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JOSE CAÑAS-BAJO
University of Jyväskylä

HEIDI RINTALA
Aalto University

ILKKA MATILA
Aalto University

The Finnish film and TV industry in the COVID-19 crisis

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the challenges confronted by Finnish production companies as a consequence of the COVID-19 health crisis. We report on the decisions and strategies on the part of producers attempting to overcome the crisis and the production overcost, including shooting practices, teamwork and market relations. We collected quantitative responses to a detailed questionnaire and conducted in-depth interviews with producers to add a nuanced qualitative perspective. Despite the many uncertainties and difficulties associated with increased costs, human resources and complex shooting practices, the respondents showed flexibility in adjusting to the crisis and foresaw some positive trends for the future.

KEYWORDS

film production
Nordic cinema
production practices
closure of cinemas
uncertainty
thematic analysis

The Finnish film and television industry has faced significant challenges as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges stem from the shutdown of film production and exhibition companies, which produced a near-total paralysis of the traditional production and distribution models dominating the industry before the pandemic. In March 2020, ongoing productions stopped and when they restarted, they did so under strict regulations and safety measures. In addition, the distribution chain was interrupted because cinemas were closed from March to August 2020. As a result, production costs increased heavily, new releases were postponed or redirected to overcrowded streaming platforms and international strategies (co-productions) were costlier and difficult to implement. Overall, the health crisis caused severe economic consequences and impacted the film industry in ways that are not yet fully understood.

According to the annual report of the Finnish Film Foundation (FFF), during 2020 cinema admissions and sales dropped 54 per cent compared to 2019, and the number of new releases decreased by 35 per cent from the average year (Finnish Film Foundation 2021a: 11). In its latest report, the FFF indicates that the drop in box-office sales, admissions and releases did not recover during 2021 (Finnish Film Foundation 2022: 14). However, online platforms such as Netflix, Elisa Viihde, Telia and YLE Areena were blooming (Kohvakka and Saarenmaa 2021: n.pag.), indicating a dramatic change in the way the film industry is operating.

In this context, Finnish cultural foundations such as the FFF and Nordisk Film & TV Fund put forward funding programmes to help Finnish producers cope with the crisis. The FFF received €5 million to support the industry during the pandemic (Finnish Film Foundation 2021b: n.pag.), and some production companies also received direct financial aid from Business Finland, the state agency for business and innovation development. These measures were instant remedies to tackle an acute crisis, but they also had a substantial long-range impact on the industry that is worth investigating.

Our aim is to assess the impact of the ongoing pandemic on the Finnish film industry. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been investigated for many creative and cultural domains (see Khlystova et al. 2022 for a review), but reports on national film industries are still scarce (but see Hjort 2021, for commentary on the situation in the Nordic countries and Mikos 2020 concerning the German context). Hence, the present article contributes to filling this gap and to extending the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the film industry. By identifying the areas most affected by the crisis and the main strategies put forward to meet the many challenges during this critical period, we may be able to assess the resilience of the industry in the future and how it recovers from this unexpected crisis (see Linnenluecke 2017 for an application of resilience theory to business).

In particular, we examine the influence of the crisis from the producers' point of view. Clearly, the pandemic affected all aspects of the value chain for the film industry, including production, distribution and exhibition. However, producers were at the core of the strategic decisions needed to adapt to health regulations and the difficulties associated with distribution, and consequently their views provide invaluable information. Similarly, the focus on Finnish film companies is also relevant, since it may represent a model for other national film industries with similar features and challenges.

In the following sections, we describe the main challenges of the Finnish film industry in the global context. We discuss the results of our empirical study, based on questionnaires and interviews with Finnish producers, to analyse the challenges the industry faced. Our claim is that some of the coping strategies employed during the pandemic might facilitate the implementation of further changes in the already evolving business model of the Finnish film industry.

PREVIOUS CHALLENGES TO THE FILM INDUSTRY

During recent decades the film industry has been in a state of rapid change as a direct consequence of the disruption of digital technologies (see Atkinson 2017 for a full discussion). The digital transition is profoundly affecting the practice of filmmaking, including production and distribution strategies. Digital technologies were sometimes perceived by the film industry as threatening, not only due to continuous changes in the style of the audio-visual language but also because the influx of new streaming platforms, which allow films to be screened on different media devices (TVs, mobile phones, tablets, etc.), questioned traditional production-distribution models (Belton 2014; Salvador et al. 2019). However, digital technologies can be and sometimes are perceived as opportunities, since different media are suitable ways of experiencing films and other cultural products and might facilitate and broaden their distribution (Moreau 2013). The possibility of consumption on demand provided by streaming and the internationalization of content and services has introduced new challenges to which film companies must adapt by creating new strategies for production and distribution (Salvador et al. 2019). These new challenges have led some companies to develop strategies such as convergence, that is, the unification of audio, video and data communications into a single source, received on a single device, delivered by a single connection. Digital technologies have created profits for the studios from new markets such as video, cable, television or video games, increasing the fear that the role of traditional film practices, theatrical release and the immersion experience of viewing film on large screens in a dark, silent theatre could slowly disappear (Belton 2014). These fears combine with traditional challenges for film companies, such as the difficulty of attracting investments and finding specialized workers in a precarious, short-term employment market (Vicentini and Boccardelli 2016: 2380).

In this changing context, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic introduced new difficulties that have affected every aspect of film production and consumption worldwide, but especially national production companies that were still adjusting to the challenges brought on by digital technologies and internationalization. Thus, whereas the pandemic affected all countries and industrial sectors (see Johnson 2021 for impact on the Hollywood industry), the health crisis arrived in Finland in the context of a rapidly changing business environment that was already affecting many aspects of Finnish film production. Increased competition from streaming platforms and increased demands for digitalization and internationalization were already forcing the Finnish film industry to change its production and distribution strategies (Grundström et al. 2020). The question for the future is whether the impact of the pandemic will slow down this previous positive trend or instead bring new opportunities.

THE FINNISH FILM INDUSTRY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Reports on the state of the Scandinavian film and television industries over the last ten years have noted a steady increase in new productions, along with the growing success of Scandinavian films and TV series (Moshe and Moshe-Cohen 2023). Thus, the impact of digital technologies and their ability to connect with new international markets promoted strategies and changes that were accelerating the growth of the Scandinavian industries. This opening to international markets represented a progressive shift from a product-oriented business model where the goal was to achieve the best possible quality, maximizing the cultural and artistic value of the film, to a market-oriented model where the goal is to adapt to a more global market and to achieve maximum audience contact (Guild and Joyce 2006; Vitkauskaitė 2020).

However, this growth has been uneven across the Nordic countries, and Finland was behind its neighbours in terms of exporting films and series (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2011: 107). Finnish film started as 'an industry catering for a small population of the linguistically marginal country, and any success here may be considered minor on a global scale' (Kääpä 2012: 7). Although successive national programmes have facilitated steady growth, the Finnish film industry has been slower than other northern film industries in adjusting to the new international landscape (Grundström et al. 2020: 102). Only recently did this tendency take a positive turn (Hansen and Waade 2017), and several series from the Finnish public broadcaster YLE, including *Karppi* (*Deadwind*) (2018–present) and *Sorjonen* (*Bordertown*) (2016–20), have been distributed internationally. Moreover, platforms such as Elisa Viihde have commissioned several series with the aim of joining the 'television series boom' (Parkkinen 2019: n.pag.).

The FFF played a key role in moving the industry in these directions. Since its creation, the goal of the FFF was to promote the production of films in Finland by providing funds to Finnish producers, distributors and exhibitors. Over the years, the FFF developed strategic plans that focused on key areas for the industry: increments in the professional level of Finnish productions, distribution channels, digitalization, strengthening of the theatre network and internationalization (European funds, markets and co-productions). These strategic plans were accompanied by continuous raises in the annual production allowance to films. As more funding became available, the quality and number of films increased, and in turn, the market shares also improved for domestic films, the total number of ticket sales (see annual reports of the FFF 2010–19: n.pag.) and collaboration and co-production with streaming services and international markets. Before the pandemic, Finnish producers were still adjusting their strategies to facilitate distributing content via streaming services and directing it to wider international audiences, but such practices now became the norm.

Along these lines, Heidi Grundström et al. (2020) assessed the significant changes occurring in the Finnish film industry as an outcome of the opportunities offered by the successive strategic plans for film and by the trending Nordic noir dramas. In 2017, a public incentive programme for audio-visual production companies was launched, which introduced new financial strategies in the industry. In addition, the industry began to develop an international focus not only because Finnish companies began to attract international financing and use international distribution but also because these companies were changing their production practices to increase the quality of their films and series and to adjust to international practices to facilitate international co-productions. Thus, Finnish productions were beginning to include a larger variety of locations, international casts and new production practices. These changes introduced new issues, such as the need for a larger workforce or new requirements for very specialized professionals. Although producers were confronting important challenges, they were looking forward to the future (Grundström et al. 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to assess the situation created by the COVID-19 crisis in the context of an already changing industry. We hypothesized that some of the challenges during the pandemic and strategies for overcoming them might accelerate the already ongoing transformations of the industry. The analysis draws on both quantitative and qualitative data. To acquire an overview of the challenges, we first collected quantitative data consisting of 29 responses to a structured questionnaire sent to Finnish producers through the mailing list of the FFF and Audiovisual Producers Finland (APFI), which includes more than 200 producers from small, mid-sized and large production companies. The questionnaire encompassed 38 questions divided into six blocks: (1) the company's situation and operations before the start of the pandemic; (2) the impact of the pandemic on production processes and strategies; (3) the impact of the pandemic on distribution; (4) financing strategies and governmental support; (5) the impact of the pandemic on international co-productions; (6) the impact of the pandemic on human resource issues. The questionnaire was implemented on an online survey platform, with most of the questions taking a multiple-choice or Likert-scale format. The data were collected anonymously through the online platforms between December 2020 and February 2021.

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with producers from seven companies to expand on some of the quantitative responses provided on the questionnaires and to gain a deeper understanding of the situation. This qualitative data collection drew on the 'elite interviewing' methodological approach in which informants are treated as 'elite representatives' of the organization with knowledge that cannot be replaced by the knowledge of any other experts (see Bruun 2016). Within the media production literature, this type of informant 'occupies a senior or middle management position; has functional responsibility in an area which enjoys high status; has considerable industry experience; possesses a broad network of personal relationships; and has considerable international exposure' (Welch et al. 2002: 613).

We sent invitation e-mails to fifteen producers with long-standing careers in the film and television industry, including company owners or individuals with a long tenure in the company and high status within the industry as indicated by awards, box-office success and international exposition. Seven of them replied and participated in individual one-hour video calls conducted by two researchers that were recorded in audio and then transcribed for coding (see Table 1). These participants represented film companies that had been operating for between nine and 27 years, and all were currently active in the profession, with at least one production over the preceding three years.

The semi-structured interviews focused on three main themes: (1) the key challenges of the pandemic for the production of domestic film and drama series; (2) the key effects of these challenges on the film and television industry; (3) institutional/public/government support for the industry. Each theme contained in-detail questions about the topic. To analyse the transcripts, the

Table 1: Data structure of themes and codes.

Uncertainty			
General uncertainty and fear	36	Uncertainty: contingency plans	12
Contradictions	3	Uncertainty: international co-operations	10
Uncertainty: shooting process	18	Consequences for the future	14
Uncertainty: increasing costs	18	Optimism/luck	10
Cinema		**Production planning**	
Closure of cinemas	47	Production practices	153
Overload of films	9	Post-production	6
Audience	13	Pre-production	11
Ticket sales	14	Budgeting	49
		Scheduling	87
Non-theatrical platforms		**International operations**	
Streaming services	18	Cross-border co-operation	38
TV channels	14	International market	24
TV series	19	Professional events	38
Financing		**Human resources**	
Cash flow	17	Casting	71
Insurance	9	Employment	41
Negotiations	49	Legal responsibility	22
Public funding	22	COVID coordinator	10
		Experience	17
Content		**Content**	
Need for content	11	Content change	23
Industry situation			
Remote working	13	Domestic market	11
TV-series boom	17	Strategy	4
Market change	51	Good situation	13

three researchers familiarized themselves with the dataset and then created a preliminary coding using ATLAS.ti software.

RESULTS

Questionnaires

We collected a total of 29 responses to the questionnaire from producers included on the mailing list. Responses to the multiple-choice questions were tallied and converted into percentages representing the frequency of the response relative to the responding sample. Responses to Likert scales were averaged across respondents. As indicated, the questions were organized into topics. We describe first the numerical responses organized by topics to provide a quantitative overview. We return to these numbers when appropriate in discussing the interviews.

Questions on the filming situation and the impact of the pandemic on filming practices

More than half (59%) of the respondents reported that their companies had ongoing productions in the filming phase when the pandemic was declared; of these, 37% completely stopped their productions, although all resumed them later. Ninety per cent of the total respondents reported that they had to introduce health and safety measures that affected filming practices and teamwork. All reported that suspensions and changes in the filming process had financial implications for selling and distribution (69%), the viability of the production (72%) and the final costs (72%). Additional costs affected all aspects of production (the script, casting, teamwork, shooting, cutting and so on). However, 65% reported that the changes in production practices did not influence the artistic quality of their production. In fact, 79% mentioned that some changes in the process might be positive even after the pandemic, especially those related to teamwork (49%) and shooting locations (49%).

Questions on distribution strategies

More than half (53%) of the respondents reported that they did not change their distribution strategies or changed them only temporarily (31%). Changes in distribution strategies included postponing distribution (72%) and using streaming services (27%), with only 15% of these reporting that they will continue this strategy after the pandemic. Many of the respondents (42%) were not satisfied with their decisions regarding distribution; 25% were satisfied, while 33% did not know yet.

Questions on financial difficulties and funding

Sixty-two per cent of the respondents reported financial difficulties during the pandemic in terms of both works in progress and new productions. Ninety-two per cent reported having used subsidies from various sources. However, only 52% of producers thought that they had been helpful. They were especially satisfied with the financial help they received from Business Finland and the additional production funding from the FFF (42%), also mentioning that this form of funding might be useful in the future.

Questions on international collaborations

Sixty-one per cent of the respondents indicated that they were involved in international co-productions when the pandemic was declared. Despite the situation, 64% of them were able to continue during the pandemic, although with more difficulties than for domestic productions. Challenges for co-productions included travel restrictions (76%), teamwork (59%) and shooting locations (47%); they also reported changes to their co-production plans and postponing or changing some aspects of the production, especially location and teamwork (75%). Ninety-two per cent were planning new international co-productions in the next few months (69%) or after the pandemic had ended (27%).

Questions on human resources

Fifty per cent of the respondent reported staff shortages and having had to use safety measures that affected human resources (restricted transport and movement, reduced gatherings, substitutions and insurance to cover shooting cancellations). Responses to the questionnaire also identified the following factors as greatly impacting production; on a scale from 1 to 5, they were rated above 4: restrictions to travel that limited teamwork, changes in the composition of the teams, in the number of shooting days or the shooting schedules. In addition, they confronted telework, reductions in teams and changes in subcontractors, all rated above 3. The ability to organize, creativity and digital skills were highly valued, rated above 4 during the pandemic.

Summary of quantitative responses

Responses to the questionnaires signalled the most important concerns of Finnish producers during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, a major concern was the increment in costs due to new and safer production practices as well as the difficulties associated with human resources and mobility. In addition, they also indicate that the industry was able to survive despite difficulties thanks to the umbrella provided by public subsidies and the new production and distribution strategies developed by the producers. Postproduction techniques and streaming platforms for distribution seem to stand out as relevant strategies for resilience during the pandemic. The fact that the quantitative responses of the producers also indicated that they evaluated some of the new practices as positive and that they were planning to continue some of them in the future suggests that the pandemic might affect the film industry in more permanent way and accelerate some of the changes in the model introduced by the digital revolution. Because the questionnaires are not able to provide information about subtle and nuanced trends and changes as the pandemic evolved, we sought the following information on the qualitative responses to the in-depth interviews.

Interviews

Thematic analysis was used to examine the interview data because its flexibility allows for minimal organization of the data, while describing them in rich detail (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). We followed the six key steps of thematic analysis developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes and codes; (5) defining and naming the themes and (6) producing the report (Braun and Clarke 2006: 87). In our analyses, these steps were used in a flexible manner, moving back and forth not only within the dataset but also among analytic steps (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82–83). The preliminary number of codes was 116, and we identified nine central themes.

Figure 1 depicts the model representing the organization of the themes. Table 1 shows the codes for each of these themes and the number of verbalizations (representing their relative weights within the model). In our discussion of each theme, we summarize the main ideas arising from the interviews, select specific examples of verbalizations about the theme and seek support from the quantitative responses.

Uncertainty

The term ‘uncertainty’ appeared frequently during the interviews and was associated with many other emotions (stress, lack of control and fear). The following comment reflects these feelings:

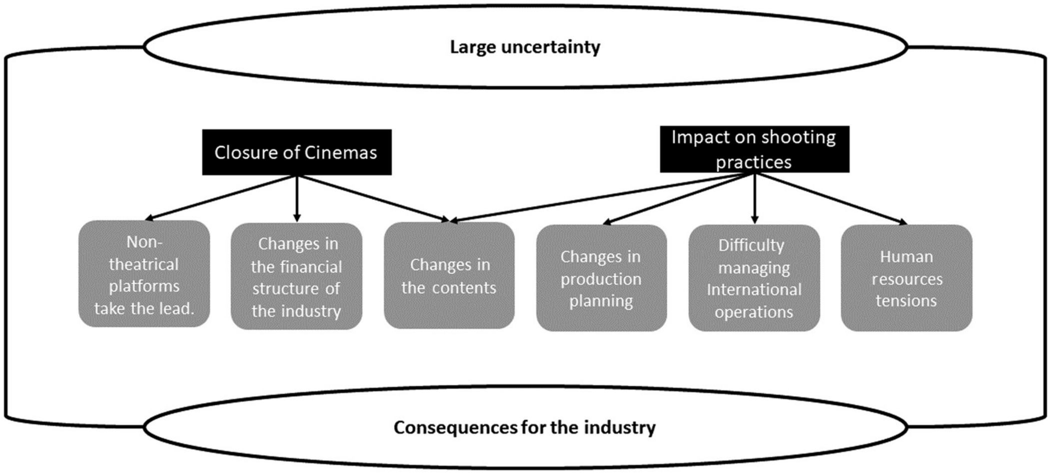

Figure 1: Representation of the situation of the film industry during the pandemic. Uncertainty represents the overall umbrella that was mainly caused by the closure of cinemas and by the continuous changes in shooting practices. The closure of the cinemas impacted the financial structure of the companies and conveyed an advantage to non-theatrical platforms and the search for new products. The second source of uncertainty was the changes in shooting practices due to safety measures that particularly affected international co-productions and human resources.

> Those who had long productions of television series or films in production at the time, they were panicking because no one knew when it would be possible to continue. Who will pay the cost, reimburse the extra costs, and so on. Now things are calmer because we have experience, and crews are getting used to working in these conditions and [with] this virus.
>
> (Aho 2021: n.pag.)

Thus, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was fear concerning the virus, but later, there was also distress regarding increments in cost and potential difficulties with the labour force and labour regulations. In agreement with the results of the questionnaires, the interviews reflected the fact that uncertainty affected all levels of the production process, including shooting plans – when to interrupt shooting or restructure the shooting conditions (rated above 4 in the questionnaire); increased costs and reduced gains (increases in costs were mentioned by 70 per cent of the respondents to the questionnaire); international cooperation (64 per cent of the questionnaire's respondents reported difficulties in continuing their collaborative work, even though they were able to complete it). Most of the interviews mentioned that the reaction to uncertainty was to create contingency plans. Uncertainty also produced many contradictions: tension between the need for content and the difficulty of creating it, as well as tensions between putting work on hold to avoid infection and the need for income.

Quite surprisingly, uncertainty was also associated with some positive comments. Some suggested that producers have been able to adapt because they are used to adjusting to unexpected events during production, and on this occasion, they had the support of the FFF in coping with extra costs. Responses to the questionnaires also supported the positive view of the respondents towards the programmes put forward by the FFF and other agencies (52 per cent found them very helpful). In this positive direction, some producers also mentioned that certain decisions regarding the filming process may have improved the final quality of the films. They also expressed their hope that the FFF's larger investment in the industry would be a long-term commitment. These positive expectations also expressed the producers' belief that the demand for cultural products during the pandemic may extend into the future:

> It may be that it's the nature of this industry or producers that we are somehow overly optimistic. We are so used to this being a battle for survival and an uncertain industry in any case that we can handle the uncertainty a little better than the average person because we are so used to it. There is that optimism. No one would make films if they were a cynic all the time because it's not worth it.
>
> (Aho 2021: n.pag.)

The closure of cinemas

Cinemas shutting down and later reopening with restrictions was mentioned as an important aspect of the pandemic that affected the entire industry. It impacted both the distribution and production processes; since distributors could not follow their distribution agendas, production was affected because companies were unable to invest in new projects. Some interviews suggested that helping distributors and cinemas to facilitate new productions has been a priority, although it was unclear whether this helped production companies. In addition to concerns about the cinema–distribution–production cycle, the interviews focused on worries associated with audience behaviour and whether viewers would return to the theatres or continue the streaming habits of the pandemic. They were also worried about possible problems with future film distribution due to the overload of to-be-released films. Many of the interviewees mentioned their concerns that distributors would prioritize international films to ensure their profits or that their own films would stay in circulation for a very short period, reducing profits. In addition, many comments expressed various impressions regarding the increase in ticket sales during the summer of 2020 and 30–50 per cent drop during the autumn, which had a huge impact on production companies.

Interestingly, these perspectives qualify some of the responses to the questionnaire regarding distribution strategies, where many producers (53%) reported that they did not change their strategies but were not satisfied with their decisions (42%) or unsure about them (33%). Clearly, they worried about the unpredictability of audience behaviour and the distributors' strategies for the future, which introduced dissatisfaction and uncertainty about their own strategies.

Advantages of non-theatrical platforms

Many of the interviewees signalled that the closure of cinemas during the pandemic conveyed an advantage to non-theatrical platforms associated with a large increase in TV viewers (see Kohvakka and Saarenmaa 2021).

The consequence was that platforms and TV have opened a new market in which TV series play a large role and platform fees substitute for theatrical ticket sales. In addition, during the pandemic, platforms began releasing some films directly on their services, replacing the role of cinemas in the distribution cycle. The following comment reflects the interviewees' concerns about distribution and releases in national and international markets:

> When will normality come back? Will it come back for the entire world? How are international sales going to develop? It has been very quiet on that front when talking about the theatrical window. Other [release] windows have functioned more normally, not totally normal, but more normal.
>
> (Bardy 2021: n.pag.)

While this tendency has also benefitted producers because they were able to release some of their films and produce new series, some comments cast doubt on whether Finnish companies would take advantage of this new market in the long term, because platforms usually prefer international content. Responses to questionnaires also reflected these doubts, since more producers reported postponing new releases (72 per cent) than releasing new films on streaming platforms (23 per cent). Despite this, in the interviews, some producers mentioned that the interest of the public broadcaster YLE in supporting and producing TV series during the pandemic was having a positive influence on Finnish film productions.

In addition, the platforms have changed the negotiating position of producers because the ability to attract subscribers and advertisers is now an important factor in the negotiation. This ability is very uncertain because it depends on the ever-changing situation of the economy. The growth of TV and platforms also influenced the workforce, with the shortage of personnel being perceived as more related to an increase in the volume of TV series production than to the pandemic (see Grundström et al. 2020). Concern about the dearth of skilled workers was also reflected in the questionnaire, where 50 per cent of the producers reported a shortage of qualified human resources.

Consequences for the financial structure of the industry

In agreement with the quantitative responses, where 62 per cent reported financial difficulties, the interviewees cited problems with the cash flow of their companies as an important negative consequence of the pandemic, mainly due to the closure of theatres, the cancellation and postponement of film releases, the increase in shooting costs and the difficulties faced by advertisers in financing ads. This decrease in cash flow heightened the risk of investing in new productions and incurring long-term debts. Hence, confirmation of funding and approval for new projects were among the most significant concerns for the companies. According to the interviews, negotiations with financiers became more difficult for reasons that included the cancellation of festivals, which made it harder to reach potential financiers, and the cautious attitude of financiers because the revenue from cinemas was very uncertain. Furthermore, reaching international financiers and producers was challenging, making it difficult to continue with international co-productions, and insurance companies did not cover costs such as substitutions or interruptions caused by the pandemic.

There were nevertheless some positive reactions that helped the producers continue their ongoing projects and start new ones. For example, some mentioned that during the pandemic financers were flexible about negotiating minimum guarantees and delivery dates, and even invested more money in ongoing projects: 'Negotiations with main financiers feel more important now than before. I mean discussion regarding practical arrangements to keep people, the different stakeholders informed' (Aho 2021: n.pag.). 'In Finland, domestic financing hasn't been affected that badly, but financiers have been willing to support and [show] understanding towards this situation' (Hentula 2021: n.pag.).

In addition, platforms that were already investing helped to keep projects alive, and public funding was positively mentioned as providing new funds to distributors, cinemas and producers. Ninety-two per cent of the respondents to the questionnaire also reported having used subsidies. Many interview comments referred to the need to support Finnish films and culture and the fact that the FFF and the public broadcaster YLE understood this: both were including more Finnish productions in their programming: 'FFF understands that they should support [a] few projects that are more Finnish, using Finnish public money and knowing that the money will remain in Finland' (Aho 2021: n.pag.).

Responses to the questionnaire also reflected that producers (42 per cent) thought that subsidies should be maintained after the pandemic. Some comments mentioned that the industry was organizing online events to substitute for festivals and marketing. The following comments illustrate the last point:

> In the production of television series, there is this reinvention of international practices through remote working, which is one of the things that has changed. This will probably also ease things in the future because we've now noticed that we don't need to attend all market festivals.
>
> (Lassila 2021: n.pag.)

> In the sense that people have flown over to financing meetings in Germany or somewhere for a single meeting, it feels absurd now. You can have that meeting on Zoom. If you are meeting up with a financier or pitching projects, you can do it right here.
>
> (Hentula 2021: n.pag.)

Impact on production and shooting practices

The COVID-19 crisis also affected normal production practices: content had to be rethought to comply with safety measures, production planning was continuously revised, international operations were cancelled or rescheduled and new problems with the workforce emerged. In line with the quantitative responses, the interviewees also reflected the impact of the pandemic on all these dimensions, as explained below.

Changes in content due to restrictions and safety measures

Safety measures affected the content in different ways depending on whether the film or series was already in production or in preproduction:

> This break gave us a little bit more time to rewrite some scenes. We also had to make these little changes to the story, in the sense that big crowd scenes were removed from the script. We made them work, but the resulting scenes were a lot smaller in terms of extras.
>
> (Lyytikäinen 2021: n.pag.)

Thus, the films and series already in production underwent alterations. Intimate sequences and sex scenes were modified to maintain distance between actors, sometimes requiring script changes. Although producers attempted to retain the original content and keep changes to a minimum, there were several exceptions in which the script was completely rewritten. Interestingly, however, quantitative responses to the questionnaire indicated that most producers (65 per cent) agreed that changes in production practices did not affect the artistic quality of their production (79 per cent).

Changes in production planning

Many of the interviewees' responses referred to the need to make structural changes in shooting practices. Some activities, such as scriptwriting and meetings between director and editor in different countries, took place online. The interviewees foresaw that some but not all the activities would remain online in the future. Whereas communication with team members in different countries is facilitated by online meetings, creative activities, such as scriptwriting or meetings between heads of departments, were less productive online than when conducted face to face. Postproduction strategies were also developed, using new technologies to resolve issues such as crowd scenes or difficult scenarios. Overall, producers were satisfied with postproduction strategies, and they mentioned that some may remain in the future. Other adjustments included placing COVID coordinators in charge of safety measures and hiring new personnel to substitute for people in quarantine, although changing actors was difficult. Changes in the shooting plan were also needed with regard to facilities, transport, the number of assistants and arrangements to separate the cast from other crew members by changing schedules, shortening shooting times and using open spaces. Planning – preparing for substitutes and replacements, long-range planning, rewriting scenes and so on – was done on a daily basis:

> We had to rethink the planning at the beginning of the pandemic; there were alternative plans prepared for any possible situation. The main thing was to have substitutes; […] then changes in transport, different pauses and catering spaces, and changes in the shooting plan, using greenscreen instead of extras.
>
> (Lassila 2021: n.pag.)

The fact that restrictions changed unpredictably over time also forced producers to restructure shooting plans, especially when dealing with foreign actors or preparing for international scenarios affected by differing national travel restrictions. Scheduling was an important job during the pandemic; despite difficulties, many of the interviewees mentioned becoming experts in the process and finding flexible planning easy and efficient after the initial period. Many responses mentioned that interruptions and cancellations at the beginning of the pandemic were the most challenging for producers. Deciding on interruptions was costly and introduced many uncertainties regarding the viability of the production or the availability of programmed content on TV and platforms. Hence, producers attempted to avoid interruptions whenever possible, but they experienced a trade-off between 'looking good' to the public and reducing tensions with workers by emphasizing health measures, as compared to the cost of reducing the viability of their productions. Producers confronted this tension by developing strategies and plans to ensure that work was safe: 'Much caution was used when shooting to follow all the safety measures' (Jaari 2021: n.pag.); 'The number of shooting days increased due to the safety measures' (Helle 2021: n.pag.). Overall, then, numerous comments highlighted the many details in production planning that had to be introduced to adjust to safety measures and comply with restrictions.

Challenges for international operations

Before the pandemic, international co-productions were increasing, due in part to tax incentives offered by the Finnish government. However, during the pandemic, as reflected in the questionnaires, all international productions faced more challenges than domestic productions. Restrictions not only complicated travel arrangements for foreign crews and casts but also affected shooting in countries with difficult pandemic conditions. Some problems were solved through postproduction techniques, but this was not always possible. Moreover, international negotiations for funding were challenging when performed online, since getting in contact with new people and arranging meetings was difficult. This led to tensions because many productions involved international financing. Some of the comments questioned the co-production model for the future:

> The pandemic led to a situation where European countries turn inwards, or at least Western European countries, and international co-productions will be reduced. […] There is this sentiment from the Finnish Film Foundation that they should now invest more money into all-Finnish productions because it would be the safer option […]. If this becomes a long-term tendency, then it would have a significant impact on our company. We would then have to consider what type of films we would make.
>
> (Aho 2021: n.pag.)

Another producer commented in the same vein:

> International co-productions are difficult during the pandemic. I know that post-production in co-productions has gone reasonably well because it doesn't matter if people are in the same country or in the same city. […] Co-productions have become difficult, and I assume that many projects may have had to cancel parts of the co-production. We are less international.
>
> (Bardy 2021: n.pag.)

These last comments clearly reflect the negative view of the producers about co-productions and the many difficulties associated with international operations during the pandemic. Interestingly, they project this negative view into the future.

Challenges for human resources

Many of the interviewee responses referred to various problems associated with the cast and crew. Maintaining distance between actors was not always possible while shooting certain scenes. The cast and producers took extra care and attempted to keep the risk to a minimum because cast substitutions would sometimes mean changes to the script or re-shooting with new actors. There was also a great deal of concern regarding employment and employees, although the situation of the crew changed over the course of the pandemic. Initially, workers feared infection, which led to many preferring to pause work. Companies interrupted shooting with concerns about keeping workers on the payroll, along with many doubts about the legality of some of the decisions made while COVID-19 legislation was being developed. When shooting began again, safety protocols made every process more taxing for the workers, which introduced new tensions. New workers were employed to substitute for those in quarantine, but this was difficult because it was not possible to hire foreign workers and all the companies competed for the same domestic workforce. The interviewees mentioned the producers' dilemma concerning whether to hire freelancers when needed or have more people on the regular crew. The last solution was preferred because there was a need for continuity, cohesion and solidarity; however, having more people on the payroll made it more difficult to implement some of the safety measures and keep costs reasonable.

In addition, producers were concerned about the shortage of specialized technicians and creatives in the country, and they called for education programmes to attract and enrol skilled people in the industry. Many comments were related to legislation and legal responsibilities. The producers felt that government decisions put all the pressure and moral responsibility on the companies' owners. PALTA (the Finnish Service Sector Employers) helped with legal issues; however, the constant temporary changes in legislation made the decision process difficult and very stressful. Negotiations with workers were sometimes strained. Many producers reported that the new position of COVID coordinator was created mainly to solve problems with human resources. Despite all these challenges, many interviewees mentioned the word 'experience' in a positive way, as experience facilitated contingency plans and made producers more flexible.

Current situation of the industry

Many comments espoused the producers' predictions for the state of the industry after the pandemic, mentioning several key factors. First, they reflected that overall, changes in the market produced by the pandemic were just an escalation of changes that were already occurring. The increment in TV series production was already underway, but the pandemic enhanced this tendency. The producers predicted that preferences for streaming services over cinemas might remain and that this could change the strategies for production and distribution. They also foresaw changes in the economic model, predicting a transition from public funding to private financiers (large streaming platforms), which might reduce the producers' control over the artistic and legal aspects of the content:

> If everything goes to streaming services or television and nowhere else, it will change the producer's position. It would change the producer's

> earning possibilities in the aftermarket. It would make producers more subordinate to the stakeholders commissioning the work. […] In that case, as the person gathering the financing, especially when a large part of it is public funding, the producer holds the power regarding decision-making in many cases since they are the person who has organized the financing. Also, the financiers are not as demanding, but if everything goes to the side of streaming platforms, where two or three stakeholders invest the big money, then it may be that the small producers' and production companies' position changes. We will become so-called subcontractors or middle-men.
>
> (Aho 2021: n.pag.)

Regarding their economic situation, the interviewees predicted that the consequences of the pandemic will persist into the future because production overcosts will have to be paid from the profits of future projects. The interviewees also expressed some uncertainty regarding the role of distributors in film funding. They have previously helped finance film production by paying in advance for theatrical release, but it is not clear whether this will continue in the future.

Furthermore, the answers from the producers reflected some tensions between domestic and international markets. The producers expected the market to become more domestic and have a stronger focus on domestic content, since some international productions were transformed into domestic ones during the pandemic. However, one interesting turn produced by streaming services and their continuous need for content is the opening of the international market to content not originating in Hollywood, which is boosting production from smaller countries. This tension between domestic productions and the international market is represented by the following two comments:

> The [international] market has opened and grown in a way that enables us to make sensible, interesting content in Finnish that sells internationally, and it's a profitable business. It's probably one thing that will benefit us in the long run.
>
> (Lassila 2021: n.pag.)

> The [film] industry has suffered a year or maybe more of a major lack of workers due to the growing business of television series. Film production has remained the same, but television has grown and the budgets have grown. And it's due to Elisa Viihde [the leading Finnish streaming service] entering the market. […] It's too early to evaluate which consequences will remain permanent.
>
> (Bardy 2021: n.pag.)

Finally, remote work affected various aspects of the industry as negotiating new productions, production meetings and scriptwriting were largely conducted online. Although some activities, such as negotiating new productions and other business meetings, might remain online in the future because they worked efficiently at lower cost, the producers foresee that creative work will return to pre-pandemic in-person activities. It is striking that despite all the problems and challenges the industry must confront, the interviewees expressed a positive view of the industry and its future. The opening of new markets and the solid situation of the industry before the pandemic have reduced the impact of the crisis.

CONCLUSIONS: INTO THE FUTURE

In this article, we have analysed the producers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Finnish film industry as well as how they adjusted to the changes necessitated by the health crisis. The analysis of the questionnaires and interviews was based on the situation of the film industry before the crisis and the changes it was experiencing as a consequence of the success of Nordic TV series and the increase in platform and streaming services, which were changing production and distribution strategies. Crucially, the questionnaires and interviews conducted before (Grundström et al. 2020) and during the pandemic highlighted several recurrent themes.

Prior to the health crisis, platforms and streaming services were a recurrent topic of discussion amongst producers for several reasons (Grundström et al. 2020). They were changing the financial structure of the companies (private funding vs. public support); producing new content (increments in TV series); consolidating new distribution strategies (international platform vs. distribution companies for brick and mortar cinemas); establishing international cooperation in the form of co-productions (see Mikos 2020 for a similar view of the German film industry during the pandemic). The pandemic and the closure of cinemas accelerated some of these changes, with increases in the market share of platforms and streaming services as more viewers used these services.

Perhaps surprisingly, the pandemic did not change the positive viewpoint of the producers, who continue to foresee the potential benefits of changes in production and distribution models, with more content being produced, more sources of funding for their products and more opportunities to reach international markets. They shared similar concerns about a shortage of specialized workers due to increments in content (and the difficulties of bringing in international specialists), as well as more complex negotiation processes with private international platforms. Hence, like other creative industries, the Finnish film industry has been able to adjust rapidly and develop new strategies that are resilient in a crisis (see Eggers 2020; Ivanov 2020).

Despite this positive view, the future also appears uncertain and open to new operating models. The pandemic changed many production practices: online production meetings and online scriptwriting, tighter teams during productions, fewer locations and more reliance on postproduction practices. Would these changes remain in place after the pandemic? In a recent interview for *Screen Daily*, the Polish director and honorary president of the Federation of European Screen Directors (FERA), Agnieszka Holland, predicted that many of these changes would remain because they decrease costs, reduce travel and the carbon footprint of films and have demonstrated their positive effect during the pandemic (Holland 2020: n.pag.). However, our interviewees were not completely satisfied with online meetings or the use of remote postproduction practices. Hence, this is something to monitor in the future.

More importantly, this uncertainty extends to viewer behaviour and the future of co-productions. Will viewers return to cinemas once they fully open? This question cannot be answered yet, but the outcome will have a critical impact on the fate of cinemas and the future of production and distribution companies. Furthermore, whereas producers predict that platforms will open Finnish film production to international markets, they have many doubts regarding international co-productions. Most of the interviewees reported difficulties implementing co-productions during the pandemic, and they were cautious regarding future co-production practices. However, before and after the pandemic, the European Union was striving to achieve a European film industry, and many European policies and funding programmes encourage European co-productions. Thus, it will also be important to monitor which of these two forces, domestic or international, will be stronger in the future. The answer will also likely depend on the tension between public and private funding, as well as whether these funding sources will be devoted to different types of content (art and domestic films relying on public funding and series depending on private money).

In sum, although there remain many uncertainties for the future and the questionnaires and interviews reflected the many difficulties that Finnish producers confronted during the pandemic, they also showcase the producers' strengths in adjusting and finding new strategies for survival. Overall, the producers were satisfied with the success of their contingency plans and with the flexibility and experience achieved during the pandemic. That they, by and large, have successfully overcome these challenges may ease the way for producers as they consider the future.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jose Cañas-Bajo is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He holds a Ph.D. in cognitive science from the same university, with a dissertation entitled 'Audience experience of commercial videos and feature length films: Are they universal or culturally mediated?'.

Contact: jose.j.canas@jyu.fi

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7498-997X

Heidi Rintala, formerly Grundström, is a doctoral candidate at Aalto University, Finland. She is currently working on her dissertation, 'New cinemas and changing audiences in Finland: Understanding the role of new technology in the encounters of audiences and films'.

Contact: heidi.rintala@aalto.fi

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2813-7477

llkka Matila is a doctoral candidate at Aalto University, Finland. He is also a producer and one of the founders of MRP Matila Röhr Productions. He has had an extensive career in feature film production and has recently been involved in producing high-end drama series.

Contact: Ilkka.matila@matilarohr.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7180-3378