

Mip TV: Mediapro Makes First International TV Co-Production Moves (EXCLUSIVE)

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Producing the Sky, HBO, Canal Plus series ‘The Young Pope,’ Spanish mega-indie preps international TV slate

MADRID – Sporting 30 offices in 20 countries, and already Spain’s biggest rights broker and a high-profile movie producer, Mediapro (<https://variety.com/t/mediapro/>), one of Spain’s biggest heavyweight TV-film congloms, is making its first moves into high-end international TV co-production as, like other big ambitious companies in Europe – think Lagardere, or even Spain’s Telefonica – it zeroes in on high-end contents as a major growth driver.

Content represents “the major bet of the company for the next five years, where it aims to grow most,” said Javier Mendez (<https://variety.com/t/javier-mendez/>), head of content at Mediapro, which also owns top Spain-based TV-film sales house Imagina (<https://variety.com/t/imagina/>) Intl. Sales (IIS).

In early moves, Mediapro – which is headed by Jaume Roures and Taxto Benet and best-known as the co-producer of Woody Allen’s “Vicky Cristina Barcelona,” “You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger” and “Midnight in Paris” and as a long-term partner with Al Jazeera’s beIN Sports in and outside Spain – has boarded Sky Italia series “The Young Pope” (<https://variety.com/t/the-young-pope/>),” Starring Jude Law, it has illustrious co-production partners: Sky, HBO and Canal Plus, while now exec produced by Italy’s Wildside, France’s Haut et Court TV and Mediapro. It was described to *Variety* by Sky Italia chief of content Andrea Scrosati as “one of the biggest investments – probably the biggest ever – for an Italian-originated show.”

Driving into Spanish IP brands, Mediapro has also optioned Spaniard Santiago Posteguillo’s three historical novels about prodigious Roman general Scipio Africanus who, born in Rome c. 236 BC, drove Hannibal’s forces out of Spain, then raised an army with little help and conquered the Carthage leader against all odds in North Africa. Never losing a battle, he fell victim to intrigue in Rome and may have taken his own life.

Mediapro is also producing for Spanish broadcast network Atresmedia an unnamed contempo comedy series, helmed by Daniel Sanchez Arevalo (“DarkBlueAlmostBlack”), one of the best-known of Spanish directors who broke through mid-last decade. It has multiple other TV drama projects in various stages of development.

Mediapro bought up longtime partner Globomedia in September 2015. With tentacles also expanding to TV services, such as the live events transmission and studios, as well as marketing, Mediapro, with partners Televisa, ad media giant WPP and investor Torreal, also holds a 7% stake in Spanish broadcast giant Atresmedia Group. Their joint conglom, in which Mediapro holds a controlling 48% shareholding, posted revenues of €1.509 billion (\$1.69 billion) in 2015, per company sources.

Currently being penned by Miguel Barros (“Blackthorn,” “Nobody Wants the Night”), with a pilot ranging from Rome to Spain, Sicily to Namibia and Carthage, “Africanus” is the big noisy creatively ambitious event series that would really put Mediapro on the international TV production map.

In further moves, Mediapro has tapped Beatriz Setuain, former Boomerang sales boss, as head of sales, U.S. and Europe, who reports to Laura Miñarro (<https://variety.com/t/laura-minarro/>), IIS director from December. Mediapro also aims to open an office in Mexico, said Mendez.

Mediapro’s new big TV production gameplan comes at a propitious time. As all over the world, Netflix and local SVOD plays are shaking up the market, forcing local players to raise their game. Launching in October 2015 in Spain, Netflix, to date more an outlet than drama commissioner, looks poised to announce its first Spanish TV drama (following its efforts in Latin America, where it has made original series “Narcos,” in English and “Club de cuervos” in Spanish and plans to produce this year Kate del Castillo-starrer “La Ingobernable” in Spanish, plus Brazil’ “3%” in Portuguese).

HBO CEO Richard Plepler announced January that HBO would bow a standalone streaming service in Spain by the end of this year. Telefonica’s Movistar Plus, Spain’s big local VOD service with 3.67 million subs as of year-end 2015, is driving into local commissions, announcing period procedural “La Peste,” set in a new Wild West 16th century Seville, galvanized by the discovery of the New World. Movistar Plus announced this January it will produce eight to 10 series a year beginning in 2017.

“Everybody’s talking to Netflix, with Televisa’s Blim, Telefonica’s Movistar Plus. There’s a change in what the market’s demanding,” Mendez enthused. When it comes to international productions, anything Mediapro does has to sit alongside such series plus the likes of HBO and Netflix.

High-end international TV production may also allow Mediapro to meet one of the biggest challenges for the indie TV production sector in Spain: accruing asset value.

In Spain, broadcasters traditionally foot the bill for TV productions and retain all rights, factoring in a 15%-of-budget profit payment to producers. That prevents production houses from building catalogs of own rights.

As a large independent, Mediapro's aim, in contrast, is to "deficit finance, an avenue we're exploring in order to retain rights and own our own destiny," Mendez said.

Mediapro's content drive will play out across its offices, spread over four continents, Mendez said: Some companies outside Spain — in Colombia, Miami, Argentina — already produce content. But "the objective is for contents to gain a larger presence in the activities of these companies."

Beyond Woody Allen, Roman Polanski ("Carnage") and Oliver Stone (docu-feature "Comandante," on Fidel Castro), Mediapro has produced multiple movies by Spain's own Isabel Coixet ("The Secret Life of Words," "Nobody Wants the Night") and Fernando Leon de Aranoa ("A Perfect Day," "Mondays in the Sunday."

"With contents, quality allows you to stand out from competition. We would like to extend our talent-driven cinema model to TV and entertainment, working with the best talent," Mendez said.

Driving into high-end TV production, Mediapro rolls off several competitive advantages. One is its talent pool, though unschooled in big international TV productions.

"We already have a large talent factory, thanks to companies such as K2000, Globomedia, Media 3.14 and so on," said Mendez.

Another is Imagina International Sales, which gives Mediapro a larger flexibility when boarding projects, and could allow it to bring both co-production coin and international distribution to the table.

Produced by Globomedia and sold by IIS, dance-academy set "One Step Forward" sold to 60 countries; reversioned family dramedy "The Serranos" proved the best-rating fiction series of the year in Italy.

To date, however, IIS has largely repped shows basically made for Spain, said Laura Miñarro, IIS director. Going forward, it will become “the international arm of Mediapro, repping sales on its international series, plus national series with overseas potential, also becoming our eyes and ears for detecting projects and possible partners,” said Mendez.

Per Miñarro, IIS will also drive more forcefully into third-party contents. “We’re especially looking for premium content that sits well with our catalog, whether U.K. fiction, or from Latin America.”

Based out of Spain, moreover, Mediapro can look two ways, to both Europe and Latin America.

On some projects, Latin America will be the primary market, Spain secondary. “The good thing about Latin America is that they are much more open to developing business models that are not so strict or inflexible as Spain,” Mendez said.

“With our seven soundstages in Miami, where we’re now doing things, or Televideo in Colombia, together with our companies in Argentina, we can cover the whole Latin American market, start from there to produce projects which can be distributed worldwide,” Mendez said.

Miñarro added: “TV operators in Latin America, even free-to-air TV are increasingly demanding with the types of stories they tell, the form they give to them.”

Mediapro has already shown its muscle in soccer, launching beIN Sports, a Spanish soccer-and-more sports channel, on past July 1. In December, it successfully bid \$2.1 billion for Spanish rights to a block of eight matches per matchday of Spain’s LaLiga TV rights from 2016-17 to 2018-19. It now wants to make good on the same ambition in big international TV production.