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PERSPECTIVE

Staying creative

By Wa'qaar A Mirza 24-09-2020

The Safi Ideas and Safi Productions CEO on how Covid-19 is pushing the limits of filmmaking and creativity after shooting a travel show pilot in Romania.

Many people have now adapted to their new way of working, whether they're still in the comfort of their own home or slowly heading back to the office. For many, it's starting to feel like life is making a slow return to normal, or a new normal at least.

But for those who work in creative environments, where working remotely, independently or socially distanced is incredibly difficult – like me, a filmmaker – work and life are far from normal in current times.

I recently travelled to Romania to film a pilot episode of a new travel show that explores the food, culture, history and folklore of less frequently travelled countries, giving the teen audience an insight into places that are often subject to prejudice. This trip demonstrated how much the pandemic has challenged not just filmmaking but creativity too.

Covid-19 crushes filmmaking as we know it

As a filmmaker, you have to be used to adapting. We regularly deal with unforeseen circumstances and last-minute changes in weather, location or technology that cause us to reassess how we film and change our methods. However, new coronavirus rules and regulations have taken this to a new level. There's more unpredictability, more to do and more at stake.



Safi Productions used handheld cameras to film a pilot in Romania

The six days of filming in Romania, and the experience as a whole, were very challenging, mentally, physically and financially. Rules from local authorities were constantly changing and certain areas were being put under local quarantine, causing us to forgo carefully created plans and think on our feet.

Our days were up to 16 hours long to fit everything in, travelling over 100 miles to new locations every day. We lost pre-booked talent and interviewees due to them being uncomfortable with the risk of coming to the city, which forced us to book new talent at a higher price. Under local rules, we were unable to set up tripods in the city and were not allowed to gather in groups of more than four.

This meant we had to film incredibly quickly to stop interested members of the public gathering around us. As such, we filmed on a steady cam, carrying the camera, which added to the physical strain. We worked incredibly quickly to reduce the number of people seeing us filming, spending only 10 minutes getting shots that would usually take half an hour to set up. And if crowds did start to gather, we had to stop production and move location or explore new alternatives with smaller cameras, which limited the types of shots available.

Unfortunately, compromising on the footage we wanted was a regular occurrence. We were often unable to enter planned indoor locations, so we adapted and thought creatively to get drone footage instead. In addition, social distancing resulted in our presenter being unable to fully immerse herself in activities with local people, so she instead watched others.

Of course, these sacrifices were made in accordance with our most important priority: the safety of the local crew and contributors. Masks were worn all day and replaced every three hours. All crew had their temperature recorded in the morning and evening and were provided with personal hand sanitiser, which was used after touching any object. A bottle lasted just one day.



Mirza's company had to adapt to new restrictions as they came into force

Only hotels with outdoor restaurants were used and we had a bus big enough for double the number of crew to allow for distanced seating when on the move. Despite these measures being essential to reduce risk of Covid-19 infection, they were unhelpful for filming. In filmmaking, we are constantly communicating to work as a team; wearing a mask made this harder, and there's no denying these measures dampened creativity at first.

We certainly came away without everything we initially wanted, but we adapted, worked hard and thought creatively to get a better end-product than we could have imagined. Working with restrictions in time, people and locations made us think in an innovative way, which resulted in us creating a far more imaginative and creative show.

Romania deserves better, honest representations

Romania is underestimated. It's modern, stunningly beautiful, and the people are the most hospitable I've ever met. Even during the pandemic, we were welcomed into people's houses to film, and they were meticulously clean. Every person we met went out of their way to help us. Romania may be a poor country but it's rich in culture, history and kindness.

In countries such as the UK, we have a poor perception of Romania due to how little we know about the country. Few people visit from the UK; the only representation we see is a negative one in the press and we hear the racism towards the Roma community (also known as Gypsies, considered a derogatory name by many), which make up around 5% of Romania's population and are one of the most stigmatised minorities in Europe. This is why we need shows for the younger generation that explore historical sites, local food and the social impact of negatively perceived countries.

Advice for filmmakers in the Covid era

Filming in a pandemic will cost 20% more and take a third more time than it did pre-coronavirus. Adhering to Covid-19 procedures and local rules makes filming a long and costly process. You have to allow room in the budget and spare time for when plans unravel, or you need to brainstorm a new course of action. But this project has confirmed to me the resilience of those in the creative industry. By embracing change and innovative thinking, there's no reason you can't create a masterpiece.

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TODAY'S CORRESPONDENT

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Wa'qaar A Mirza has been in the business and marketing sector for over 40 years, having worked in the corporate sector with companies such as PwC and BT, where he held several senior marketing positions. He then moved to HSBC group financial services in new product development.

He has developed various business of his own and has consulted across the world on business development. He is also a published writer, working on his second novel, a documentary filmmaker and directs the kids' animated series Zayn & Zayna's Little Farm.

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