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Sydney, 22 July 2006. Big dramatic demonstrations like this swept the world during Israel's invasion of Gaza and Lebanon but they were, on the whole, ignored by the mainstream media and poorly covered by the alt internet media.

TIPS & TRICKS

How to photograph street marches

By Gavin Gatenby, Possum News Network
 29 August 2006

I'm constantly amazed at the lack of good photo coverage of demonstrations on the web. My own photo essays on Sydney demonstrations have been, to my astonishment, much admired and widely praised – particularly by Americans.

Over recent months there have been large and feisty marches against the imperialist wars in

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Iraq and Afghanistan and most recently against Zionist aggression in Gaza and Lebanon, but the visual record on the web was typically of poor quality, if it existed at all. Thousands marched – sometimes hundreds of thousands – but apart from a few thousand passers-by and, if we're very lucky, TV viewers seeing a few seconds of coverage, nobody much saw what happened.

Folks, this just isn't good enough. All of us fighting against these wars need to see, and be inspired by, what we're collectively doing and saying.

Street marches and rallies are dramatic expressions of public dissent. For this very reason they're seldom covered by a mainstream media that characteristically treats them as a disreputable subversion of the public's duty to consume, maybe vote, be silent and die. For this very reason it's vital that the alternative media reports them promptly and well.

I just wish more people would try their hand at this simple and inexpensive form of journalism. To help those who want to try, I've put together a few tips and tricks I've picked up over the years.

At the demonstration

1. Use a good digital camera, preferably with a 10X optical telephoto lens, or better (I use a Fujifilm S5000). Carry cards to store at least 250 shots at the highest resolution your camera permits, spare batteries and a notebook. Wear shoes you can run and climb in and a small backpack for your spare gear.

2. Arrive at the assembly point for the march shortly before the advertised time. Consult the organisers about the route and the move-off time. You might even consider seeking this information the day before and, if you're not familiar with the area, scouting out good vantage points in advance. The more preparation the better.

3. Use the time before the march moves off to take pics of the most interesting banners, placards and tee-shirts. I often photograph these with telephoto, because if the people holding the placards aren't really aware of your presence you capture a more spontaneous impression. Alternatively, ask people to hold up their placard. Both approaches work fine. With these shots in the can, you've already made a good start. They're a good fallback if you don't happen to catch clear shots of those brilliant slogans during the march itself.



TIP: Get shots like this before the march starts. You mightn't get another opportunity.

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4. Find a vantage point and take wide-angle shots showing the assembled multitude. If you have software that automatically assembles a panorama from overlapping shots (it often comes with digital cameras) get shots to cover the full scene. Work quickly from left to right overlapping by around 25 per cent.

5. A few minutes before the march starts, move several hundred metres down the route to a vantage point from which to take the all-important telephoto shots that'll give a graphic impression of its size. The greater the distance over which the march is going to stretch out, the further away you should move so you can, hopefully, get the full length of the procession in the shot. An embankment, a wall, some steps, a safety barricade, an overhead bridge – anything that gives an uninterrupted view will do. The effect will be greatly enhanced if the march approaches you down a slope because you see more of it and the marchers and banners at the rear aren't masked by those in front.



TIP: To capture the emotional power of a street march, get ahead of it and use telephoto. If it's coming downhill, you capture an idea of its length, and the banners at the front don't obscure those behind. To get this shot of a March 2006 Sydney demo, I climbed onto the construction barrier seen at left foreground. The TV news cameraman at left did the same. Great minds think alike.

6. Start shooting on maximum telephoto when the head of the march is around 200 metres away. Take lots of shots, gradually widening the view as the marchers get closer. Telephoto images compact distance and restore to still images some of the emotional power of a moving mass of humanity that otherwise gets lost. I have a theory that this effect derives from bringing many faces onto what's almost a single pictorial plane.

7. As the head of the march passes, stay on your vantage point for a little while and concentrate on individual



banners and placards. Try to capture a clear view of all the wording on each important banner or placard. Take lots of shots – landscape or portrait format as necessary. Often marchers will notice you, look straight at the camera and hold their placard up. This makes for a great image.

8. Get off your perch and get some shots from within the march, at street level, using wide-angle or telephoto as necessary. You might have to run back to the head of the march. This is no time to be shy and retiring. Don't be scared to ask people to clear away from in front of that striking banner or to hold it up higher or stretch it out so all the wording can be read.

9. If possible, try to repeat the above process by cutting through back streets to get ahead of the march. Move fast. Pre-march planning will help here.

10. Cover all the political tendencies and social groups represented. There's great news value and human interest in the unity of disparate groups and individuals around a common aim. Check out some of my photo essays (links below) and you'll see what I mean.

11. Take lots of shots. In the pre-digital era, this was the professionals' biggest secret: they burned film because their clients were going to pay for it. They knew that if you take 10 or 20 shots of the one subject, it's hard not to get a passable one. In the brave new world of digital, we can all adopt the same strategy without the cost.

12. Watch for the unexpected: quirky placards, counter-demonstrators, spontaneous signs of support from passers-by, heavy-handed police behaviour, provocations. Get these on film. They're newsworthy and important. One of the classic problems with newsgathering is the tendency to look for the routine and expected and to miss the new and unanticipated. The old lady with the quirky hand-lettered placard or the rage on the face of a counter-demonstrator might convey more about that moment in time than a routine shot of hand-out placards, however well composed.



13. Take shots at the march's destination to show the size of the crowd.

It's best to shoot from near the stage or platform, looking out into the crowd. Ask the organisers for permission to do this. The shots you get here may be better than the similar ones you've taken before the march kicked off.

14. It may be worthwhile to take portrait shots of the speakers. Take several of each speaker. If you take just one you're sure to catch them in a goofy or uncharacteristic moment, which is unfair. Don't be shy about pushing your way to the front. If you don't recognise speakers get their names. Approach them directly or ask an organiser.

15. Having an assistant, or collaborating with another photographer will make everything much easier. I can cover a demonstration of up to 20,000, but, beyond that, I reckon I'd be missing important stuff. Work out a division of labour based on

the capabilities of your equipment; coverage of key vantage points; personal fitness ... or whatever. Extra labour makes everything easier. For example, an assistant could carry a small, lightweight, stepladder – which is certainly safer and more convenient than clambering up onto hoardings and rubbish bins!

Getting your images out to the world

- 1. Don't miss anything important but make a timely getaway.** Remember: the whole world is waiting for your images!
- 2. On your way home, cull obviously inferior images on the camera.** This saves a lot of download time. (Health & Safety warning: don't attempt if you're driving home).
- 3. Download your photos to your computer and pick the best 10 to 15 images.** It's best to carefully select a few representative shots that tell the story. Do try to massage them to enhance brightness and contrast. If possible use Photoshop. If not, do the best you can with the software that comes with your camera or operating system. I save my shots at 85 dpi and up to 635 pixels wide, to fit the Possum News Network format and I downsample the image as much as possible without sacrificing quality.
- 4. Stack them down one page with a short introduction and captions as necessary.** Five really good shots are better than lots of small mediocre ones. I wouldn't use one of those little programs that post thumbnails of your pics linked to big high-resolution originals. These systems tend to be painfully slow and a real turn-off for the reader.
- 5. Try to have your pictures up within four or five hours of the end of the march.** As soon as you have them on the web, send out an email alert with your photo essay's web address to any alt news-link site that might link to it, plus, of course, all your friends and contacts.

Some of my recent Sydney street march coverage

[Saturday 12 August 2006](#)

• Stop the Bombing! • No Israeli occupation of Lebanon and Palestine!

[Saturday 22 July 2006](#)

• Stop the Israeli attack on Lebanon & Gaza! • Freedom and justice for Palestine!

[Sunday 2 July, 2006](#)

Rally for Palestine

[Saturday 18 March 2006](#)

• Troops home now! • Peace & justice for the Iraqi people!
(Part of the global weekend of action on the third anniversary of the invasion)

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