

NETWORK 7

Female viewer – “A lovely programme ruined by poor camera work.” Caller was horrified when advised this was deliberate and Network 7 style.

Male viewer – “Stop messing about with the camera angles!”

Female viewer – “Appalling camera angles made her so dizzy she had to switch off.”

Male viewer – “Disgusted by programme. I’m a Christian and this is God’s day.”

Male viewer – “Interesting topics but the camera work makes me feel sick.”

Female viewer – “Asked if there were any problems with the transmitter?”

These are some of the phone calls Channel 4 received after the first few editions of Network 7. Martin Hawkins and Simon Morris give the low down on the angles.

Despite these comments the new current affairs programme, Network 7 went on to be one of the most talked about programmes on Channel 4. Both because of its content and visual style.

The idea of Network 7 was dreamt up by Janet Street-Porter and Jane Hewland who had wanted to do a big ‘live’ programme for some time. They went to Channel 4 who liked the idea but didn’t want to hand 22 episodes and £2.5 million to an ITV company. Keith MacMillan was added to the team to be responsible for the technical and production style, with LWT retaining editorial responsibility. The result was Sunday Productions, a 50/50 split between LWT and MacMillan’s Video Visuals. Network 7 was to be a current affairs programme aimed at a young audience but made with all the visual impact of one of MacMillan’s music shows and in contrast to the traditional current affairs type programmes.

The first thing we at Limehouse heard about N7, in April ’87, was a two-hour, five camera current affairs show(!?) on, yes you guessed, 22 Sunday lunchtimes through the summer. Bang goes the lunchtime pint!

The more we heard the more excited we got. The concept was a group of rebels camped out in a caravan graveyard putting out their own pirate TV programme. Hence it wasn’t Studio One but the top floor of the warehouse next door. The five cameras were all to be hand-held (nothing on a

tripod) and with fog filters!!!!

The lighting was going to be a mixture of daylight provided by the windows of the warehouse, sunbeds on motorised scissor lifts and tungsten from 1000 watt lamps fitted to shopping trolleys and in dustbins. In fact John Henshall lit the whole set without any traditional TV lamps.

The set was a collection of old caravans (which doubled as offices) hanging chairs, a ‘video heap’, a gaint 10 foot high television and a café area.

Endless captions flashing information at the viewer, live OBs, manic ‘ENG’ and a producer who wanted to make this lot into a current affairs show!!! Perhaps we wouldn’t miss the pint after all.

Slowly but surely the caravans arrived and were lifted into the second floor warehouse where they were converted into production offices and the set! The idea of the ‘rebel encampment’ was brought to life with caravans lining a curved ‘street’ and in the centre of it a scaffolding staircase led to the warehouse roof.

After the caravans went in, we rigged the camera cables – from CTA, on the first floor of Limehouse, to the warehouse. This meant hours of pushing and pulling cables through ducts and holes in the wall. Eventually five multicore cables and a triax spare arrived on the set. By now the electricians had installed lighting circuits, dimmers and tech mains. Which just left coaxial cables for monitors and multiways for sound.

Both sound and production control rooms were borrowed from Studio One with lighting being controlled from the warehouse.

Every Sunday morning during the series we were in at 7.30 to ‘rig’ the ‘studio’. First of all we would have a talk through with Tony Orsten, the series director, to give us an idea of that day’s show and how many cameras he needed to cover each item. Because of the large number of locations – the roof, the dockside, N7 entrance (at ground level) and the warehouse, which in itself was 100ft by 180ft – we had to be careful that the cameras could easily get to their positions in time and with enough cable!

The usual complement of cameras was three Sony 330s and two Sony 30s. We then decided which cameras would do what – the 30s would be the cameras which went inside and out, because they have a colour balance memory for each filter wheel position. The three wide angle lenses (two Fuji 7×7 and one 3.5–1) were put on the busiest cameras.

After rigging the usual sprinkling of TX and switchable monitors, all five cameras went to line up and we went to breakfast.

At nine o’clock we started camera rehearsal of the ‘studio’ items. A third of the two-hour programme was from the ‘studio’, rehearsals were restricted to a quick look at positions, lighting and the main points of interest of the item.



Christmas Sept. '87.

Although the programme was going to be manic we still had to get information over, it quickly became apparent that this revolutionary programme needed a revolutionary way of shooting. Hand-helds and wide angle lenses were chosen so that we could shoot in the restricted space of the caravans, where tripods would only get in the way and slow us down, and anyway it hadn't been done before!!!!

Most programmes have, to our minds, an uneasy mix of hand-helds and peds. This results in odd cuts between steady (hopefully!) ped shots and moving hand-held shots.

Network 7 gave us the unique opportunity to explore the endless possibilities of hand-held cameras. Now the camera had complete freedom why try and imitate a ped! A result of this was the canted shots, which gave great scope for manic framing, everyone liked this and it seemed to suit Keith's idea of a N7 look!

An early example of this was in show one when we had to shoot a demonstration of fitness. This included a shot of a man on a treadmill. With conventional framing there would have been a lot of air to the left and right of frame. But when canted with the man's head top left and his feet bottom right, there was no wasted frame. Effectively a tighter shot but with the same information. (Making better use of rather naff 4x3 aspect ratio?!).

Of course, being hand-held the camera could be on the floor to make things even more dramatic. On top of all this we had to take into account the famous captions constantly being supered at the bottom of frame.

Because we had five cameras and all wanted to be involved we used five cameras, we started with the usual wide shot camera, close-up camera and a couple of camera cross shooting. But this was too conventional for N7, the crew felt that better use could be made of the flexibility of the hand-helds.

As Tony Orsten said:

"It became more and more obvious that translating the viewer's image of the show onto camera, as opposed to cameras, was more interesting and an unusual way of doing things. I found that you could rely on three cameras to shoot something, even going down to two or even one."

This meant that each camera had to work harder on each item. For instance, if one

of the presenters was describing a piece of food and the 'on air' camera was on a mid-shot (canted single!!) we would just go in for a CU of the food (track not zoom). With the wide angle lens and the camera off the shoulder this was relatively easy. Taking the eyepiece magnifier out helped us see the shot with the camera at odd angles, except outside in the summer sun when we couldn't see the cue lights!!!! So Tony or Roz (the vision mixer) would keep us in touch. Focussing was a matter of being on 30ft or 18 inches... slowly and surely a look and a style was emerging.

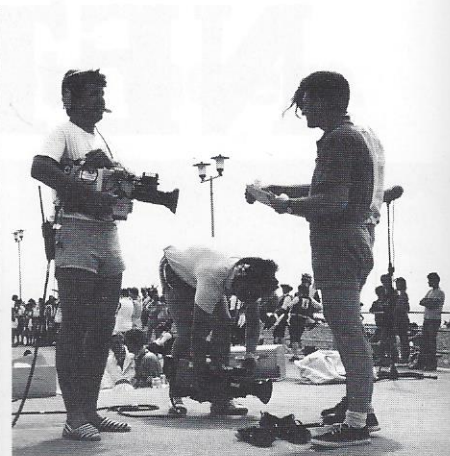
One of the problems of all this freedom was the cables. We had to be careful not to get them completely knotted as cameras cleared from one area to another. It was all to easy, in a rush, to take the shortest path and step over a cable you may already be under! Something you don't come across with a ped. Many a time was heard the cry "**** the cables, where's the radio link!!" Now there's an idea for series two...

Radio links were something we did have on the live OB. As the location wasn't decided till quite late in the week, flexibility was all important. Of the one or two cameras on location one had a radio man-pack, provided by BT. As the OBs came mainly from events which attracted large crowds, not being tied to the scanner with a cable gave the cameraman freedom to move anywhere and was much safer for the public. The radio links even extended to OB talkback from the 'studio' which was provided by a portable telephone. This method was used because most locations were not decided on before the Friday or Saturday, which didn't give Telecom enough time to arrange 2 or 4 wire talkback. The vision links were microwave so were more flexible when it came to locations.

The rehearsal time normally carried on till the check line-up about twenty minutes before TX. This last twenty minutes could turn into pandemonium as we changed monitor feeds, repositioned to the top of the show, changed into our N7 boiler suits, grabbed a sandwich, thought up that week's gossip shot and generally sorted out all those little (!?) pre-transmission problems.

Magenta's gossip section was made up of a live 'studio' interview and ENG material shot at night clubs, parties and pop concerts. The idea being to pick up celebrity gossip (i.e. who's bonking whom) with a Papatricie style of camera work.

Because all the locations were crowded and the idea was to keep a low profile, the standard ENG crew of cameraman, spark and sound recordist, each linked together with an array of cables wasn't practical. The solution? A one man unit. So our spikey haired cameraman, Colin, ventured off into the small hours armed with a Sony CCD BVW 105p, an electrovoice RE50 and a Pag light screwed to the top of the camera. Sound levels were monitored in the viewfinder and the effects via the camera mike, put on channel two. Apart from Colin the only other person needed was a bouncer/camera assistant - after all, walking through London's night clubs with £30,000 worth of equipment isn't a good idea at the best of times!!!!



It's hell on location - in Brighton.

A CCD was chosen to avoid the nightmares of comet tailing and sticking in the inevitable low light conditions. And of course the CCD is smaller and lighter.

The 'Pink Caravan' shot developed during the series as we ran out of ways of shooting Magenta's caravan. We tried the wide shot of Magenta outside on the steps, cut to a shot inside as she walks in. But you can only do that so many times. So the shot got more and more involved as the weeks went by.

One week we started with the camera on the roof of the pink caravan and passed it through the skylight ending on a shot of Magenta. On another occasion we passed the camera through three caravans before it ended up in Magenta's. This involved four cameramen hiding and taking the camera as it passed through various doors and windows.

Tony would leave this opening, and sometimes closing, shot to us to arrange. He would only see it on transmission - he must have been mad!!!! This became one of the most difficult parts of the programme. You try and think of 22 different ways of getting a camera into a caravan!

This was a good example of the trust that developed between Tony and the crew. One item that Tony remembers was on the day of the London marathon when we had a race track on the roof. The item was about cycling and cycling fashion. "At one point, apart from the wide shot I was on at the time, I was being offered a cycle seat, a foot and a handle bar. To a director on a normal show there would have been instantaneous panic, but I knew that if I said 'coming to three, take three' - that three, who was on the handle bars, would develop to the bloke's face or four, who was on the saddle, would have done the same. It was the intuitive knowledge that the person on the other end of the camera was an extension of the whole gallery."

Looking back on the 22 Sundays of N7 we all had a bloody good time. Having said that, we all hope that this was reflected in the output. As cameramen it gave us the unique opportunity to explore the use of hand-helds like never before. You may have liked the camerawork or hated it but at least everybody talked about it!!

We're all looking forward to the new series which starts at the end of May. •



What Experts!