

“Keep the energy”

THE CHILDREN’S SCREEN INDUSTRY IN THE TIME OF LOCKDOWN

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31 producers of children’s TV from 21 countries were asked to provide insights into their strategies about how they are dealing with the current COVID-19 crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in most countries are emerging as serious issues for those involved in developing and producing content for children. Production processes have been disrupted and international fairs, like MIPTV are canceled. What situations do producers worldwide find themselves in, what consequences do measures like social distancing have for their work, and what strategies are TV executives developing to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on their business? The IZI, in cooperation with the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation, asked n=31 producers of children’s TV from 21 countries on all continents to answer these questions in an online questionnaire (SoSci Survey). The range of respondents included small and medium size production and development teams

with less than 35 employees, NGOs producing in several countries as well as larger production companies with up to 150 employees. Contacts were made via the PRIX JEUNESSE network, CMC (Children’s Media Conference) and Kidscreen.

WHAT WAS THE SITUATION LIKE IN THE MONTHS OF MARCH AND APRIL 2020?

During March and April when many countries went into lockdown, production companies had to abruptly adapt their activities by working from home. Around the world production companies continue to develop projects and according to one French respondent are “actively networking mostly online.” However, many projects have been put on hold, or in some cases cancelled as social distancing makes production impossible, particularly for live action productions. As routines have been disrupted, those involved in international

productions have deferred overseas shooting because travel is not possible, a factor which has also disrupted international markets such as MIPTV. While a small number of producers in Europe and North America professed “full steam ahead” and claimed not to have “lost a beat,” particularly for animation projects which can be completed online, most others were compelled in March and April to adapt their plans, pulling “forward writing concepts” and concentrating on development and writing work which could be completed at home using Zoom and Teams. For the European Broadcasting Union’s (EBU) children’s drama series initiative, the necessity of remote meetings has still allowed the EBU and commissioning broadcasters to engage effectively with writers, directors and producers with “a very positive spirit and an enthusiasm,” which suggests that online meetings are likely to become more frequent in future as people realise that travelling to work may not always be necessary. However, in Mexico working online has been more challenging with unstable internet connections, reminding us that good online communication is not always straightforward and universally available.

As companies shift to remote working, the various stages of production have been affected differently, forcing companies to innovate and “adapt formats to the new situation.” In practical terms post-production, development and writing have been less affected than casting and filming, particularly for studio-based or live-action shows. Sales, promotion and policy work can also continue remotely. Voiceover recording for animation has continued



Screenshot from TVOKids Power Hour of Learning © TVO

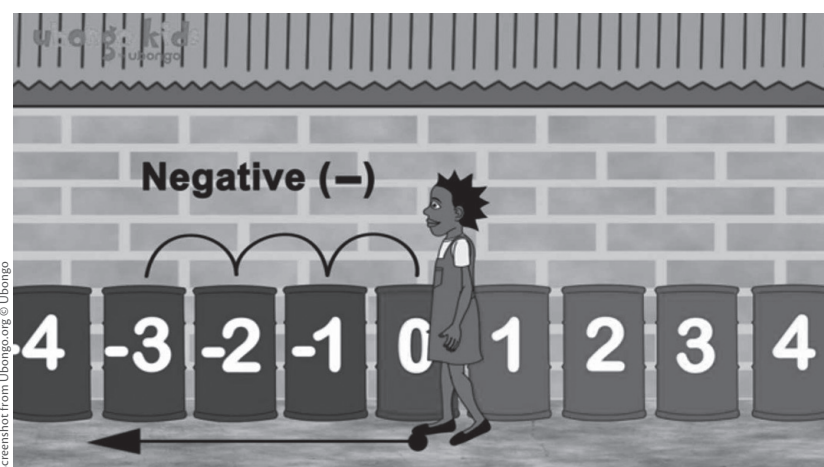
Ill. 1: The presenters of TVOKids Power Hour of Learning explain topics from the maths and science school curriculum (here: “all about sound”)

in some instances with additional planning to maintain social distancing and hygiene in studios. However, the disruption to filming in particular has heightened uncertainties. According to one Norwegian producer, “we are supposed to start shooting 3 shows in 1-4 months. 1 might go as planned, 3 will most probably be delayed. Hopefully just for a short time, but maybe for months. It is really uncertain times.” What the responses underline is the ongoing precarity of the industry with regular staff put on leave, freelancers let go and production postponements, a situation exacerbated by “networks who won’t commit to any major new shows until they have a better overview of the corona situation,” according to one Norwegian respondent. One Canadian producer exclaimed that it has been “terrible. Everything stopped.” At this moment in time (March-April) there was less talk among producers about cutbacks as opposed to slowdowns and it may be too early to make a judgement until the impact of budget cutbacks and declining advertising revenue work their way through to commissioning. Danish producers are looking for government financial aid, but Canadian producers claimed there had been no additional support. An Australian funder, ACTF (Australian Children’s Television Foundation), has adapted its application processes so that it can provide development funding more regularly to producers and writers, “so that they can use this period of production ‘hibernation’ to work on new projects.” In Ecuador, producers have had access to additional funds from UNICEF to produce COVID-19-related content for educational purposes. There is in fact a sense of a divide between developed and developing economies. For those used to working with low budgets, including NGOs working in Latin America and Africa, it was suggested that there has been less abrupt change so far, apart from increased workloads with demands for new programming, particularly about COVID-19.

Nevertheless COVID-19 has encouraged companies to look at their work in new ways. In Northern Macedonia lockdown became an opportunity for one production company to broadcast new live educational programming on national TV for 7 hours a day, particularly for those children, whose schooling has been interrupted and who do not have high quality internet access at home. At TVOKids in Canada the in-house team has adapted filming to allow presenters to use their mobile phones at home to address children’s concerns around COVID-19. New programming includes *TVOKids Power Hour of Learning* (Ill. 1), 2 daily hour-long blocks at 9.30am and 1pm to teach maths and science, linked to curriculum for “a focused hour of learning” (TVO). Another Toronto-based producer has used lockdown to develop a “new dramatic series based on kids in lockdown with YouTube” which will be shot entirely on phones. Similarly, the non-profit Mexican producer Viento Culturales has switched to online production, inviting both children and families to send videos from home, while presenters film themselves at home as part of amended formats. The company has also created short video animations in more than 20 indigenous languages, to be distributed on social media, WhatsApp and

broadcast TV (see also Carmona in this issue). In Tanzania where broadband is less widespread, the NGO Ubongo has adjusted its educational programmes (Ill. 2) across Africa by making all educational content “available across all platforms for free” in partnership with broadcasters and online platforms in as many languages as possible. It has also created radio programmes that enable parents to help their children to learn from home, including new content that “talks about COVID and hygiene habits for kids in a fun language they understand.”

As the pandemic progresses, countries are at different stages and this is shaping responses. US companies were less open about the situation in March and April, although one US executive worried about “a government that is far behind the public health and economic need” in terms of taking “appropriate precautions” as recorded mortalities have soared in the US. Companies seemed unsure about their plans for the next year. According to one Australian executive, “as the entire production industry has closed down at the same time, there is now a concern that when restrictions are lifted and production can start up again, that our producers will find it difficult to attract high level crews to work on our shows because there will



Ill. 2: Ubongo Kids offers STEM cartoons for kids aged 7 to 14 to help them find the joy in learning math, science, technology and engineering

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be such a backlog of production for primetime shows ready to go, that it will be hard to compete with them and this will affect production budgets." In those countries where lockdown is likely to be eased earlier because of low mortality rates, for example in Norway, there are plans for low cost dramas that would suit online viewing, but others are "stripping down" their activities, because it is hard to anticipate what the future is likely to hold. These concerns about the future were underlined by one Canadian producer: "It's totally unclear whether other projects in development will be able to move to production. That's due to no one really knowing what the situation with broadcasters will be in the short and medium term and how they may make their production decisions, how quickly financing will come together, etc." What is evident is that planning is going to be difficult if the pandemic lasts longer than 6 months and possibly longer. While development of new productions continues, it seems inevitable that the restrictions and ensuing economic crisis will make it more difficult to keep all producers active and in work.

TOP 3 TIPS ON HOW TO SURVIVE THE CRISIS

We asked the same producers to provide their top 3 tips of how best to survive the COVID-19 crisis. 3 strategies were mentioned most frequently: Use the time to reflect, do research about your target audience and keep up your connections.

Mostly the response has been how to simply keep the company alive and find a way to survive this crisis. The strategy of many producers here is to use the involuntary disruption in a positive way and to see the crisis as an opportunity. While during the normal production process, there is rarely time to think about long term goals, this is a time to think about your aims for the company

and what you really want to achieve. "See it as a sabbatical" is the strategy of Christoph Biemann from Germany; "Use the time to find your passion project for kids" writes Danish producer Frederik Hansen. For Jenny Buckland from the ACTF in Australia, this is a chance to think "about how the world might change after it recovers from this pandemic and how that might impact what you do."

Some see the crisis as an opportunity to develop new targeted formats, taking advantage of the extra time to talk to children, get to know them better, and take a "few hours to study and research." (Beth Carmona, Brazil) The aim behind this strategy is to get a deeper understanding of all types of children, making use of new and fresh perspectives on their current situation: "Identify the less seen and most in need." (Elke Franke, Mexico) The focus for many producers is to identify the needs of children with 8 out of 10 respondents adhering to the view that they need to "seek what kids need in this situation and give it to them." (Is-sada Aisiri, Thailand)

Working collaboratively and networking with each other is the third most mentioned strategy. According to Lawrence Mirkin in Canada this means "staying in touch with colleagues - not only in your own productions/company but also your colleagues around the world who do this kind of work." Keeping in contact, maintaining trust and sharing are words that are mentioned more than once. Further tips include participating in as many online industry activities and virtual conferences as possible and using your contact base from events like Kidscreen.

Other responses include preparing future shows and "advanc[ing] the table work of various projects. At some point it will be needed" (Pedro Flores, Peru), as well as working on "projects that were saved for another time off the shelf." (Rafael Michelli, Brazil)

The general attitude is to "keep energy up" (Emmanuèle Petry, France), and

keep your mind open for creative solutions and new paths. "Make a plan and then plan to alter the plan, none of us have a crystal ball into the future," writes Marney Malabar (Canada).

Many producers are using the time to look for new financing opportunities, ranging from pre-sales to "look[ing] for funds to produce stories that children need in order to recover." (Monica Maruri, Ecuador) They describe how they are looking at productions online and offline and "find[ing] new ways for distributing content and reach[ing] the target audience." (Arild Halvorsen, Norway) Now is the time to utilise mobile devices more for filming or even, according to Beryl Richards, a UK producer, to move post production equipment home to finish off productions.

The COVID-19 crisis is an extraordinary time in which self care is becoming an important aspect and which producers of children's TV see as an opportunity for personal reevaluation and for creative freedom. J.J. Johnson (Canada) summarises one of his central strategies as follows: "Give yourself some breathing room, if your creativity is sparked and you feel like developing something, do it! If you'd rather use this time to reconnect with family and friends, do that instead! Ultimately do whatever you need to do to get yourself through this." ■

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