

Candid camcorder

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Black out . . . Undercurrents cameraman at work PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM TURNER

Undercurrents videos show the angles television news misses

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Simon Hattenstone

BONG! Police disperse M11 road protesters with undue force. Bong! Criminal Justice Act outlaws peaceful protest. Bong! "Unemployable" man makes living pulling dropped coins out of drain. And finally! Third World countries silenced as Gatt destroys millions of jobs and paves way for environmental disaster.

It may not be what Trevor McDonald had in mind, but Under-

currents is good news for the British media. The alternative news service is produced on video cassette and is available by mail order or from independent book shops. Dedicated to environmental and social justice issues, its philosophy is simple — place the Hi8 camcorder (best quality) in politically sensitive situations, give time to people not normally heard, show angles not normally seen, and continue filming even when the nice man with the badge puts his hand over the lens.

After Channel 4's initial radical

surge, many alternative documentary film-makers felt they lacked an outlet. Thomas Harding, one of six members of Small World, the non-profit-making media company that runs Undercurrents, found he could not get his environmental films shown. Distributors would tell him they were too political, that they needed re-angling. Sorry, he would reply, but they *are* political and that *is* the angle.

Harding joined forces with Jamie Hartzell, another environmental film-maker. They started

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Undercurrents to enable Small World to report the issues and events that, but for a riot, would go unnoticed, and to encourage grass-roots direct action.

The first issue (the second comes out this month) was impressive. It ran at 85 minutes, cost £4,000 to make and was shot by a mix of activists and Small World workers. The quality was surprisingly good, but it didn't really matter; often the filming was at its most powerful when at its shakiest. With no presenters, just a string of films accompanied by subtitle read-bites, the format is almost Chart-Showish.

Undercurrents shocks (we see houses pulverised with people barricaded inside), informs (on the Criminal Justice Act) and exposes (the Bash The Baddy spot fires politically embarrassing questions at figures of authority

till they go red). The profile of the drainer who makes a living from recovering dropped coins is funny, sad and strangely uplifting. Its 40-minute documentary on the M11 road protesters, filmed long before they hit the mainstream news, won first prize at Germany's Okomedia film festival. "We tried to sell this to British TV stations, but they all said it was unusable," says Harding.

The camcorder has long been associated with Beadlesque inanity, but Undercurrents proves it to be a wonderful enabling tool. A vital part of Small World's work is training volunteers to make decent films. "The availability of high-quality video means that professionals are not the only ones who can make programmes," says Harding. Nevertheless, the BBC has recently equipped its professional foreign reporters with

camcorders so they can turn radio's From Our Own Correspondent into television.

While the camcorder is unlikely to transform mainstream news, it can *make* the news, as with the recording of Los Angeles police beating Rodney King, and can also challenge normal news values. Increasingly, the media is having to revise its original reporting of conflicts as people come forward with video evidence that contradicts their stories.

Although Undercurrents has received an EU grant, it is hardly rolling in riches (Small World members pay themselves £125 a week). But it can afford a certain insouciance. With next to no assets it does not fear libel suits, and is prepared to name names and, if necessary, secretly tape and broadcast conversations.

Despite its promising start,

Undercurrents could struggle. With only three issues a year planned, topicality will be difficult. And at close on £10, (for the employed), Small World does not reckon on selling more than 1,000 copies of the early issues. But once viewers have passed on the message — and video — it estimates that up to 100,000 people could get to see it.

Then there is the age-old problem: how do you make yourself known to those who are not already converted to the cause? One way forward is to tackle a broader range of issues. It also hopes to reach a wider audience by placing "shorts" in sympathetic cinemas and selling individual items to national and local TV stations.

Actually, Undercurrents would sit easily and proudly in the medium for the masses, but TV has never been quite as democratic as

it likes us to believe, not even in the days when the BBC cuddled up to Ken Loach, or when Channel 4 darned the socks of any documentary film-maker who could spell "anti-establishment". Anyway, if television were to set aside a nice little slot for alternative news, wouldn't it implicitly involve a terrible admission — that its perfectly balanced accounts of events just may have been skewed in the first place?

The new issue of Undercurrents (£8, £4 concessions) plus £1.50 p&p is available from 1A Waterlow Rd, London N19 5NJ. Further information: 071 272 5255, e-mail: small.world@gn.apc.org

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