

What camera skills do you need to be a BBC news shooter?

BBC news shooter **Julie Ritson** has covered conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq. She tells us why she's passionate about learning and teaching skills to future camera professionals.

By Julie Ritson

The question I get asked most often is 'How can I get into news camerawork'. A simple question but not an easy one to answer because there isn't one specific way in, it differs from person to person and the route I took doesn't exist anymore.

At age 17 and still at school, I was offered a place at Glasgow Art School. However, by the time I reached sixth grade a year later, I realised that a career as an artist wasn't for me. Instead, I enrolled in a Film and Television Communications and Design degree course at Manchester Polytechnic. During the summer breaks when my fellow students returned home, I stayed in Manchester and just rang up the BBC Post Production office at Oxford Road asking if they could offer me any work experience. In those days, it was as easy as a phone call and I spent many enjoyable weeks watching the Film Editors working away on their Steenbeck's, crafting a finished film with little more than a chinagraph pencil and sellotape.

Towards the end of my degree course, I was working at my evening job in an off-license when one of the BBC staff came into the shop. Post-production secretary, Cathy Graham mentioned they were looking for Assistant Film Editors and would I like to come in for a chat. The day after I graduated on 15th June 1988, I started a one-month trial period. This was extended to rolling 3-6 month contracts. And that was it...I was in! I secured a staff job 5 years later after I'd moved south to London.

At BBC Television Centre, I worked as a News Picture Editor for a few years and then moved on to longer format editing at White City, working on The Money Programme, Assignment, and Here & Now, all programmes that have long since

vanished. In the early 1990's, BBC News embraced multi-skilling and so the role of shoot/edit was created. By then the long hours working in dark airless edit rooms had me yearning for the outdoors so this opportunity couldn't have come at a better time.

I arrived with several other editing colleagues at the BBC Wood Norton training facility feeling nervous but very excited. We had 2 weeks of training on Sony's Betacam SP camera and we also learned sound recording. Then it was out 'on the road' with an initial attachment as a sound recordist, spending roughly a year working alongside BBC News cameramen Steve Rogers and Nigel Bateson.

This was a pivotal time in my career progression, and I didn't realise at the time just how lucky I was. Working every day with these experienced cameramen taught me not only the technical skills but also the roadcraft skills I'd need to succeed in this highly competitive, stressful, and at times harrowing occupation.

Over the next ten years, I mostly worked abroad covering conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq. I was also based in the BBC's New York Business office and the Moscow News Bureau between 1997-2003 where I had incredible, life-changing experiences. The most memorable assignment was being embedded with the British Military in Iraq during the 2003 invasion and I talk more about this in a vlog on my YouTube channel.

As I slowly progressed through the camera ranks, subsequent training on the latest camera or editing equipment was provided by senior colleagues. Then after a 7-year stint on Newsnight, it was my turn to do the teaching. In 2013, most of the London-based camera crews were shooter/



ALL PICTURE CREDITS: BBC



Julie Ritson in a military helicopter flying into Southern Iraq in 2003.



Julie Ritson with BBC reporter Clive Myrie in Afghanistan 2002.



editors which is basically what it says on the tin. We shoot the News and then we edit it for the BBC News channel and TV bulletins. At the time we were using Apple's Final Cut Pro 7 but having previously used Avid, I never really warmed to Final Cut Pro 7. So, when Final Cut Pro X came out, I grabbed the chance to learn and master this new system.

As an early adopter, it was inevitable that I'd be asked to teach others. This is when I created my first ever 3-day training course which I delivered to many camera colleagues over 4 months. I also produced a lengthy series of online FCPX tutorials which were watched by thousands of BBC News staff in the UK and abroad. For years afterwards, I was recognised around London Broadcasting House as the 'lady who teaches the editing' and regularly thanked in the lifts by people I'd never even met!

My next big training assignment was in 2017/18 for the World 2020 project. This was an expansion of BBC services around the world using new UK government funding. Plans for new programming required more technical staff, including camera crews. My involvement started with the recruitment process in our overseas bureaux such as Nairobi, Lagos, Bangkok,

and Jakarta. Once the successful applicants came on board, I'd return to deliver a 5-day camera and editing training course.

One of the challenges with training camera crews in other countries is that you often need to untrain them first. With fewer opportunities for formal training, many have taught themselves and have picked up some bad habits or they completely lack certain skills and knowledge. When they join the BBC, they're issued with a new camera which might be unfamiliar. They also need to learn the BBC workflows and operating techniques. This allows me to take things back to basics, working through each of the functions and menus on the camera whilst incorporating film and photography theory into the training as well.

When I ask a group what an f-stop is or what causes diffraction, I'm often surprised at how few of them can properly explain it. For me, understanding photographic principles and the inner workings of a camera hints at the expertise of the operator. In my other role as a recruiter, I always ask some technical questions in an interview which is why I encourage all my trainees to increase their knowledge. I believe it will only benefit them in the long run.

YouTube is a great resource for filmmakers and photographers with tutorials on pretty much anything so that's a great starting point if you don't have access to college courses. And it's available in most countries so I often include links to my favourite videos in the course handouts.

Another crucial training tool is scenarios. This puts the classroom learning into practice and helps to 'bake in' the skills I'm trying to teach. One of my favourite scenarios is the '7 shot challenge' which is based on the average number of shots needed for a standard News sequence. I deliberately use a very simple action for this, with the trainees filming each other setting up their tripods and attaching the camera.

Initially, it seems like an easy task, but it gets trickier when you restrict the number of shots that can be filmed. This way, the trainee needs to think about how the sequence will look on an editing timeline and film enough close-ups and action shots to make the continuity work.

Once they have edited those 7 shots together, we have a group viewing so everyone can learn and benefit from the mistakes or successes of others. Usually, there are a few focusing and exposure issues, to be expected from a first attempt with a new camera. So, I run the exercise a second time and there's always, without fail, a massive improvement which then lifts everyone's confidence.

In 2018 I was promoted to a more senior semi-managerial role and tasked with finding a replacement for the popular PMW500, which Sony no longer supported. This was a fantastic camera, but broadcast technology had moved on and so had the cameras. Plagued by back and shoulder injuries, many National and Regional News crews were also ready to embrace smaller and lighter equipment. However, this did mean moving away from the traditional shoulder-mounted cameras. Enter the Sony PXW-Z280 and the rollout of more training.

Between the summer of 2019 and February 2020, I'd been working on sourcing and testing accessories as well as developing a face-to-face Z280 camera training course. However, Covid soon put a halt to that. Instead, I had to film and edit a 30-minute video tutorial from my back garden which turned out to be no great hardship during an unseasonably warm and sunny springtime. As restrictions lifted, I was able to get back in the classroom and to date have trained 100+ camera and editing colleagues.

During all this training I've tried to continue with my shoot/edit role. I did manage two filming assignments in Ukraine last year, one with correspondent Laura Bicker on the frontlines near Zaporizhzhia but it's safe to say that I'm now seen and used more as a trainer than a camera crew. I get a constant stream of requests from BBC managers seeking training and/or recruitment help with their staff, so I've just decided to embrace it. And I recognise it's an important role, particularly when the opportunities for professional 'News' camera training are so limited both inside and outside the BBC.

Within the BBC News camera department, we've traditionally relied on each other for training and development. Alongside my camera colleagues Duncan Stone, Rob Wood, Phill Edwards, David McIlveen, Tony Fallshaw, Tony Dolce, Paul Francis, and Julius Peacock, we have created and delivered bespoke training courses every time a new bit of kit comes along, or new joiners arrive. In the past, this worked well because only a handful of ENG broadcast-capable cameras were available and new models were only released every 5-8 years. Therefore, the training periods were well spaced out with plenty of time in between to continue our core filming and editing duties.

But times have changed. There now seems to be a new camera or equipment release every five minutes. I exaggerate but that's how it feels compared with the nineties and noughties, it's often hard to keep pace with it all.



Julie Ritson with newly qualified Kenyan news camera operators.



Kenyan news camera trainees filming on the streets of Nairobi.

However, this is undoubtedly positive progress because cameras are now cheaper, smaller, and much more accessible to everyone, not just those working within the broadcast News industry. This has also improved staff diversity although there is still a way to go, especially amongst women and ethnic minorities. This is a separate discussion best saved for another day, but my point is that with the rapid expansion in the range of cameras capable of filming broadcast quality footage, there's an even greater need within News for proper training.

This is especially true when it's easy to switch on the numerous camera auto function buttons and capture decent footage without too much effort. I've watched many slick-looking showreels but it's not until you directly talk to a camera crew that you get an accurate understanding of their skills and experience.

Every Broadcast News company has its own workflow, and BBC News is no different. Our brilliant R&D teams have developed many bespoke apps to help with the creation and delivery of content in this fast-paced News environment we now live

in. This is why most of our camera training is in-house. Learning to send raw footage and finished News packages back to base using Cloud-based technology, LiveU, or the BBC's own JFE - Jupiter Field Edition system does require additional IT knowledge and training that's very niche to the News industry.

It's also why the introduction of a new camera only happens after a lengthy and detailed procurement process and workflow integration tests, involving many different areas of the BBC. In the summer of 2019, an initial procurement gathering at BBC Wood Norton set out to examine and test a range of cameras from all the main manufacturers. After further bench and field testing, several different cameras were added to the BBC's approved list, the Sony Z280 being one of them.

When I design a camera course, I'm conscious from my own experiences that crews generally don't like sitting in a classroom watching a lengthy presentation. That's why I designed my Sony Z280 course around keeping the blood flow circulating and the coffee breaks plentiful. Using a mixture of presentation slides, videos, and practical hands-on sessions, I work through

the camera from front to back and then into the menus.

On the second day I'll introduce the accessories including a monopod, 3D printed detachable viewfinder for the LCD monitor (J-loupe), a wide-angle lens adapter, and the Sony radio microphones with dual receiver which attach directly into the multi interface (MI) shoe. The audio settings take the longest time to teach because of the unfamiliar audio menu design and the option to use 4 channels. But once mastered it works well.

Teaching the mechanics of a camera is one thing but by far the hardest challenge for me has been convincing camera crews to embrace the new ergonomics. Sony didn't design the Z280 to be a shoulder-mounted camera, it sits in the 'large hand-held' category so it's been a tough transition for many of the longer-serving crews who have used shoulder-mounted cameras for most of their careers, including me. It took 3 months for my PMW500 muscle memory to fade and adapt to operating a smaller camera body.

To aid with this transition, I sourced a shoulder base plate that could be used with the Z280 and added the Sony FS5 smart grip on an extendable arm. This seemed to help, however, over time many crews began to realise it was often easier not to use it and just go handheld. Now I try to steer them towards using the monopod to support the camera when not on the tripod, but I appreciate this doesn't suit everyone or every situation.

At the end of the day, it's always going to be a compromise between trying to reduce manual handling injuries with less weight but still maintaining the high-quality sound and images needed for Broadcast News. Inevitably it was a difficult switch for many, although for myself it was easy because I had no choice. Ten years ago, I suffered a slipped disc in my lower back, probably a result of running around war zones wearing a flak jacket and carrying a 13kg camera on my shoulder. I always had a tripod with me, but it just became too cumbersome when you're jumping in and out of armoured vehicles. Thankfully smaller and lighter cameras like the Sony Z280 and A7Siii have helped extend my BBC career and allowed me to keep working.

But what of the younger generation who seek to follow in my footsteps. How do they break into the industry and specifically BBC News camerawork? The BBC offers over 100 apprentice roles across the UK from school leaver level (3-5) up to Level 6 (degree) and Level 7 (higher/ masters) with apprenticeship schemes in technology, journalism, business, and



BBC Park Western, west London in 2022.

production management.

Amongst these is the Broadcast and Media Systems Technical Operator course which is excellent. It offers some location training but mostly focuses on galleries, newsrooms, studio, and IT operations. This is a good option for school leavers over the age of 18 who might not know what specific broadcasting career path they want to take. The course covers many areas which is great, but it doesn't guarantee an apprentice will specifically seek out a career as a News Shoot/Edit.

There is one recent addition to the apprenticeship scheme in memory of a wonderful and inspirational cameraman, Raeph Ballantyne who sadly died last year. Raeph was known for his empathy and support for our younger staff members, many having come through the apprenticeship scheme themselves.

Sky News also has a bursary in memory of legendary cameraman Mick Deane. It's a 12-month trainee scheme that gives one person the opportunity to work alongside technical camera and engineering teams, with the simple goal of learning what it takes to be a modern-day, technical news camera assistant and operator.

The bottom line is that being able to shoot and edit a National News package requires experienced, highly skilled staff trained in multiple disciplines as well as an aptitude for the challenging role of a Camera Journalist, the official BBC name for a shoot/edit. This is why most of the people

we tend to recruit already have some News camerawork and/or editing experience from UK regional News bureaux or other News broadcasters. Once we see potential, we can upskill with bespoke training to bring recruits up to the level we need.

We also train internal BBC staff on attachments from other areas such as editing, production, and studio cameras. This can be more difficult because they often need a comprehensive training programme covering not only location camerawork but also lighting, sequencing, feeding from the field, live operations, interview setups, and general roadcraft skills. This is one of the ways that we've managed to introduce younger camera crews into our department but they're usually on attachment so must wait for a substantive post to become available before they can apply for a permanent camera position.

For anyone completing my camera course, I'd personally like to see more shadowing opportunities because I know how beneficial this was in the early part of my camera career. The problem now is that most News Shoot/Edits are solo operators, we don't use sound operators for 'on the day' stories. They're mostly hired for big interviews or special events. So ultimately News broadcasters would have to commit to sending a second 'trainee' camera crew on jobs that are already being covered, which of course costs money.

The challenges ahead include financial

restrictions as the squeeze on BBC budgets makes it ever harder to refresh kit at the rate camera crews and production teams always want. We are now also facing a struggle to retain newer talent that we have trained and nurtured through our excellent apprenticeships. They're in much demand elsewhere which is leaving us with a relentless pipeline issue that we need to address.

This article was written by Julie Ritson, BBC News.

Julie Ritson

Born in the North East of England, bred in Scotland, Julie travelled extensively with her engineer father, secretary mother and brother. The family lived for short periods in Australia and South Korea before settling back in Scotland. After leaving school, Julie attended the Film and Television Communications and Design degree course at Manchester Polytechnic where she also started her career with the BBC.

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