6 Filming for new and old media

This chapter looks at how to film and produce reports, for would-be VJs, those already practising and journalists wanting to develop video skills. The market and opportunities for videojournalism are opening up at an unprecedented rate, so from a career perspective, having VJ skills, i.e. being able to shoot, write and edit, are undoubtedly ‘must-haves’ for anyone going into the communications business. Kinsey Wilson, editor-in-chief of USA Today.com, the website of the biggest selling daily nationwide, forecast in 2006 the top trend to watch on newspaper sites would be ‘the continued, expanded use of video and real experimentation around how video is best deployed on the internet’. How right she was.

What does this all mean? Well for anyone looking to be employed as a journalist, it means that multi-skilling is going shortly to become a requisite. Moreover it is not just for newspaper sites or local TV, but also for the dedicated internet broadcast channels that are springing up offering all sorts of video content. They have emerged because the technology is now simpler for companies to do this, but they are also following the success of video blogs or vlogs, and the immensely popular MySpace and YouTube, Bebo, OhMyNews, Current TV, Flickr, Google Video, and Yahoo! where you can upload your videos. Why are these so popular? Well as more people are using video to express their views and to film material, they want to share it and it appears there is an audience who wants to watch, surf and comment on their offerings. You can sell your video too. It is ‘our’ space that can compete with traditional or conventional broadcasting and is subject to few guidelines.

With VJ skills you can shoot not just for broadcast but for corporate webcasts and video streaming online, offer user-generated content (UGC,) and make vlogs and mobcasts to mobile phones. There are companies now specialising in mobile content that need people with video skills and every newspaper or company or broadcaster that wants to put video on their website needs those skills too. Even the PR industry is finding that without internet communication tools in their kit, they are lagging behind and so are their clients.

Can anyone become a VJ?
This is a debate that centres on the idea that some skills are innate and cannot be taught, so that some people have an ‘eye’ for a shot and a ‘nose’ for a good story and that it cannot be learnt. This the view of one practising VJ, Gareth Jones:

I believe VJing is not for everyone and that therefore it is impossible to bring in across the board. Broadcasting is an increasingly fast and complex tri-media activity. New editing technology means VJs can now do desk-top editing; journalists are being trained in how to input their words and pictures directly into their news websites. We are now asking more of journalists than ever before in terms of multi-skilling and not everyone can or should become skilled in all these disciplines. Apart from anything else, I don’t think all journalists can get all the practice time they need in all these new skills in order to get fast, proficient and confident. I think the best newsrooms will have combinations and permutations of these skills: there’ll be VJs who can edit, but there’ll also be people who may just specialise in writing and processing words and pix for TV and online. Online is demanding people who can write well and who specialise in subjects (BSkyB have just appointed a bunch of such specialists). But I’d also like to think there’ll be VJs who are valued for their ability to be street-wise, able to deal with the difficulties of gathering material in the big wide world. I find that broadcast journalism risks becoming increasingly newsroom-bound. There aren’t enough people with practical newsgathering skills developed on the street or in the field. VJs are often part of that culture and need to be nurtured and appreciated for that.

Can print journalists make video reports too, without special training?

As newspapers shift into multi-media mode their journalists are being asked when out on a story to use video cameras too. While special courses are being run to help journalists think visually, the same principles of story-telling remain. However, combining words and pictures means inverting your priorities. The pictures lead on a video report, but the facts of the story and its content still dictate what those pictures are. So you can have the same interviewees, for example, but for the pictures you have to introduce them and then place, frame and film them in a relevant and acceptable light. Or if you’re covering an accident, say, you will note for the print piece the scene and describe it: twisted and damaged cars, an overturned lorry, an ambulance ferrying the three people hurt; but for the video you have to show all this and use the language of filming. The wide shot, the close-ups, some action of the ambulance arriving or leaving and so on. The advice and ideas that follow in this chapter will help set you thinking about these skills.

So what should you bring to being a VJ or practising videojournalism? A short checklist of key skills includes:
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- an ability to engage with people
- an inquiring mind so as to ask pertinent questions
- a visual awareness, to combine pictures with words and a storyline
- a value system and objective view of the order of things, plus a sense of moral, ethical and legal issues that might affect recording video.

The rest of the chapter is going to cover the following topics:

- identifying a story from various sources and for its relevance
- researching and how you can do this
- pitching a story on the basis of your further research
- structuring and writing out a rough draft or running order
- sourcing other material like graphics, extra footage from the tape library or other sources if you are sure of your storyline and needs.

In the filming section there is advice on:

- film techniques and using the right shots
- logging your shots to find the best soundbites, shots and takes on the piece to camera (if there is one); this can be in a rough form as you download and choose shots, but it helps to have a record
- scripting using recorded material as the basis of the report
- editing often done as you script, but easier to cut to your already written script and quicker.

Beyond these are the new media skills that are more technical but nonetheless a key part of the videojournalism craft, like uploading or sending a report that you have edited on your pc or laptop, to get it on air or onto a website.

Identifying a story

What is a story? A story is when something out of the ordinary happens. That then becomes news. For example: a ferry capsizing, a plane crash, a new law coming into force, a birth, a death, an election, or an uprising. Events where people win, lose, commit crimes or stop crimes. Anything you can think of that ‘happens’. It only becomes news if it is reported, either by word of mouth, electronically or usually if it appears in the media. Most TV news stories are started by an alert of some kind, via a news agency wire, a newspaper piece, an internet RSS feed alert, a contact or a traditional press release or e-release.

As a journalist your role is to identify how strong or good a story is, whether it is one you have been given in the news room or found yourself, or been told about. Does it answer the key questions, the so what and why does it matter?
To gauge how important or relevant it is ask if it addresses these questions:

- Is it new?
- Is it a new twist on an old tale?
- Does it affect people other than those featured – i.e. is it of wider significance?
- Will it affect people?
- Would it help people to have this information?
- Is it relevant to your audience?
- Is it an eyebrow raiser?

Someone has described defining a news story as being like ‘nailing jelly to a wall’. It keeps slipping away or changing or not being quite what it appeared to be. For example, a flood is reported to have drowned 50 people, but on checking it is cattle not people; a crime wave turns out to be two burglaries in a town not 200. The only way to pin a story down is to research it further and without doing this, a journalist is unable to progress. If you do not know the answers, you cannot pitch it at a news conference to a news editor or get on with your job. Research = investigation and although there are investigative journalists who research long-term stories or documentaries, every journalist has to be a detective. Everyone has to inquire about facts and the sequence of events.

Daily news by its very nature can be seen as a recipe demanding ‘just add water’ reporting, rather than ‘first marinade the meat for 3 days’.

Interestingly the public in general disapprove of journalists but approve of the practice of uncovering and reporting on corruption and fraud in business, in government and other organisations. Think back to the WMD story discussed in the previous chapter. It got the headlines and almost brought down the UK government, or at least the Prime Minister Tony Blair when it turned out he had lied about the presence of these weapons. The WMD media campaign got the public involved, as do famine reporting and general disaster reporting, where raising awareness is responded to by donations of money or concerts for charities. Today more reporting is aware of the public’s wish to be involved; it is seen by the level of interaction online and the response even to TV news appeals for mobile phone footage of the 7 July bomb damage in London in 2005. Why do the public want to be involved? Part of the answer is that they now can, without having to a write a letter and post it or even call a news desk or switchboard. Knowing this makes a journalist’s job in many respects easier. The ‘field’ is no longer a hostile zone where people are unhelpful and where filming is a problem. Probably the contrary.

The rules by which the journalist works, however, do not change. Your responsibility is to not only be sure of your facts but doubly so, as what you report could lead to people losing their jobs, a change in public opinion, a business reputation being lost or a political career being left in shreds.
Think again of the WMD story. The ‘letting drop’ of the scientist’s name, David Kelly, who had said there were no WMD and had met with journalists including Andrew Gilligan, led him to take his life. While this was a complicated and complex situation where it was the government who gave the media heavy hints about who Kelly was, Gilligan did have to admit his source for his story. Did he or anyone else know the fatal consequences of this? Even with hindsight, no one was apparently aware of just how stressed Kelly was and how untenable he found his position, so that he killed himself (though there is a conspiracy theory about this too) before the public hearings on his conduct. So protecting people is a priority.

There are other basic principles of journalism too:

- Be curious about the truth
- Ask questions
- Be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives
- Rely on your own original work
- Always check and double check the facts
- Never add anything that is not there
- Do not let spin replace checking facts and sources
- Bring energy to your job
- A lazy journalist gets only half a story, or gets it wrong.

**An example of getting a story wrong**

Nancy Durham, the VJ interviewed in Chapter 3, is still mortified about an incident that took place some years ago.

She was out filming in Kosovo with a local doctor when war broke out in March 1998. Filming in a hospital she came across a girl soldier who told her a harrowing tale of how her sister had been killed. It featured in the report; her heart-rending account helped make the report a strong one. When Nancy returned to Kosovo she traced the girl and arrived at her house, only to be met at the door by the younger sister who was supposedly dead. When questioned, the girl soldier said she lied because she thought that was what Nancy would want to hear. For Nancy ever since there has been a concern about checking the truth of the story. Difficult to do in a time of war, but still she as a journalist felt she had failed in her job. Luckily there were no repercussions, no one was harmed, and there was no legal redress needed.

**Research**

The reporting equation is that the greater your preparation and research, the better the end product. Even in breaking news stories, research of the best shots, locations, people to interview and the facts produces a better story. New equals news. Why? Because you have to bring something new to your report, something that will last the day or 24 hours or even longer.
before it is broadcast. Your research should be able to answer these logistical questions:

- Can it be done?
- Do you have the resources?
- Is there time to do it?
- Is the story accessible?
- Is it affordable?

The possible elements in a report that you might need to research:

- Interview soundbites
- Vox pops (short comments from people usually on the street about the story)
- Pictures relevant to the story
- An opening and a closing or end shot
- Graphics showing statistics or a locating map or a quote
- Extra footage like library shots
- Still shots
- Piece to camera
- Music (though not often in a news piece unless relevant).

Finding facts and figures relevant to the story and background information has become easier with the web. However, you still have to check and double check sources as nothing can be taken for granted just because it is on a website. The best way of corroborating material is by contacting people and a new web source are the blog search engines that allow you to find people. Also telephone directory services globally like teldir.com and infospace.com, and other sites like usenet.com make research possible without leaving your desk. When you interview people for your research (on the phone or face to face) there are checklists. Remember what you are looking to do: to gain the trust of potential interviewees and those who can help further the story.

Remember the example Stuart Ratcliffe from Staffordshire Local TV gave of how he won the trust of the travellers to get their story. He persevered for days by visiting them and just talking, before he got their permission and also an exclusive report.

To do this you have to focus, be organised, informed of basic elements of the story, and have ideas about what your report’s elements are. Above all you need a good manner and style of conversation that will get you what you want.

If contact is by e-mail or SMS text then you have to be even more careful in the way you voice your requests so as not to make them appear like demands. The shorthand and casual style of both these modes can quite often cause offence, people taking umbrage at what they see as a lack of
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politeness, sensitivity and normal courtesies. After all, you need them, they
do not necessarily need you.

A basic skill is knowing how to contact people:

- Identify yourself clearly
- Say why you’re making contact
- Explain that you need help and of what kind.

During the conversation:

- Ask open ended questions: who, what, when, where, how and why
- Ask simple questions
- Know what information you want
- Be polite, interested and above all curious
- Listen to what they say and follow it through
- Don’t be aggressive
- Don’t make it personal
- Make notes
- Ask for clarification of anything you’re unsure of.

Your line of questioning has to elicit the information you need:

- Why is it so important?
- Why is this happening?
- Why do you feel like this, others feel like this?
- Why does this matter?
- Why should people be interested or concerned?
- Why have you done what you have?
- What are you going to do about it?
- What may you do in the future?
- Where can you see what has happened?
- Where can you meet?
- Where might be impacted next?
- Who else is involved?
- Who else might be worth talking to?
- Who do you blame/praise/care about/support/condemn?

At the end of the conversation:

- Check names, title, telephone numbers, e-mails or fax details
- Check where the person will be over the next short period of time in
case you need to contact them
- Ask if they can suggest anyone else you might talk to
- Thank them and say you might call again.
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Of course research is not just about the story – it is also about the visuals, the pictures:

- What is there to see and to film?
- Ask what a place looks like
- Ask if there are any distinctive sounds
- Ask what the mood is
- Ask what people do – thinking of sequences
- Ask for that detail in terms of their routine.

Also think about: if you can’t get direct pictures where else can you source them?

- Library footage
- Past events
- Similar location to give as an example
- Online
- Graphics
- Maps
- Animation
- Treated images i.e. stills or moving pictures to use as background
- Stills.

Shots to think about:

- Atmospheric or symbolic/interpretative pictures
- Abstract images of sunsets, feet walking, wheels turning, roads, planes taking off
- General shots of people on streets, buildings
- Aerials or top shots
- People shopping, farming, swimming, doing carpentry, whatever they normally do
- Names of places and companies, identifying pictures
- Opening and closing shots
- Good locations for pieces to camera or live two-ways with the studio, e.g. if you are doing a story about increased traffic on a motorway, a suitable backdrop would be a bridge showing the motorway behind you.

Legal and ethical issues

These are taught at great length on specific courses, but this is a reminder that if you are providing footage especially for news stories, this is what you should bear in mind.
When filming people

Although it can be hard to persuade people to be interviewed, it is surprising how often they agree with no thought of the possible repercussions.

You want to give their names and show their faces on the screen because it strengthens the value of your report; yet you have to be concerned about the consequences of letting their identities become known. The act of naming someone you have interviewed or merely showing their face can be enough to get them into trouble.

Tip: Get the person or people to sign an agreement (you can write it yourself) that the interview or footage can be used. This way you are safe from any legal repercussions.

Example: A common case is that of the ‘whistleblower’ who has factual or verbal evidence of a company’s criminal activities or mismanagement. Do you identify that person, are they prepared to be identified and is the story solid in terms of facts?

Example: A person in an emotional state at a disaster gives an interview which they might not want shown at a later date, when they have recovered or had time to think about it.

So you have to think this through, discuss it with a senior member of a news team or a lawyer, or make the decision yourself, knowingly. In most cases in newsgathering a gatekeeper in the shape of a news editor or producer will check your report before transmission. If you have made a decision first and filmed an interviewee, for example, with their back to the camera then the value of this changes and has to be decided upon merit.

You have to vouch for the fact that the person or people you have interviewed can be shown – in whatever context you are offering it for. No broadcaster or company wants to be sued or to pay out settlement fees.

Legal concerns

These are very particular and every broadcaster has a media lawyer to check anything in a script or the pictures that might result in a legal action, costing the broadcaster a good deal of money. It can be a sackable offence. It can also jeopardise your career.

Most of these pointers are common sense. You do not make a statement that you cannot back up with fact; you use words like *alleged* and *reputed* rather than stating something as a fact; you do not show faces of people if the script makes it seem that it applies to that person.

Example: If the commentary says ‘women are increasingly victims of domestic violence’, over a shot of a woman looking out of a window, then the viewer could assume this applied to the woman shown. So do not juxtapose the two; change the shot or the words.

Example: The Tanzanian government banned certain skin creams that claimed to whiten skin. Medical evidence pointed to some of these containing
ingredients that were potentially carcinogenic. The report talked to: women who had had skin problems as a result of using the creams, a skin cancer specialist, the Ministry of Health spokesperson, an advertising executive about the way they used lighter-coloured models for their campaigns, and an editor of a women’s magazine who was promoting ‘black is beautiful’ in her editorial.

What the report could not do was name those products that allegedly caused problems, nor show them. It had no statement in defence of the products by any manufacturer and the focus of the report was on the ban, but also why men and women wanted to whiten their skin.

A libel case example: Oryx won its libel case against the BBC. The BBC’s Ten O’clock News on 31 October 2001 broadcast a Special Report entitled ‘The diamonds that pay for Bin Laden’s terror’. The report accused Oryx of funding Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network. On 19 November 2001, three weeks later, the BBC broadcast an apology. Oryx Natural Resources sued and was successful in its action against the BBC. The London High Court awarded judgement and costs to Oryx. Geoffrey White, Deputy Managing Director of Oryx, said,

The BBC never had a shred of evidence for its broadcast. It has now also accepted that it acted irresponsibly. I am delighted that the Court has confirmed this. The broadcast injured Oryx. Our reputation suffered and we sustained enormous financial damage. The BBC will now have to compensate us.

The BBC failed to come up with a convincing defence. Its only claim was that the report was not defamatory. When covering a particular story, if it is likely to offend, upset or provoke a chain of reaction, then you have to consider whether it is worth pursuing. This applies to all kinds of cases which are not in the public view already. Remember Laura McMullan’s story in Chapter 3 of wondering whether she should show someone’s face:

I’d never covered a court case and so when I did a piece on a pending court case, I wondered about a picture of the guy accused. The person I asked in the newsroom went crazy and said ‘don’t use a picture, you can’t’. She then offered to write the script for me too! So I’m always checking.

Pitching and proposing a story

Once you’ve chosen your story, how do you sell it and convince someone that it is worthwhile? Many people find it the most difficult part of journalism because it involves presenting yourself and your confidence in the story or project, as much as selling the actual idea. If you can encapsulate the proposal in one sentence then you stand a good chance of at least having it
understood! You would be surprised at how many people never really get to the core of their idea or why it matters. Similarly people do not spend enough time researching the programme or website or channel that they are aiming at. If you have not watched a show how can you know what they want or whether your story might fit their brief? Do your homework.

Tips for when you pitch:

- Do not say
  - It’s not much of a story but …
  - I don’t know whether we could do this but …
  - I haven’t checked it completely but …
  - I think I can get the person to speak …
  - I know it’s a long way to go but …

- Do not
  - Undersell the story
  - Oversell it

- Do
  - Be positive and give an opening sentence that sums it up
  - Explain why it’s important/matters
  - Explain how it is possible to film
  - Explain what the logistics are- this would include costs
  - Say what the research shows
  - Be realistic in your pitch
  - Be honest

How to pitch using this format:

- Title (stick to one name for the piece throughout process. Make sure it is easily identifiable)
- Story (sell the story in one or two lines only)
- Why are we doing this story now? (one or two lines only)
- The peg or realistic date available to air
- Elements (special sequences, access, locations and interviews).

Once successful at getting your proposal accepted, or even if you decide to film something yourself on spec and hope to sell it afterwards, there is a good deal to think about before you set out. Logistics are 90 per cent of filming and only 10 per cent is creativity. If you remember this you cannot fail!

**Structuring and writing**

Before starting to film it is often best to map out a rough running order and storyline so that you know what you are looking for. This should include questions to ask interviewees too. It is a good discipline and, especially for a
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VJ who has to think about the reporting and the filming, a reminder of what you need. This is a time-saver, and of incalculable value, as you may well set off immediately travelling or driving to the location and not have any further thinking time. Everything can be refined and changed, but having it roughly in your head is helpful.

Sourcing other material

Graphics

A news report often has extra information in it that is presented in a different format to pictures. Graphics are either a single static page showing key facts or figures or quite literally a graph; or they can be animated. This is a way of highlighting facts especially or even a quote that you as a reporter feel needs to be understood clearly.

Graphics are often ‘keyed’ or superimposed over an image that is graphically altered in some way to make it paler or changed from negative to positive to make it more interesting. This image can for example be of people at work if the statistics are showing the rise or fall in the number of unemployed.

Graphics are more commonly used in the news studio where a presenter or specialist correspondent stands next to the large screen and talks about a topic, with the graphics coming up as illustration for him or her to point to.

Extra footage

Extra tape or archive film material can be useful for a news report. You can access footage from a tape library within a news organisation, or bought from an outside source like one of the TV news agencies. Film archive material is costly and can take time to order and deliver as it has to be transferred to tape or else a copy made from an existing tape in the archive. However sometimes only archive will do to illustrate a past event. The BBC is now opening its archive to the public and other TV stations will probably follow suit. You can tell when this footage is being used in a news report or a documentary when a caption saying library footage or archive with a date on it is put up on the TV screen.

Other sources of footage include material from amateurs or ‘citizen journalists’ who have taken unique shots at an event. The rights for this material are negotiated with the individual unless they have sold it on to an organisation. Corporate footage of company headquarters or production processes can be requested from Shell or Microsoft or IBM for example and they often hold what is called B-roll of their activities. If this is used especially illustrating, a past event it also has a caption on it with the date for viewers to understand what is being shown. TV news agencies like APTN and Reuters offer news reports and footage that is used by news channels.
This material is usually paid for by an annual subscription to the service and allows for unlimited access by the large news companies. For an individual it is expensive to buy. Other organisations like charities, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and the UN hold tape libraries and are often forgotten as possible sources of pictures. Video is so much cheaper to record that even local councils have pictures and regional newspapers have video on their websites and should be remembered as possible sources. There are specialist archives too that are listed in Film Research handbooks, existing worldwide that may have the rare footage you are looking for. As with all research, perseverance can result in you getting something original, unique for inclusion in your report.

Filming

This is the most important part of your work. Without images and soundbites or interviews you have nothing. There is an argument that says photographers are born not made, that some people have an ‘eye’ for composition and others do not. The same might be said for directing people and ‘seeing’ how to shoot a sequence, but in truth it can be learnt.

A news report is short, factual and allows for little in the way of super-creative shots. The pictures in a news story are there to illustrate it. Using different lenses like a wide-angle or filters, a lot of camera movement, dramatic lighting or any other effects, sits better with longer reports, mini features, documentary, drama or magazine reports. That is not to say that a wide-angle shot is not useful and sometimes necessary if filming in a tight space, or to give the desired effect, but it is not necessary for a news report. So this reduces the amount of effort you need put into the creative side of filming. However, it does not mean that you can fail to find and film the critical images that tell the story.

Also the filming of those images can and should be done as well as possible in terms of:

• framing a shot, knowing that mid to close up shots work best for impact
• getting the cut-aways (those short usually close-up shots of hands, writing with a pen, eyes, a dog watching, that are used for editing)
• positioning interviewees with a suitable or relevant backdrop, and not against a window, for example, where they cannot be seen
• the same for a piece to camera
• finding a telling opening and closing shot that remind the viewer of the story.
Length of a news report

A standard VJ report that is on BBC World, for example, is two and a half minutes long, around one and a half minutes on national, regional or local news and anything from three to five minutes or even up to 20 minutes on Channel 4 News. (A longer version of seven to twelve minutes is often cut to make more money if you are a freelance and want to sell it to other broadcasters in Europe, the US, Australia etc., or to provide other programmes with different versions for broadcast. For example, a children’s or young people’s news programme, or a weekly review show could take a long version; news on other channels, for example BBC4, might take a longer piece.) For online and especially newspaper sites, it is interesting to note that one of the main providers of video clips commercially, the Associated Press, offers clips that run from approximately one minute in length, with some as short as 30 seconds or as long as three minutes. Knowing the commission and the eventual placing of the film is helpful, but not critical. What is, is deciding for yourself how much extra material you might shoot in case you want to do a longer version. It all comes down to mathematics.

Example: A standard news piece is, say, a total of 1 minute 30 seconds.
Two soundbites between 12–18 seconds in length = 36 secs
A piece to camera = 12 secs
Remaining commentary = 42 secs

So you go filming, knowing approximately how much time you have and need to fill.

Filming tips

This section is about tips for filming from VJs, so that you can hear what others do. Every cameraperson develops a personal style of filming. It is inevitable. I prefer extreme close-ups and always getting something strong on the edge of frame, so that like a painting the viewer is drawn in, but everyone is different. There is a basic grammar and also a limitation on the type of shots you can take. However, what changes all the time is your eye and your use of pictures to convey the essence and important points of each story. That is the challenge and also the stimulating part of filming, to capture it, to allow people to see what you see.

Question: What was the hardest part when you first picked up a video camera?

Remembering to stop waving the camera round and let action leave the frame before repositioning myself.

(Tim Parker)
I was annoyed during interviews that once I was happy I had done everything technically to get the shots right, my journalism would let me down, as my mind would suddenly go blank and I would think ‘What should I ask.’ Or I would be so absorbed in monitoring the sound that I wouldn’t be listening to what the interviewee was actually saying so the result was not as good as it could have been.

(Stuart Ratcliffe)

When I first bought my Hi8 for my new job at BBC World Service TV, I took my wife to a park in Ealing and tried to film her feeding some ducks. It was terrible as I hadn’t understood when and how to start and finish a shot. So the stuff was the classic ‘tromboning’ continually zooming in and out, pans, tilts, every kind of moving shot an editor would find unusable.

(Gareth Jones)

I went to do a piece on child labour at a farm in Lancashire and I remember a videotape editor advising me to ‘follow your subjects and don’t let them out of your sight’, and that’s literally what I did. The result was that the camera shots zoomed right, left, everywhere because I was definitely not letting the girls out of my sight, or out of shot! Well, I took the tapes back and the piece almost didn’t work because there were no cutaways and no one ever left the frame! The editor had to put in a few arty mixes and we just about got away with it.

(Ian O’Reilly)

My first assignment on Hi8 I shot and shot so that I landed up with a shoe box full of tapes and had to turn them into a short feature. It looked so basic, nothing special, no feeling of access because I had gone out and acted like a cameraman and used a tripod all the time. My bureau chief said, ‘throw your tripod out the window, go hand-held, go somewhere between breaking and following the rules, to bring something special to your reports.

(Nancy Durham)

Question: What do you try to remember each time you begin filming?

The visual context; what background is best. For sound, how can I best capture it and is the ambient sound a bonus or not.

(Tim Parker)

I found it hard to remember all the things I had to check. White balance, focus, exposure, sound … it seemed if I forgot one then I remembered it next time, but then I would have forgotten something else. I used to have a little checklist in my bag to make sure I had done things.

(Stuart Ratcliffe)
I wrote down notes for reference, troubleshooting notes and a checklist of drills e.g. to make sure the tripod was level and at the right height before you put the camera on it. First decide if you’re going auto on everything or not. There’s no shame in auto, especially if there’s a lot going on around you. I rarely go auto on anything except maybe sound on channel two, that way you know you’ve always got something usable; on the Z1 it’s so good. For focus or exposure I press the auto functions if I’m uncertain to check, but I use the manual functions as much as possible.

(Gareth Jones)

**Question: What did you learn the first time that you downloaded your shots and tried to edit them?**

I didn’t film enough cutaways in length or variation. I learnt that I needed to hold shots longer to be able to edit them.

(Tim Parker)

I was gutted at how little I could use because I wasn’t holding the shots long enough.

(Stuart Ratcliffe)

The sound. It was over or under recorded or sometimes on the wrong channel. You have to decide on what sound you want from a situation. So you have to use the right mike and at the right distance for the sound you want and then make sure the levels are right watching the meters in the viewfinder.

(Gareth Jones)

**Question: What has got easier the more you film?**

The set-ups and directing contributors. I’m getting more confident because even with user-generated and user-authored content it is essential to maintain and link scenes visually. Some shots are the basic grammar so we can’t do without them and that makes it easier.

(Tim Parker)

**Question: What is your favourite shot?**

Pull-focus. A bit cheesy if over-used but always a winner! Don’t leave a shoot without one.

(Tim Parker)
I like continuously moving shots which are now my trademark. Rather than going for cutaways during a sequence of action. I try to be as smooth as possible and do it in one shot.  

(Stuart Ratcliffe)

The pull-focus shot because it can be poetic and also a wonderful way of saying things in pictures without laying it on with a trowel verbally. I also like filming on the long end of the lens; it can have a lovely effect on the way things look and move.  

(Gareth Jones)

**Basic camera kit**

First, we consider the types of small lightweight camera that are available.

For low cost shooting: Sony PD170, PD150, or the VX2000, VX2100E. For high quality shooting: Sony HVR Z1, or the HD version too. For traditional crewing or very high quality production: Sony DSR 500 or 570, or the new DSR-450 which is the replacement for the DSR-570. You now get a flip-out screen and a better head end which should mean better pictures although it still records on tape.

There is also the Panasonic HVX-200; it’s the same size as the Sony Z1 but able to record standard definition to tape and HD or SD to P2 card. Also it has adjustable frame rates from 4 to 60 frames per second. The problem is that the single 4 GB card (about 20 minutes of dv) costs £850. Or there is the P2 camera which is a solid state storage medium. Then there are the Canon XLR1 or JVC models too.

Some of the above can also shoot wide-screen, that is 16:9 ratio, which is what most TV is now broadcast in. If not, the cut piece or some rushes, in a news edit suite, have to be ARCed and converted through the Avid edit machine.

Along with your camera, some of which can take different lenses like a wide-angle, is the all-important tripod. They come in varying weights and designs. One with a spirit-level on the head is most useful for ensuring that it is straight, before you put the camera on it. Why do you need one? Well, hand-held is fine in a lot of situations, but for filming interviews a lone VJ has to sit or stand next to the camera, also for filming a piece to camera, but apart from logistics, steady shots make it easier on the eye for the viewer and for editing. A tripod also allows you to zoom and to pan or track with the camera, which is difficult hand-held. You have to remember your end objective, to make editing of the shots possible.

The camera has a fixed microphone, but the quality is not always good enough for interviews as it records all the surrounding noise too. So a clip or tie mike is invaluable. Light and easy to use, usually with a small battery, it can be plugged into the camera easily. A stick or hand mike can also be part of your kit, as can a small boom mike, that has an extendable handle.
Illustration 6.1 Sony Z1 camera

Illustration 6.2 JVC HD camera
Illustration 6.3  Panasonic HVX 200 tapeless camera

Illustration 6.4  Sony PD150 camera
Radio mikes are also good in allowing greater movement for the interviewee. Everyone has their preferred way of working, but everyone uses an external microphone of some kind to ensure the best sound quality.

Headphones are so important in order to check that you are recording and also for any extraneous sound that might spoil your recording. Without using them you are unable to gauge what is being recorded. Finding out at the edit stage is too late for recovery.

Batteries are needed if, as is usual you are filming away from a mains socket. If you are in a room you can always plug into a socket, saving battery life. Extra batteries are vital to ensure that you can film as much as you want. Extremes of temperature reduce their efficiency and strength. A charger that plugs into your car cigarette lighter, a solar charger or one that in difficult locations can be attached to a car battery or generator is definitely worth having.

Tapes are called mini-dv and are of varying brands and recording lengths. They can be re-used. Tape-less cameras will do away with the need for these.

Lights are not usually part of a standard kit, but there is a camera-mounted light, like a still camera flash, that can be used, and also mini spots that stand on their own tripod legs. Using lights requires extra skill and thinking through. Do stay on manual focus, white balance and keep all the shots for the sequence on the same exposure so that you can edit them together. Otherwise some will be lit and others not. Also if using lights you have to remember the time of day when editing, so to jump from a lit interview to a sunny garden sequence with the same person will appear odd.

There is also the Camera bag with tools to carry spares in, including tapes, batteries, lenses, lights, screw-driver for the tripod plate when it works loose, a lens cleaning-cloth, spare batteries for the clip mike, and plug adaptors if abroad. A spare small camera is also vital if abroad and investing time and money in a shoot. If one breaks or is stolen, you are unable to proceed.

Tip: Assemble your kit the night before if you are unfamiliar with any of it. Ensure the batteries are charged. Load a new tape in to save time. Use your checklist of equipment to confirm it is all there.

On location allow at least 30 minutes setting up as you will have to choose the interview position and location and also deal with distractions. So arrive early and plan before or request an interview room or space where you can go to set up before the interviewee appears. People are often pressed for time and appreciate you being ready for them. It also gives you time to check your questions and remember your journalistic role.

Health and safety issues are a consideration in whatever company or workplace you find yourself. On the road or out filming there are extra safety issues (even more so if you film abroad). These are basic pointers of potential safety issues. Filming in public places – people tripping over cables or equipment, children and others getting hurt in some way, drawing a crowd, where you are allowed to film e.g. on the pavement, in royal
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parks, in sensitive areas like airports, theft of equipment if left unattended. Your car – parking, locking, and leaving it unattended in unsafe places. Also driving needs your full attention, so if alone, map reading and long distances need to be worked out carefully. Carrying your equipment – alone you have a tripod plus camera case, plus notebook or even laptop, plus possible extra bag with tapes and batteries. You can easily strain yourself, your back, over-tire and lose track of your gear. You need to remember to take a break and sit down. Communication is important. Keep in touch with base or the relevant person by mobile or other means so that your location is known.

**Doing interviews**

Reminders: what is the focus of your interview? Do you need the background to show company identification in some form, or to show a geographic location that enhances the story? For example, if the story is about a polluted river, or endangered building then showing it behind the interviewee is helpful. However, it is important that events are not going on directly behind someone that might change and so make editing impossible. Is the person to stand or sit or do something while talking?

Do you need to see their hands because they use them constantly, which means you need a wider shot? The sun has to be in their face not behind them to act as a natural light even if indoors. Placing someone against the light or a window results in a silhouette! Are you going to frame the person

*Illustration 6.5  Hand-held filming with a PD150*
in a mid-shot or close-up and change the shots during the interview? This is not impossible if you are happy to stop and start the interview. Think about which way you want the person to look – right to left or left to right. Position them always at the side of the frame so it looks more natural that they are looking at someone. If you want to do a reverse shot of yourself asking a question this is important to remember, if they look right to left, then you must look at the camera the opposite way otherwise you cross the ‘line’. The line is virtual and all you have to remember is to keep everything as you would see it in real life.

Having someone speak directly into the camera lens is used for effect and if they are telling a story it can work. You have to direct the person as to what you want; otherwise their eye-line can flicker from you to the lens and appear unsettling.

If you are following someone as they are showing you something and talking at the same time you need to be sure you have cutaways and shots to cover what they are doing for editing purposes. Otherwise you will get back and find there is no way you can edit an interview that never changes shot or stops. For example, if someone is showing you what they have discovered at an archaeological site, you need to take separate and ‘clean’ shots of what is being pointed out, or else, or as well, film the person showing what they are talking about.

Before pressing the record button: check if you are on manual or auto focus, check your sound is working, and check your headphones are on and also working.
Check for any background noise that may prove distracting, like an air conditioner unit that hums, someone banging in the next room, a phone that might ring etc.

Outside sound is also very important to check, as filming always seems to attract road drills, helicopters, microlights and other things which appear out of nowhere. Interviewing at a busy crossroads means you will have bad background noise. You cannot separate the sound once back editing it. So choose a quiet location – unless the sound is relevant to the story, but even then you have to be aware of the level.

Once you have hit the record button, you have to position yourself next to the camera and begin your interview. Always watch that the person is talking to you and that their eye-line is constant otherwise they will appear shifty.

*Have the courage to stop and start again* if there is any technical hitch. Also if there is anything you were unhappy with in their reply. You will not get another chance or you will forget to do it. Once you are happy with the replies you have, remember to double check that the tape is fine before you let the person leave.

**Doing a piece to camera**

If your report needs one or it is requested then a piece to camera or stand-up has to be shot. Where does a piece to camera fit? In the middle of a report as a gear change or to emphasise a point, at the end as a sign-off or at the front if necessary as immediately establishing where you are.

This is by far the most difficult shot to accomplish as a VJ. Another person is very useful, even if you pull in a passerby to stand in for you while you frame the shot. Choose your location carefully in terms of background noise as mentioned above. Obviously you have to use a tripod or if that is impossible you can prop the camera on a wall or get someone else to hold it, but it is less likely to be steady. This does not matter if you are travelling in a boat or car, for example.

Rehearse your words, which you should have written down, and ensure that the length of the piece is appropriate – 10 seconds or 30 words is standard. Record one take and play it back to check on the picture framing and also the sound. Always record more than one acceptable take for safety.

Also, depending on the story, it is always a good idea to record different versions of the words.

**Hand-held or not?**

The benefit of a small camera is that it is flexible and can convey movement, intimacy and getting into somewhere. So it is used for that effect as a supplementary shot in documentaries, for example, but in news it is used hand-held while travelling, moving around on purpose, in conflicts
where there is danger and to give a point of view or perspective. There is a difference between wobbly scope and purposefully planned movement. Many interviews filmed with two or three cameras use the hand-held shot to convey a sense of ‘being there’ and being ‘live’ but it can be an annoying and distracting device. For news reports the hand-held shot has to be meant if it is going to show wobbles or shaking. Otherwise a tripod, monopod or steady shot is best – especially for editing. Always remember that walking around continuously filming gives you no ‘out’ points for editing. You have to have cutaways or additional shots that allow you to edit. Unless you have planned the whole sequence meticulously and direct the person accordingly. Of course hand-held can become your style of filming and become a virtue in your reports, but it does have to be thought through carefully. Just like preparing to paint a picture.

Various shots

A news report is most often neutrally shot with a mixture of establishing or wide shots, some mid and sometimes close-ups (but not extreme) in it. Why is this? The story that the pictures are telling is important and arty or distracting shots are conventionally not used. However, there are a number of shots that can be incorporated and used where relevant and where they help ‘make’ or tell the story.

- A tracking shot, from a moving car, or using laid tracks, or sitting in a wheelchair or supermarket trolley as it is pushed, following a person by walking with them and so on.
- A pull-focus from one object in the foreground to another in the background is common for changing emphasis and moving to another person. Or at night on car headlamps.
- A pan from right to left or vice versa. If these are too long they can rarely be used in short reports. It has to have a purpose or reason for the pan.
- A tilt up or down. For example from a person’s eyes to the book they are reading, from a sign outside a building down to the entrance door or vice versa, and so on.
- A zoom in or out. For example from a church tower to the whole village, or from a close-up of a tank rolling to see it coming into the wider frame and showing its location.
- A wide angle where there is some distortion of the picture which can be used to effect if used with a pan or tilt.
- A point of view from over a person’s shoulder to show what they are seeing in relation to them.
- An opening and closing shot is good for getting the viewer’s attention and reaffirming the point of the pictures at the end. Classic shots for ends are sunsets, cars driving away, a door closing and so on. Watch films and see how they end. An opener is usually the best descriptive shot
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to show what the story or footage is about. For example, if it is about children in an African village having to walk miles every morning to school, then you would start with a wide shot of them leaving the village or else a close-up of feet walking. If it is storm damage or floods you would try and get the best wide shot to show the extent of the damage before using closer or mid-shots. If it is a tailback on a motorway, again you would need a top shot or wide shot to show it.

Slang terms: pov (point of view), gv (general view), PTC (piece to camera) or stand-up, track (any moving shot), B-roll (background shots).

Filming is something you begin to get a feel for: how to express the visual points you want to make, how best to show something. Everyone has their own style of filming, just as they do in writing or speaking and you should work on developing your 'eye' and visual signature. It is satisfying and creative, but if you just film literally any shots and hope they’ll do, you will find it does not pay dividends or work.

An interview with a professional dv camera trainer

Andy Benjamin who trains many BBC staff in what he terms self-op filming has his own views on how to use equipment.

Question: Should you always use a tripod?

My view is you have a vision of what your programme is going to look like so there are no rules on whether or not to use a tripod. It should always come from the story – if you’re following ambulance crews at night, you’d have to be hand-held and to set the camera on auto. If you have more time and it is a different sort of film, put it on tripod.

Question: Can someone be taught to have a visual eye?

Some people naturally have better hand/eye coordination than others – it’s an aptitude thing. If you look at the way some people move and their style, some are very deliberate and precise, some scatty. In my experience, the latter often have the best programme ideas and are good with people – but not with cameras. So you don’t always get both skills. It’s like being a bad or good driver.

Question: What is your favourite shot?

I don’t personally have one. There’s always the thrill of the new in this business and everyone is trying to get a look or new style. Some tend to overuse shots. In drama at one stage it was the NYPD Blues [American police series] style of shooting – never cut but with whip pans. This
was all rehearsed moves and is difficult to copy. Then there’s Louis Theroux style because it is all about his view of things and presenter-led. So the camera shots are from his perspective and from behind him, also filmed in one continuous shot. The programme producer felt if you cut a lot, the viewer thought they were missing things. Once you’ve got that sort of real time sequence you can use it whole. Pull-focus is difficult to do on the small cameras because of the chip size. I don’t recommend it. But for a deep two-shot then alright, it is an interesting device but if used in the wrong way, a little focus-pull looks like a mistake not an effect.

**After filming**

After filming the process goes on. The shots have to be viewed and logged or in any case noted; the commentary or script written and recorded. A good format is to use a table in MS Word and to write a rough running order for your story, with possible shots against the words (see Table 6.1).

Before you write your script:

- Make a plan, writing notes and bullet points before you write
- Put down interviews and quotes
- Facts and figures
- Look again at your rough running order. Use this as the basis for your script
- The script, storyline or narrative is the key to a report
- A script is determined by maths: three words per second
- Research defines the content
- The role of images
- Soundbites have to be short, 15–20 seconds
- Remember what your piece to camera says
- Lay out your script as in Table 6.1.

### Table 6.1 Running order and possible shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commentary</th>
<th>Pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is the morning after the worst floods the West Country has ever seen</td>
<td>Wide shot of flooded streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are still being rescued from the roofs of their houses by boats and helicopters</td>
<td>Person being helped to safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTC ‘Behind me is the main town square with all the cars submerged’</td>
<td>Reporter in vision with flooded square behind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing

- Open with a short sentence. Why? It focuses the reader on the story and you the writer on the telling
- The first sentence should encapsulate, titillate and make the viewer want to keep watching
- Think about giving details: time, place, date, ages, quantities
- Set the scene so the viewer can be there with you: just one phrase or sentence can do it
- First sentence to be followed by a second that details why you should stay interested, starting to unravel or tell the story
- Keep up the pace: whether a feature or news piece, the story-telling has to develop
- Use an active verb and not a passive one. That means ‘The train crashed into the car stalled on the tracks’ rather than ‘The car stalled on the tracks was crashed into by the train’.

Make the writing interesting

Example: ‘A multiple car crash in Birmingham’s city centre has this morning claimed the lives of 16 people’. Rather: ‘16 people were killed this morning in a multiple car crash in Birmingham city centre’.

Try not to use slang, jargon or clichés. Examples: sparked off, sixty-four-dollar question, infrastructure, nitty-gritty, brass tacks, in the red, took a dive, top of the table, wheeler-dealer, grass-roots, spin doctors, only time will tell, the future looks bright, no end in sight, beginning of the end, by and large.

Avoid over-used or abused metaphors. Examples: targets being exceeded, bottlenecks being cured, bridges crossed.

Cut your calories: use words that count. Hit the delete key and lose your adjectives. They are imprecise. A ‘massive’ earthquake happens one week and then another one a week later; what does ‘massive’ mean? A ‘big’ fire – whose scale of reference?

All of the above are often used and are part of what is known as ‘journalesse’. Watch any news bulletin and see how many you can identify.

Once you’ve written the script, consider this checklist:

- Is the top-line of the story sufficiently supported?
- Has someone double-checked, called or visited all the phone numbers, addresses or web addresses in the story? What about names and titles?
- Is the background material required to understand the story complete?
- Are all those in the story identified and have they been contacted and given a chance to talk if required?
- Does the story take sides or make value judgements?
- Is anything missing?
- Are all the quotes accurate and properly attributed and do they capture what the person really meant?
Logging

Logging takes time and yet it helps you to identify time codes for your material, to look again at what you have shot, which shots are usable and where the soundbites are and how long they are. Playing back your material can either be done on your camera or when you download your material onto your pc, through your edit software programme.

A log can use the same table format as the running order and script. You can just add the time codes to your script as well (see Table 6.2 and 6.3). If like the local TV VJs in Chapter 4, you are working against the clock, a much rougher logging or jotting down of the shots you want can be done, or if you are so sure of your story and have shot a small amount of footage then you can grab the shots as you download and then assemble your edit as you go.

Editing on a PC or laptop

Software programmes for editing to a professional standard are usually Avid or Adobe Premier Pro or if using a Mac, Final Cut Pro. Every PC today comes with an editing package which is useful for doing your own personal editing and for practising with. The programmes have to be learnt, but are not difficult to work with. In fact they allow you to edit creatively with an array of effects that can keep you occupied for hours experimenting. A news report or straightforward cutting of sound and pictures does not

Table 6.2 Logging shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time code showing hours, minutes and seconds</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
<th>Pictures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00.03.22–05.30 Choice of shots in these 2 minutes</td>
<td>This is the morning after the worst floods the West Country has ever seen</td>
<td>Wide shot of flooded streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00.06.30–07.50 Either one shot or several in these times</td>
<td>People are still being rescued from the roofs of their houses by boats and helicopters</td>
<td>Person being helped to safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.40–55 i.e. 15 seconds</td>
<td>PTC: Behind me is the main town square with all the cars submerged …</td>
<td>Reporter in vision with flooded square behind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.3 A brief log of shots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time code</th>
<th>Shot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tape 1</td>
<td>00.00.00–04.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.28–35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
usually require more than cuts between shots, but fades or dissolves can be
used depending on the programme and eventual output source and taste of
the news editor or producer who is taking your material. Also each story
demands certain effects and for a softer human interest story, for example,
dissolving from one scene to another may be acceptable, but not for a
story about a foreign conflict or a hard-edged political story. In order of
importance, editing has to:

- Ensure the report or story is understandable
- Be to time or an accepted length
- Have good sound levels
- Maintain a pace and interest
- Include a commentary track
- Include captions if that is the house style (or else caption details to be
  sent together with the script)
- Include other source material including library footage, any still photos
  or shots of relevant documents etc. that are needed for the story, graphics
  which have relevant statistics, facts or figures, written quotes.

It is easy to do graphics and captions for interviewees as well as for
information.

A house style, e.g. the font used and coloured strap, is important plus a
logo of the programme. Often the name straps, captions or Astons are put on
live during studio transmission, but each programme, bulletin and channel
has its own way of doing things.

**Recording commentary**

This can be done before editing and used as a track to cut the pictures too,
or else pictures and soundbites can be assembled first and then a voice track
or commentary added to link the story elements. Each person has their
preferred way of doing it. If time is a pressure then writing and recording the
commentary first is the fastest way. The commentary can be recorded straight
onto your pc, but the noise around may make going into a quieter space and
recording into your camera the better option. This is then downloaded off
your tape as with the shot footage. Again depending on the gatekeepers and
who has to check the script, it may be that the commentary is only a guide
and then is finalised at the last moment, or else that it is changed in some
ways, or passed.

For freelance VJs sending in a cut report, a script is often sent in with a
guide commentary or a separate commentary track is recorded, to allow for
editing or for re-voicing by someone else. For VJs just sending in footage
that has been bought to be cut or put into another report, a log of the shots
and the people interviewed is important.
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Captions

The names of interviewees have to be checked and double-checked for spelling and their title. Also captions for the dates of archive footage have to be accurate.

Tips: The best way to learn and improve your own editing style is to watch output and see how people approach cutting, the effects they use, and whether they work for you as a viewer or not. Also to watch feature films, documentaries and other genres like pop promos, videos or advertisements to see how they are edited. Remember that if your material is going out online then the size of the screen is much smaller, and the definition much less, so that the shots you choose need to be able to take a drop in quality for play-out.

Summary

Recording video needs preparation, consideration and organisation.

Once you have mapped out a plan of action, filming should be enjoyable, creative and rewarding. Compare it to cooking a meal for some friends. Do you just hope the meal will come together in some way, or do you plan it, read some recipes or ask for advice, write down the ingredients you need, go out and buy them and then come back to cook? Just picking up a camera, switching it on and ‘having a go’ is fine but not if your objective is to be professional and to use it for work. Even for personal use and say uploading onto your own blog site or for friends and family to watch, I would argue that the more planning that goes into it, the better the quality of the footage and the better the response.

Questions for students

1. How do you identify a story?
2. How do you pitch a story?
3. Is writing a rough script before you go out filming useful?
4. What are the rules to remember when writing a script or commentary?
5. Are there legal concerns to do with filming, and if so what are they?