

The revolution will not be televised

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Matthew Grainger mourns the passing of the last truly independent TV company

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This," says Undercurrents co-director and producer Paul O'Connor, "is the first time I've had to do this." He pauses, then types "The End" on the last frame of Undercurrents' 10th — and final — video about activism. And thus ends a footnote to recent British social history. O'Connor, who has been with what Time Out called "the Pathé News of the 90s" since its beginning in 1994, looks at the words and says: "It feels a bit weird."

Undercurrents is — was — a journalistic phenomenon; it reported on stories largely ignored by the mainstream. "From the time people first saw images of protesters being cut from concrete bunkers on the M11, they couldn't believe it," says co-director Thomas Harding. "We still get the same reaction: 'Why didn't I get to see this on TV?'" Fed up with television that trivialises, misrepresents or ignores the protest movement, Harding, Jamie

Hartzell, Zoe Broughton and O'Connor formed Undercurrents in 1994 to "demystify activism". The timing — the era of the rave and John Major — was perfect; people felt they had a lot to shout about. The video sold out in weeks and suddenly camcorders were *de rigueur* on the activism front line.

"The roads campaign, for instance, wouldn't have taken off as fast as it did without mass screenings of Undercurrents," says co-producer Jason Torrance.

Social protest and Undercurrents fed off each other. The videos were confrontational and "not legally obliged to be balanced", says Harding. "In fact in terms of our audience they were obliged to be unbalanced."

People either loved or hated Undercurrents' subversiveness. It was "an attempt to undermine and provoke authority," said Margaret

Thatcher's former press secretary, Sir Bernard Ingham.

In 1995 Hartzell left Undercurrents to form the Ethical Property Company. It moved from London to Oxford and continued to produce news video, winning 20 international awards and triggering video activism in Europe, Australia and beyond. Its archive is the most comprehensive study of the 90s British protest phenomenon, with the possible exception of Scotland Yard's.

"They were fantastic," says comedian Mark Thomas, whose Channel 4 show comes nearest to Undercurrents' two-fingered salutes to the establishment. Writer John Pilger says Undercurrents was vital because "in an age of media conformity, we need to hear more dissenting voices"; to BBC Wildlife magazine it was "compulsory viewing for anyone who writes off

the grassroots as a bunch of anarcho drop-outs".

Undercurrents ran on goodwill, which, in the end, proved unsustainable. The videos could neither be sold in the high street without costly marketing nor, with rare exceptions, to mainstream TV. Charity funders were wary of such a politically charged medium. "[It] was frustrating at first," says O'Connor. "Though it did give us free rein."

Four full-time staff "worked our arses off to get people on board but it didn't happen," says O'Connor. "The people who could [have taken over] left for Channel 4, or India, or Africa. That's great. But where can you find someone with humour, activism and broadcast ability who can commit to 12-hour days 10 months a year and survive on £8,000?"

Last month co-producer Roddy Mansfield decided, after seven

Bleak view . . . Death (as in these skulls of Rwandans massacred in 1994) and starvation are images all too often associated with Africa
 PHOTOGRAPHS: PETER ANDREWS, AFP

people's politics but their minds as well. Whereas even in the most poverty-stricken and politically oppressed corner of Africa, there is an irrepressible vein of hope and humour that bubbles to the surface. Perhaps this is what Ben Okri had in mind in his poem *An African Elegy*: "We are the miracles that God made/To taste the bitter fruit of time/We are precious/And one day our suffering/Will turn into the wonders of the earth."

It is a noble sentiment but not one you will easily glean from my reporting. There has been too much of Africans as victims and not enough showing their daily triumphs against impossible odds. I could console myself with the thought that such is the nature of my work, the currency of news, but the problem is more complex than that.

The success of television news is that it has tapped into British people's sympathy for those less fortunate than themselves. You have only to look at the money that has poured into aid agency coffers after coverage of humanitarian disasters such as Ethiopia in 1984, Somalia in 1992 and Sudan last year. But sympathy is not the same as understanding; indeed, the one may cloud the other.

To get people in British living rooms to identify with the frazzled aid worker as she tries to cope with a humanitarian disaster is easy. To get people to see that the crisis is part of the convulsive process of post-colonial political realignment is more difficult. If Africa's problem is political instability we have been much better at showing its effects than its causes.

It's not for want of trying. There are times when the power of our medium to captivate an audience can itself complicate the task at hand. Take the Sudan famine last year. My editor sent me there with two goals: to help the audience to decide whether what was happening was a genuine emergency (at the time there was heated debate about this) and, if the answer to that was yes, to try to work out how things had got that bad.

I filed two stories for the Nine O'Clock News. The first, from the tiny town of Tonj, described a situa-

tion that was dire even by southern Sudan's standards. I like to think that the pictures we showed of people dying of hunger did not exploit them. The second and, in journalistic terms, more challenging piece was an attempt to give context to the first. There were several interviews in this dispatch which were important from an investigative point of view but



People remember feeling sorry for the Sudanese (above) but few recall how they reached that state

pretty low on the Richter scale of televisual images. Both pieces were given over three minutes' airtime, which is to TV news what Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is to the novel.

Ask anyone in our newsroom which piece they remember and they will tell you it was the first, with its harrowing pictures of a famine at work. The letters I received from viewers confirmed this. Most people

remember feeling sorry for the poor souls of southern Sudan but not many can recall being told how the people there had reached that sorry state.

Which brings me back to my lecture tomorrow. I am the last person to deride the emotional response that viewers had to some of my reports, but the danger of feeling sorry for someone is that it can be a somewhat ephemeral reaction. It lasts only until some other tragedy eclipses it.

The Kosovo crisis is a case in point. The British public has reacted to the appeal with its customary generosity. But listen to their reasons. Many say it's because it's happening in Europe. They identify with the Kosovans. Indeed, politicians have used the "our backyard" argument to justify their unprecedented bombing of Serbia.

Is this what it boils down to — proximity as a guiding principle to our reaction to crises abroad? If so, where does that leave other vulnerable people across the world? The fact is that it will always be easier to feel sorry for people close to home.

Surely the reason we need to take action on behalf of the people of Kosovo and Sudan is that, in both cases, human rights are being trampled. In Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic has presided over the systematic hounding of ethnic Albanians, while in Sudan various factions have fought a war in which civilians have often been the targets.

The defence of human rights is a principle. It is an absolute. People can rally round it; countries can go to war over it. On the other hand, feeling sympathy for someone is merely a state of mind. It is a fickle condition.

Africa matters because its leaders say they respect human rights and ought to be held accountable to their words. To do anything less would be at best patronising and at worst racist. To ignore Africa's self-inflicted pain would be to share Speke's despicable portrayal of the continent as a place where one can only expect the worst from a venal people.

The challenge for those who take my place on the Africa beat is not so much to make people care about Africa, but to make them care about it for the right reasons. It is a challenge I will hold them to.

George Alagiah begins presenting BBC news bulletins later this month. Tickets are available at £10 on the door for "Why Africa Matters" at 7pm tomorrow at the RGS, 1 Kensington Gore, London SW1. Proceeds to VSO.

arrests and "five great years", that it was time to leave. He is going to the new £700,000 Oxford TV channel, run by Harding and his wife. The non-profit Undercurrents Foundation will continue video-activist training and Joanna Huddart will manage the archives and marketing. Torrance is thinking about a touring roadshow, perhaps with a compilation of the "Best of Undercurrents".

There is a feeling among activists and media commentators that British television has lost — for now at least — its only alternative free of the influence of shareholders and advertisers. "It's a crying shame," says Natalie Fenton, lecturer in communication at Loughborough University. "Undercurrents responded in ways the TV corporations couldn't because of pressure to maintain profit."

Not everyone is upset. "It's a blessing to society," says Ingham. "I'm surprised they're not all in prison."

In its new form, Undercurrents plans to help regional groups make their own radical videos. Spin-offs are already setting up countrywide.

O'Connor, meanwhile, adds the final touches to Undercurrents 10: naked protesters cavorting in the City; Liverpool miners repaying solidarity to Kosovans who months before had given up a day's pay for them; hunt sab veteran Simon Wild of Bognor singing opera to a furious master of the hunt. There's a genetic food update, continuing a story the mainstream media could have picked up from Undercurrents years before now. O'Connor types "The End". And, in the following frames, "of", "the" and "beginning".

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Up in arms . . . a video activist is carried away by police