

HOW TO VIDEO A PRESS CONFERENCE FOR BROADCAST TV AND WEBCASTING

by

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HOW TO VIDEO A PRESS CONFERENCE FOR BROADCAST TV AND WEBCASTING APPLICATIONS

THE PRESS CONFERENCE

A press conference is a media event in which newsmakers invite journalists to hear them speak and, most often, ask questions.

Compared with other news gathering and current affairs assignments, Press Conferences generally produce more anxiety and stress for the reporter-cameraman (hereinafter referred to as 'videographer') than any other location filming activity.

This guide provides advice on my recommended preparations and filming practices required to successfully video a press conference. It features techniques that will ensure that the video editor (be that yourself or a.n.other) will be able to gain sufficient material of a quality that will meet the discerning expectations of news and current affairs editors working in broadcast, webcast, podcast and other media genre programming.

DEFINITIONS OF WORDS USED IN THIS GUIDE

Videography = the process of capturing moving images on electronic media (e.g., videotape, hard disk, or solid state storage, streaming media).

Videographer = a person who uses a video camera to record moving images and sound on tape, disk, other electro-mechanical devices.

Cutaway = a shot that is used to provide the viewer with visual information on a location's environment, reactions to an action or statement or close up/detail of an item of interest referred to by an interviewee/presenter. Cutaways are commonly used to shorten action or dialogue.

BACKGROUND

Press conferences are usually coordinated by press officers and typical subjects can include celebrities, sportsmen and their managers; national and local government officials and employees; members of the legal profession and their clients; emergency service personnel (police, fire brigade), health and education service officials and members of the public.

The typical audience for a press conference will invariably include a mix of newspaper, magazine, radio and TV journalists (and also broadcast video camerapersons and recordists), all of whom will be anxious to gain the best coverage material for use in their report. Thus a competitive atmosphere will be apparent from the moment the doors are open, even more so if the subject has special news appeal in which case congestion is common with videographers, video crews, stills photographers and radio reporters all jostling for 'best position' with their cameras and mics (a situation which is often repeated again when 'post presentation' personal interviews are sought).

To the novice videographer the biggest obstacles to overcome are:

- Securing a good camera position to shoot subjects and cutaways
 - Combating poor lighting issues
 - Securing a good microphone position
 - Selecting the camera settings that will ensure optimum results
 - Securing a good position for 'post presentation' personal interviews
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VENUES

Almost any venue capable of holding a gathering of people can be used - hotel and stadium suites, church halls, business centres, board rooms included. They can be cramped, spacious, well or badly lit, possess good or bad acoustics, be located in quiet or noisy surroundings. Therefore, unless forewarned, the videographer has to be prepared with all the equipment and skills needed to cover any recording eventuality.

THE RECCE

Forewarned is forearmed. Adequate preparation is always advisable and a recce (reconnaissance) of the venue is always advisable (but rarely achieved due to time constraints). Nevertheless, if time were not an issue, the keen videographer would visit the press conference location early (even the day before) specifically to gather the following information.

- Transport
 - If you intend to drive to the location then access to parking is critical. On the day, you could be in the vicinity of the venue on time but then spend an hour parking and miss the start of the event or worse.
 - Check if the venue has parking available for you, if not what are the alternatives?
 - If parking is available check whether you require a pass to access the car park. If this is the case then you should arrive early so that you

have time for the security personnel to issue the correct documentation and sign you in.

- Where the location is located in a busy city centre where parking would be an issue then consider taking a taxi or public transport. In any event taxi or public transport could be the better option all round!
- Interior or exterior
 - Visit the location that will be used for the press conference and ask the organiser how many people have been invited. This will give you a sense of how crowded the venue will be during the event?
 - If you know that the conference is to be held out of doors (i.e. at a stadium or civic area), check the weather forecast to assess clothing and footwear requirements. If rain is forecast, an umbrella, camera raincover, waterproof kit bag and black plastic bag (bin liner style) may come in handy to protect you, the equipment and accessories from the elements.
 - Inquire about the seating arrangements and positioning of the stage (top table). Ask if space has been allocated specifically for videographers where they can place their tripods.
 - If exclusive one-to-one interviews are anticipated after the formal presentation then knowledge of where you can (and can't) go is useful to have when planning interview strategy.
- Lighting
 - When it comes to lighting, videographers often have to contend with locations that are creatively challenging; more often than not, making do with only that which is available. However, it is always useful to have advanced knowledge of lighting so that, in the case of extreme low (or bad) lighting conditions, remedial solutions can be considered.
 - At the very least our job as videographers is to obtain a stable, well exposed, image, with an acceptable overall colour (or white) balance. A basic knowledge of camera exposure, lighting theory and camera technique is essential in helping to overcome problem areas.
- Audio
 - When you walk into the venue for the first time the audio quality of the environment (its ambience) will be immediately apparent. Carpeted low ceiling hotel rooms seem to absorb noise producing a dry reverberation free environment, whereas large halls with hard floors and high ceilings can exhibit serious reverberation characteristics. As for stadiums and other open civic areas - well that's a whole different ball game with issues of serious reverberation, echo and stray external

noise being amongst the biggest concerns that can effect the recording of a coherent audio track.

- You should ascertain whether a P.A. (Public Address system) will be used on the day. The presence of such a system can often help the videographer in situations where there are multiple presenters performing on stage. The reason being that the videographer's use of a single positioned microphone on the front table cannot hope to accomplish what an individually mic'd, P.A. system can achieve. As we will find out, you don't need to be wired directly to the P.A. system, just as long as your directional mic is getting a good, clean pick up from the P.A. speakers should suffice.
- What extraneous noises characteristic of the room could pose a problem? Listen for traffic, air conditioning, aircraft, building sites, doors banging, buzzing fluorescent lights; in fact listen for any noise that could pose a problem to the recording of quality audio.
- Although it is predictable that you will bring a generous accessory kit with your camera, the fact that you are forewarned of problem areas will make the choice of videography tools, especially for audio, that much easier.

The Recce - a final comment:

As time goes by it is likely that you will be invited to many popular press conference locations in your city/region. You will build a mental database of these locations, negating the need for a recce for each assignment due to your familiarity with them. Perhaps the only time a recce then becomes important is when a special stage or layout is planned which could alter the videographer's field of vision or the lighting and audio characteristics of the venue. In such an instance it's still probably worthwhile popping in the day before or arriving early to check it out.

Generally speaking, at the recce, you will be 'let in' to view and assess a venue by a member of the organiser's staff. However, in some instances, you may be met by the conference organiser themselves, in which case some of your comments and recommendations could help them in providing the best layout and resources to assist the visiting media representatives on the day.

As I said at the start of this section: "Forewarned is forearmed".

PRESS CONFERENCE - THE SHOOT

So you've undertaken a recce (or have at least arranged to turn up at the venue early to fully ascertain the conditions pertaining to the shooting requirement).

You now need to assemble your shooting kit. You have to be self sufficient to be able to cope with all observed-at-recce eventualities, always remembering that the task in hand is to produce the best possible content, not only from the journalistic point of view, but from the creative and technical aspect as well. Excellence in the quality of the video you deliver is yet one more way to distinguish yourself in a competitive business like journalism. Your viewers and managers will definitely appreciate your efforts.

Equipment Check List:

The following equipment list is suggested as an 'all contingency' safeguard for most video journalism shoots.

Items marked with a single asterisk (*) should be considered essential for the indoor Press Conference situation and most of it, excluding the tripod, will fit into a professional back pack or suitcase.

- * Camcorder (with tripod plate fitted).
- * Camera batteries (minimum of 3)
- * Tripod (with camera plate)
- * Tape stock/Memory cards
- * Camera light with batteries (minimum of 3)
- * Tape head cleaning tape (if tape used)
- * Soft cotton cloth
- * Lens tissues
- * Cotton Buds
- * Microphones
 - * *Integral camera mic*
 - * *Short gun mic with handgrip and wind gag*
 - * *2 x Personal lapel mics with wind shields*
 - * *Cardioid mic with windshield and low profile desk stand (possibly with your organisation's logo fitted as a cube/flag)*
 - * *Radio mic transmitter/receiver (with extra batteries) complete with small channel selector screwdriver*
 - * *Microphone extension cables*
- * Headphones
- * Wide angle lens / or screw-on wide angle adaptor lens

- * Small lighting kit (2 x 300 watt lamps) - where top up lighting is needed
- * Extension power cables - where top up lighting is needed
- * 2 x 3 way adaptor plugs
- * Biro type ball pen (black ink)
- * Postcard sized cards (for use in prompting)
- * Bluetack
- * Roll of one-inch (2.5 cms) white camera tape (for general use)
- * Roll of two-inch (5 cms) white gaffer tape (used to secure extension cables)
- * Velcro cable ties (used in retaining cables and supporting wireless mics, etc)

I also carry releasable 10 inch and 12 inch nylon cable ties, which are again useful in tidying cables and securing mics to the camera body, etc. Eventually personal preference will dictate whether your preference is for a velcro, camera tape or cable tie solution. In my case it's always a case of mixing and matching to suit the application.

Additional items (**) for outdoor applications:

- ** Camcorder rain cover
- ** Umbrella
- ** Personal waterproofs
- ** Waterproof shoes/boots
- ** Several black plastic bags (bin liners)

Finally, never travel anywhere without your Personal Photo ID Card. If flying (or going overseas) then you'll need your passport as well.

Arrival and Signing In:

When you arrive you may be asked to 'sign in'. Have your press pass ready as a means of identification.

The Press Officer, or member of his staff, may escort you to the venue, otherwise just follow the crowd. There will probably be many familiar faces from your peers in attendance.

If an interview opportunity is scheduled for after the main presentation, identify to the press officer whom you would like to interview and where you are likely to be setting up your camera so that they can direct the subject in your direction when the time comes.

Setting Up:

On entering the room go swiftly to the space allocated for videographers and place your tripod in an optimum position. In general, where there are just one or two presenters, positioning your camera dead centre near the front works best as you will get an unobstructed, personal view of the table/podium.

However, if there will be many subjects at the stage/table area then you may have to pull back to accommodate everyone in the shot. Use the wide-angle lens/adaptor to reduce the need to move too far back in the room.

If you are not the first videographer on the scene then look at where the competition has sited their tripod and consider whether being close to them will yield a better, equal or near-equal shot. As with so many aspects of the process the early birds, many of whom will be 'old pros', have a knack of finding the best vantage points - learning through observation is to be encouraged.

Avoid positioning yourself to the side as off-centre eye-lines of the subjects will dilute the impact of the shots. It's better if they are looking near to - but not directly at - the axis of the lens.

Don't go too far back in the room as heads in the seated crowd, and the equipment and presence of other videographers, photographers and radio journalists can cause obstructions between you and the stage.

If another videographer, journalist or photographer gets between your camera and the subject then make them aware of your presence and ask them to move. Professional respect will see some people oblige you but, alas, many won't! As a professional journalist/videographer, you will already understand that the very nature of press conferences does not bring out the best in human etiquette. Even after a recce and early arrival to ensure optimum positioning, due to crowding and the actions of over-zealous (some might say, selfish) competitors all fighting for best position, compromise must be expected. Your job is to achieve the 'best compromise'. No more, no less.

Camera & Tripod Settings

Unfortunately many multi-tasking videographers are merely content to gain average exposure and audio coverage of their subjects and certainly, in press conferences, rarely worry about the finer creative options available to them. Yet there are some simple tips that can be easily applied that will offer the editor and viewer a superior coverage of the event.

Tripod:

Do not leave a folded tripod propped against a wall or chair. Always lie it down on the ground. This is because when tripods fall over, it is possible for the pan-handle (panning arm) to fracture at the point where it is attached to the tripod head as this is traditionally a weak spot in tripod/fluid head design.

Make sure the tripod mounting plate is fully tightened to the base of the camera before attaching the camera to the tripod.

Level the tripod using the spirit level (if fitted) or by eye if not. You are looking to achieve a horizontal platform for the camera, i.e. no tilt to the image discernible through the viewfinder when lining up on horizontal reference points. Failure to level will give the viewer the impression that the scene is tilted.

Switch on the camera:

Check you have enough battery life for total conference coverage (this will usually be indicated in the viewfinder as a 'number of minutes left' value).

Insert tape and/or memory card. If tape, run the tape - usually with colour bars displayed - for 30 seconds. Most drop-outs (defects in tape manufacture causing sound and picture degradation) occur in the first and last 30 seconds of the tape's length - where it is physically joined to the spindle at each end of the cassette. By moving 30 seconds in from the head of the tape you are minimising the chances of drop-outs occurring. The inclusion of colour bars are useful to engineers and editors who compare this colour and exposure information with the scenes that are actually recorded as part of the equipment line-up process.

You can also put a voice ident over this 30 second spot (over the colour bars) so that as soon as the editor loads the cassette (or memory card) into their suite they can hear the basic information pertaining to the job. If it happens that you are also the editor then the ident serves as a valuable aide memoir. Voice idents usually include a) name of job and venue, c) date and time, d) roll number, e) which tracks you have allocated for interviewer and interviewee, f) name of reporter, g) any special information you feel the editor would benefit from knowing. In effect, it's all the information that you would normally write on the cassette/memory-card label, recorded as a verbal ident. Idents are also useful because, if the tape is archived, a new user will find the information invaluable as a first point of reference before viewing the material.

Neutral Density Filters:

Generally speaking, interior lit locations do not require use of the camera's neutral density filters. Therefore if your camera has ND filters installed, switch them off.

Viewfinder selection:

Many modern professional compact cameras offer both the sports (or eyepiece) finder and a side fold-out LCD screen. The fold out screen is normally considered the better option for press conference coverage as it gives a larger viewer area and thus focusing, framing and colour adjustments are easier to make. It also avoids eye strain and aches from sustained awkward-posture problems common when using the sports (eyepiece) finder.

Frame markers:

If your camera permits, use the menu selectors to switch on the 'safe area marker' and 'centre cross hairs' marker. Computer screens, and TVs have slightly different framings when viewing video. Whereas the computer screen generally portrays the 'whole wide screen picture', a domestic TV will usually cut off the edges. This is apparent when you see captions that are clipped at the edge of a TV screen. Videographers tend to shoot with a safe working area in mind. The 'safe area marker' indicates the area that the average domestic TV screen will display and thus provides an excellent guide as to where graphics can be safely placed without the risk of cropping.

The 'centre cross hairs' give an excellent point of reference for 'where to place the nose of the subject in a close up interview' so that the geometry of their head and body sits well within the 16:9 (widescreen) frame. Also, being dead centre of screen, the cross-hairs marker is useful for aligning and framing documents, photographs and other objects.

You might like to keep battery life, time code and audio level information visible, but the screen should not be so full of information that it detracts from viewing the main image. The choice is really down to personal preference.

For tripod mounted videography the 'image stabiliser' should be switched off to avoid drifting effects when the stabiliser is coming to rest after pan and tilt shots.

Focus (Manual or Auto?):

These days AUTO FOCUS on professional compact cameras is nothing short of excellent with a seamless adjustment achieved as the videographer pans and zooms between scenes and subjects. But, where 'AUTO FOCUS' commonly fails is where the subject matter does not fill the whole screen in instances where there are strongly defined textures and/or patterning to background (or foreground) areas. Problems are generally more apparent when the lens is being used at the telephoto end of the zoom. Without manual intervention the AUTO FOCUS feature finds it hard to know whether it should be focusing on the background or foreground. The symptoms of this condition are usually identified as either, a) subject out of focus whilst background is in focus, or b) the focus is hunting between background and foreground but never locking on one or the other. If AUTO FOCUS is failing to work for either of these reasons, recognise the symptoms and take the remedial action of switching to manual focus.

The traditional way of manually focusing with a zoom lens is to zoom fully into the subject (or onto an object sited exactly where the subject will be - this might be the back of chair). Then adjust the focus ring until the picture is sharp. The focus is now set for the whole range of the zoom lens. Zoom out to the desired framing and you're ready to shoot. Many cameras have 'peak' and 'extended zoom' features that aid the ease and precision of the focusing operation however these features are best explained through reference to the individual camera's manual. Suffice to say that the zoom-focus-frame technique explained here is the standard routine for setting focus manually.

When shooting one-to-one close up interviews and support objects like photos, exhibits, etc., a common mistake is to position the camera entirely too close to an object to be able to focus on it at all. The instant remedy is to move the camera back to the lens's minimum focusing distance and then use auto or manual focusing to bring the subject sharp.

Iris/Aperture (Manual or Automatic):

Just as with focus, the auto iris feature on modern professional compact cameras is generally adequate for everyday assignment coverage. Panning between light and dark subjects and areas will result in exposure compensation adjustments being apparent but if these adjustments are smooth and do not detract from the overall scene then they can be considered acceptable and pass relatively unnoticed by the viewer.

However, there are times when the exposure will be incorrect and the AUTO IRIS function cannot cope. Salvaging shots in the edit are not really an option when the videographer could have got it right at the shoot.

Problems can occur:

- Where there is a strongly lit area behind the subject (common when a subject is standing in front of a window where they are only lit by room lighting - or where they are standing in shade but the background is lit by daylight).
- Where a subject is brightly lit, as if under a stage spotlight, yet the background is only illuminated with ambient or reduced light.

In both these examples the big issue is the fact that there is a significant difference between the light level illuminating the subject and the light level illuminating the background.

The solution is to 'eye it in' manually, which means that, assuming the LCD screen is properly adjusted then by switching the iris to 'manual', you simply rotate the ring until the subject appears well exposed.

Common symptoms of over exposure include loss of detail in the lighter areas of the scene such as on foreheads. Creases in the skin and hair definition disappear, there's loss of colour intensity and affected areas appear to be generally bleached. White shirts become block white with no texture in the cloth or detail in the creases and shadow areas

With under exposure there is a loss of detail in the shadow areas.

Your aim is to set the iris so that there is a balanced exposure across the subject with maximum detail evident from the highlights to the shadow areas.

One useful exposure aid common to most professional camcorders is 'Zebra Stripes'. They ensure a perfect exposure every time. Set the menu of your camera to 70% Zebra Stripes. Then, when 'Zebra' is switched on, you will see through the viewfinder that, as you adjust the aperture/iris ring to and fro, a diagonal striped pattern appears over skin tones (applies to caucasian skins only). The presence of 'Zebra Stripes' indicates a good exposure for the face which, in the case of a press conference, is the most important feature to 'get right'. So if you have 'Zebra Stripes' showing across your subject's face then, technically speaking, you have a perfect exposure that matches what the professionals would call 70% grey scale or average flesh tone. Different solutions can be employed for different skin variants, but suffice to say that at this stage if there is detail in the highlights and in the shadow areas then your safe with your exposure.

Shutter Speed:

Set this to 1/50th for PAL/SECAM (for UK, European and Chinese TV standard) and 1/60th for NTSC (the USA, JAPAN and SOUTH AMERICAN television standard). Your camera will normally have the local TV system's shutter speed setting as default. If in doubt consult your local dealer.

Gain:

Whereas a stills camera has a menu button called 'ISO' which changes the sensitivity of the imaging device to facilitate working creatively across a wide range of lighting levels, the video camera has a GAIN control.

Most professional camcorders feature AUTO and MANUAL GAIN functions.

'Manual Gain' settings are usually factory set at 0db, 9db and 18db. Many professional camcorders permit further user-adjustment to suit their personal preferences.

For the technically minded - +9dB Gain adds 1.5 F Stops of light and +18dB Gain adds 3 F Stops of light when compared to the standard 0db (no gain applied) image.

Introducing gain does degrade picture quality. Certainly at 18db of gain you will see a grainy quality to the picture therefore 18db and above is usually used in conditions of poor light where no other solution is available. But where you find yourself in a situation where there is a borderline amount of light to get a good exposure when you are at your widest aperture and just need a tad more sensitivity, switching in 9db of gain will have the same effect as if you were shooting in 1.5 times the amount of light. Further, 9db of gain does not appear degraded when compared with the graininess (sometimes called noise) of an 18db image. What I am saying is that 0db and 9db shots can invariably be cut together seamlessly with no perceived degradation of image by the viewer.

So when light is low, gain can often come to the rescue.

Lighting

Some venues will have lighting so low that gaining an adequate exposure will be nigh on impossible.

Solution: Set up two lamps (300 watts will usually do the trick) at either side of the room pointing at the action area. Ideally at 45 degrees to the action. Adjust the lights' barn-doors and focus to get an even spread across the target area. Watch for reflections in windows, mirrors, etc and adjust the position of each light to minimise any problems.

Use brightly coloured extension cables so that people can see them clearly. Where they pass across flooring where people will be walking it is worth taping them to the floor (say every 12 inches) using white or brightly coloured 2 inch (5cms) gaffer tape to minimise the risk of anyone tripping.

Where additional lighting is not possible then increasing the camera GAIN setting is the only solution open to you (discussed earlier).

Recessed (or direct) top lighting can introduce strong facial shadows onto the subject/s.

Solution: Again set up two lamps (300 watts) at either side of the room pointing at the action area.

Side windows facing the sun could introduce direct sunlight problems causing the subjects to squint against the light.

Solution: Draw the blinds/curtains or suggest moving the table to a different spot where the sun is not obtrusive.

Subjects are placed with bright light source behind them such as a window or strongly lit stadium.

Solution: Use the camera's zebra bars visible in the viewfinder (discussed earlier) to get a good exposure from their faces and let the background over-expose.

A sunny day with intermittent cloud poses a big headache in terms of fluctuating exposures. One minute the subject is in direct sunlight, the next a cloud obscures the sun and the exposure drops dramatically. The situation also applies to rooms where the principal illumination is the daylight coming through windows.

Solution: Master videographers will seamlessly manually adjust the aperture ring/control as they are recording to compensate for variations in lighting intensity. They literally ride the control using the zebra stripes visible in the viewfinder to ensure accurate exposure.

If you're not feeling quite so ambitious, if the background is illuminated pretty much to the same level as the subject then setting the camera's aperture/iris control to AUTOMATIC will probably suffice.

For good colour images the camera's auto WHITE BALANCE parameters must be set correctly. Simple adjustments can usually be achieved using the CAMERA MENU. These options generally include standard default settings such as INDOOR and OUTDOOR. 'Indoor' is suitable where the light (the colour temperature) is yellower (characteristic to tungsten lights) and the 'Outdoor' setting is suitable for use with the blue/white nature of outdoor light. But what if the lighting is mixed or the venue is using non-standard lighting sources?

Solution: If you arrive early and the lights which will be used for the 'actual presentation' are on, place a sheet of white paper in the position where the subject will be, facing your camera position. You will probably need to prop the paper up against a water jug or similar. By placing the paper directly facing the camera then an 'average white balance', based on the 'actual light' falling on the subject, is gained. To set the balance in camera, return to the camera position, zoom in so that the white paper fills the frame, adjust the iris/aperture so that the paper is well exposed (can usually be accomplished by momentarily pressing the auto iris button), and then press the WHITE BALANCE button. After a few seconds the 'WHITE BALANCE set' icon is displayed (this varies from camera to camera but generally speaking it is set when the viewfinder 'white balance' icon stops flashing. Check your camera manual if in doubt). If you do not have time to do the white paper routine then check to see if there is any white paper on the table top or whether a subject is wearing a white garment (shirt or dress). Zoom in and take the white balance off of this, then zoom out to the desired frame remembering to reset the iris/aperture for correct exposure before recording.

Note: White balance can sometimes be hard to accomplish if parts of the image are overexposed. Closing the aperture/iris down a little (say one stop) from the 'correct exposure' setting and then pressing the white balance button will usually allow the white balance to be set. This method also helps especially when the lighting colour mix is extremely varied. But do remember to open up the iris again to the correct aperture before you start recording.

If one-to-one interviews are planned for after the main presentation, check for suitable locations where lighting will give optimum results.

Solution: Normally, reporter-specific interviews will be conducted in, or to the side, of the main conference room. If the opportunity presents itself, rather than use the same room, many videographers opt to take their interviewees away from the immediate environment to gain some level of privacy. Daylight or well-lit landings and balcony's are common options.

Remember, squinting will occur when subjects look towards the sun or a bright light. The aim is to position them three quarters to the light source to achieve a classic lighting set up with no squinting. Positioning subjects with their back to the main light source (effectively in their own shadow) makes it comfortable on their eyes and can provide pleasingly over exposed backgrounds.

Diffused (or bounced) wall lighting can provide a perfect soft lighting which, if low level, can be enhanced by adding one level of GAIN (discussed earlier). Position your subject facing 45 degrees to the wall to achieve a classic lighting look.

As mentioned earlier, strong top lighting can be problematic, creating unacceptable shadows and over-exposing tops of heads and foreheads. Try to move your subject to an area where there is side lighting and out of the direct glare of the top light. Where there is no other option, consider lightening the face with a battery light. This can be camera mounted or held just above the lens, softening and adding detail to the shadows. Remember the colour temperature of the battery light must match (or be a close match) to the ambient location light so carry light blue daylight conversion filters with you to convert the yellow battery light to the blue-white light of daylight if needed.

A new generation of camera mounted LED battery lights are balanced for daylight and can be varied in brightness without affecting their colour temperature. To use them in indoors under tungsten/yellow light locations, a light orange filter is required (this usually supplied by the manufacturer).

Audio

Press conferences pose one of the worst environments to gain useable audio of any situation you are likely to meet. Microphone technique is a big subject to cover but here are some basics.

Identify where the purest source of the speaker/s voice will be coming from.

- From the mouth (no P.A. system)
- From a P.A. system using static table mic/s or hand held radio mic/s (or both)

You will probably have seen that many videographers place microphones on the table where the speakers will stand, connected wirelessly, or by cable, to their cameras. But you may be surprised to learn that many of the mics you see at such events are unsuitable for the job they are being called upon to perform.

For a single speaker, and if there are not too many other reporters, it is worth checking whether they would mind wearing a personal radio microphone. If so then job done. But most Press Conferences do not allow such luxury. It's a fast flowing affair with many journalists, camerapersons and photographers and only one chance to get it right.

For a group of speakers where there is no P.A. system it is advisable to place a wide area (omni-directional mic) on the tabletop in a low profile microphone stand. If no mic stand is available then lie the mic flat facing forwards. Place this on the table dead centre facing the centre speaker position and run the lead back to the camera position. Select AUTO on the mic switch then the sound will adjust to an appropriate level for each speaker leaving you to concentrate on the image. You can monitor the audio through a pair of headphones. As the mic picks up everything around it then it will also pick up questions from the floor.

Where there is one principal speaker (or two sitting close together) then a short directional cardioid microphone in a low profile microphone stand can be used to gain the maximum articulate level from the speakers. Use the stand to point the mic directly at the speaker's mouth (or mid point between mouth's if two speakers).

Keep one channel of your camera mic open to capture room atmosphere (also useful for catching audience questions). If the audio switching on your camera cannot accommodate onboard camera mic and XLR (external mic) at the same time then plug in a second mic (omni or short cardioid) into the vacant socket to get the atmosphere and questions from the floor.

Alternatively, where there is a Public Address (P.A.) system installed, the mixed mics going through the speaker system will invariably offer a better quality of coverage than your lone mic on the front table top. Therefore, as an alternative (or backup) sound source, you might allocate one audio channel (say Channel 2) to a cardioid gun mic pointed directly at one of the P.A. speakers. You could strap the mic to your tripod legs using velcro or camera tape.

Another option for recording the subjects is to place a personal (lapel type) mic on the table top plugged into a small radio transmitter. Together they are commonly called a 'radio mic'. Lapel mics are omni-directional and well suited to this type of setup. Coil the excess mic wire around the transmitter to prevent the risk of anyone snagging or tripping over it.

The main problem encountered with radio mics in press conferences is the fact that someone else in the room may already be using your selected frequency. Therefore if, after listening to the incoming audio through your headphones, you hear another microphone breaking through onto your channel, you will need to switch the radio receiver's channel selector until you find a free channel and then select the identical channel on the microphone transmitter so that both are matched. This is usually accomplished with the aid of a small screw driver. Again the mic channel level switch should be set to AUTO.

In rare instances, usually where there are small audiences and where time permits, the P.A. mixer operator may agree to run an audio line directly from the mixing desk

direct into your camcorder, but generally the pace of the average press conference rules this out. In the event that you do have a direct line, remember to select the 'LINE INPUT' setting for your incoming audio to balance it with the output signal of the mixing desk. Remember to switch it back to 'MIC INPUT' once you have finished with the 'line' feed.

By having two microphone sources recording the presentation, you are ensuring a backup in the event of a mic, wire, radio mic or battery failure.

There is a trend in the industry to record the principal sound on track one and secondary/backup audio (such as camera mic - or second mic - atmosphere and questions) on track two. Where two persons (interviewee and interviewer) are mic'd for an interview the interviewee should be plugged into channel one and the interviewer into channel two. These are not 'absolute conventions' merely a rule of thumb that allows the editor to easily identify sound sources.

Audio for the one-to-one interview

When the opportunity for a one-to-one interview comes, use a short cardioid gun mic pointing directly at the subject's mouth connected to audio input one. There are special mounts you can buy to hold these mics, alternatively you can use velcro or cable ties to attach the mic to the camera in such a way that it can be held in position. Although lapel mics are an obvious alternative, interviewees are generally in a hurry and so rigging (and de-rigging) a mic inside shirts, dresses and trouser legs is time consuming. Further, their omni-directional characteristics (they pick up sound from all directions) are not suited to the busy post-conference free for all. Therefore, in my opinion, the short gun mic is by far the best solution for this situation.

Remember, if you are operating a camera it is difficult to use a handheld mic, hence why the camera mounted cardioid mic is invariably the best bet.

Good microphone theory and technique for the videographer is a subject in itself and is covered in depth in a sister publication (DVD) to this series.

THE SHOOT

You've set the exposure, the mics are in position and the doors are open. In comes the subject/s. They take position at the front and a short introduction by the principal spokesman normally outlines the order of events.

The running order will normally include the details of periods when questions may be asked and, if applicable, whether a photo-call is planned. Photo-calls are set up for press photographers to gain shots that draw attention to the subject/s and/or message that is at the centre of the press conference. Examples would include 'signing a contract', 'sports team line up', 'cutting a ribbon', 'star portrait', 'unveiling a plaque', 'a performance', 'planting a tree', etc. Photo-calls do provide good opportunities for the videographer to gain cutaway shots used in setting up (or introducing) an item, or as an explanatory adjunct to a story.

As 'the journalist' covering the event you will know pretty well what constitutes essential, relevant content for your story, elements of which will most likely be similar to the journalists standing next to you. Therefore, unlike a normal news cameraperson who generally shoots everything, you are able to shoot material exclusively for 'your piece'.

- You will have considered how you are going to open the story, set the scene.
- You will have considered the style the piece should be shot in.
- You will have considered what statements, what speakers you need from the press conference itself (as opposed to what you will use from exclusive interviews gained later).
- You will have considered what other shots (commonly know as cutaways) will be needed for inclusion in the piece, to better illustrate the storyline and convey atmosphere.
- You will know the likely slot length and purposes to which the piece will be used and will have already calculated how much material needs to be filmed to cover the piece and all eventualities (commonly known as the 'shooting ratio').

Now its time to put the plan into action and start collecting content.

Coverage - Telling the Story

Filming subjects arriving and taking the stand offers useful set up shots. Remember to take reaction, scene setting shots of the audience upon the subject's arrival - these can be used as cutaways and to give the viewer a flavour of the event.

Once the subject/s have taken the stand it is useful to show a wide establishing shot of the whole platform (the whole group) and then, as the main speaker/s get to the essence of the topic, to zoom in and stay with them full in the screen. It is not a good idea to go really close at this stage because the opportunity for close-ups will be coming later if individual interviews are planned. In press conferences, it is the medium shot (head to waist) and medium close up shot (head to chest) that works best when covering each speaker. Ask any editor or director why these framings are preferred and the answer is invariably, "because it looks right".

The objective is to stay framed on the action. Keeping the principal speaker/s and very much centre of frame. As each new speaker delivers their message, pan to them swiftly and smoothly. Cutaways can be used to cover the pan if need be.

Another device to enable a smooth segue from speaker to speaker is, once a subject has finished their speech, zoom out to the group shot, identify the new contributor in the wide shot and then smoothly zoom into the new speaker keeping them centred in frame.

When you consider that you have recorded sufficient material of the subject/s to fully satisfy the conference message in the context of your treatment (story), you should then turn your attention to filming reaction cutaways. These are shots of people's reactions to what is being said. Examples might be singles (single person), 2-shots (2 persons) and 3-shots (3 persons) of fellow subjects at the top table listening to the current speaker. And, when a comment provokes a reaction from the assembled audience just turn the camera on the crowd to get their reaction. This could include clapping, cheering, cameras taking pictures (be careful of too many flashes though, as there are strict laws on the use of flash during a TV programme - it can trigger epileptic fits in prone viewers). Other useful cutaways might include taking over shoulder tight shots of press release documents on journalists' laps or in their hands (with the title of the event clearly evident), journalists writing notes in reporter's pads, etc. Cutaways allow the video journalist to seamlessly condense or expand an edit by bridging cuts in dialogue/interview. They also create a dynamic that keeps the viewer engaged, allowing them to gain a more complete picture of the event.

Make a note of any supporting items used or referred to by the subjects in their presentation as there will usually be an opportunity to gain separate shots of these once the subjects leave the stage when the proceedings are less frenetic.

Use the headphones to monitor the speaker/s audio quality throughout their presentation. If your camcorder has a 'review' capability then it is also worth periodically checking the recorded material to satisfy yourself that everything is working OK. Be warned that in many instances, where camcorders do not have a 'review' facility, simply rewinding and viewing recorded material without resetting timecode can cause discontinuity problems on some edit systems.

The Photo-call

Once the main presentation has been recorded the organisers may move on to a photo-call. This is usually a static affair with the subjects posing for the stills photographs. Still with your camera mounted on the tripod you will be able to get a whole range of wide, medium and close up shots that can be used to enhance your report. Celebrity heads, pans from star to star, signing contracts, cutaways of the press photographers in action. Such images provide ideal voice over, scene setting and event coverage material, adding greatly to the viewers' perception of the event, its atmosphere and the messaging contained therein.

It is not advisable to hand hold the camera as telephoto shots will invariably be shaky (even with the image stabiliser switched on). Lightweight tripods are easily moved and provide that solid base to operate from, yielding steady images at all points on the zoom lens's range.

One-to-One Interviews

If permitted, an opportunity for one-to-one interviews may follow on from the formal presentation or photo-call.

Either the press officer will bring the subjects to you (organised by prior arrangement) or you will have to seek them out for yourself. Either way, when your

turn comes, take your interviewee to the area that you have previously recce'd for lighting and which is, as far as possible, least prone to extraneous noise. Check the lighting on the face - beware the top light, increase gain if levels are low and add battery light if shadows are problematic. Then, with the camera running, ask the subject to state their name and spell their name. This not only gives you the chance to check the audio quality of the recording but also provides you (and/or the editor) with the correct spelling of their name and title for a video graphics caption.

Ask the subject to speak directly to you, maintaining your eye contact, throughout the interview. They should not look at the camera. It is generally a good idea to keep the shot locked off as a medium or medium close up in the frame. This means you can concentrate on the interview and not on the need to change framing. The medium close up works well with cutaways in most situations - the topic itself is driving the interest without the need to vary the framing all the time.

Note: At some press conferences (typically sports events) it may be a condition that the subject/s have to be interviewed in front of sponsor boards (pre-prepared backgrounds covered in sponsor and branding decals) leaving the videographer with no option than to use the environment, or set, that is provided. Journalists move through as if on a conveyor. These scenes will inevitably look similar between all those media organisations that have taken up the opportunity of an interview. You can only do your best - and if your exposure, colour balance, focus and audio is better than the competition then you have done well.

Hint - do not get too close with the wide angle lens as facial distortion may occur. Better to stay at arms length and zoom in a little. It will also ensure that accurate focus is maintained.

Cutaways of Supporting Items:

So, now you've got the conference, the photo-call and the interviews recorded.

If there's still time, from your wish-list of additional cutaways, you might like to physically backtrack through the venue to gain shots of any support materials that were referred to in the presentation or may be useful to the storyline, items that you were not able to shoot during the media furore. These might include shots of documents, trophies, medals, photographs, exhibits, etc.

Remember to repeat zooms, pans and tilts at different speeds to provide maximum timing options for voice over at the edit. Ultra slow zooms are a useful device when the need to extend a voice over a single shot is required, they maintain a hint of movement allowing you to comfortably dwell an extra few seconds on the shot when compared to the static alternative.

Select a suitably lit environment, with curtains, carpets, white board easels and table tops being the most common backgrounds to film against. Position the items creatively and record multiple shots using different framings. Use the viewfinder's 'safe area marker' lines, your eyes and personal judgement, rather than the tripod spirit level, when lining up on photographs and artwork as it is difficult to get them exactly vertical.

Remember that photos and artwork generally require even lighting. The camera should be positioned 90 degrees and dead centre to the subject both vertically and horizontally. If an artwork (photo, painting, etc.) is glossy or has a glass frame, the red tally light on the front of your camera can reflect back into the lens causing an unsightly highlight. Switch it off. Stray light sources behind the camera can also contribute towards unwanted reflections. If there is a problem then switch off (or shield) offending room lights or adjust the item and/or camera position. Even draping a black cloth behind the camera between two lighting stands can stop such reflections. But when is there ever time to do that - you must be the judge. At press conferences it's all about quality with compromise.

Pieces to Camera

If you are to include a personal piece-to-camera in your coverage of the event then you must first select your location, one that has a suitable background in context with the event. This could be the building's exterior or, possibly more likely, an interior scene in the vicinity of the event with conference related items visible - e.g. the fervour of activity, the participants, the room in which the press conference was held.

Rotate the LCD viewfinder on the camera so that it is facing you - on most cameras the viewfinder image will flip horizontally to show the true framing as the viewer will see it. Then, with the camera still facing you, raise the tripod until you see an ideal background framing emerging which also allows you to look authoritative in frame. Too low an angle and you will look too dominant, too high an angle and you will look too diminished. An ideal angle is 'on the level' or just 'slightly below level' with your face. Don't use the extreme wide angle of the zoom. Zoom in a little to avoid facial distortions.

If you and the background are well lit fine. If not then you may consider positioning a battery light on the camera.

Check colour, focus (may need to go manual) and exposure.

For audio, you will probably be using the onboard cardioid mic which, if possible, should be pointing directly towards your mouth with the camera audio setting switched to AUTO. Put the headphones on and listen to the clarity of your voice. If the background is too noisy consider repositioning or using a handheld cardioid mic instead (better for reducing background noise).

Lock off the tripod.

If you need prompts then the 'poor man's autocue' solution is to write bullet point notes in black ink on a postcard and stick/bluetack this on the camera directly above the central axis of the lens. It is a phenomenon that reading text positioned above the lens looks natural as if the speaker is looking directly into the lens, whereas reading text positioned to the side of a lens will look distracting and unacceptable.

If there is a red tally light on your camera and you wear glasses, you may consider switching it off to stop its reflection back into the camera lens. Similarly, reducing the LCD viewfinder's brightness will lessen the risk of unwanted reflections. If the image

of yourself in the LCD viewfinder is a distraction then, having satisfied that the framing, focus and exposure parameters are OK, turn the viewfinder away from you so that you can concentrate on presenting to the lens.

Once you are happy that all is set then remove the headphones, switch on the camera, and deliver your piece to camera. The recording may take several takes and raising one, two, three, four or more fingers in front of your face into shot between takes will make it easier to locate the best take in the edit. So, if the best shot is 'take three', as you fast forward through your rushes, you simply look for the shot where you are holding up three fingers at the start of the take.

Establishing Shot

As you leave the premises consider taking one last establishing wide shot of the premises which can be used as an establishing shot at the front of the piece as part of the storyline setup.

SUMMATION

I hope the comments and techniques in this document will help you in your transition into video journalism. In this changing profession where multitasking and emerging distribution platforms place more and more pressure on the individual to perform, I feel it is essential (and a distinct advantage) to have to hand the tools and knowledge of the techniques which will make life easier, and potentially more creative and productive in the workplace.

Press conferences can be competitive, highly charged affairs made worse by the fact that there is no margin for error. You can't say "hold it, can you say that (or repeat that action) again".

If I have been able to shed some useful light (no pun intended) that will make your job easier, more enjoyable, more creative and ultimately more successful, then I have succeeded in my mission.

Please email your feedback on this free manual to feedback@journocam.com, the information from which will be considered when enhancing future versions of this document.

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Happy shooting!

Nicholas Shipley M.B.K.S.

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Nicholas Shipley has enjoyed a long and varied international career both as a practitioner, and teacher, of film and video production and camerawork. He is an experienced senior cameraman in news and current affairs with the BBC, the former Head of Production for Media Assets Ltd and Head of Network Production for STAR TV (News Corporation) Hong Kong. Nick has worked as cameraman on landmark BAFTA and EMMY award winning Channel 4 investigative documentary, Gold winning IVCA and BIEA videos and has many highly acclaimed factual, corporate and broadcast projects to his credit.

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