

# The TV-Production Shift During the COVID-19 Health Crisis: How TV Language Changed As a State of Alarm Was Enforced in Spain

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*TV consumption has broken records in Spain during the COVID-19 lockdown period enforced in the country subject to State-of-Alarm provisions. Audience data have shown unprecedented consumption rates. Specifically, over 335 minutes of consumption per citizen per day; and a 2.1-million news-bulletin viewer growth in March (Barlovento, 2020a).*

*TV script writers, camera operators, directors, editors and producers alike have been working under the strictest rules to comply with all the health and labour standards. The production team—specifically, its director—makes important decisions as regards pre-production, recordings, actual production and post-production. Upon going live, a director relies on their team’s professionalism, being ultimately responsible for deciding what—and how and when—is seen on screen, as well as for*

*its visual quality. A director is the person at the heart and core of a program broadcast on TV (Bernad, 2016).*

*This paper aims at bringing to public notice a change of method in live TV production team work during the first month of lockdown, as well as in the workplace shift. It also aims to reveal the increase in the use of video conferencing signals, Skype or WhatsApp, which have replaced the traditional satellite and radio frequency signals, a process entailing visible quality losses. The analysis system is based on questions posed to those professionals involved in TV broadcasts during the first month of State-of-Alarm enforcement by means of video calls, online surveys and WhatsApp messages.*

**Keywords:** production, TV, Skype, coronavirus, quality.



## HYPOTHESIS

Given the 2020 coronavirus—or COVID-19—lockdown, the number of TV viewers—whether they turn to this medium for information or for entertainment—has increased to a record-breaking point of during the State of Alarm declared by the Spanish Government from March 14 to April 14 (Barlovento, 2020b).

This paper studies the adaptation process that production teams have undergone when it comes to the programs broadcast live during said period. Our research analyses the change in the work routines of a production team itself, as well as the teams involved in the pre-production, post-production and broadcasting of on-air programs on Spanish TV.

The sample is made up of production team members of the main Spanish TV channels—as well as some large-audience regional ones, which have also experienced significant growth—. However, a director's work depends on many teams, including all sorts of technical operators, link compilation, post-production, sound and graphics, among others. For this reason, our spectrum of respondents has been forced to be expanded to all these jobs without which a live performance is impossible.

Three working hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Production team work routines have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. This has meant an adaptation to a new technological environment which in turn has had an impact on the final output by the director and all the teams which cooperate in a program's pre-production.
- H2: The increase in signals coming from Skype, Zoom, mobile video calls etc. has caused some chains to create *ad hoc* spaces for their reception, which in turn represents a quality loss when it comes to the final audio-visual product.
- H3: Both physical workspaces and production-team location have been modified, which in turn may represent a new way of working lasting over time. Teleworking has been tested on TV and is working on something as unthinkable as TV production.

As analysis methods, three techniques of a qualitative nature have been used, by adapting to the possibilities offered by our research during lockdown, as well as that by the TV team. The contact has been with professionals of TV production and representatives of those sectors that intervene in the pre-production and in the live broadcast of TV programs, both national, regional, open or paid.

On the one hand, questionnaires sent via email to different professionals from RTVE, Antena 3, La Sexta, Telecinco, Cuatro, Canal Sur, Telemadrid and Movistar have been used. In addition, videoconferences on the subject of this research have been recorded through the Zoom and Skype applications. Third, audios or video calls have been requested through WhatsApp for those professionals who—mainly due to lack of time because of their work situation—have not been able to record a live video call or answer the questionnaires. All contributions have been uploaded onto YouTube or Drive channels, and the link to access those materials is provided.

## STATUS OF THE ISSUE

On Saturday, March 14, the President of the Spanish Government, Pedro Sánchez, decreed a State of Alarm, the second in the recent history of Spanish democracy. The first one had been declared in 2011, under José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's administration, when air traffic was stopped due to a strike by the sector's flight controllers, who were replaced by those of the Spanish Air Force for almost two months.

The State of Alarm declared by President Pedro Sánchez was justified by the outbreak of 'COVID-19, a respiratory virus which had emerged in China to quickly spread around the world. Its virulence was such that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a "pandemic".

After this WHO declaration, Spain took a measure classified as "state of hibernation". According to María Jesús Montero, Minister of Economy and Spokesperson for the Executive, the concept of "hibernation" consists of freezing the country's productive capacity for a given period of time. A social, economic and labour "parenthesis", as defined by King Philip VI in his speech to the Nation on March 18, 2020.

The State-of-Alarm altered the daily lives of 47 million Spaniards, who found themselves to be locked down by a Royal Decree confining them at their homes. Exceptions were limited to four basic needs: buying food, going to the doctor, walking pets and accompanying people with disabilities (BOE, 2020).

This behaviour and routine change unleashed a hitherto unthinkable series of milestones on a TV level, the arrival of teleworking or 'tele-interviews'.

- First: "audience consumption soared up to the highest levels in its history" (Barlovento, 2020b). On the first day after the State of Alarm was declared, more than half of the country's population consumed TV: according to Kantar Media's meter, 35.2 million people—that is, 75% of Spain's population—watched TV for a few minutes at least.
- A second milestone was the introduction of the so-called "fourth screen", a term referring to digital devices such as mobile phones, tablets or other portable computers. Faced with the impossibility of reporting *in situ*—due to the health hazards that this entailed—, news programs and magazines adapted their visual language in order to continue broadcasting information in times of "health crisis" as had been decreed on March 14.
- The third milestone was the possibility of conducting interviews via Skype or Zoom, which in turn permitted live broadcasts from a living room, as well as information pieces being recorded by the protagonists of a news story. Such apps feature tools which are essential for communication purposes during the virus outbreak and spread: "usability, portability, ubiquity, accessibility, [and] permanent connectivity [which] make digital devices essential" (López and Gómez, 2016). In Cebrián Herreros words:

The technological development that mobile telephony has undergone in recent years has been adopted by the media sector, as it represents a new communication channel

for sending and receiving information by information professionals. They can even publish directly to digital editions using their mobile phone. These advances in the field of mobility offer communication professionals the ability to send text, images and video without the need for complex infrastructure, and to do it ubiquitously, anytime, anywhere (Cebrián, 2010: 240).

The foray into low-cost 'magazine' programs had the advantage of conducting interviews with characters who would not have been available under normal circumstances. Such is the case of *Hoy en Día*, a Canal Sur program which saw in 'tele-interviews' their chance to compete on a same-level basis with leading morning shows such as 'Ana Rosa's program' or *Espejo Público* (Public Mirror), thus being able to interview medical personalities such as Rafael Bengoa, advisor to Barak Obama, or María Neira, head of the WHO in Geneva. Such magazines covered a wide range of content due to their versatility and were characterized "by a diversity of content or ingredients, from newsletters and live connections with reporters on the street to fiction series or interview spaces and debates in the studios" (Castillo, 2016).

During the period from March 14 to April 14, these types of programs and TV newscasts introduced interviews which until then were not justified, such as connections via Skype or Zoom to speak with the protagonists of the information day.

For the kind of live broadcasts that this research focuses on, "the program's narrative is simultaneous to the event narrated, though it has admittedly been planned in advance" (Castillo, 2013). It is because of such planning that the work of many a department becomes of great importance, since for a minimum of five hours prior to the live broadcast the entire production team will prepare an audio-visual narration which will later reach our houses 'on air'.

Live on air occurs when a program takes place at the same time as the event itself. It is the TV production procedure *par excellence* (Barroso, 2008). Despite all planning, any director is prepared at the moment of the live for a tension that will lead them to establish rhythm and continuity between live connections, video, graphic resources, studio camera plans, digital signage or parallel film-making on overhead projectors or led screens. Besides, that tension is made stronger by their being aware of the amount of audience that is connected at that moment, as well as the fact that, if there is an error, there is no going back.

For these reasons, within the context given, we believe this paper to be of great interest for the knowledge of TV production during the lockdown period studied. It also intends to stir a reflection on the possible changes that may affect professional TV production according to the results obtained.

## RESULTS

After studying all the contributions received, it has been possible to obtain a complete vision of the change in TV production work routines as regards live programs during the first month of lockdown (March 14-April 14) due to the

COVID-19 pandemic. All the information analysed consists of five highly relevant sections: live connections, telecommuting, reception of live signals, hygiene and safety measures, and physical workspace.

**Connections or live signals** are one of the most important elements in live performance. This is one of the great changes produced by the COVID-19. Most of the programs have seen these signals increase, with the exception of sports programs, but with a different format and quality. The signals received by satellite or a 4G dongle have decreased, but those received by Skype or the like have increased substantially. César García, director of Informativos 20H in La Sexta, tells us that some editors even have their own system and their own direct line (walking live). In the case of interviews, interviewees are given certain guidelines in their favour: place the camera at eye level and choose the location they consider most appropriate with good audio quality. A substantial change in the number of signals has been seen, raising from approximately ten to about sixteen, excluding false live calls (Aparici, 2020). Connections by Skype, which are received at central control, have increased as in La Sexta. Despite being received as central control, like the rest of the signals, at Telecinco it is the director or an assistant who talks to the guest or the editor to give instructions about the plan, the sound, the background, and so on. In the case of Telemadrid, this type of interviews are not only conducted via Skype, but also through an Avid News application called DMNG APP which achieves a better quality while being received at mission control, too (Alonso, 2020).

For Eugenio Robles, director of Hoy en Día on Canal Sur, the use of connections via Skype or similar has a very clear disadvantage; namely a poor audio-visual quality as well as its lack of security and reliability. Only a few months ago these types of connections would not have been considered valid, but are now admissible due to their informative interest. In addition, the work by camera operators has been affected in several aspects: working hours have been reduced, shifts have been established to avoid contact, and coverage has decreased. Whenever camera operators be present, they may be used to record images and do interviews, thus providing a plus of quality and originality to e.g. interviews with health care personnel, or social workers... (García, 2020). On the other hand, teams working outside the newsroom, such as editors or camera operators, cannot enter to edit their videos. They leave their homes, so they work in the streets; and it is from there that they do their coverage and send their footage. If they can edit them by teleworking, they do so. If not, they usually deliver them via an FTP site (Jiménez, 2020). It should be noted that, according to José María Castillo, ENG serves to “record the presence of a journalist on the information focus, or for the presenter to establish a certain dialogue with the interviewee or reporter” (Castillo, 2016). With the addition of new working methods, this line would be blurred in the absence of such feedback.

In the Mediaset group, as in Atresmedia, the audience has disappeared from the sets. What we do not see is that there are programs where the on-site director has also disappeared as such, now being in charge of managing signals through Zoom as is the case of Minister’s Quarenta, currently under a technical manager and a mixer. As for El Intermedio, Lo de Évole, Zapeando or Late Motiv they are

aired directly with their collaborators on Skype, without the presence of a live performance like before COVID-19.

Teleworking has become commonplace in TV production too. Beatriz Galán, director of Mediaset, has part of her team teleworking from home, as well as assistants to manage queues. The same is the case at TVE, where José Antonio García Molina, coordinator of the TV production coordinator of the so-called “bunker” (explained later), tells us that there is teleworking both for TV production and script writing through Media Composer, an Avid application, so that they can continue their work from their homes. In the case of the production team, their working day assembling pieces and images remains the same, with a satisfactory result that avoids “casualties” (García, 2020). In programs by the Mediaset group such as *Women and Men* and *Vice Versa* or *The Panic Room*, shift rotation systems have also been established, and teleworking has been promoted (Barroso, 2020)

Something similar happens with sports. In the case of Formula 1, Paula Fernández Crespo is the director and coordinator of the MoviStar programs dedicated to this competition. Right now, the production team is divided between those who are teleworking and the director, who selects from mission control the Skype interviews made with GoPro or a camera provided by the broadcasting corporation at best. Some presenters, like Antonio Lobato, have set up their own overhead projector or video wall at home, enabling them to project images, tests or videos onto a white wall (Fernández, 2020). Most of the production team is teleworking thanks to Avid licenses provided by Movistar. The images arrive through a cooperative Wettransfer or FTP. Once the videos have been edited, and the signals selected, a joint viewing of the program takes place before it is uploaded onto FTP to be reviewed and sent to continuity. In this way we are facing a semi-direct TV production, with a large telework load.

The case of MoviStar’s #Vamos does not differ greatly from what has been explained so far. Director Alejandro Romero has gone from making a program where there were many live signals for soccer games, to having video calls. It is one of the few cases where the number of live signals has decreased. There are no matches being played; therefore, there are no commentators on the pitch anymore.

**Signal reception** is another forte. In the case of Telemadrid, two human teams have been arranged which are exclusively dedicated to controlling the signals arriving into central control by DMNG APP or by Skype (Alonso, 2020). The producer passes a list of whom to call, and it is the central control operator who advises on the type of shot before passing the signal on to TV production control. In spite of everything, there is a decompensation resulting in constant drops of frames per second. This is reflected in the pixelation, which has meant a reconfiguration and creation of new duplexes and multi-windows, by adapting them to a 16/9 aspect ratio (Ramírez, 2020a).

In Canal Sur the management of video calls is done as an external signal. A producer calls a contact; and once the audio has been tested, it is sent to sound, where it is kept on the control monitors as prior; and it is given way when the presenter begins to interact with it. Just as if it were a signal from a mobile unit or radio link (Robles, 2020).

The volume of videos sent through social networks, such as WhatsApp, is of such a magnitude that it sometimes becomes overwhelming. Eduardo Aparici, producer of Informativos T5, tries to adapt the images from ICUs, nursing homes or hospitals to the 16/9 format, which is not an easy task when they are sent vertically. In order to minimise quality loss, the production team, together with the post-production team, try to adapt image output to the correct format. But such a massive download of images and totals becomes very large, which increases the workload. The production assistants are in charge of carrying out this adaptation, unless they are overwhelmed with work. The result is then passed to an editorial telephone to be downloaded into the link room, whence it is in turn forwarded to a common folder and digested into the system (García, 2020). Paco Ruiz de Pablo, Mediaset control technician, is part of the entire team who has created a specific room in the group to meet the needs of the broadcast corporation in terms of this type of signal. Special Slype equipment has been purchased, allowing simultaneous calls to be made; and the machine itself offers a clean output for each of the video calls individually, with its audio and video quality separately (Barroso, 2020). In *Four a Day* it is working with about fifteen or sixteen signals per program: seven spots on the Iberian Peninsula, two international ones, and approximately six Skypes per day (Barroso, 2020).

#### Cuatro mission control



Source: Own elaboration.

As for the **physical workspace** in all the TV channels, it has been tried as a general rule that all “not essential” staff must telework. In the case of TV production, this is quite complicated, so most are sticking to face-to-face work by trying to maintain safe and hygienic distances. To achieve this, several standards have been put into practice. Regarding hygienic measures, every time a control team leaves a facility (despite working with gloves) this is completely disinfected for the sanitary safety of the next work team. Even at Mediaset ozone machines have been purchased for deep sterilization and, as with all controls, separation screens have been installed. Teams have been separated in several locations, and divided into several controls. The number of people physically present at work has been limited, and cleaning has been increased. The Mobile Units have also been affected, since only four people can work together: the director, assistant, sound technician and content director.

## Telemadrid mission control



Source: Own elaboration.

Cesar García (Producer Informativos La Sexta) works with his team on two different controls. In one of them he works alongside film-making, titling and production assistance, while in another is the lighting control personnel, who leave everything ready and would return in the event of any incident during live performance. At Telemadrid they are working with hard plastic screens that separate the mixer from the director (Ramírez, 2020a). In the same way, the director is also separated from his assistants by such panels to maintain the required sanitary distances and avoid possible infections. Elisa García, from the Mediaset production team, also lives with this separation in the production control. Here too all work is done with masks and gloves, a situation that is experienced in every broadcasting station.

In some cases all control staff has had to change its location. In Telecinco's case, for example, the first-class assistant—who usually sits on the front line, next to the director—has moved to the position of the producer on the second line (Aparici, 2020). In some stations the control staff has been reduced from ten to six: mixer, director, one or two assistants, editor and producer (Alonso, 2020). On set, camera operators have also been reduced to a minimum (when they still exist physically); and in the event of being robotised, as is the case of most news programs, everything remains the same. In *Cuatro al Día*, eight camera operators have been converted to six, two of which are robotic. The figure of the alderman has been removed from some programs such as *Deportes Cuatro*. In *Viva la Vida* the exits to corridors have been eliminated; and in *Survivors*, being a large set, only camera operators work (Barroso, 2020).

Work in #Vamos is carried out through two control posts. At the main one, next to the director, sit the mixer and the operator of robotic cameras. At another secondary control sit the assistant, editor, and tag operator. These controls communicate with each other through an intercom (Romero, 2020).

A special case is that of TVE. Area 51 (the 'bunker') consists of twenty-five writing stations with Avid Media Central, two production stations with Avid Media Composer and a single-camera set with autocue, plus sound and lighting elements, all mixed together in case Torrespaña requires disinfection with no program interruption (according to José Antonio García Molina, Area 5's coordinator for TV production). It is physically located next to the famous "Lolipop" building, just 300 meters from the TV production controls for the RTVE

news programs. This “bunker” is connected by fibre with Prado del Rey and Torrespaña itself. The production staff, as well as the technicians and journalists, never enter Torrespaña in order to avoid contagion. As of today, there has been no such need, but all work teams are operational (García, 2020).

### Área 51 RTVE



Source: Own elaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout research, we have been able to learn how the pandemic has caused technological changes in TV, operated mainly by adapting existing technology to the reception of new signals. In this way, our hypothesis number one has been gaining strength. On the one hand, there has been an increase in the signals coming from video calls, mainly through Zoom and Skype, and that must be derived directly to the editorial office or to mission control. And on the other hand, the large number of images and audios sent by those affected by the coronavirus to the media themselves. These are sent via WhatsApp, and must be formatted to adapt to the 16/9 ratio (TV format) with which the networks broadcast in today. All this has led to the implementation of new systems, and an adaptation of work of various departments on which the live performance of the programs depends, such as central control (where the reception of images from outside is carried out), camera operators, post-production (image and sound retouching), production assistants or links (entrance and exit room for news images). The director has stopped handling a greater number of live connections and signals (mainly satellite), subject to a very fast and permanently changing implementation, with the added stress of their content and the context of work.

The dynamics of the film-making team and the film-maker in particular have been affected by a new way of working in their physical space, limited as they are by a separation through screens and the use of gloves and a mask. Even so, the equipment has been divided into two different controls connected by intercom (wired communication system) to avoid contagion.

With regard to the second hypothesis, all our interviewees agree that at the moment *information supersedes quality*. A low-quality image (due, on the one hand, to the video calls through Zoom and Skype; and on the other, to the huge

amount of data received mainly through WhatsApp) still has strength, as long as it is relevant. Some filmmakers like Eugenio Robles, from Canal Sur, believe that this loss of quality is a curve that started a few years ago, and does not improve the final product. Eduardo Aparici, Antonio García del Amo or Elisa García have no doubt about the contingency of quality to information at a time of health crisis. TV stations have been forced to take an accelerated expert course in connection, transformation and signal management (generated by Skype, Zoom, 4G or satellite), TV production rhythms and telework. Additional posts have been created in central control, new personnel has been enabled, new systems have been investigated to improve the quality of poor-resolution images, and new media such as the aforementioned DMNG APP are being experimented with.

Fewer staff in all pre-production areas (program preparation), including drafting, and fewer workers present during the broadcast (air out) of the program. The previously very remote possibility of teleworking has now become palpable. Some production assistants, about one third, are teleworking. Their mission is to check, compose, or adapt the images they send from the editor or from the streets before returning it in the form of queues (images with live audio of the presenter), totals (declarations) or videos (audio from the editor plus images and totals) through a remote control allowing them to manage the same program that they would in person. Therefore, our number three hypothesis is thus corroborated and becomes stronger, by foreseeing an adaptation that may have future consequences when the COVID-19 health crisis is over.

This novel situation opens a debate, a door that was closed; and it is time to ask ourselves whether the tendency to prioritise content over quality will continue, so we may witness a change in the TV production of content where everything is worthwhile. It is far from implausible that telework should be put in place as an effective way to broadcast TV in general and deal with TV production in particular, which may in turn lead to the need for some jobs; or on the contrary, to facilitate the long-awaited combination of a rich family life with a successful career in an environment where this issue had not been raised.

In José Antonio García Molina's words (TVE), "we must be alert, because a new TV is being developed that will be very much talked about" (García, 2020).

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