



CHRONICLERS OF REALITY

DOCUMENTARY MAKERS ARE MORE THAN WILLING TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES TO CAPTURE THE TRUTH. LEE ZACHARIAH LOOKS AT SOME OF THE EQUIPMENT WHICH HELPS THEM GET THERE.

DAN FALLSHAW AND Violeta Ayala were in the midst of making *Stolen*, a documentary about refugees in Western Sahara, when they became the focus of unwanted attention.

Their questions about whether slavery was taking place had raised the ire of the Polisario Liberation Front. Fearing their footage would be seized, the filmmakers buried it in the desert and fled.

Later, with the help of the Moroccan Government, the footage was smuggled out of the country in diplomatic bags.

Such extreme measures highlight the sort of lateral thinking that chroniclers of reality must face and the hardships their equipment must take in the pursuit of truth.

Filming ABC mini-series *On Trial*, which examines the court system in New South Wales, might superficially appear to be easier, but filming inside the courtroom presented just as many obstacles.

The producers had to seek permission from the Attorney-General's department, the district court, the director of public prosecutions, the New South Wales police, not to mention all interested parties involved in the individual trials.

"We knew, in a sense, that it was always going to be a hard shoot," says producer Ian Collie, "because we had to get permission from all the key players before we could film."

In a sensitive situation like a criminal trial, obtaining permission was a lot more difficult than simply handing out release forms.

"It's a very stressful situation [for the defendant and their family]," says Collie, "particularly if they get convicted and go to jail.

"A lot of them said 'what's in it for me?' and

there's nothing really in it for them. What we want to do is show the criminal justice system and how it works in practice."

A key element of the agreement was that the documentary be as unobtrusive as possible.

The production used three cameras, almost always fixed to a tripod, so that the proceedings would not be interrupted by camera operators constantly panning and moving position. With a PA system already in place on the witness box, the sound recordist was able to tap into this and record directly from the source.

Anna Brownfield, the director of *Making It Handmade*, found that by being the lone crewmember and not having to coordinate numerous people on a daily basis, production became easier.

She used a HD tapeless Panasonic AG-HPX172EN P2 camera. "It's a light camera that isn't too imposing, which enabled me to move within the environments I was shooting easily and without making the subjects feel as though I was even there," Brownfield says.

Despite the advantages of working without a tape, a hard drive fault resulted in the loss of a half day's footage.

"I devised a better backup system that has since been working without a hitch. Without having a tape to return to at a later date, it is extremely important to make sure the data is backed-up in several independent places."

Advances in technology, particularly with high-end HD cameras, are of little direct benefit to low budget documentaries. The main piece of new tech that aids independent films is the internet.

Making It Handmade looks at how art and craft is experiencing a resurgence thanks to open source

online networks. Brownfield uses this genesis to her advantage.

"As this documentary is about a community that is primarily online, I blog about the film's progress and use social networking sites to keep people informed."

Phoebe Hart, director of *Orchid*, gives her work a deliberately eclectic look.

The documentary looks at people with intersex conditions; a somewhat sensitive subject for many of the people she planned to interview. "A lot of the participants weren't, at first, particularly willing to participate, or they were a bit reluctant to give us a go."

Hart deliberately created an intimate shooting situation that was designed to be as non-threatening as possible – "almost like a bit of a home movie".

"I've used everything from old M20 video cameras, VHS, to high-end Super 8 for interviews, HDV-style cameras, and pretty much everything in-between. I've used mobile phone footage and video from a stills camera."

The varied formats are both a creative and practical decision.

"It's about getting stuff that has a bit of an archival look, or when I haven't had another camera to hand when something's been happening."

Techniques that may seem like a budgetary necessity can actually end up being a stylistic choice.

"I'm actually doing a recut of it for ABC Broadcasting at the moment, and we're looking at things like animation and those kinds of effects, but even then we're doing a lot of hand-made film, then bringing it into the system and doing effects on it. It's about meshing the old with the new again."