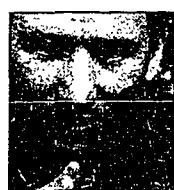


How to become a video activist



Thomas Harding, veteran campaigner, presents a 10-point guide to using your camcorder for political ends

A new breed of social organiser has proliferated in the past decade to affect social change: the video activist. In the hands of a video activist, a camcorder can deter police violence. An edit suite can set the political agenda. A video projector can generate mass awareness.

Video's most direct social consequence is Rodney King's police beating in 1992. Footage taken from a nearby block of flats sparked off riots in the streets, was broadcast around the world and was subsequently used to prosecute the Los Angeles police officers involved.

This type of "witness video" is only the tip of the iceberg. Video activism encompasses a broad grouping of individuals whose tactics vary enormously.

Video equipment was first used in the 1960s by anti-Vietnam war and civil rights campaigners. The past decade has seen an explosion in the use of video for political change. This has been the result of three factors. First, high-quality, low-cost and easy-to-use equipment has become widely available. There are now 15 million video cameras in use in the US and 23 million in Europe — one in seven households in the UK has access to a camcorder. Second, there has been a new wave of grassroots, video-friendly, colourful, "in your face" activism, particularly in the UK. And third, because the mainstream media has covered only the most sensational of these movements, people have been spurred to take up their own camcorders.

I first experienced the power of the camcorder in August 1994, while working at the alternative video organisation Undercurrents. Some 50 housing protesters had gathered inside the police station in Oxford city centre to complain about the arrest of some colleagues earlier that day. The police evicted them, at one stage letting a fire extinguisher off in their faces. After a while the protesters began

to drift off, but not quickly enough for the police, who lined up and baton-charged them up in the main street. Eight people were arrested for "affray".

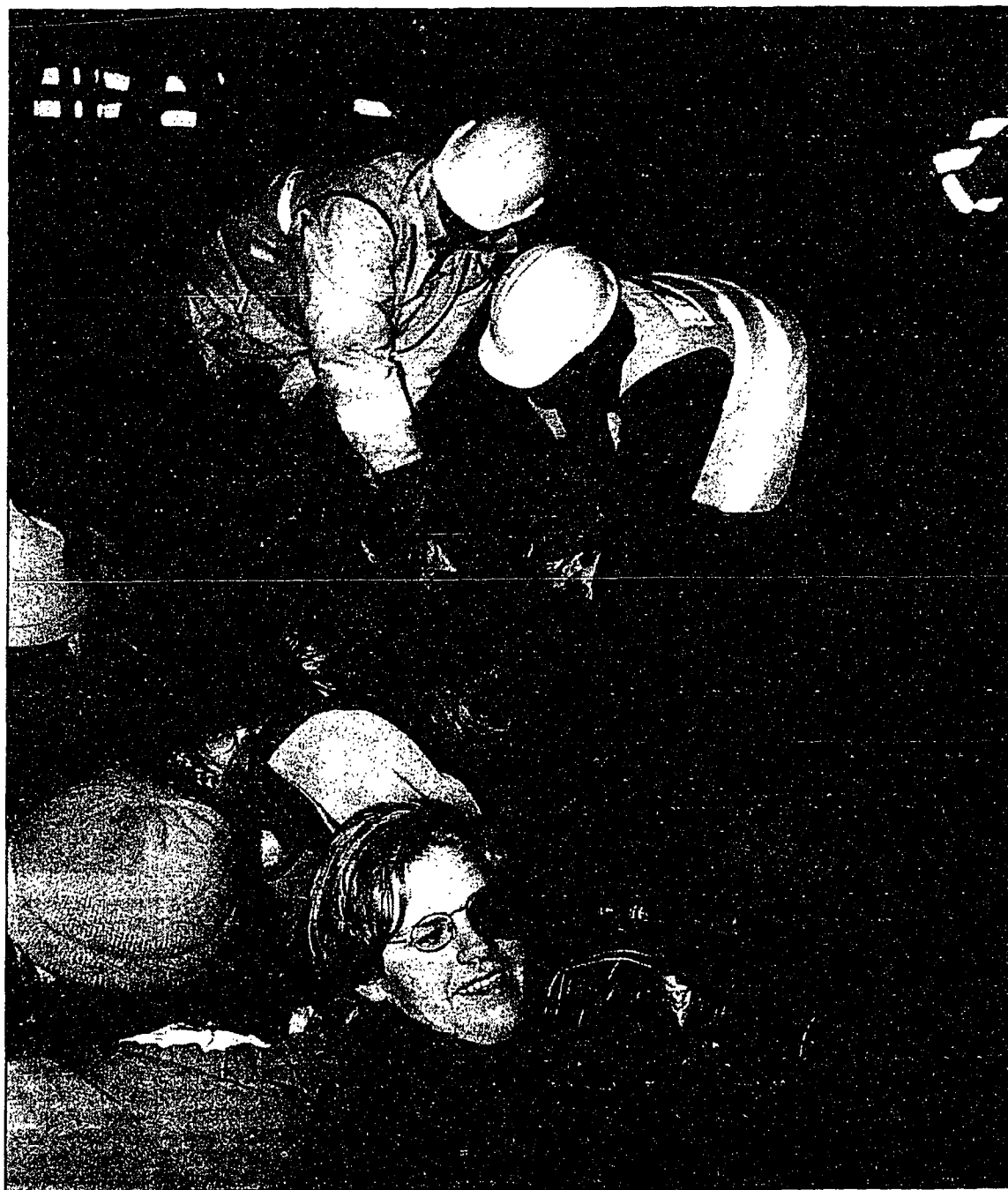
I was lucky enough to capture the entire episode on camcorder. I immediately rang up local TV stations to see if they would be interested in the footage. Both BBC Newsroom South East and Central News took it. The first reports on the news the next morning went something like: "Four policemen were hurt today when a housing protest went out of control in Oxford city centre..." An hour later the newsdesk line had changed completely — apparently, it had taken them this long to see my footage. Now it went: "Two protesters were injured last night when police baton-charged..."

The city council ordered an official investigation. The image of the police recklessly letting off the fire extinguisher in the faces of the activists clearly made an impression. The footage was then used in court six months later. It showed that at least three of the defendants weren't in the places the police claimed them to be. The eight accused were acquitted. Their legal team said that the video evidence played a substantial part in swaying the case.

The event convinced me that a video camera can have an enormous impact on a local campaign. Since then, Undercurrents has worked with hundreds of activists in the UK and around the world. Here are 10 tricks taken from our experience:

● **Agree the purpose of your video with the activists.** Video activism involves working with groups with real problems who need support for a specific reason. It is best to have a complete production and distribution strategy agreed before you begin.

● **Never turn up to video an action or event without having talked to the group beforehand.** They will probably think you are



Life in the fast lane? An activist records 'security' in action at the Newbury bypass protest

PAUL O'CONNOR

the police and, at best, ignore you, at worst, hurl abuse at you.

● **Don't get obsessed with the quality of your video kit.**

It's far more important that you are out and about than at home scanning the latest Camcorder User magazine for the latest Sony Digi-cam. Do worry about sound quality, though. It is best to use an external microphone for doing interviews and recording background noise.

● **Don't try to be Quentin Tarantino.** Avoid using zooms, pans and digital effects. Try to give the video editor as many choices of shot as possible. Write down the purpose of the day's shoot and list the essential shots that you must cover.

● **Use your camcorder to calm situations in which people are being threatened by violence.** It also helps to have a friend who can mind your back, and point out shots you are missing.

● **Gather evidence of some wrongdoing and use it to prosecute the perpetrator.**

Ensure the video is relevant to the case and establish a chain of people who have handled the tape to guarantee it has not been tampered with. Video is a double-edged sword: don't record anything that might incriminate those you are working with.

● **Win a wide audience for your footage by selling it to TV news.**

Broadcasters are increasingly willing to take footage (especially Hi8 and Digital). Call local and national stations and agree a deal (you should get at least £100 for local news, £200 for national). You are never going to make a living doing this type of work, but the money should cover tape and repair costs.

● **Make your own campaign video to raise awareness of a local issue.** Find a cheap edit suite in a nearby college. Ensure that you involve

the campaign group in the editing so that they feel they have ownership over it and become committed to using it in their campaign work.

● **Distribute the video yourself.** You can organise screenings using a video projector (hire cost around £50 a day), set up a mail-order video magazine and build up a subscription base, or include video clips in your web video catalogue.

● **Train others to become activists.** It takes less than 10 minutes to show someone how to use a camcorder, an hour to operate it well, a day to use it as a political tool. The camcorder is one of the most democratising inventions of the 20th century. Viva las camcordistas!

The Video Activist Handbook by Thomas Harding is published this week by Pluto Press, price: £11.99 pb, ISBN 07453-11695. For more information about video activism contact undercurrents on 01865-203661 or visit www.undercurrents.org.