

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

191G0931.mov

Interviewer: So tell me where were you born?

00:14:21:04 - 00:14:33:10

Paul: I was born in Dublin, Ireland, and lived there until about 16, before I escaped and I went travelling around the world and ended up in London.

00:14:33:12 - 00:14:38:04

Interviewer: When you say escape, what were you escaping from?

00:14:38:06 - 00:15:00:04

Paul: Ireland! Yeah. Well I was, I was following a long lineage of hundreds of years of leaving the country really. Just because since the famine really and the British Empire had their way with us. Really. It was every generation. We just left. You left school. That's what you did. You left Ireland. Ireland was a very poor, depressed country.

00:15:00:06 - 00:15:04:14

Interviewer: And where did you travel to?

00:15:04:16 - 00:15:37:01

Paul:

All around Europe really just took off and just bummed around and trying to find out a goal in life, really. And what I really wanted to do. And, in Ireland got into photography, sports photography. So I started doing that and kind of took that then. Then I started photographing bands around Europe and following Irish bands and all kind of finding out what to do, really, and what was life and then discovered sort of then you, the Berlin Wall was there just after for that, and then everything just sort of went from there, really and then the squatting movements, punk umm yeah.

00:15:45:04 - 00:15:46:16

Interviewer:

Wait you were there when the Berlin Wall?

00:15:46:16 - 00:16:11:08

Paul:

Just after. Yeah. Yeah, just months afterwards. Which was wild because you had this whole thing. Everybody moved from from East, East Berlin over to the west, but everybody in the west went, oh, there's lots of empty buildings over there. So they moved into East Berlin and set up these amazing resource centres, squats, community cafes was fantastic and very vibrant scene there. And that's kind of my first introduction to the counterculture really.

00:16:15:08 - 00:16:19:16

Interviewer: Wow. Was there any video around then or was that.

00:16:19:18 - 00:16:39:03

Paul:

Probably. Yeah. I wasn't doing any filming at all really. Like I was doing a lot of photography and even by that stage I've kind of put the cameras. I got all my camera stolen actually in Germany. So that kind of was the end of that. But it was kind of a freedom in a way, really. Looking back on that now, I think some of the things I've seen and how they've changed now, it would have been great to have a record of it, but actually not having anything was just quite a relief, really. And it kind of led into video then eventually.

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00:16:53:02 - 00:16:56:13

Interviewer:

So what happened after Berlin?

00:16:56:15 - 00:17:29:08

Paul:

Yeah. No. Went back to, Yeah. I was all over the place. And then festivals. And I came back for a Glastonbury Festival in 1992, and I came back then, and then I met Zoe. Zoe Broughton and she was working with this group called Small World. So, I thought that was kind of interesting. And then we got involved in this campaign in East London, for this road campaign, the now M11 link road.

00:17:29:10 - 00:17:49:23

Paul:

And then it was again, there was lots of squats there. And the idea was to squat each house that the road was coming through to slow up the road. And, Zoe was saying, well, we should film this. So I said great idea. So it's okay. Well, let's find a video camera. And I thought, well, this is quite like a huge movement here.

00:17:49:23 - 00:18:37:09

Paul:

Like the chopping down a thousand trees and I come out. It was 400 houses along this route. I thought, this is a big story. And it wasn't really being covered at all. The media and then I said, right, let's get a video camera. And then, so this is like '93 and then the BBC Communities Programmes unit was up there and we heard about those. So I said, well, let's go and meet them. And I got a meeting with Bob Long. And I said, listen, the Criminal Justice Bill is making a lot of noise and it's going to affect everything that I'm involved with. Travellers, squatting, music. Right to Silence, all these kind of things that massive sort of attack on the counterculture that I was a part of.

00:18:37:11 - 00:19:29:09

Paul:

So I said, well, we need to do something and raise awareness for this, give us a camera. And Bob was like, yeah, maybe kind of, yeah, kind of I think this is a serious thing. So he did, eventually. No, he didn't actually he refused. And he said, no, I'm gonna think about it and go right. And I came away from that thinking like, this is important. So we need to get this. So, I went and bought a camera, a video camera, this yellow sort of bash-proof, waterproof camera, video 8 and start filming our own protests and direct action. And it was incredible really like showing the footage back to everybody each evening saying like, this is what we just did and a lot of the locals would come along and sit and watch with the activists and go, oh, right, okay, okay, this is what's involved.

00:19:29:11 - 00:20:11:11

Paul:

And I actually this there's something here, there's power here. We're kind of making our own news and showing it. And we did that for a while. And then my camera got smashed by a security guard. I thought urgh. And then eventually Bob Long got in touch and realised, actually, the Criminal Justice Bill was a big thing. So gave me a camera for a huge eviction. So I was on the roof there filming riot cops smashing in doors and cherry pickers coming in and picking people off the roof. So that was very dramatic. And it was immediate. It was right, right there. And they saw the footage and it's just like, okay, this is a whole different story, really. And then... um

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00:20:11:13 - 00:20:13:22

Interviewer:

So did Bob commission you to do a video?

00:20:14:03 - 00:20:36:01

Paul:

No. No. So what they did was that it took about six months and then they use about 30 seconds, if that, for a very small piece. And it just said a lot of a TV at the stage. I was just like, Jesus, this is this is what happens when they can't spot a story that's in front of them that had huge repercussions on the culture we were involved in.

Interviewer: Who was Bob Long?

Paul:

So Bob Long he was the BBC Communities program unit. He was a, I don't know, commissioning editor, I suppose, head of...

00:20:49:03 - 00:20:50:18

Interviewer:

I think he was head of the CBU at the time.

00:20:50:18 - 00:20:56:16

Paul:

Yeah, yeah. Nice guy. But, but yeah, but.

00:20:56:18 - 00:20:58:04

Interviewer:

This is all M11 stuff?

00:20:58:07 - 00:21:15:13

Paul:

This is all M11. Yeah. So this is all around the M11 and the criminal justice bill, which was coming in '94, and they were pushing that through and broadcast media were completely ignoring it. There wasn't a single thing on television about the Criminal Justice Bill. So we said, well, let's do it ourselves.

00:21:15:15 - 00:21:20:02

Interviewer: So what were the particular features of the Criminal Justice Bill?

00:21:20:02 - 00:21:42:24

Paul:

It was various like I'd been a traveller. I'd basically been living in vans all over Europe. So I thought that making that illegal makes it much more difficult to be like a new age traveller. The right to silence was a big thing for me. I thought I'd been arrested enough times that I know that like you, say nothing.

00:21:42:24 - 00:22:24:23

Paul:

You don't give evidence to the police, let them find it. So I thought, well, that's that's not good. Squatting. I thought, there's so many houses that were empty and abandoned for like, 20, 30

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years that I'd seen people get in, do them up, live in it, and, do incredible things. So I thought, well, that's affecting me. And then right in protest. So there were, there were curtailing that with aggravated trespass. So any direct action they were trying to make a criminal offence. So I thought all these kind of things. This is going to have huge impacts on people and why are they not being discussed? So we said, well, let's make our own film. And that.

00:22:25:00 - 00:22:25:16

Interviewer: And a film came out of all that work?

00:22:25:16 - 00:23:30:02

Paul:

Exactly. Yeah, yeah. So then Jamie, Zoe was working with Jamie and then and Thomas Harding and, then we had a meeting. Well, the M11 was kind of coming to a head. There was a huge eviction planned, and, we got together and said, well, okay, well, let's film this as part of the Criminal Justice Bill and we'll make a thing about how protest is being erm affected. And we had a meeting. We thought, yeah, this is this is good, let's do this. And they had TV experience. I had activist experience, photography. I had a video camera. Zoe had she'd studied media studies. So it was an interesting sort of group of four of us with different backgrounds and so the eviction was planned and they sent in a thousand riot cops in East London, which was quite a scene, especially when you're sitting on a roof and you've been up there all night with 300 people who'd all come up to resist it.

00:23:30:04 - 00:24:14:03

Paul:

And it was quite visual spectacle, really. And we had four cameras in different places. Plus we had other people who had cameras that we could call up if we wanted the footage. So from that we made this Criminal Justice Bill piece, which was about, I think it's about eight minutes showing who was a fact and how it would affect. And we got in touch with, people in the rave scene. They'd made a video and we put it together and said, right, we've got a video, let's go and show it around. And then we thought, well, we've got this video, how are we going to distribute it? And then the M11 was getting bigger and bigger. We thought well we should make a film about the M11 link road.

00:24:14:05 - 00:24:27:12

Paul:

So we thought, okay, we'll do that. So we made a film of the M11 link road campaign that the campaign could use. And then we thought we have two films now and then erm.

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Interviewer: Could you say a little bit about what the M11 campaign was about?

00:24:32:01 - 00:25:02:22

Paul:

Yeah. So the M11 link road was, it was a road linking the M11 into the central London is what they were doing. And to do that, a building, this link road that would cost hundreds of millions of pounds and cut through Wanstead, Leytonstone, Leyton. Literally carve their way through communities, destroy houses, roads, parks, everything really and people just thought, well, we don't want this road and they've been campaigning since the 60s against it, but...

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00:25:03:14 - 00:25:24:10

Paul:

This campaign really sparked off the the anti roads movement all over the country at that stage. So a Newbury bypass and Twyford Down and there were all part of it. And this was because it was London centric there was a lot of people, it was accessible. So people came from everywhere and it just go ahead...

00:25:24:12 - 00:25:52:20

Interruption: Don't die. It's all right.

Paul:

So yeah. So the whole thing just mushroomed really from that as a roads movement. So it was a key point. And again, it wasn't being covered or it was if it did get coverage, it was Green Guerrillas. We were called Eco Zealots. All the usual Daily Mail stuff. And we thought we need something to balance that.

00:25:52:22 - 00:26:15:24

Paul:

So, so we made a film of the campaign from different perspectives. And because there was lots of, High 8 camcorders kicking around, we just got footage from lots of different people and made this 40 minute documentary. "You've got to be Choking" it was called. And, Yeah so we had the two films, and then we thought, well, what else can we get?

00:26:15:24 - 00:26:38:24

Paul: And then George Monbiot was, a young, you know, an up and coming troublemaker then.

So we put a camera on him and he went up to a councillor about cycling in Oxford, who had basically banned all cycling lanes and everything else. So George put a microphone up to him and George in his great manner really he came across really well and ran rings around this guy so we thought

00:26:38:24 - 00:27:01:24

Paul:

Okay, we got a little news piece there and then lots of different pieces came up. So we had this bunch of films and we said, right, how do we distribute? And it was Jamie came in and said he just read about Tony Benn just released his speeches, his best speeches on VHS tape and sold 100,000 tapes.

00:27:02:01 - 00:27:28:13

Paul:

We were just going what? So we thought, well, VHS tape, okay, there's a distribution, these are years before the internet was around, for video. So we thought, right, VHS. So we thought we put the videos, we compiled them onto one block of VHS tape, made 500 copies designed a cover and said, right, what now? And then we took them around...

00:27:28:13 - 00:28:02

Paul:

...festivals. The Glastonbury's and Green Gatherings and church halls, community centres, anywhere we could we just showed the films. And it was an Undercurrents: Alternative news service is how we dubbed it the news you don't see on the news. And it was incredible. The response, like from the word go, it was just, wow, okay, we've got something here. People are desperate for alternative views. So then The Guardian did a review and we just got this, new

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phone system. We just moved into a new office. It was a new phone system, and it was 16 phone lines. Which we were all going to get removed. And so it was the Guardian and then from the Guardian, the little picture show picked up from the Guardian, and they reviewed, Mariella Frostrup reviewed *Undercurrents* on TV and it went out at 10:00 in the evening, I think it was.

00:28:28:07 - 00:28:49:05

Paul:

And we were all in the office and at the very end of the review, very positive review. It was great. She put our phone number up and like literally within minutes of it going up, all our phone lines lit up and we're just going, okay. So we spent hours just answering the phone and taking orders from people. And we haven't got anything sorted out by then really.

00:28:49:07 - 00:29:17:01

Paul:

So all 500 copies were gone, soon as. So then we'd get more made. And then it just went down from there. It was just like a snowball. We were getting reviews and everything from Face magazine, ID magazine. It was just it became this thing, like video activism became a thing right across the media. And yeah, it all just just kept piling in and we thought, right, we've got something here.

00:29:17:03 - 00:29:19:19

Interviewer: Why do you think it mushroomed like that?

00:29:19:21 - 00:30:17:03

Paul:

I think at this time, like we had you had BBC and ITV and that was kind of it really like channel Four was around. They were doing fairly interesting stuff. But literally on news, there was no other source. You didn't have internet, you didn't have any other ways of getting visual news really. Magazines were very popular. So people were reading about this stuff, but they weren't seeing it moving images. So I think it was that really. And it just became very immediate.

Interviewer: How much did you sell them for?

00:30:17:03 - 00:30:41:02

Paul:

So yeah, we worked out and, with un waged or low wage for a fiver, or 12 pound for a videotape, or you can subscribe for three issues for £35, which was to basically help us produce the next one then. And then we had this guy, we had various people come in and join us then, one was Ted from Canada and Corey from the States, and they were very media savvy, and they knew Photoshop and how to put it all together and leaflets and fliers. We thought, okay, this is great. This looks a bit more professional now.

00:30:41:04 - 00:31:09:03

Paul:

And, we just went for it then really, and trying to get subscriptions. We realised that's the way to do it is get subscriptions, because that gives us a funding base. And, then we planned *Undercurrents* Two and that came out. So *Undercurrents* One we launched April 1994 we thought April 1st was a suitable day. And we've done a lot of things on April 1st ever since.

00:31:09:05 - 00:31:30:03

Paul:

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And then Undercurrents Two came out erm '95 the start of 95. And then by that stage, a lot of people had seen it. And then in different campaigns around the country, they were phoning in and saying, listen, I want to make a film. And we said, okay, we've got an edit suite, which was a huge thing as there was no edit suites around then.

00:31:30:05 - 00:31:53:19

Paul:

And Jamie had managed to get funding to get an edit suite. So we had this video machine. It was called and phenomenal. Phenomenal. Just the fact you could compile your tapes in a digital, you couldn't actually online digital edit like now, the way we do it now but it lined up your tapes. But first of all, we would edit on VHS cassette.

00:31:53:21 - 00:32:31:22

Paul:

So we'd get filmmakers in and say right here's your crash editing essentially, with a controller VHS to VHS with timecode burnt in, and people would make their own films, and then we'd go on to the video machine and do the online digitally. But it was a real revelation for people. People would come in, with this whole box of tapes and they'd go out with a three minute film at the end of it whittled down. And suddenly that became a thing then that it was a, we were production and distribution then for alternative news.

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Interviewer: For quite a wide range of issues?

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Paul:

Huge. Yeah, yeah, we had everything with everything from, strong Tory upbringing people sort of fighting against a golf course destroying their local nature reserve right up to full on anarchists. So it was a broad sweep, really, of everything. But the fact it was all over and suddenly people were seeing protests happening in Scotland as Wales in London or Twyford Down and was just like you saw it was peace, it was people jumping on nuclear convoys, road protests...

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Paul:

Golf courses, you name it, everything that people were standing up against. Suddenly on one cassette you kind of see a movement and you can see actually this is quite big, like a direct action movement is really growing. It wasn't just people marching a banner on the street. This was like people taking direct action which which is much more immediate and much more interesting, really.

00:33:38:01 - 00:34:03:24

Paul: So that was Undercurrents Two them.

Interviewer: And where were you based at that point?

00:34:03:24 - 00:34:09:09

Paul:

We were based in north London, Archway. So and so Jamie had got, an inheritance and he put that into building a resource centre. He bought an office in archway and then rented it out to different campaign groups at low rent, but shared resources so we had the top office then.

00:34:09:11 - 00:34:25:01

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Interviewer:

So looking back on that, that era, what I mean, obviously it went very well were there were any drawbacks or limitations to what you were doing there?

00:34:25:03 - 00:35:02:13

Paul:

Drawbacks? Yeah. Interesting drawbacks. The limitations. To. No, it just felt all revolutionary, like. Yeah. I can't think of any drawbacks. Like, suddenly we had our own distribution and we could produce our own films. It was incredible. So, yeah, if anything really, I felt I think we felt more equipped then than we do now with the internet and everything else. Where we're just swamped with images and everything. Now I think we just hit something at the right time. So yeah, I can't think of any drawbacks back then.

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Interviewer: So VHS was a successful distribution method then?

00:35:06:14 - 00:35:31:17

Paul:

Yeah. It was. Yeah, yeah. Looking back at the quality of VHS now, it's just shocking. I can't believe like people are watching it, let alone we, we were going around screening it everywhere like it was dreadful quality. And there was also a lot of stuff filmed on hi8 or video 8 camcorders, a lot of wobbly cam. But again, I dunno it was, storytelling as well. People told good stories.

00:35:31:19 - 00:35:41:16

Interviewer:

Do you how much do you think the success of Undercurrents really depended on all the activist movements around at that time?

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Paul:

And very much so. Yeah, very much because, we were tapping into networks and because we were activists ourselves. We were travelling...

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00:35:51:12 - 00:36:14:22

Paul:

around all over the country getting involved in different protests. Meeting lots of different people. So we got a groundswell of trust really. Erm but all those activist groups had different networks to the point of even, copying the tapes as well. And that became a whole thing that we had nothing to do. We didn't even know what was happening most of the time.

00:36:14:24 - 00:36:39:24

Paul:

Especially in Manchester, they were copying hundreds of our tapes and shipping them out and sending them off. And, I went to Prague, for a conference, an activist conference. And I went over there and on the shelf of this resource centre was all our videos, all translated, and we had no idea that was going on.

00:36:40:01 - 00:37:06:10

Paul:

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And we thought, wow, this is great.

Interviewer: So you don't really even have to see precise figures for the distribution?

Paul: No idea. No idea.

Interviewer: I mean, do you know how many VHS you put out?

Paul: We'd end up doing about 3000 of each one. And then I know they were copied thousands of times, and then they were shown to a lot of community TV around Europe, like Denmark and TV stop.

00:37:06:14 - 00:37:26:18

Paul:

And they'd show our films as well. So it was getting into the strangest of places like Australia, Aboriginal TV. They were showing it like, because we got these random emails from people from far side of the world, just kind of like, I've just seen your film, but I'm not sure what. So yeah, it took on a life of its own maybe.

00:37:28:05 - 00:38:06:04

Interviewer: And did you have a get any relationship with TV in this country?

Paul: Oh yeah. Yeah. So because I was filming all these actions, because I know that they were going to happen, I was getting into particular places and getting the best positions and filming these actions, whether it was people jumping on bulldozers or climbing the Houses of Parliament to get on the roof to drop banners or whatever it was, really.

00:38:06:04 - 00:38:31:21

Paul:

So I did all this footage. So I ended up selling a lot of footage to news, and that became an income then, that would fund me basically sort of going out and filming other stuff. And that was really useful and literally like every probably four times a week I'd be selling to ITV or BBC or CNN, CBC, anything really, or Japanese TV, if it was related to whaling or whatever.

00:38:31:21 - 00:39:06:01

Paul:

It was really. Yeah. So did a lot of footage of that. But we were constantly sort of pitching to Channel Four particularly saying, listen, we're doing this. This is Undercurrents commission us to make a programme about activism. And it was always a no, constantly a no. And then, when Tony Blair got into power and the day he got in, they phone us up and said, oh we'll commission programmes from you now.

00:39:06:03 - 00:39:29:00

Paul:

So we had a meeting with them and it was, it was kind of the best of undercurrents they wanted. That was Channel Four and Best of Undercurrents, they wanted it. But there was one stipulation we weren't allowed to mention Labour, so everything had to be under the Tories. So it was protests against the Tories. I was like oh so that's how it works.

00:39:29:00 - 00:39:50:12

Paul:

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I said, okay, and they explained to us as it was hot history and cold history. And so because the Tories were out of power, suddenly it was cold history then. Yeah, we can do it then. But we couldn't do it at the time because it was too conscious, too controversial, whatever really maybe I was like, okay, I said it was, it was mind blowing.

00:39:50:14 - 00:40:15:23

Paul:

But the, it was fascinating. I'm trying to think the commissioning editor for that, but he doesn't ring a bell, that name. But he was running around sort of trying to get his own credentials. So he went on a protest against Shell once and not no, it wasn't Bob Lombard, but it was fascinating just watching him trying to get kudos amongst us.

00:40:15:23 - 00:40:35:18

Paul:

I mean, just thinking, what? So, but it was a real insight how that worked. The, the legal loopholes we had to try and find for everything. And they were just like, no, no, you can't do that. You can't say that. Now we've got to take this out. And I was like, what? And we just had kept pushing back at them, pushing back.

00:40:35:18 - 00:41:01:18

Paul:

And we finally got it through. We did two 24 minute programmes and we call it Major Resistance. So it was resistance under John Major. And we thought that was good because they wouldn't let us call it Undercurrents was the other thing. So we thought, okay, major resistance, we'll call it. So then it finally went out and the that was a when's it going to go out?

00:41:01:18 - 00:41:22:16

Paul:

What's the time? They wouldn't tell us. And then literally like the day before it was due to be broadcast, they told us and they'd changed the name back to Undercurrents. So in the the listings we went it was Undercurrents. So it went on TV and we thought, yeah, this is going to be something. And I went on TV and nothing like nothing.

00:41:22:18 - 00:41:55:19

Paul:

We didn't get any emails, phone calls, nothing. And it was like, okay, this this is a bit weird. And we thought, well, maybe that's just TV. It's basically it went on like 11:00 at night. And I don't know, maybe people just aren't as engaged, whatever it was, it was really odd, but it told us something about television that we were getting much more interaction with the way we were doing it on VHS, so we never did much more with TV after that. It kind of taught us a lesson, really.

00:41:55:21 - 00:41:59:24

Interviewer: It's incredible.

Is that because you were looking at Past tense?

00:42:05:01 - 00:42:27:22

Paul:

Yeah, it might well have been that really. I think it wasn't well produced, really. Because we didn't mean that we were dealing with Telly really. We were kind of, which is the current model, really just videos. We just slammed them together. Really. So it wasn't particularly well produced. We could have done a lot better looking back on it now.

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00:42:27:24 - 00:43:35:19

Paul:

But we kind of think, well, they didn't help at all. And you think like why not sit down with us, give us some pointers, whatever. But they didn't. But yeah, I think that the fact that it didn't stand out from all the other TV programs, high gloss and it was called budget, really, that it gave us, so but yeah, it might have been the fact it was looking back and anybody in the activist movement was looking at what Labour was doing, where they're going to repeal the criminal justice bill now, where they're doing a lot of the stuff that the Tories were doing, yes. So things hadn't really changed. And the activist scene really. So, yeah, it might well have been that really

Interviewer: interesting. So how did Undercurrents work develop and change over the next couple of decades?

00:43:35:20 -00:44:01:00

Paul: Well we spent ten years doing the alternative news video. We did the last one in 1999. And because we thought at that stage, you know, things were changing, cameras were a lot more available. So there's a lot more people making films. And people had their own edit suites. So we thought, well, maybe it's not needed anymore. And then we just carried on supporting campaign groups and training activists to make their films and distribution. We kind of stepped away from. And then a few years after that, we, we thought, oh, DVDs now were a thing.

00:44:01:00 - 00:44:30:12

Paul:

So we thought, well, I will do a DVD suite. We did an Undercurrent News Network DVD, similar sort of idea pulled, pulling films from around the world. Activist films launched that showed that that was good. And we tried CD-ROMs, films on CD-ROMs and disks because they're easily copied cheap. And that was good. And of course, then the internet was sort of coming in and kind of maturing really for broadband.

00:44:30:14 - 00:44:57:16

Paul:

So we thought, well, how do we make the most of this? So in 1999, just going back to that was, the Carnival Against Capitalism, and that was a whole idea of shutting down London. And loads of different groups came together, reclaim the streets, particularly to, shut down the stock exchange. All the kind of the banking financial district.

00:44:57:20 - 00:45:44:14

Paul:

So it was going to be a huge action. So we thought look, we're going to have to document this. So Undercurrents we coordinated, 16 different people filming, different fractions of the day. And we arranged him with couriers with the whole idea was that it would be live streamed. This is 1999, remember! And, Matt Black from this band Cold Cut. He was a big DJ musician at the time. And, we were set up in London Bridge, and the whole idea was we'd get all the tapes back from all the couriers during the day, and he would mix it to music, a live stream. And this was all very exciting. We thought, wow, okay, this is this is the the new distribution.

00:45:44:14 - 00:46:08:13

Paul:

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This is the new wave of internet, video on the web. This is great. And, I remember it was a lot of work coordinating all these people and getting it through riot police. And it kicked off big time, really. And I wonder how many people were there? 100,000 people, like, all over London, just coming from all different directions and congregating in the middle.

00:46:08:13 - 00:46:28:24

Paul:

And it was just it was such a visual treat. Everything was going on. And so I remember getting back, and then into the room and there was all this kit, like, was like NASA all this kit and streaming. There was this little postage stamp that was streaming you could see. And that's kind of what came up.

00:46:29:03 - 00:46:33:13

Paul:

And how many people are watching this. And so I'm about 30 now. We're up to I'm thinking 30.

CLIP 4 - 191G0934.mov

00:46:33:16 - 00:46:58:13

Paul:

If I was looking for something. And then I realized it was actually saying 30 something, 30 people! I think he said that the server can't handle any more. What! And of course, yeah, he was a pioneer at the time, but none of this kind of we knew beforehand. And I just realised, oh my God, like, video on the web is so far away that.

00:46:58:15 - 00:47:27:23

Paul:

Yeah, but yeah. So we got all the tapes then and we edit a video and knock together 40 minute video, and then we had that out within a few days and that would tour the country, then filling cinemas everywhere and community cinemas. We were packing it out there and, and people were seeing what was going on from all different angles and that that was quite an education. But I realised then the internet just wasn't there then.

00:47:27:23 - 00:47:29:16

Interviewer: So then in the early 2000s?

00:47:29:18 - 00:48:02:16

Paul:

Yeah. Yeah. So then we were looking at, climate camps were popping up and climate camps where, these groups would choose target like a power station, or whatever, whatever polluting nuclear, whatever, whatever they'd choose, and have a climate camp, which is getting lots of people together to discuss climate issues and then take an action wherever direct action was shutting down Kingsnorth power station or whatever it was.

00:48:02:18 - 00:48:24:15

Paul:

And we thought it'd be great to have a TV studio set up in the middle of it. So we kind of worked out the logistics of that the technology. How could you do it with camcorders and a mixer? And we worked it out and it worked well. So we've got people coming back from an action. Chairs put them sitting there, have a Q&A about well what just happened?

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

00:48:24:17 - 00:48:49:13

Paul:

And then we'd drop in footage of the actions and we'd edit that and then we'd have it. We'd have a, a video ready to go, a chat show, as it were. And then we couriered that out, past the police lines, because they'd surrounded the camps. And then we got somebody with decent broadband to upload it and that was great.

00:48:49:13 - 00:49:04:24

Paul:

And then people were watching that and coming to the camp and coming into us and saying, I'm only here because I've just watched it, because they could see the camp in the background, they could see the people who were involved and it was as close to live as they could get really. So they knew the the set up.

00:49:04:24 - 00:49:13:17

Paul:

So loads of people came in there and we thought, oh, this is, this is kind of interest to me. This is a whole different thing. It's like community TV in a way.

00:49:13:19 - 00:49:16:08

Interview: So this was all broadcast on the net?

00:49:16:08 - 00:49:42:23

Paul:

This was all broadcast on the net, yeah. It wasn't stream it wasn't live streamed. We just didn't have the capabilities to live stream it. But it was kind of like YouTube came in 2005. This is 2004. So it was kind of early days. It's maturing. But people were watching it and we thought, well, this internet could be an exciting kind of distribution model.

00:49:43:00 - 00:50:03:03

Paul:

But what happened there was we realised that there's no money in it. So we were doing all this work. There's no way of monetising it. It was great to have some sort of distribution, but the sales of the VHS tapes of the DVDs meant we could produce the next one. We could pay for sort of travel costs and everything else, and suddenly we had no income.

00:50:03:05 - 00:50:30:06

Paul:

And we're producing these films and we're going, okay, this is a this is a whole different thing. So we thought, well, let's do a film festival. Maybe that's an interesting way of sort of bring an income. But yeah, what you do with all these films. So we ran a film festival then for ten years in Swansea, where we are now. Beyond TV a video Activist Festival.

00:50:30:08 - 00:50:35:19

Interviewer: What year did that start?

00:50:35:21 - 00:51:04:09

Paul:

So the first one we did of that was 2001. Yeah 2001, November 2001. And that was great. And that grew into quite something really, with filmmakers from all over the world and video activists coming and showing their films and then its discussions afterwards. And again, we used the TV live TV studio set up then. And that was great, really.

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

00:51:04:09 - 00:51:27:18

Paul:

So we'd, we'd interview Afghani filmmakers about their film and then put the two of them together and then distribute those. And that was that was great, really, because it became we've kind of put a festival into the film festival. So I've been to a lot of film festivals, but they're not much of a festival in many ways. So we basically put in the music and dance because it most from what we realised it was the socials afterwards...

00:51:27:23 - 00:51:50:00

Paul:

That's where the power is. That's when people connect and so we really went to town on that and pulled that in really. And it was yeah. So that's we spent six months organising it and then doing the festival in November and December. And that was a whole new distribution then really. But again, the same problem we just kept coming against.

00:51:50:00 - 00:52:03:04

Paul:

How do you monetise these films, how do you get funding? And yeah, we never found an answer for that, really. The internet was great in some respects but in other respects it kind of killed us really.

00:52:03:06 - 00:52:05:19

Interviewer: Interesting. So you've got some more viewers but probably less ability to go and do more work

00:52:18:04 - 00:52:38:21

Paul:

Yeah. Which is exactly which is exactly what happened it is the exactly what happened. Because we couldn't we couldn't afford to do a lot of stuff. And there was a real sort of revelation. And then it was like, okay hmm what do we do here? And because the way the internet started, everybody expected everything for free. I why that happened is bizarre.

00:52:38:22 - 00:52:52:11

Paul:

Everything was just given away for free. And of course it was advertising. That's what drove the internet, corporate advertising, which we were completely against all that. So we couldn't monetise that. So it was like, okay, what do we do?

00:52:52:13 - 00:52:56:09

Interviewer: And what did you do in the end?

00:52:56:11 - 00:53:30:08

Paul:

We kind of ground to a halt is essentially what we did. Yeah. Like eventually we kind of all went our separate ways. Some went into television and Roddy went in doing all the undercover work for Sky News directly from Undercurrents. They basically headhunted him. Ted worked BBC nature programs in Bristol yeah and we just all went separate ways really.

00:53:30:08 - 00:53:58:02

Paul:

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

And then sort of came together every so often to do a film that we could find funding for, and we worked together and do a film. And then it was kind of more sporadic like that then and then training. Zoe went into a lot of training and she's trained hundreds of activists now. And then, of course, mobile phones came in, the camcorders kind of went west, and now everybody was filming on mobile phones.

00:53:58:02 - 00:54:08:01

Paul:

And then it was like, well, how do you film on a phone to get decent images and how do you use it best? So Zoe's been doing that for years now, really, which is great.

00:54:08:03 - 00:54:13:21

Paul:

And, and Undercurrents now exists right now does it? Principally as a website?

00:54:13:23 - 00:54:37:13

Paul:

Yeah. Suddenly. Yeah. So Undercurrents now, we've kind of carried on. We do films as and when we want. Really. We're not doing the same err quantities of films as we used to, but it's more targeted and it's probably longer films, like we did one on fracking there a couple years ago. We got because we saw the fracking campaign was huge it needed support.

00:54:37:17 - 00:55:05:22

Paul:

So a bunch of us got involved, found the money and just got stuck in and supporting the fracking activists and made a documentary of that. Power Trip it was called. And we toured that around all the different places where they were going to get fracking and successfully, really because they stopped fracking in this country. So it was things like that really we targeted, targeted films or films on the media looking at what was happening, the media, the journalists being arrested.

00:55:05:24 - 00:55:20:00

Paul:

We said, well, let's expose that. So we did that, won a few awards and worked with the NUJ to sort of get to the police saying, what are you doing? Arresting journalists. So kind of targeted campaigns, really. That's what we did.

00:55:20:02 - 00:55:48:18

Interviewer: And this is my last question, really, which is how do you, when do you think back to that, particularly to that mid-nineties period? You know, incredible activism. What are the kind of things that you think we can learn from what you did then?

00:55:48:20 - 00:56:14:05

Paul:

Having an understanding of the history of film activism and video activism would have been really useful because we really thought we were doing something that nobody'd ever done before, because we just didn't know. Just with no idea, we'd no connection with past video groups or whatever, really. So that would have been really useful to know was kind of the lineage of it.

00:56:14:07 - 00:56:39:02

Paul:

And at the time, like we found out years later that what we are part of was a long tradition since film began, like in the 19th century, really like people have used it for activist purposes. Because

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

that probably would have helped us being a bit more targeted in a way of how we actually use video to actually create the changes umm.

00:56:39:04 - 00:56:54:18

Paul:

Because a lot of the people making films, but actually they didn't have a target audience. So trying to work out what you're trying to do with this film. So we had to learn that and we did. We learned a lot of lessons on that. But I think that we could have saved us a lot of time, really.

00:56:54:20 - 00:57:04:09

Paul:

I don't know, having other groups coming in and saying like this, this is what you're doing. This is what happened in the 80s. There's one in the 60s. Oh, really? How how similar is that?

00:57:04:11 - 00:57:15:12

Interviewer: So if somebody sort of turns up at your door with the, you know, their mobile phone says, I want to use this for activism, what would the sort of undercurrents response be?

00:57:15:14 - 00:57:21:21

Paul:

Work out what you want to achieve? Like don't just go off the film everything work out. What do you what?

### CLIP 5 - 191G0935.MOV

00:57:22:24 - 00:57:51:05

Paul:

What specific thing do you want to change? And it makes people think then about who the audience is. Because one of the films we did, we went through this, a group up in mid Wales, they were living beside this factory that was just pumping out all this pollution and noise during the night. We thought, yeah, we'll make a film with this sort of and then show it around the locality and everything else.

00:57:51:05 - 00:58:21:19

Paul:

And we realised, actually, who has the power to actually change. And we found that it was just the factory owner who lived in New York. We thought, well, he's never going to see the film. So we worked out. We'll make a video diary. We interviewed all the different people affected by it, made a video at the factory, a video diary and then went to New York, found this guy, went into his office and handed him and it was called Dear Lenny and saying, watch this.

00:58:21:21 - 00:58:41:06

Paul:

And, to his credit he did. Well, actually he didn't. He threw us out first, but we went to the local TV in New York and tell them the story, and they showed it and then got in touch with Lenny. And then he had to watch it. And then he changed it. He basically they got new filters in.

00:58:41:06 - 00:58:57:23

Paul:

They stopped working at night. They got everything to all the locals that asked, and we realised it was one person. That's what the audience was. I thought it was a real valuable lesson. So that's

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

kind of what we say to anybody who turns out now we just go, who is your audience? And it could be one person. It could be a thousand people.

00:58:57:23 - 00:59:05:02

Paul:

It could be a million people. But you have to work out specifically who your audience is and what you want to achieve with that.

00:59:05:02 - 00:59:07:04

Paul: That's great. Thank you. What year was that?

00:59:07:06 - 00:59:18:09

Paul:

That was, 2000 to that. Yeah. The 2000. Yeah. Yeah, that was brilliant.

00:59:18:11 - 00:59:29:21

Interviewer: I guess my question, maybe to I just was thinking back to earlier, like, can you describe the 90s for the youngsters?

00:59:29:23 - 00:59:31:20

Speaker 1

Yeah. For sure.

00:59:31:22 - 00:59:44:20

Paul:

It was an interesting time because in what was, what was going on and I suppose it's. Well, is that what things did you manage to change your, did your work in that, in that moment?

00:59:44:22 - 01:00:00:07

Paul:

Okay. Yeah. For the people who weren't there in the 90s, the internet was a thing, but only for email. You couldn't put video on the internet. It just didn't exist.

## CLIP 6 - 191G0936

01:00:46:22 - 01:01:25:18

Paul:

Yeah. So. Yeah. 90s. So yeah, the 90s was it was quite a time really, because you had conservative government been in power, it felt like forever. And it was the beginnings of a direct action movement for the environment, which was relatively new. And that was very vibrant. And a lot of people really motivated. And climate change we'd been hearing about since the 80s, by the 90s, people going, wait, we actually have to do something about this.

01:01:25:20 - 01:01:45:17

Paul:

And plus you have the rave scene, which was a huge scene. And then you had the camcorder, like suddenly you could afford a camcorder, which only a few years earlier, it was thousands of pounds. And suddenly you have a camcorder fit in the palm of your hand and you can make your own films. So it was really revolutionary time, really.

01:01:45:17 - 01:02:09:09

Paul:

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

And all these things came all at once. And then on top of that the criminal justice bill, the government tries to outlaw everything. So that galvanised everybody together. So you have the rave scene, the environmental scene, the peace movement. Vegetarian, veganism was becoming a huge thing as well. So it was like all these movements all coalesced together.

01:02:09:11 - 01:02:21:03

Paul:

And that created a real vibrant energy. And it felt revolutionary. And then add video on top of that, you can make your own films and. Yeah. And what was your question?

01:02:38:03 - 01:02:54:13

Interviewer: Was undercurrents Distribution method was kind of similar to rave culture? Perhaps like a rave culture distribution method?

01:02:59:15 - 01:03:28:21

Paul:

Is that it's I think that's spot on, really, because I think you had us doing the videos. You had. Yeah. DJs doing mixtapes for their music. The amount of like Zines going around as well, which was amazing. And then you had, like things like Schnooze, which was, a A4 sheet, of news all kind of alternative protest news that came out and you used comedy and, but they used to fax it out every Friday.

01:03:28:23 - 01:03:53:15

Paul:

And it was really well written and put together. So that was kind of like. And then we had Scrawl Magazine, which was like the kind of The Telegraph's version of an activist's, tabloid, really well researched, well written. So we had our own sort of distribution of videos, music, news. And this is like, wow, this is incredible, really.

01:03:53:21 - 01:04:11:13

Paul:

And this was before the internet took off. And yeah, fascinating scene really. And we thought, yeah, this, this could build into great things really. But again, I think the internet came along and kind of killed a lot of it in many ways, did a lot of other things, but probably killed that particular kind of culture.

01:04:11:15 - 01:04:20:24

Interviewer: And how important was it for you to make something quickly? You talked about making it up in two days and having it out there. That was quite quick turnaround

01:04:30:02 - 01:04:57:16

Paul:

Yeah. I think because we were doing it day in, day out and we became so quick at turning this stuff around. And at the time we didn't really acknowledge of how skilled we were in a lot of stuff, like, looking at what we were turning out now it's just phenomenal.

01:04:57:16 - 01:05:19:04

Paul:

And we were all young. We were all in our 20s, and we had the energy and you could work around the clock, and we were doing like 24 hour days, like, you know, on stuff and hot swapping edit desks and everything else. It was incredible, really. And yeah, we had the motivation. I think we were all driven because it felt like a time.

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

01:05:19:04 - 01:05:34:08

Paul:

It really felt like a revolutionary time that things were really going to change. And then Tony Blair got in and all the energy went that way. Everything think oh Labour's going to go in now is going to be a better world. And very little really changed.

01:05:34:10 - 01:05:40:14

Interviewer: What things did you what change in the 90s, was there a kind of memorable moment?

01:05:50:15 - 01:06:20:12

Paul:

Yeah, it's always difficult to pinpoint, like actual changes really in a lot of stuff. I think what we did, we educated a lot of people on the media and how the media works. We have so many cases of emails and letters and, filmmakers getting in touch saying, you educated me on how the news works, basically from your videos and from how it was shown on TV.

01:06:20:12 - 01:06:46:23

Paul:

I saw very different perspectives. So that was a lot of sort of changes there. And it was a lot like the roads movement. I think we had huge impact on that because suddenly it wasn't just a local issue. We were making local issues in a way global because some of the issues we'd make a film in wherever in Bath about, a roads issue in Bath.

01:06:47:00 - 01:07:09:16

Paul:

And then we'd find out a group over in Slovenia had watched our videos and use the same techniques to stop a road over there. And you think, wow, okay, this this is quite something. So we made a global network. I think that was one of our main things that we did, really made everything global. We thought local but made it global.

01:07:09:18 - 01:07:19:09

Paul:

And just the fact we did it, just the fact we made an alternative news network was a huge thing really that didn't exist.

01:07:19:11 - 01:07:24:06

Interviewer: When you first went to Europe with your camera, that was a stills camera was it?

01:07:37:16 - 01:08:04:01

Paul:

No, I think I think when I was in Ireland, I got into sports photography. So I, I black my way into stadiums and I big cup finals and photograph and sell to magazines and and it was all kind of interesting really. And I end up doing lots of different sports stuff. And then I got burnt out and sport became more and more corporatised really.

01:08:04:03 - 01:08:22:02

Paul:

And suddenly I was going, is this really what I want to be doing, sitting on a football pitch in the middle of winter, like freezing. So I went traveling. I kind of got disillusioned with photography, so I

## Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript

went around Europe and yeah, I did photograph a lot of different things as part of a kind of a cultural counter-culture scene.

01:08:22:04 - 01:08:48:15

Paul:

But the fact when all my stuff was stolen, it was a really interesting time. I was kind of like, okay, I'm, I'm unburdened. But all this kind of stuff, really all my Nikon's are gone. Now, what? And, so I got more immersed in different things in the different cultures and everything from off grid living and, just see what was out there.

01:08:48:17 - 01:09:09:10

Paul:

And the alternative music scene was groups like Chumbawumba in the, in Berlin were becoming big. So I was seeing the birth of all this stuff, but in a way, I kind of preferred not being have the cameras because I wasn't an observer, which when you had the cameras, you are an observer of anything that you're trying to do.

01:09:09:10 - 01:09:20:01

Paul:

So actually being part of it was a really interesting thing, and it was only really when I came back to London that I picked up the video camera again.

01:09:20:03 - 01:09:28:07

Paul:

Do you feel part of it making the films for Undercurrents or did you feel more like an observer?

01:09:28:09 - 01:09:48:04

Paul:

Sometimes. Yeah. So. So it was it was kind of tricky. It was a tricky balance. Because especially there was a lot of actions where I just wanted to get stuck in, but I realised nobody was filming. And so actually, it's really important to document this. And, I had to play with this and actually work out what my role was, which is where we came up.

01:09:48:05 - 01:10:07:19

Paul:

Video activist I was an activist with a video camera. Video camera was my tool. It wasn't the banner. It wasn't a dialog. It was the camera was my tool. And that's kind of what I was trying to do to make change. And yeah, looking back on it was really the best thing I could do, really.

01:10:14:00 - 01:10:37:12

Paul:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Like at the time. Like at the, like go in a protest now really like everybody's filming from every, every single angle on their phones. And you think, well, how, how much of this footage will actually get seen? And that's another thing really. So back then, really, you had more people doing stuff and probably one camera.

01:10:37:14 - 01:10:46:11

Paul:

Now it's like 20 cameras and probably one person doing something, and that's really it. Really how it's changed.

01:10:46:13 - 01:10:58:10

## **Paul O'Connor Interview Transcript**

Interviewer: Is there anything that you think we haven't covered that you think we should?

01:11:05:08 - 01:11:27:02

Paul:

Well like training was a big thing right from the beginning. Because how we ended up. So we were in London and then we moved to Oxford. So we were based in Oxford, then because we realised we got stuck in the kind of London M25 bubble and realised that most of the things we were covering was in London.

01:11:27:02 - 01:11:40:04

Paul:

We said, well, how do we get outside? So Newbury Bypass was kicking off, roads they were trying to build through there. So being an Oxford was useful. That gave us.

### **CLIP6 - 191G0937**

01:11:40:08 - 01:12:09:07

Paul:

Access to Newbury, but also gives access to north of England. It was much easier to go that way. And then we thought, Wales. Like who? Who knows what's happening in Wales and none of us did. So if someone can find out what's happening in Wales. So we came down here then and we got involved campaigns here, particularly, housing developments that a developer was trying to evict a lot of people.

01:12:09:09 - 01:12:26:11

Paul:

So we thought, right, okay, well, let's get involved here. And then, there's a woman here, Helen Iles. She got involved with us and she said, this is great. I want to set up a branch. So she set up her own branch of Undercurrents in Swansea. And then she concentrated on training. And that was her big thing for years.

01:12:26:11 - 01:12:51:20

Paul:

So she trained particularly women as well. So did women's Film making workshops on a regular basis. And then so we had Oxford and Swansea and it was quite a good mix then really like the training was done there. Production was done in Oxford.