workers on its own productions around the world. It's currently in the process of working out exactly what this means, production by production, the company said.

This is in addition to the two weeks' pay Netflix has already committed to the crew and cast on productions forced to suspend by mid-March.

Aimed to support the broader film and television industry, \$15 million of the Netflix fund will go to third parties and non-profits providing emergency relief to out-of-work crew and cast in the countries where it has a large production base, such as Spain.

The confinement measures have skyrocketed TV viewership figures.

"Right now there is a TV consumption boom, so there will be a TV content shopping boom," Gonard says.

The digital route is allowing sales and acquisitions executives and creators to continue their work despite the cancellation of key TV market events.

For example, The Mediapro Studio's Ran Tellem pitched online last week TV thriller series project "Submarine," a co-production with Brazil's Globo, at Series Mania Digital Forum.

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