

Might not main

For those who feel ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream media, the solution may be to play them at their own game. **Tim Malyon** reports on two groups leading the way

On 5 August 1994, ITN ran a feature on Dame Barbara Cartland's royal dress sense. Arrayed in shocking pink and looking like a predatory chicken, she describes telephoning Prince Charles to tick him off about his untidy suit. "I know him quite well, you see," clucked the make-up encrusted old matron. ITN chose this "story" over a mine explosion killing 73 and injuring 99 in China; the Red Army causing £1.5 billion environmental damage in Poland; 13 prisoners hammering nails into their heads to escape hard labour in a Romanian jail; and the first heart transplant in India. This example of mainstream media news values is featured in the latest edition of *Undercurrents*, 112 minutes of riveting video, which runs some of the stories we should have seen, mainly focused, in this case, on squatters, travellers, road protests and the dance culture.

"If what you see on TV were fair, there'd be no need for *Undercurrents*," says Paul O'Connor, a former freelance sports photographer turned member of Small World Media, which produces *Undercurrents*. "But there's a phenomenal interest in it, because people know the institutional media is biased, obsessed with Westminster and totally out of touch." Before *Undercurrents*, O'Connor was involved in the protests against the M11 extension in east London. "We used to go on actions in the early days. Then we'd rush back, see the news, and feel so deflated. Either they missed the story completely, or they missed the point. It was really frustrating. So then we wanted to get our own stuff on TV."

O'Connor was already using a video camcorder at M11 protests, "mainly to stop the security guards' violence and defend court cases. Then Jamie came down. We just sat down and said, let's try to do something with this video footage." Jamie is Jamie Hartzell, co-founder of Small World Media, a film production company specialising in environmental and political features. Small World still produces films for organisations like World Wide Fund for Nature and the Channel 4 Independent Film Unit, which bring in commercial money. But now the six collective members, all paid £160 per week, devote much of their energy to *Undercurrents*.

Two editions have been produced so far. Number one's coverage of the M11



protests carried off first prize at Germany's Okomedia film festival. And Small World also sells footage to commercial TV stations. "They won't take footage from a protester. We're unashamedly biased, but because we're a production company, we can get away with it." It was *Undercurrents* that filmed the action at the House of Commons when protesters against the Criminal Justice Act climbed up on the roof. "That went right across the world. We're linked into the movement, so people trust us and tell us in advance about actions." All the TV material is shot on Hi8 cameras. The *Undercurrents* video sometimes uses

VHS or Video 8, which are not broadcast quality, when Hi8 is not available.

"We had a policy at the start of not charging TV companies," explains O'Connor. "But they didn't take us seriously. They lost tapes and sat on stories. The first time we charged them, they took us seriously. They looked at the tape, explained the background, and they cut the story with our help. Before, they'd take the tape and write their own story. Now we are influencing the story."

Undercurrents influences in more ways than one. On 20 July 1994, Jacob Secker was charged with assault on a police officer, PC Moore from the Metropolitan

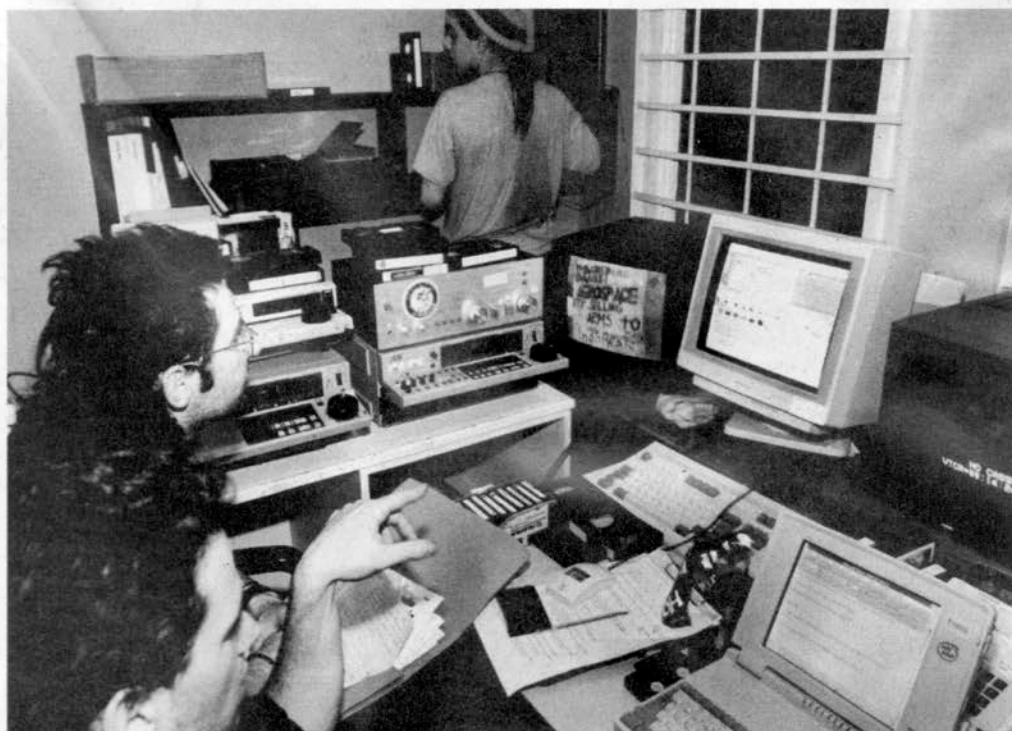
Police Tactical Support Group, after an anti-Criminal Justice Bill demonstration outside Hackney Town Hall. When the case came to court the crown withdrew the charge after footage filmed by *Undercurrents* and Haggerston Film Co-op showed Moore punch Secker in the body. Now *Undercurrents* is coordinating a camcorder action network.

O'Conner gives an example: "Last week, a group of travellers were being evicted. The coppers were getting really heavy. In ten minutes, we got someone with a camcorder down there. It turned out the cops had no right to evict, so when the camera arrived, they backed off." Travellers are a big concern, probably the most vulnerable, isolated of groups under threat from the new legislation. "To get involved in covering travellers means a lot of time on the road. You have to build up a trust. You don't want to go down and spend two days on a site. You want someone who lives on a site. So rather than us going out and looking for stories, we want to help people make their own stories." The problem is cameras. *Undercurrents* only has four, so can rarely lend them.

Undercurrents One and Two both make riveting viewing. The second came out last December. You don't often see a construction site security guard headbutting a peaceful protester on the small screen in front of three witnesses and a police officer refusing to arrest him. "I think direct action by environmental groups doesn't really fit into the media," Alex Kirby from BBC Radio Four tells us. Whose media?

There are no "big daddy" commentators in *Undercurrents*. Basic captions explain pictures or the outlines of an issue. People speaking to camera are given space to have their say, or are confronted and squirm, as did Councillor Charles Shouler when taken to task for preventing a car-free city centre in Oxford. Sound and picture quality are sometimes shaky, like when the cameraman was forced to flee before an Oxford police charge. But then rock-steady ITN and BBC pictures usually show evictions from behind police lines, with crews fearful of being seen to be involved in trespass. And even if they are on the inside, as was ITN at the "Battle of the Beanfield", where police attacked travellers' buses mob-handed, back in the editing suite the worst police excesses were edited out and the reporter gagged. *Undercurrents* is inside when the barricades are battered down; on the roof when protesters are being "cherry-picked"; or up in the trees when the road contractors' chainsaws are buzzing. It's raw, immediate and empowering, the news and views we are routinely denied.

"The main problem we have at the moment is distribution," says Ted Oakes,



Undercurrents distribution coordinator and only three weeks in the job. He telephoned from the Oxford office at 10pm one Friday. "You have the feeling you're on the edge of something that is going to be very big. It's exciting. That's why I'm in the office now." Alongside the camcorder network, *Undercurrents* is also beginning to set up its own distribution. "Eighty per cent of video distribution is controlled by two chains. The media, just like the land, has been enclosed by the state and large corporations. We're attempting to unenclose the media and reclaim it for ordinary people."

Undercurrents sells 80 per cent through mail order. The problem is letting people know where to buy it. The first video sold 1,100 copies in 11 months. Number Two has sold 800 in three months. Articles in the *Guardian* and the *Independent on Sun-*

"The media have been enclosed by the state and large corporations. We're attempting to reclaim them for ordinary people"

day have helped. In the past two weeks, the media have been falling over themselves to report on this new broadcast democracy with visits from Radio Four, NBC, CBS, CBC, World Service TV and BBC Scotland. "People should pick up their camcorders and start filming things that disturb them. And buy *Undercurrents*," concluded Oakes, before leaving the office for the night. "This could affect in a big way how broadcasters do news." Small World runs workshops on using cameras as well as how the news is put together. This is ingenious do-it-ourselves culture at its best. *Undercurrents* Three is out in June.

Reflecting on his life as a journalist, the late and very great James Cameron said: "I have never been too good at the basic principle of reporting, which is total objectivity." What was so great about Cameron's work was precisely its lack of objectivity, his insistence on writing what he believed, for which he twice resigned plum jobs. He double-checked his facts, especially when gainsaying the establishment. But he covered the angles he felt mattered, and let the reader know his bias.

"A few strong prejudices help. If you want to be solemn about it, you can call them values, or beliefs... something that permits one occasionally to get pretty angry, or even the reverse." That's honest journalism, provided of course the facts are checked and properly sourced. We're people, not automata. Dishonest journalism pretends to be objective, hiding the bias that every journalist and every media organisation has. So, by a curious inversion, despite being "unashamedly biased", the *Undercurrents* videos provide the most consistently honest news coverage to be seen on the small screen in recent times. We know where *Undercurrents* is coming from. Information is properly sourced. And it covers crucial issues, rather than Dame Barbara Cartland's clucking tongue.

"That's why I love *Undercurrents* and scream at the TV every night. In terms of content and remit, we're comparable to *Undercurrents*. We see them as the visual version of *Squall*." *Squall* is a quarterly magazine that started out covering squatting, then travellers, then everyone affected by the Criminal Justice Act.

Sam Beale is one of its writers. She'd spent the previous day in court fighting eviction from an empty children's home that ten people are squatting. They run a café there five nights a week with a children's play area. After the ten-day adjournment squeezed out of the court,

Left: Seen through *Undercurrents*'s lens—a worksite occupation by the No M11 Link campaign; above: the final edit of *Small World*'s second video

they will probably be evicted.

"*Squall* is selective, like all media. We talk about people without a voice. But it's very important to be factually correct. I don't want to be writing about a truth that I'm bending. There are lots of magazines whose desire to wag the finger is greater than their desire to tell the truth. We don't need to lie. My mother was blown away when she read *Squall*. It described another country to her. But she believed it."

Squall is widely read by the non-violent direct action (NVDA) movement, as well as journalists and politicians. It's outspoken, an excellent read, amusing, reliable and carried by far the best parliamentary coverage during the passage of the Criminal Justice Act, mainly written by Jim Carey. There's an excellent piece in the latest issue about John Battle, "a jewel in the political mud" being shuffled out as shadow housing spokesperson to be replaced by the "sharp suits and crocodile smile of Nick Raynsford".

Squatting in Russia, activism on the Internet, comprehensive news of community actions, explaining Agenda 21, Claremont Road, a John Hegley poem, DIY community care, a look at the "skew-whiffs" of the British press, stealing our land, the Luton community collective Exodus, sexual harassment of female road protesters, the World Bank and reflections on art, dead pigeons and politics from Lofty Tone, plus excellent pictures from Nick Cobbing all make this a bargain at £1.30. And no, I'm not a shareholder, but I have taken out a subscription. It's also a very heartening read, conveying as it does a graphic impression of widespread, imaginative, non-violent direct actions across the UK and abroad. "We want to tool people up with information so they are empowered," says Beale.

"I want MPs to read it so they can't say they don't know. For the rest of the population, they need another version of who travellers, protesters, dancers and squatters are, rather than the *Six O'Clock News*. The *Six O'Clock News* doesn't describe brave people with a lot of guts living their lifestyle. We call what we do 'writing to the bridge'. That's writing for both sides, to tell the people whose lifestyles we're celebrating that they're right, go on with the passion. And for the politicians, we want to tell them there's a billion other ways of living which bypass their knowledge and legislation. We don't just want to point the finger at the bastards, but take part in an informal debate.

"I think this is a mad time for young people to reach maturity, post-1980s Thatcher," she continues. "Cynicism can only last so long. We're doing what she demanded, going out and doing it ourselves. If you're involved in a community, it's empowering, there's loads going on. But nobody trusts politicians and the

media. Everyone cares and craves a passion for something to believe in. There's a definite desire of people to live their lives, rather than get a career. Once you've made that decision, you're gonna follow your bliss, creating something positive rather than just struggling against. That makes you an outcast. That makes lots of ads on telly irrelevant. And it makes a fundamental shift in your head. We're on a cusp. We can never go back to meaningless jobs producing meaningless products. What's going on is inevitable, and the politicians can't accept it. Something's gotta give. We're not going away."

As with *Undercurrents*, *Squall*'s biggest problem is distribution. Issues are available in some community centres, small cafes and bookshops. The previous issue printed and sold 3,000. The latest has printed 5,000. The magazine is funded mainly by subscriptions and donations. It runs benefit nights, and has just recruited a fundraiser. Nobody gets paid. Two days before number nine was due to go to press, the computer crashed. They met the deadline, but need a new computer.

Squall lives up to its ideal of telling the truth, despite zero financial resources and honest biases. Other publications do not, despite huge riches and pretences of objectivity. Last July, John Harlow, transport correspondent on Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* wrote a disgraceful story about supposed violence within the anti-roads protest movement—a "summer of hate" against construction companies. It was inaccurate, and it made a series of unsourced allegations, such as accusing protesters defending Solsbury Hill of constructing pits "camouflaged with bracken and leaves".

Harlow wrote: "A dozen sharpened files capable of piercing the heaviest boot had been hammered into the bottom of the pits." Holes were indeed dug, for protesters to chain themselves inside to stop bulldozers, but they contained no spikes. Harlow quoted an unnamed Bath police spokesman as saying: "It was lethal, mantraps straight out of the Vietnam war." NSS contacted Inspector Lemoir from Bath Police who felt angry and set-up. He denied making any such comment and did not know who had. Lemoir said he had wanted to go to see the "pits" after they were described to him by Barry Williams, Amey Construction's security manager, but was told they had been "filled in". Curiously enough, despite a proliferation of cameras carried by security staff, who were filming everybody and everything on and around the site, no pictures were taken of the "pits", nor has anybody ever been produced as a first-hand witness to them. To her shame, Madeleine Bunting in the *Guardian* produced a précis of Harlow's story without questioning its truth.

A coalition of road protest groups lodged a detailed formal complaint with the Press Complaints Commission against the *Sunday Times*. The PCC was also supplied with two NSS reports (8 and 22 July 1994) refuting in detail the *Sunday Times* story. They never came back to us for clarification or further information. In its judgment, the PCC said it believed that "the newspaper provided an adequate explanation of its sources".

And now the Scottish edition of Murdoch's *Sun* has run a similar story on the M77 Pollok protest. In "ANOTHER *Sun* EXCLUSIVE", it dug up the mantraps again and, like the *Sunday Times*, failed to name a source. "It was claimed last night some protesters are digging man-traps lined with broken glass to trap motorway workers," wrote Alan Muir and Martin Wallace. There were indeed holes dug, for car-bodies which are being used to create a "carhenge". Some holes contained windscreen glass.

While inaccurate, sensationalist stories do get reported, others—accurate and non-sensationalist—do not. In its latest edition, *Squall* reported on the *Sun* reporter, Damien Lazarus, who was sent undercover to expose a group of travellers and wrote a positive report on his return. The *Sun* spiked his story.

Not that the Murdoch press is the only villain in the corporate media pack. There's the story carried by *Private Eye* and *Squall* of a reporter from the *Daily Mail* being told to "get lost" by a middle-class animal rights protester. "You've been lying to us for 30 years," she shouted. "We're not talking or listening to you again."

We cannot trust the mainstream media, with a few honourable exceptions. They increasingly fabricate or disregard stories according to their political and business purposes under a double-peak guise of objectivity. *Squall* proclaims its beliefs on the first page:

"Information is your weapon."

The purpose of this magazine is to tool you up.

With accurate information and positive inspiration.

To expose hidden agendas and highlight new initiatives.

Standing for cultural diversity, community and respect.

To give fair voice to those who have none, have gone hoarse, or are frightened to speak.

To battle for a better environment— countryside, urban and psychological.

With no book, no badge, no flag and no anchoring affiliations other than the truth.

... Anchour yourself."

James Cameron again: "I always tended to argue that objectivity was of less importance than the truth." *Undercurrents*, *Squall* and the rest of the burgeoning independent media know what he meant—and are acting on it. ■

"*Undercurrents*" is available from Small World Media, 46 Rymers Lane, Oxford OX4 3LB, tel: 01865 712520; e-mail: SmallWorld@gn.apc.org, £9.50 or £5.50 unwaged. "*Squall*" is available from 2 St Paul's Road, London N12 2QN; e-mail: squall@intermedia.co.uk, £1.30 per issue