

less and less likely to be heard. At the same time new technology is giving activists communication opportunities never available before.

Second, I wanted to show how anyone can learn how to operate a camcorder successfully. All that you need to become a true video activist is the necessary equipment, practice to develop the required skills, and, perhaps most importantly, inspiration.

Third, I wanted to explain why I've written this book. When I started to use video for change, I had to learn everything by trial and error. I couldn't find a book that provided the tips I needed for my activist work. There were plenty of guides telling me how to get the white balance right and how to make a wedding video, but none on how to become a video activist. With this book I hope to fill that gap.

The aim of *The Video Activist Handbook* is to show people working on environmental and social justice issues how they can use video in their day-to-day efforts. The book assumes no prior knowledge in using video. It is structured so that beginners can learn basic skills and ideas, while offering people with some previous experience suggestions on more sophisticated video strategies. This book will help you, whether you just want to video the occasional community event or need to document a long-running protest campaign, whether you intend to sell footage to television news or are planning to screen a campaign video at a rave.

Good luck and happy videoing!

Thomas Harding
January 1997

What is Video Activism?

'We can become more possible than they can powerfully imagine.'
(Jim Chambers, No M11 Link Road campaign)

Over the past ten years, we have seen the proliferation of a new breed of social organiser: the *video activist*. The term 'video activist' means different things to different people, but in this book it is used to mean a person who uses video as a tactical tool to bring about social justice and environmental protection.

In the hands of a video activist, a camcorder becomes a powerful political instrument that can deter police violence. An edit suite becomes a means for setting a political agenda. A video projector becomes a mechanism for generating mass awareness.

Perhaps the best known example of video having a direct social consequence is the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992 (see Chapter 5, p. 65). Footage of the beating taken by a person who happened to be standing on the balcony of a nearby block of flats at the time sparked off riots in the streets, was broadcast around the world and was subsequently used to prosecute the Los Angeles police officers involved. People suddenly realised the power of the camcorder.

This type of 'witness video' is only the tip of the iceberg. Video activism encompasses a broad grouping of individuals. The people involved, the methods used and the energy committed all vary enormously – ranging from the local resident who occasionally uses her cousin's camcorder to record community meetings, to the full-time campaigner who tries to sell footage of every protest to local television, to the overseas aid worker who includes footage of a refugee camp with his monthly report, to the lawyer who uses video evidence to help her

client get off false charges. Despite such variations, video activists are united by purpose and practice. They all realise the power of the visual image and make use of this power to bring about change in their communities.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO ACTIVISM

There's nothing as good as a success story to inspire people into action. Equally important, perhaps, is that people like to feel that they are part of a tradition. It adds validity to their work and gives confidence in tricky situations. What follows, therefore, is a bit of historical background to video activism.

Even at the beginning of cinema, film-makers were using cameras to capture the world around them and effect change by showing their completed films to audiences. The first films ever made, by Louis Lumière in 1895/96, were documentary in form. People jumped back in shock when they saw the 'Arrival of a Train', and were amazed when they witnessed 'Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory'.

In the 1920s, Russian film-makers developed the documentary as a means of raising awareness. Dziga Vertov, who was editor of the newsreel *Film Weekly*, sent camera operators to the far corners of his country to catalogue people struggling through civil war, famine and rapid social change. He then distributed the newsreel as widely as possible, through 'agit-trains', 'agit-boats' and town screenings.

In the UK, in the 1920s and 1930s, the GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit, led by John Grierson, focused on documenting everyday reality. The rawness of such footage became a political force. For instance, their film *Housing Problems* – which focused on the need to demolish and replace derelict slums – featured slum residents speaking for themselves, in their own kitchens, rather than 'voice of god' narration. This had a huge impact on the attitudes of the audience and contributed to a change in the government's housing policy.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Hollywood exerted a monopoly control over cinema distribution. This reduced the opportunities for dissident voices to be heard. The political significance of this reached its peak in 1931, when Fox Corporation issued a statement that none of its cinemas would be allowed to show newsreels of a controversial nature. In reaction to this, labour groups set up their own screenings – Workers Film and Photo Leagues. They soon began generating

their own material and exchanging films. Out of this network developed a whole generation of advocate film-makers.

Around this time, an important debate developed among social theorists as to whether film had a negative or positive impact on social change. At the centre of the debate were Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, both from the German Frankfurt School. Benjamin argued that film could be used to educate and mobilise the masses, and was therefore a tool for social change. Adorno argued that it was indeed a powerful tool, but that it could be used by anyone, not just leftwing activists, and probably more effectively by those already in power since they had more resources. He claimed that it was therefore a double-edged sword. He also said that the best use of film would be to show alternative realities rather than blunt social realism, as Picasso did with painting. This would prompt people to be critical of their lives. Benjamin called Adorno an elitist and said he missed the point. This debate has continued to run through film and video history ever since.

Returning to the history of using film for political purposes, during the Second World War both Allied and Axis powers used film to arouse passions and patriotism. For example, the Germans produced a *Weekly Review*, with stirring music, emotional narration and highly charged footage. But film was also used to catalogue human rights abuses. Footage shot by Yugoslav and Polish partisans documenting concentration-camp atrocities was used as evidence in war-crimes trials. Similarly, American and British troops found Nazi 'home movies' – for instance, a vicious pogrom against the Jews in 1941 Stuttgart – which were later used at the Nuremberg trials.

It was in the 1960s that film became a popular tool for grassroots organising. Using the newly available light 16mm cameras, film-makers worked to reduce the technical baggage between them and their subject, so that the 'truth' would emerge more easily. One example of this type of work was '*cinéma vérité*', where film-makers provoked people into action (for example, by asking people walking on Parisian boulevards: 'Tell us – are you happy?') rather than simply observing them. Another powerful example took place in Canada, when the National Film Board trained and equipped Mohawk Indians. The Mohawk crew filmed a protest about the free passage of goods between Canada and the United States. They recorded the confrontation between police and native Americans, including the arrest of some of the leaders of the protest. The footage was then edited into the film *You are on Indian Land*. This film was a huge success with audiences,

won a hearing for the native Americans in Ottawa, and brought a new unity to the people.

By the 1970s, documentary work for social change was dramatically boosted by the arrival of video cameras. The new cameras – in particular the Portapak and U-Matics – were small, easy to use and relatively cheap. Unlike film, video tape could be re-used and the cameras needed only one person to operate them. A new breed of 'guerrilla' video-makers, at first in the United States and then elsewhere in the world, began to appear on the streets. They recorded Vietnam protests, civil rights marches, environmental disputes and women's rights rallies. Groups like New York's Downtown Community Television Center gave free training to local citizens. In its first seven years the centre instructed over 7,000 people, in English, Spanish and Chinese.

THE CAMCORDER REVOLUTION

So much for history. What about today? Video activism truly came into its own in the 1980s and 1990s when there was an explosion in the use of video to bring about political change across the world.

In Brazil, unions set up screens in town squares and show the latest 'alternative' news from around the country. In Denmark, anarchists run a weekly cable show giving voice to the 'underground' scene. In the Czech Republic, anti-mining campaigners video their actions and then make campaign videos out of the footage. In Tibet, dissidents capture Chinese exploitation of their land and smuggle the tapes out of the country. In Kenya, human rights groups record evidence of torture on video and give the tapes to forensic scientists for further examination. In the UK, anti-road activists video police evicting them from tree-houses and sell the footage to television news.

It could be argued that the apparent explosion in the use of video over the past two decades is illusory – people are doing what they always have done – and that it seems new to me because I am a newcomer to the activity myself. This may be true, and I acknowledge that writers tend to claim that things are 'new' because they want to be seen as sailing in uncharted waters. Nevertheless, I do believe that there has been a fresh development in the use of video over the last few years: a dramatic increase in the number of people involved in video activism.

This sudden rise in video activism is a result of a number of factors: (a) a new wave of activism; (b) the failure of the mainstream media to adequately cover social and environment justice movements; (c) improvements and availability of video equipment.

New wave of activism

Over the last 15 years, the number, diversity and vigour of popular movements has increased around the world. From the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe, to the gay and lesbian rallies in San Francisco, to peasant farmers demonstrating against the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in India, large numbers of people have been involved in bringing about change, and wherever there's been an action, a video activist is likely to have been near by.

Such actions have tended to be different in character than in earlier years. Whereas labour and national independence struggles have continued undiminished in some countries, in many places the activist momentum has moved to more single-issue campaigning. A good example of this is the UK (see the table below), where campaigns on the environment, animal welfare and human rights have become increasingly vigorous and – perhaps as important for this book – visual. Large numbers of small group actions, such as banner-drops, lock-ons and office occupations, are increasingly replacing small numbers of large group rallies and marches. This trend towards more decentralised but colourful organising has encouraged the growth of video activism.

Membership of UK civil organisations

Amnesty Intl.	40,000 (1987)	127,000 (1995)
Friends of the Earth	75,000 (1988)	200,000 (1995)
Greenpeace	80,000 (1987)	420,000 (1995)
National Trust	1,000,000 (1980)	2,200,000 (1995)
Trade Unions	13,000,000 (1979)	7,000,000 (1995)

Sources: *Deficit in Civil Society*, Foundation of Civil Society, Birmingham, 1996; Amnesty International British Section.

Behind these popular movements lies an increasing awareness of global crisis. A whole generation of people grew up in the knowledge that the very existence of the planet was under threat by nuclear

weapons. Now there is an added threat, global warming. Many people, when asked to explain their decision to get involved in video activism, say that they felt it was the best way of dealing with the problems facing the world.

Anyone reading this book will almost certainly be aware of the problems they are talking about. Nevertheless, it is always worth reminding ourselves of the trouble we're in, and it is important to think of the people behind each statistic (the following data originates from various UN sources and is collected in Worldwatch Institute's *Vital Signs*, 1995 and 1996):

- As a result of global warming, the ten hottest years on record have all occurred since 1980.
- There were over 27 million refugees in the world in 1995.
- There were almost three times as many wars in 1994 as at any time in the 1950s, and twice as many as in the 1960s.
- There are still over 40,000 nuclear warheads in the world.
- The world lost 8 per cent of its tropical forests, which provide habitats for 50 to 90 per cent of the world's species, during the 1980s.
- Over 100 million people living today have no shelter whatsoever.
- In 1960 the richest 20 per cent in the world received 30 times more income than the poorest 20 per cent. By 1991, this group received 61 times more money.
- In 1995, women held only 10 per cent of seats in national parliaments, just 3.5 per cent of world cabinet ministers were women, and women held no ministerial positions in 93 countries.
- Studies suggest that between one in five and one in seven women in the United States are victim to a completed rape during their lifetime.

Such trends may well get worse in the near future. And in response there will be a greater and greater need for popular action, and a mirrored need for video activist support.

Failure of mass media

The second main cause of the growth of video activism has been the failure of the mainstream media to cover adequately the global crisis

we're experiencing and the mass movements that have emerged in response to this crisis.

Why are the mainstream media – in particular, television – important to all this? The reason, of course, is that the mainstream media play such a crucial role in modern societies in helping people form opinions and, as a result, make decisions.

In 1990 a Mori survey found that television and newspapers are more significant than friends, family, politicians and other sources of information when it comes to influencing opinion, and that television journalism, in particular, is the main source of people's information about the world (McNair 1996). According to research carried out by Barrie Gunter, 'Around two-thirds of the mass public of modern industrialised societies claim that television is their main source of national and international news' (quoted in McNair 1996).

During the 1960s and 1970s, it was relatively easy to get local and national television in the UK to cover a group's activity or issue. All you had to do was issue a news release, run a press conference, drop a banner, and television coverage would be assured. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, this changed radically. Broadcasters increasingly cut down on their coverage of 'progressive' issues. This may have been because they had become anxious about being seen as impartial and unbiased. Or it may have been because they had grown more conservative under the force of the rampant commercialisation that had swept through the industry.

When we think about the 1960s, we tend to have images of protests, anti-war demonstrations and civil disobedience. Though we do see some similar images today, their scale and prominence is far less now than it was then yet, in my experience, and according to many who have lived through both periods, activism and counterculture are thriving today, perhaps more than ever. This is echoed by Richard Neville – founder of 1960s underground magazine *Oz* – in his autobiography *Hippy, Hippy, Shake* when he visits an activist free festival/rave in Byron Bay, New South Wales: 'At this nineties knees-up for eco-dreamers, bodies are bared and tribally painted, dolphin charms play around suntanned necks, eyebrows and navels are pierced and decorated with amulet ... "it's happening all over again" says another knarled veteran of the sixties "with bells on".' The only explanation is that television covers non-mainstream politics more rarely and more superficially now than it used to.

A group of environment and development organisations in the UK – including Oxfam, Christian Aid, Friends of the Earth and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) – became so worried by this situation that they decided to do carry out some research to see how coverage of their issues was changing over time. Their Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project on UK television (*What in the World is Going On?* 1995) found that:

- two-thirds of all news reports about the developing world focus on just three countries;
- reports from the developing world account for just under 10 per cent of all broadcast news;
- conflicts, disasters and politics account for 90 per cent of all news and currents affairs reports from developing countries;
- documentary output on international topics had fallen by 40 per cent across all four UK channels between 1990 and 1994.

At the same time, there have been specific trends relevant to each issue. This has made it very difficult for groups to win airtime if their issue isn't 'sexy'. For instance, in many countries, pictures of starving African babies were seen as a crowd puller in the mid-1980s, but a few years later television executives decided that viewers were bored of such images and were suffering from 'fatigue'. Similarly, during the 'green boom' in the late 1980s, environmental concerns were all the rage, entire programmes were dedicated to these issues, environmental journalists were appointed for the first time, and awards specific to environmental programmes were set up. By the early 1990s, most of this had gone. Fashions came and went: AIDS, homelessness, Eastern European orphans, land mines ... What next?

As an example, here is a situation I experienced personally. In 1995, I tried to make a news feature for Channel 4 News about the 3 million Kurdish refugees who had been forced out of their villages and had their homes burned by the Turkish army. The then foreign editor said 'I am not interested in Turkey, I want African stories.' That was that. If I wanted to get a story on the UK's leading news programme it had to be from Africa.

Whatever the reasons for the changes in the broadcast industry, over the past decade many activists have decided that television has not sufficiently covered their campaigns. At the same time these activists discovered non-broadcast uses for video – such as educational

features and gathering evidence on wrongdoers for use in court – which television could never be expected to fulfil but which were nevertheless important. There was a vacuum that needed to be filled. Hence the emergence of the video activist.

New technology

Perhaps the biggest reason of all for the rise in video activism has been the vastly increased availability of cheap, high-quality video equipment. True, portable video equipment was around in the 1960s and 1970s – and was used by social change groups to great effect – but it was not until the emergence of the 8mm and SVHS camcorders of the mid-1980s that video activism began truly to proliferate.

What was different about these cameras was that they were much smaller, easier to use, cheaper and of better quality than earlier models. They also had better features – like 'steady-shot', instant playback, long-life batteries and swift autofocus. Perhaps even more importantly, the big corporations that had developed the new technology decided to sell it to a mass domestic market and therefore made it widely available.

You could now go into a shop in Bradford, Brisbane or Birmingham, Alabama, hand over the equivalent of \$1,000, and have yourself an almost broadcast-quality camcorder kit. According to BREEMA (British Radio and Electronic Equipment Manufacturers Association), by 1992 there were over 3 million camcorders in British homes (one in seven households), 6 million in Germany and 15 million in the United States. And contrary to some expectations, people were using these camcorders on a regular basis. In a 1995 survey by consultants GfK of 10,000 UK households, it was found that 35 per cent of people use their camcorder at least once a month, 36 per cent two or three times a year, and 27 per cent use it on special occasions.

Next came huge improvements in editing equipment. Cheap, easy-to-use VHS domestic edit suites replaced the more expensive industry-standard U-Matic suites. Then came the personal computer edit suites, nicknamed 'video toasters' after a particular brand of suite, which were not only cheap but gave the added facilities of digital effects and titling.

Finally, new distribution opportunities became available. Microwave technology helped Kurdish rebels to broadcast their own videos in Northern Iraq. Public access cable networks enabled gay and lesbian

groups to syndicate their shows nationally in the United States. Tenants of housing estates in France ran weekly screenings to each other using the new cheap, single-beam video projectors. Environmental activists in Australia designed Web pages to carry video images of their latest pro-cycling protests.

Camcorder ownership in Western Europe

Year	Sales (millions)	In use (millions)	Homes (millions)	Penetration (%)	Obsolete (millions)
1990	2.8	7.9	145	5	0.04
1992	3.7	14.9	148	10	0.2
1994	2.5	19.4	149	13	0.7
1996	2.7	21.7	151	14	1.6
1998	3.5	23.7	154	15	2.5
2000	3.4	25.2	156	17	3.0

Source: GIGA Information, supplied by Sony Marketing UK.

Of course, there are further possibilities to come. In the future, social and environmental movements will have even more tools to use in their efforts to bring about change in their communities. For now though, I shall stick with what is being used by video activists today. This book is about how you can use such technologies. You may choose to roam through its pages, finding the sections that interest you. I strongly recommend, however, that you read Chapter 2, 'Strategy', before going any further. In my experience, strategy is the one area where video activists are most lacking in knowledge and skills. Without strategy you will have no impact. And if you want to be a video activist you must, if nothing else, have an impact.

How I became a video activist

by Roddy Mansfield

I'd always had an interest in journalism, yet it wasn't until I purchased my first camcorder that I realised I could contribute to the mainstream and alternative media.

In February 1994, after working as a shop assistant at Boots for six years, I saw a Channel 4 documentary on fox-hunting and



Photo 1.1 Roddy Mansfield at the No M11 Link Road campaign site, London (photo: Nick Cobbing)

badger-baiting, which had been videoed with a camcorder. The scenes of purposeless cruelty I witnessed left me in no doubt as to the impact a camcorder could have when placed in sensitive situations. The footage was instrumental in making me question society's attitude towards animals, and within a few months I had purchased a camcorder and was videoing fox hunts with my local hunt saboteur group. The number of camcorders now carried by both hunt saboteur and League Against Cruel Sports members has led to a decrease in the level of violence offered by both terrier-men and hunt-supporters.

By 1994, I regularly travelled across London to Wanstead to video the actions that were taking place as part of the No M1 Link Road Campaign (Photo 1.1). After a while the campaign began to receive increased media attention, mainly as a result of activists sending footage into local TV news stations.

One incident I won't forget was seeing a line of police officers burst out laughing upon realising that a very distressed protester had lost his flute, which was probably the only source of income he had. As soon as I pointed my camera in their direction and they realised that they were being videoed they suddenly decided it wasn't so funny after all.

As the Criminal Justice bill loomed over the horizon, it became apparent that a whole section of society, whole cultures even, would be criminalised and those of us in the protest 'n' party movement, of which I was now a part, would be turned into outlaws. Yet the silence from the mainstream media was deafening. It was then that I heard about the non-profit alternative news video **undercurrents**, which was put together by activists with their own camcorders. I was soon contributing footage of demos, actions, marches, hunts and the police. I even took my camcorder for a wander around the Houses of Parliament!

It was not until the summer of 1995, however, that I began to notice a gradual shift in the attitudes of the police towards camcorder activists. You are now threatened with arrest for obstruction and officers deliberately try to block your view when an arrest is being made. On 7 July 1995, I travelled to the Marsh Estate in Luton where I heard that young Asians were rioting about police violence. At two o'clock in the morning I was out on the streets when I noticed riot police taunting the youths. 'Can't you throw better than that?' they yelled, and 'Let's have some more petrol bombs!' I couldn't believe it. They were actually encouraging the youths to riot! I started

recording, but then the policemen saw, and three of them ran at me. 'I am a journalist!' I shouted, and showed them my ID card. They ignored me and began hitting me with their truncheons and shields. They then took my camcorder, smashed it and stole the tape. I picked myself up and spent the next hour taking down the police officers' numbers to identify them later, and finding witnesses. I also found a documentary crew and asked them to document my injuries and record my testimony. A few weeks later I lodged an official complaint, and won Legal Aid to take the police to court for damages.

Some people express concern that an army of activists wielding camcorders increases society's 'Big Brother' factor. Yet if you attend any action today, whether it be a tree-sitting at Newbury, stopping live exports or sabotaging a hunt, you'll be videoed by the police, private security guards and detective agencies working for the government, all of whom are compiling secret files on us. That's spying on people. Yet when I see a security guard assault someone, or a police officer use unreasonable force, or a fox being torn apart, or a 400-year-old tree being destroyed, I'll be the first one to video it. That's not spying on people; that's justice!

Now, six years after leaving the shop assistant job, I work as a freelancer doing undercover video work for broadcast television, and I am out on the streets working with activists to get their issues to a wider audience.