

**MEDIA AND METANOIA:  
DOCUMENTARY 'IMPACT' THROUGH THE LENS OF CONVERSION**

Pamela Calvert  
© 2003

Pamela Calvert <pjcalvert@earthlink.net> is an independent producer working in the fields of social change media and religious communications. She has served as station relations and outreach manager for the Independent Television Service and director of programs and services for the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, and was a founding board member of Working Films. She is co-producer of THE FIRE NEXT TIME: A NOT IN OUR TOWN SPECIAL, which will be broadcast on PBS winter 2004-05. This paper was written as part of doctoral work at Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. Deepest gratitude to Lewis Rambo.

## **MEDIA AND METANOIA: DOCUMENTARY ‘IMPACT’ THROUGH THE LENS OF CONVERSION**

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conversion theory provides a nuanced perspective with which to interpret the nature and circumstances under which social documentary—media created specifically so as to have a social effect—may in fact have been said to have an “impact.” Innumerable media theorists have discredited market models where the uncritical television viewer gets off her couch straightaway and goes out to join a social movement in the same manner as she might buy a new brand of toothpaste, and yet an expectation of being able to demonstrate (often quantifiable) “results” insistently follows documentarians and public television outreach professionals, particularly when called upon to justify their work to funders and station managers.

The determinist model may be seen to be analogous to a “Road to Damascus” view of instant and permanent religious conversion, likewise discounted yet tenacious. It is an illuminating exercise to consider the operations of documentary media from the perspective of conversion theorists such as Rambo, Stromberg, Tippett, and others. In this light, it is possible to understand both how certain documentaries have facilitated individual and social change, as well as why most, in truth, do not. As a working professional in social change media, I know these questions to be at the core of the discipline, and this paper is thus an exercise in theologically-informed *praxis*, intended to contribute both to scholarly discourse and to professional practice. In particular, this work is both informed by and bears clear applications to the study of religious media production in general and televangelism in particular (Alexander 1994, Frankl 1987,

Hoover 1988, 1990, Horsfield 1984, Marty 1961, 1972, Parker 1961); these implications are not laid out here, but are available for further development.

“Even in a ‘variable’ field like communications, where an eclecticism of approaches is normal, the prospect of foundational shifts in the ways that phenomena are studied and described can be unsettling,” writes Thomas Lindlof (1987, x). The choice of religious conversion to study secular documentary may strike the reader as initially mystifying, even perverse. To add to the disorder, I am not engaging with the distinctively supernatural quality of conversion, focusing rather on the psychological, sociological, cultural, and narrative aspects of the phenomenon. I take heart from James Fowler, whose use of “faith” terminology has “something to offend everyone” but who is nevertheless unwilling to relinquish it “despite its complexity, its likelihood of being misunderstood, and the difficulty of pinning it down precisely” (1981, 92). Ultimately, my choice of conversion theory is a personal one, a “heuristic device . . . convincing because [it fits] the fundamental worldviews, assumptions, and philosophical/theological systems of a particular scholar” (Rambo 1999, 260).

That said, one does in fact find quite striking parallels in the two discourses. This paper will first lay the two side-by-side to demonstrate their coherence, then consider case studies of three documentaries in terms of what new insights a conversion perspective brings to an understanding of their immediate and long-term impact. To do so, a range of research methods and data-gathering tools have been employed: scholarly publications, memoirs, outreach materials, websites, video records of public events, and personal interviews. Neither the methodology nor the results purport to be “scientific”: it is exactly the standards of quantitative empiricism that continue to be so misleading an avenue for media research, while qualitative narrative accounts are downgraded to the trivialized status of “anecdotal evidence.” In this work,

I make the choice for “understanding” over “science”: that is to say, “a grasp of what is occurring and why, but devoid of the unattainable demands of positivist science” (Lindlof and Meyer 1987, 26).

## PART ONE: CONVERSION

### *What Is Conversion?*

The reader may well ask, what exactly do I mean by “conversion”? It is a more than reasonable question, given the “definitional bedlam” surrounding the term (Gillespie 1991, 72). Liberal Protestants are even said to have “abdicated” use of the word, “fleeing” it “out of embarrassment” due to its associations with revivalism (Gaventa 1986, 150). While some might wish to make a case for evangelical Christian specificity in conversion, a critical mass of scholars focus on its non-sectarian—even non-religious—significations, with the common element of deep-seated change and newness: “change in a person’s behaviors and beliefs” (Richardson 1985, 163); “sweeping changes of character . . . ‘rebirth’” (Downton 1980, 382); “the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories” (Fowler 1981, 282); “a reorientation to the world in general” (Percy 2001, xvi); “new ideals, new codes of behavior, new spiritual disciplines” (Flinn 1999, 61); “whenever one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual’s life” (James 2002, 154). “Varied use of the word,” concludes Rambo, “by many people in many situations leads one to believe that it means just what a given individual or group wants it to mean, neither more nor less. It is this laissez-faire character of the word (and by definition, the experience itself) . . . that has distanced scholars from each other” (1993, 3).

The concept I find most fruitful in considering the topic at hand is that of *metanoia*, here limned by Gillespie (1991, 26):

*Metanoia* seems to have several connotations of conversion including a change of mind after reflection; a going beyond the present attitude, status, or outlook; or repentance, which is also its translation. Karl Barth made a distinction between *shubh* as a once-and-for-all or repeated individual movement, and *metanoia* as an inclusive movement in which “man moves steadily to continually new thoughts.”

*Metanoia* captures several qualities—coming to one's senses, repentance, transcendence, inclusiveness, open-endedness, movement—which will be explored in greater detail below as they clarify the phenomenon of media-related individual and social change. I will, however, use “conversion” throughout the following discussion, with the understanding that unless indicated it is intended with the coloring of *metanoia*. Against the more-common individualist and privatized focus of conversion studies, I will also foreground conversion's *affiliational* and *societal* qualities, those dimensions of the experience (or process) which manifest in communal and public expression—a perspective accentuated in liberation interpretations of conversion (Baum 1978, Freire 1978, Henriot 1978, Wallis 1981) and particularly important in considering media effects.

This momentary wavering between “experience” and “process” above brings us to the phenomenology of conversion, a question as knotty as that of definition. One cannot over-state the role of 19th century revivalists, particularly Charles Grandison Finney, in fixing in the popular mind the Pauline stereotype of conversion as an instantaneous, dramatic, emotional, individual, externally activated, decisive and final *event*. Certainly such conversions take place, although they are by no means as normative as might be claimed. Nevertheless, this image influenced much early research into conversion, which accordingly took on psychological and deterministic hues. Later work began to challenge the construction of the convert as a passive

and atomized recipient, with more recent work recognizing the role of dynamic agency and experimental role-play, even to the degree of “self-conversion” (Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1993). Trying to find some phenomenological and terminological clarity, Gillespie notes “confusion between the conversion *moment* and the conversion *incubational period*” (1991, 18). Indeed, many have come to reject the instantaneous paradigm outright, preferring to consider conversion as a “process” (Rambo 1993), a “career” (Richardson 1977) “evolutionary, not revolutionary” (Downton 1980), “a marathon, not a sprint” (Percy 2001). In any event, regardless of the timeframe in which transformation takes place, some common phenomenological elements begin to emerge: encapsulation, repentance, decision, ritual, and testimony; these will be considered at some length below.

### *Who Converts?*

Who converts? First of all, it is necessary to point out that the vast majority of people do *not* convert, even (or especially) when faced with a direct decision about a clear alternative. This may seem like a commonplace, but it bears repeating in light of the implications for studies of media effects: *most people say “no” to conversion*. “Personal and social conditions rarely facilitate change,” observes conversion scholar Lewis Rambo:

Hence, what makes any voluntary conversion process possible is a complex confluence of the “right” potential convert coming into contact, under proper circumstances at the proper time, with the “right” advocate and religious option. Trajectories of potential converts and available advocates do not often meet in such a way that the conversion process can germinate, take root, and flourish (1993, 87).

Rambo delineates a provocative set of hypotheses regarding the dynamics of conversion (ibid., 41). They include the following:

- Stable, resilient, effective cultures will have few people receptive to conversion; cultures in crisis will have more potential converts. The duration and intensity of the crisis influences the degree of receptivity.
- Marginal members of a society convert, people with “nothing to lose”; the more marginal, the more likely they are to convert.
- Coherence and continuity are key: the more consonant the cultural systems, values and symbols between the old and new belief systems, the more likely conversion will transpire.
- Contact between advocates and potential converts is a dynamic process, with the relative power of advocate and recipient influencing the interaction.

Rambo additionally notes significant differences in motivation and demographics between those who convert to a new movement early on, or later when it becomes more established.

Lofland elaborates this point in his study of a religious movement he identifies by the pseudonym “DP” but now widely assumed to have been the Unification Church (1965, 1977).

He observed “a decisive shift in the recruitment pool of the movement.”

Converts I studied in the early sixties were decidedly marginal and rather “crippled” people, drawn from the less than advantaged and more religiously inclined sectors of the social order. . . . As it became fashionable in the late sixties and early seventies for privileged and secular youth of the higher social classes to be alienated from their society and its political and economic institutions, a portion of such youth encountered the DPs. Some converted. Some of them were offspring, indeed, of the American upper class, a fact that has caused the organization considerable trouble (1977, 807).

Lofland raises the possibility that conversion in the early seventies might in fact have become *normative*, querying whether “an entire generation of youth became, broadly speaking, religious seekers . . . and frenzied themselves, indeed, with a fashion of ‘seeker chic’” (ibid., 815).

Recognizing the western individualist focus of much work on the convert, missiologist Alan R. Tippett adds his observations of *group conversion* to Christianity in Oceania: “the process of multi-individual experience and action of a group, through its competent authority, whereby the group changes from one conceptual and behavioral context to another, within the operations of its own structure and decisionmaking mechanisms regardless of whether or not the external environment changes” (1977, 205). While at first glance such insights might seem quite remote from the priorities of North American social change media dynamics, in fact they will become directly relevant as we consider the documentary case studies.

### *Context*

Reiterating Rambo’s point above about the confluence of the “right” convert, advocate, option, time and place, one can simply state that context determines conversion. A person, a group, or an entire society may experience dissatisfaction with the status quo to the point of crisis, but if no coherent alternative presents itself, transformation is unlikely to take place. Rambo uses the sociological term *structural availability* to refer to these dynamics, “the freedom of a person or persons to move from previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, and obligations to new options” (1993, 60):

Contextual factors shape avenues of communication, the range of religious options available, and people’s mobility, flexibility, resources, and opportunities. These forces have a direct impact on who converts and how conversion happens. . . . The various networks that shape our lives—family, job, friendship, religious organizations, and so forth—are often very powerful in discouraging or even preventing change and development, however desirable that change may be to the individual. Despite the internal responsiveness of a person, he or she may, for various reasons, find the new option inappropriate, unachievable, or unavailable (ibid., 20, 60).

The role of the “significant other” or “reference group” in mirroring one’s sense of self is recognized as a critical factor in conversion: “a process of coming to see that reality is what

one's friends claim it to be" (Erikson 1995, 19). Lofland and Stark's original study of the DP movement (1965) supports Rambo's observations about the greater likelihood of conversion among more marginal members of society, particularly those lacking well-developed reference group structures. The earliest DP converts were "social atoms. . . . Converts were acquainted with nearby persons, but none was intimate enough to be aware that a conversion was in progress or to feel that the mutual attachment was sufficient to justify intervention" (872).

Since the group may either encourage or inhibit change, a new reference group is sometimes necessary in order for conversion to occur. (I say "sometimes" because at times conversion can also become normative for a group, as Lofland [1977] and Downton [1980] suggest, illustrated in discussion of the case study *The Uprising of '34* below.) Contact and interpersonal bonds with "believers" are key in instilling a sense of trust in the rightness and coherence of change in oneself, and can be even more important to conversion than the role of the charismatic leader or evangelist. As a whole, a new community—a "believing" reference group—can set new norms for the person who is in the process of conversion, providing social incentives to reinforce the transformation and discouraging "backsliding." Greil and Rudy observe that these social dynamics are the same regardless of whether the nature of the change is religious conversion, achieving sobriety, deprogramming, or "adopting a feminist perspective" (1984, 260). This process culminates in a new sense of self-in-relationship, accountability *vis à vis* the new reference group, a felt quality of "belonging to, and responsibility for, others" (Savage 2001, 16).

*The Advocate*

In conversion, the “advocate” is the social agent whose role is to actively present the alternative ideological option—the evangelist. Applied to social change media, one might situate both the producer and/or the work of media itself in this position, depending on the circumstances of interaction between advocate and potential convert. Just as the coherence and continuity between the convert’s existing belief system and the new ideological option play an important role in facilitating change, so does the advocate’s own self-presentation: “There are connections between a missionary’s style and ideology and the type of convert who is attracted by the missionary enterprise” (Rambo 1993, 68). These factors, combined with complex “insider/outsider” dynamics and perceived power differences between advocate and prospective convert, may affect the convert’s opinion of the advocate’s trustworthiness, or “source reliability.”

Tippett’s 1977 analysis of group conversion in Oceania provides a particularly useful model for understanding the specific contexts in which media-as-advocate may be most decisive. He proposes a four-part schema: “awareness,” “decision,” “incorporation,” and “maturity.” Converts pass successively from one stage to the next via the points of “realization,” “encounter,”<sup>1</sup> and “confirmation.”



Of the first stage, awareness, Tippett writes:

Innovation (and conversion is innovation) is impossible without a period of awareness. . . . It may be accidentally or intentionally stimulated. It may be clearly or vaguely felt. It may be of short or long duration, or of diminishing, accelerating or irregular intensity. But somehow or another the individual and/or group must become aware of another way

---

<sup>1</sup> Note Tippett’s use of the term “Encounter” to refer to a clear-cut public action demonstrating conversion is distinct from Rambo’s, where it indicates the interaction between potential convert and advocate.

of life, another behavior pattern, or another set of values apart from his traditional context. . . . Without awareness of a possible context different from the old one, there can be no conversion (207, 208).

The period of awareness is terminated by the point of realization: “Either for the individual or for the group, there comes the moment when it suddenly becomes apparent that the passage from the old context to the new is not merely an idea. It is a possibility. A vague notion becomes a clear truth” (212). Tippett emphasizes the importance of advocacy in confessional language that nonetheless bears self-evident relevance to the operations of media in the context of social change:

Thus is the Christian group responsible for bringing the pagan group from a state of awareness (static or hostile) to a state of decision-making (dynamic) by thrusts of advocacy in meaningful forms so that the potential converts may see that the Gospel does speak directly to them. “How shall they hear without a preacher?” Paul asks (Rom 10:14) (217).

Recognizing that different strategies are appropriate at different points of the conversion process, few mission enterprises employ only one mode of evangelism. Without getting ahead of myself, I wish to merely indicate here that considerations of media effects have often tried to isolate media from an overall process of personal and social transformation, and succumbed to either an overly deterministic perspective or else dismissed media influence as “essentially confirming and reinforcing agencies and only rarely or eccentrically converting agents” (Marty 1972, 111). This last point about media’s role as a “confirming and reinforcing agency” is not invalid, but refers more accurately to the dynamics of Tippett’s “incorporation” and “maturity” phases, where group identification is established and increasingly secure. Tippett’s schema offers a clear paradigm for understanding not only where ideological advocacy is most influential, but also its absolute necessity to further progress in the conversion process. We will return to reflections on his work in consideration of the case studies.

## *Phenomenology*

Five elements of the phenomenology of conversion are particularly relevant to the operations of media as an agent of change. The first, *encapsulation*, builds on the insight referred to above that the interpersonal context of the reference group is a key factor in encouraging or inhibiting conversion. Encapsulation isolates the potential convert in a controlled environment where all social influences will reinforce identification with the new reference group and acceptance of their ideology: “like cocoons, they coat themselves with a protective covering to protect the process of transformation within from interference from the outside” (Greil and Rudy 1984, 263). As Rambo points out (1993, 104), this has a sinister tone, but it is generally considered appropriate to limit the flow of information and interaction in any number of learning contexts—a classroom, for example. Groups with strong boundaries who self-identify in opposition to mainstream culture will tend to employ more demanding encapsulation strategies than those who are oriented to open-ended spiritual “seeking.”

Greil and Rudy (1984) identify three forms of encapsulation: physical (as in a retreat or communal living situation), social (distinctive dress codes and language, guidelines for contact with outsiders), and ideological (“inoculation” with a comprehensive world-view, for example the 12 Steps). While groups may use different combinations of encapsulation according to their aims and the particular situation, Greil and Rudy doubt that ideological encapsulation alone would be viable “because this would mean, in effect, that members’ worldviews and identities would not receive social confirmation from reference others” (269). We will return to this point in discussion of the integration of media and social movements, specifically in reference to the case study *Not in Our Town*.

The second aspect of conversion relevant to social change media is *conviction of sin*. This may sound dissonant, even quaint, to the secular reader, but all three case studies will show evidence of this dynamic at play. Repentance is at the core of *metanoia*, and no writer on conversion discounts its significance in the overall process of change. Conviction of sin is a fundamental realization of moral disorder in one's life and the acknowledgment of the imperative to restore oneself to order; conversion is the process of restoration, however that might be defined. This can take place at an individual level or, at times, by an entire community—the latter case recognizing that social sin such as racism “resides in a group, a community, a people” (Baum 1978, 288). Liberation theologians recognize the integral connection between the two: “Conversion from social sin is possible only if efforts are made to see that structures are changed. . . . First, personal conversion, then conversion of structures, but no authentic personal conversion without genuine commitment to change structures” (Henriot 1978, 324, 325).

The third element we will consider is referred to variously as *decision, point of encounter* (Tippett 1977) or *impression point* (Stromberg 1985): the point at which one might say there is a tipping, a discernable before-and-after, “when formation gives way to transformation” (Haughton 1978, 25). This aspect alone has stereotypically been taken for the phenomenon of conversion as a whole, to the detriment of clear understanding. That said, there are particularly interesting intersections between the work of anthropologists Peter Stromberg (1985) and Susan Harding (1987) on the *rhetorical* aspects of decision within conversion on the one hand, and the ideological/interpretive framework of “Birmingham School” media study on the other.

Harding studied rhetoric as the “central vehicle of conversion” among fundamentalist Baptists, discovering to her mingled fascination and consternation that she herself began to be

drawn into the fundamentalist worldview just through the act of carefully listening to and making an effort to understand the belief system of her interview subject. The evangelist's strategy is to personalize the group narrative in language individualized to the listener, rhetorically "reconstituting" the listener as a participant in the group discourse. "If you are willing to be witnessed to, if you are seriously willing to listen to the Gospel," says Harding, "you have begun to convert"—you have "come under conviction," begun the process of joining "a narrative tradition, a way of knowing and being through storytelling" which naturally culminates in your own speech as a believer (1987, 178). Harding observes, "The process starts when an unregenerate listener begins to appropriate in his or her inner language the regenerate speaker's language and its attendant view of the world. The speaker's language, now in the listener's voice, converts the listener's mind into a contested terrain" (169).<sup>2</sup>

Mirroring Tippett's transition from "realization" through "decision" and "encounter" into "incorporation," Harding writes,

Coming under conviction (listening to gospel stories or voices) is easy compared to getting saved (speaking; telling stories). When you come under conviction, you cross through a membrane into belief; when you get saved, you cross another membrane out of disbelief. . . . Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, as it were, vicariously. But generative belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech. Among fundamental Baptists, speaking is believing (179).

We will have an opportunity to reflect on this transition from listening to speaking, from "vicarious" to "generative belief," in all three case studies.

Harding's work is in turn closely paralleled by Stromberg's presentation of the "impression point" as the transformative moment when a symbol system is suddenly realized to have fundamental and immediate personal significance in, for example, the famous conversion experience of Augustine: "In the moment of conversion, Augustine reads a verse that

---

<sup>2</sup> Harding acknowledges her debt to Bakhtin (1987, 180).

corresponds perfectly, in his mind, to his own situation. . . . In this moment the Word and experience merge. . . . Augustine finds an important aspect of himself in the Christian symbolism, and this discovery entails a commitment, an emotional investment in that system, which has now been revealed to partake of the unique significance of the self” (1985, 60, 61).

Stromberg continues in much the same vein as Harding, “As the actor forges a commitment to a set of symbols—elements of culture—these symbols re-form the actor by becoming part of his or her new understanding of self. . . . The resulting relation between actor and cultural system is on another level of emotional power than that cognitive assent we usually indicate by the term belief” (61, 71). This *emotionally transformative* quality of the impression point is exactly the level at which a powerful work of art—very much including media—can engage its audience, speaking directly to their experience with potentially potent constitutive effects.

Decision is often symbolized by *ritual*, the fourth aspect of conversion bearing our attention. The “altar call,” in which congregants are invited forward to “accept Christ,” is a classic evangelical strategy for making the convert’s new commitment *public, vocal, and embodied*. Bill Leonard discusses the traditional language of “walking the aisle, an outward and visible sign of an inward and evangelical grace”:

Converts began to describe salvation’s event in terms appropriate to the invitation: when I “walked the aisle,” when I “shook the preacher’s hand,” “when I went forward.” . . . Indeed, many testified that salvation seemed to come to the very act of moving from pew to aisle (In Gillespie 1991, 29).

Ritual “reshapes experience,” writes Bobby Alexander. “Ritual provides an opportunity to entertain new ways of thinking about the world and new ways of living in it and to experiment with these, especially through new social identities, social arrangements, and social encounters” (1994, 10, 11)—supporting the role-playing strategies that themselves often facilitate modern

conversion. In this sense, ritual plays a dual role, fulfilling both experimental and confirming functions; the common observation that many who respond to the altar call are already “saved” church members is a demonstration of ritual’s allowance for “*conversio continua* . . . [the] continuous verification of what we are as converted men [sic]” (Fuchs 1978, 261). Ritual’s communal and public nature reinforces bonds of mutual responsibility. The case study of *Not in Our Town* will provide a specific opportunity to consider the role of media in public rituals of conversion and confirmation.

One specific aspect of the conversion ritual comprises the fifth and last significant element of conversion we will consider in light of its relevance to social change media: the public *testimony*. Testimony is the centerpiece of conversion, fulfilling key functions both for the convert and the community. To return to Harding, it is the demonstration of the transition from “vicarious” to “generative belief,” the outward sign that the convert has fully integrated the “narrative tradition” of the community and has emerged from listening into speaking, in turn confirming the validity of the group’s ideology and methods of conversion. In testifying, then, the convert becomes an evangelist: “Every story of conversion calls for a conversion, confirms the validity of conversion, and shapes a person’s experience of conversion” (Rambo 1993, 159). As one evangelical writer observes,

Frequently, an individual who comes to faith is as impressed with the stumbling and nervous response of the ordinary Christian as they are with the polished communication of the evangelist. The role of the evangelist is to make the message clear and to present it in a winsome manner, while the task of the Christians present is to tell the story which provides a point of identification for those who are considering the truth and relevance of the gospel (Gibbs 1992, 288).

In Stromberg’s terms, the convert’s testimony may become the stimulus for an “impression point” in a new listener. This “point of identification” is clearly manifested in the effect of the “charismatic witness” in media, discussed in *The Farmer’s Wife* case study.

The conversion narrative is necessarily anachronistic, constructed both in and for the current context. It provides an opportunity for continual biographical reconstruction, confirming the coherence of the self-transformation originally experienced in conversion. Through time and repetition/revision, “the telling of the story may have more impact on an individual’s life than an actual event,” as Erikson observes (1995, 10). The division between past and present becomes particularly pronounced:

A typical expression of the reconstruction of one’s life story, after a conversion experience, is the sentence, “At the time I thought . . . but now I *know*.” . . . Looking back and putting one’s life in order is a common human experience, but because converts have a new and dramatic frame of reference in their lives, looking back and putting their lives in order happens in a more intensive and deliberate way (ibid., 12).

Finally, the normative expectation of performance of testimony may shape the experience of conversion itself, notes Rambo: “Groups that do not require public testimony are generally less demanding, and hence the changes expected and manifested may be fewer and less dramatic than in groups that require a powerful conversion experience and a report on that experience” (1993, 139).

### *Sustainability*

“To have a conversion experience is nothing much,” says Peter Berger. “The real thing is to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility” (In Gillespie 1991, 3). Here’s the rub, the point at which conversion begins to resemble discussions of documentary “impact” very closely indeed. “Things hot and vital to us today are cold tomorrow” (James 2002, 155); does that mean that the conversion experience wasn’t “real,” just a momentary lapse, an attack of hysterics?

Perhaps by now it will be clear to the reader that we are again encountering category confusion, a mistaking of event for process. Conversion is dynamic, not static, and any dramatic emotional experience (if in fact that does attend a particular conversion, by no means always the case) will naturally subside. William James contended that using “backsliding” as grounds for dismissing the validity of conversion was “psychologically and religiously shallow”:

Men lapse from every level—we need no statistics to tell us that. . . . That [the conversion experience] should for even a short time show a human being what the highwater mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance,—an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it. . . . [Edwin Diller] Starbuck’s conclusion is that the effect of conversion is to bring with it “a changed attitude towards life, which is fairly constant and permanent, although the feelings fluctuate. . . . In other words, the persons who have passed through conversion, having once taken a stand for the religious life, tend to feel themselves identified with it, no matter how much their religious enthusiasm declines” (2002, 201, 202).

Naturally, religious conversion literature focuses significant attention on factors that maintain and strengthen the convert’s transformation. First, returning to Greil and Rudy’s point about the inadequacy of ideological encapsulation, without a *social container* for the conversion—a community of reference others to provide some degree of social encapsulation—the pre-existing environment of the new convert will tend to exercise a powerful resorbent influence. This reinforces the significance of *structural availability* (Rambo 1993): a person may indeed have a powerful experience of personal transformation and be entirely ready to make a commitment to a new way of life, but in the absence of a visible structure or community to receive and initiate the convert, s/he may remain frozen at Tippet’s “point of realization,” lacking an option for “decision.”

If the convert does connect with some form of believing community, *ritual* and *testimony* reinforce Tippet’s “period of maturity,” although under some circumstances these practices can also have the effect of “freezing” the conversion experience, encouraging believers

to “enshrine the conversion as a sacred moment and relive that moment over and over again [with] little power to transform their lives” (Rambo 1993, 163). As Stromberg observes, change is sustained “only to the extent that it is continually constituted” (1993, 15).

## PART TWO: MEDIA

We have concluded our discussion of the factors of conversion which shed special light on the operations of social change media, and will now spend a brief interval reviewing some parallel streams of communications theory, completing the groundwork for consideration of the case studies.

Early research on media effects evolved from the Frankfurt School’s “hypodermic” approach—in which powerful media were thought to “inject” ideology into the mass consciousness—to the post-war American emphasis on quantitative measurement of the effectiveness of media “persuasion,” using stimulus-response models based on the priorities of commercial advertising and political campaigns. Despite the elusiveness of “proof” of direct, quantitatively measurable media effects, the “hegemony of American behavioral science” (Hall 1982: 57) has continued to exercise widespread influence among both academics and practitioners in the media field (Aufderheide 2002; Morley 1992, 50; National Center for Outreach 2003).

Like revivalist “Road to Damascus” conceptions of conversion, this mode of audience research is “overwhelmingly interested in the instantaneous,” notes John Downing. “Longer-term impact is an extravagance in terms of commercial priorities. The notion of ‘slow burn’ . . . is not on the agenda” (2001, 9). The Birmingham School’s “interpretive/ideological” approach addressed this problem by re-orienting the frame of reference to focus on the hegemonic role of

media in shaping the overall discursive environment in which individual and collective identities are constituted and re-constituted. “What was at issue was no longer specific message-injunctions, by A to B, to do this or that, but a shaping of the whole ideological environment: a way of representing the order of things which endowed its limiting perspectives with that natural or divine inevitability which makes them appear universal, natural and coterminous with ‘reality’ itself” (Hall 1982, 65).

The “semiotic struggle for the mastery of discourse” (Stevenson 1995, 39), then, sheds new light on Rambo’s thesis of “structural availability” as a necessary pre-condition of conversion, especially as related to social change media. If media are “best characterized as a force field in a constant state of flux” (ibid., 180), then the “politics of signification” determine (or preclude) the conditions of reception and potential consequences of Tippett’s “period of awareness” and “point of realization,” as well as influencing the rhetorical operations proposed by Stromberg and Harding.

The question then becomes, under what circumstances can social change media be said to gain the upper hand, however intermittently, in the semiotic struggle? Considering the insights of conversion theory and interpretive/ideological media analysis in combination allows us to reconstruct the notion of “impact” on both private and public levels. This exercise will, I hope, allow us to problematize statements such as Downing’s on the one hand that media activism “lights a flame that, like some trick birthday cake candles, obstinately refuses to be doused” (2001, 392), as well as on the other Brian Winston’s flat negation that “the underlying assumption of most social documentaries—that they shall act as agents of reform and change—is almost never demonstrated” (1995, 236).

Media are the site for a multi-valent “reference group” which encourages or inhibits change, “allow[ing] us to participate in a plurality of popular narratives out of which we construct a sense of selfhood and imagined community. . . . These imaginary communities may be transitory experiences that hold our attention for short periods, or equally they can be the site of more intensive feelings of identification” (Stevenson, 183, 184). Of course, the viewer’s “non-imaginary” community plays a corresponding role in mitigating the effects of media, establishing the standards of normativity and coherence, the “intellectual availability” to change.<sup>3</sup> And we must remind ourselves here again that the odds are always against change, in the realm of media as in all other dimensions of human existence: most people *do not convert*. But Rambo’s (1993) and Lofland’s (1965, 1977) observations on the relationship of socio-cultural marginality to conversion are helpful: to the degree that social networks are unstable or unsupportive, an alternative ideology may have greater suasive power.

The major impediment to media’s use as an agent of change is the “information culture’s” habituating function to Tippet’s “period of awareness”; this problem was recognized as early as 1948 by Merton and Lazarsfeld:

The individual reads accounts of issues and problems and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualised, remote connection with organised social action is not activated. The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself [sic] on his lofty state of interest and information and forget to see that he has abstained from decision and action. In short he takes his secondary contact with the world of political reality, his reading and listening and thinking, as a vicarious performance. He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them. . . . In this peculiar respect, mass communications may be included among the most respectable and efficient social narcotics (In Morley 1992, 252).

In a cultural context where mass communications are expected to provide an undifferentiated flow of novelty—“imagined communities” which can be experienced vicariously without any

---

<sup>3</sup> These reference others are themselves, of course, also perpetually self-defining in negotiation with the ideological operations of media.

incentive or means to take further action—an activist engagement with media strains at the bounds of cultural coherence and continuity which influence the likelihood of conversion, to return to another point from Rambo. A radical discursive disjuncture has been established between atomized private media consumption and collective public action. On the other hand, without direct intervention using the cultural *lingua franca* of media, the “point of realization” never *can* be reached, the understanding that there in fact *is* a real “decision” to be made.

To repeat a point made earlier, people cannot move from awareness through realization into decision unless there is some entry-way, a social container to receive them. Just as few mission enterprises rely on only one mode of contact, and ideological encapsulation alone is inadequate for effecting a sustained conversion, it is difficult for media divorced from a larger social movement to facilitate meaningful and sustained transformation. Nevertheless, a quality of careful distancing is the practice of most social documentaries and virtually all journalism. The institutional structures and professional ethos of independent documentary and journalism discourage (even disparage) media-related “advocacy” in terms reminiscent of those used for religious proselytizing on the one hand, often while demanding measurable evidence of “impact” on the other. Formal association with an organized movement or campaign constitutes a “conflict of interest” which compromises “objectivity” and reduces the media work to the status of a “sponsored project” or “promo,” in turn severely limiting possibilities for broadcast distribution.<sup>4</sup> In short, media’s ineffectiveness as an agent of change is virtually required—by internal norms, industry rules, and cultural expectations. That said, the case studies illustrate alternative strategies—not anomalous “exceptions to the rule,” but an intentional set of practices

---

<sup>4</sup> See Aufderheide 2002 for some new thoughts on “partnering” strategies between NGOs, funders, and filmmakers.

which cohere with the conversion-based theoretical framework for social change media we have been developing.

One final point needs to be made connecting media and conversion discourses. Media's conservative force, its strength in confirming pre-existing opinions, is widely acknowledged (e.g. Morley 1992, 48; Winston 1995, 237). Where change is *not* the intention, there is no disjuncture between the mediated "reference group" and viewer ideology. However, in the context of social change media (as well as in televangelism), an ideologically confirming relationship between media and audience is denigrated as "preaching to the choir." It should be clear by now that this function is, rather, in fact central to *conversio continua*, the maintenance of ideological encapsulation. Conversion is not a once-and-forever event, but a process of continual growth periodically requiring reinforcement, validation, and revival. Social change media viewed by those who are already "converted" perform an analogous function to the altar call which prompts the already "saved" to "walk the aisle" yet again, reaffirming both the believer's transformation and commitment to the community of faith.

These are the operations of Tippet's "period of maturity," spurred by the experience Tippet calls "confirmation." As Tippet notes, "'incorporation' and 'growth in grace' are two quite different elements in the process, and one should not be taken for the other" (1977, 220). While the period of "incorporation" can only take place in the context of an organized community or social movement, media is quite effective in the period of maturity, confirming the rightness of a decision that has already been made. And to remind ourselves of a point from Rambo, there is a complex relationship between conversion and confirmation; the greater the coherence between old and new belief systems, the more likely transformation will transpire.

“Preaching to the choir,” in short, may move an appreciative listener from sympathetic but passive awareness to active decision.

With this groundwork in place, we are now ready to turn to the specifics of three documentary case studies: *The Uprising of '34*, *The Farmer's Wife*, and *Not in Our Town*.

### PART THREE: CASE STUDIES

#### *The Uprising of '34*

In 1994, filmmakers George Stoney and Judith Helfand tossed a “cultural hand grenade” into rural Honea Path, South Carolina (Beacham 2002, 124). Sixty years before, seven workers had been killed and thirty wounded to break a union drive at the mill, part of the massive General Textile Strike of 1934. Eleven local men were indicted for the shooting; despite eyewitness testimony from a total of ninety-nine survivors, none were convicted. Two weeks after the deaths, the entire region-wide strike collapsed, their resources exhausted, with no gains having been made. Honea Path settled into sixty years of uneasy silence, a “social contract” allowing neighbors to continue to live and work alongside each other, knowing that some had destroyed the lives of others. It was a company town: “If you want to work here, you’re going to have to [keep silent]. If you want to stay in your house, you’re going to do this. This is the deal. If you want to be part of this town’s society, this is what you know and this is what you don’t know” (Judith Helfand in Beacham 2002, 149). The code of silence extended to immediate families, with generations growing up only knowing that unions were anathema, a subject never to be raised in their homes. The hegemony of the mill owners prevented even a mention of the incident in state history texts.

Frank Beacham, the grandson of the mill superintendent who ordered the shootings, discovered his own family's history by seeing Helfand and Stoney's film *The Uprising of '34*. He wrote of the experience: "After watching the tape, I sat frozen. I was stunned by what I had learned, yet angry at how it had been revealed to me" (2002, 121). Although born and raised in Honea Path, Beacham had "escaped" long before, like many ambitious young people from small rural towns. In 1994, he was living "a decidedly non-Southern existence in Manhattan," having spent years as a reporter, producer, and writer (ibid., 10). In twenty five years away, he had achieved some distance from the culture he had grown up in, an insider/outsider perspective of intimacy combined with a measure of detachment. *The Uprising of '34*, however, initiated a profound process of autobiographical reconstruction, a "difficult personal reexamination of my earliest years in the South" (ibid., 123). Eight years later, this drive has not abated: Beacham self-published a memoir in 2002, and is currently attempting to sell movie rights.

Approaching the story with a reporter's eye, Beacham began to contact people interviewed in the film—survivors and family members of the strikers. Kathy Lamb was among them; she had likewise learned about the events of 1934 through the film production: "I couldn't believe my ears," she remembered. "I was upset that I was finding out what happened . . . from strangers." She went home and asked her father about the deaths:

He dropped his coffee cup and said, "Who told you about that?" . . . He told me to follow him to his bedroom. We sat on the bed, and he started to tell me the story about Honea Path and my family's involvement. He cried almost the entire time (Lamb 1998, 9, 10).

Lamb's grandfather had been sent home from the mill that day in 1934 as guns were being loaded in, and told to "forget he ever saw them or he wouldn't have a job." Lamb's father, eight years old at the time, saw the excitement at the mill gates and climbed out his bedroom window to join the rally out of curiosity; he narrowly avoided being killed when the shooting

began. He ran home, “pulled the sheet over his head and cried. He heard women screaming and crying and the sound of people running away from the mill” (ibid., 10). Lamb’s grandfather did eventually testify that he had seen the guns arriving at the mill; although he declined to name names, he was nonetheless fired two months after the trial.

Lamb’s reaction to her father’s story was amazement: “This had been kept a secret for nearly sixty years. I didn’t think my family could keep a secret for sixty seconds” (ibid., 11). Beacham expresses similar incredulity: “In retrospect, it’s hard to believe one could grow up in the midst of a community that had experienced such tragedy and not be aware of it. The fact is, it’s almost impossible to keep a secret at all in a small town like Honea Path” (2002, 123). He calls Honea Path “a cocoon, a closed environment where a cultural artifice could be successfully constructed, sold, accepted, and maintained for generations” (ibid., 9). *The Uprising of ‘34* utterly changed that, starting with the people directly involved with the production and, through catalysts like Beacham and Lamb, continuing to reverberate in perpetually widening circles.

Against all odds, Lamb organized a memorial service to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the strike and raised the funds to erect a monument to the dead strikers. The monument dedication event, held in May 1995, was also to be the documentary’s Honea Path premiere. By now, Beacham was aware that the town gossip mill had exaggerated the production into a “Hollywood movie” and the memorial “union propaganda.” He secured a five-minute interview on a local radio talk show to correct some basic misperceptions—the station had no intention of giving more time than absolutely necessary to this controversial and advertiser-alienating topic.

Then something extraordinary happened. My brief phone-in interview turned into a two-hour town meeting. Caller after caller queued up to tell a personal or family story relating to the strike. Suddenly, the sixty-year silence had broken. . . . During the entire broadcast, only one caller criticized my efforts. As the show progressed, Matt [the host]

went from surprised to relieved to euphoric. . . . He knew instantly he had tapped a deep well of emotion in his audience. About midway into the program, Matt stunned everyone by promising on the air to do a live remote broadcast at the dedication of the workers' memorial. As a highly visible and respected member of the community, . . . his tacit endorsement—a miracle in light of his anti-union views—gave the memorial a new air of legitimacy (ibid., 157).

Beacham feels that the radio show was the true turning point, the collective breaking of silence. The town's mayor spoke at the dedication; in the town-wide process of re-discovery, he himself had learned that he had one uncle inside the mill and another outside who was shot. The event garnered national coverage; even the *Wall Street Journal* used the occasion for an in-depth article on the current labor relations in the South. "Everywhere the film touched, things changed," Beacham recalls (2003). Nonetheless, it took South Carolina's statewide public television system two years and a change of management to broadcast *The Uprising of '34*, long after its 1996 national PBS airdate.

In 1997, two years after the memorial dedication, Lamb was doing a house-to-house union organizing drive in Honea Path; she wrote at the time, "Not one [person] has said anything negative against unions. Everybody wants in. . . . If someone had told me two years ago that they were going to organize a union in Honea Path, I would have said forget it. Nobody will even talk about it—it would take an act of God to get a union here. But now, people have the courage to call up a union and say, 'I need help'" (Lamb 1998, 14). Nonetheless, Beacham now feels that as the people directly involved in the strike pass away and his own generation grows older, there is a risk that Honea Path's history will be forgotten again unless it is institutionalized into the school curricula: "People will deny there ever was a cover-up. In the South, you can uncover something remarkable and it will just die. It's lost, it doesn't mean anything twenty years from now" (2003).

*The Uprising of '34* is a remarkable example of the power of media to transform a whole community. Conversion theory allows us to outline these operations as follows:

- First and most obviously, there was no empathetic leap to be made between the media narrative and the Honea Path audience, no discontinuity between the viewers' *reference groups*: *The Uprising of '34* was literally their story. Its transformative power lay in combining perfect continuity with radical disjuncture, demanding a wholly new understanding of individual, family, and community autobiography—"the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories," to recall Fowler's definition of conversion (1981: 282). Both on an individual and collective level, the truth of Erikson's observation about the "intensive and deliberate" process of autobiographical reconstruction is seen in force: "At the time I thought . . . but now I *know*" (1995, 12).
- The *demographics of conversion* closely follow Rambo's and Lofland's observations in both individual and cultural terms. The film can be said to have revealed instabilities in the town's social contract, precipitating a crisis, which in turn facilitated the conditions for numbers of conversions. The earliest "converts," such as Beacham and Lamb, were to some degree marginal to the community, and perhaps most significantly no longer lived there, giving them both psychological distance and a greater degree of personal safety. (On one visit home, Beacham was confronted in a local coffee shop by the doctor who had delivered him: "He proclaimed loudly that I should be shot for what I'd done. No jury, he shouted to the gathered diners, would convict the shooter. He wasn't kidding" [Beacham 2002, 167].) Their conversions, however, turned them into evangelists, making it possible for greater numbers of people to experience *metanoia*—"to come to their senses." Finally, adoption of the new master story became virtually

normative, and only at that point did those closer to the center of power such as the radio host and the mayor turn with the tide. However, by no means was the entire town magically transformed; for example, Beacham's own family remains bitterly divided over his actions.

- The phenomenology of change followed many of the patterns of conversion laid out above. In particular, one sees the transition from vicarious to generative belief in Beacham's account of the radio interview, in which for two hours caller after caller added their story to the community story (and the calls to the station did not end that day). Like responding to an altar call, people "walked the aisle" and "took the preacher's hand," *repented* of the sin of having maintained an oppressive culture of silence, and *testified* in an exercise of collective re-membering. Tippett saw this phenomenon in group conversions: "The group self-image may need restructuring, and a new set of norms may have to be fixed. The group may demand from each individual some ocular demonstration of separation from the old context" (1977, 205). At this point of encounter, "the group is ready to act in unison. . . . [The demonstration] must leave no room for doubt that the old context may still have some of their allegiance, or still hold some power over them. . . . The old way is terminated" (ibid., 213). The callers' "stumbling and nervous responses" provided a "point of identification" for listeners-then-callers in a continuous loop of conversion-narrative-becoming-evangelism, while Beacham (and by extension the film itself) played the advocate's role of "mak[ing] the message clear" and [presenting] it in a winsome manner" (Gibbs 1992, 288).
- The *role and trustworthiness of the advocate* are interesting in this case. Both Beacham and Lamb singled out for mention their anger at hearing their story "from outsiders."

Filmmakers Stoney and Helfand were based in New York, which is as outside as it gets in the South. Stoney, then in his eighties, is originally from North Carolina and became acutely aware of the role of *class* in this production process: “I physically represented the kind of person many people in the South had every reason to hate. . . . I reminded them of an old foreman that used to be mean to them, or the shoe salesman downtown who insulted them fifty years ago” (ibid., 166). Helfand was in her twenties, from Long Island, and had her own challenges to face: “There’s a horrible myth about people like me . . . Jewish New Yorkers in the South. It’s always a group of Jewish New Yorkers who come down and try to get everybody to join a union. Who push people to take incredible personal and economic risks . . . and then leave. And here I am trying to organize everyone to be in a movie . . . about unions!” (ibid., 163). Nonetheless, the involvement of nearly sixty scholars and educators in the project lent it a “credibility” (ibid., 150) which the individual advocates—and early converts—may not have mustered on their own.<sup>5</sup>

- The *structural availability* of the community for conversion was extremely limited before Stoney and Helfand arrived, due to a very efficient combination of ideological, social and physical encapsulation—a small rural town, a “social cocoon” as Beacham called it, with a community social contract of silence reinforced by a cultural ethos valuing “not stirring up trouble.” Even after (or more likely because) the film had had such a dramatic effect in Honea Path, significant efforts were made to foreclose its wider impact through denial of a South Carolina public television airdate and the cancellation of other community and educational screenings (ibid., 154). (These efforts, of course, backfired, giving the

---

<sup>5</sup> There is unfortunately no room here to discuss Helfand’s unexpected personal bond with disabled millworkers, which played a formative role in her subsequent autobiographical documentary, *A Healthy Baby Girl* (Beacham 2002, 164).

documentary higher visibility and a certain *cachet*.) To return to Tippet's point, conversion cannot not begin in the absence of awareness; had *The Uprising of '34* not been produced, Honea Path may well never have had the structural availability for change.

- In a related and final point, the *sustainability* of the conversion of Honea Path is still an open question, for the reason raised by Beacham. On an *individual* level, there is no question that *The Uprising of '34* will continue to be the defining moment in the lives of those who directly participated in the film in 1994-96. On a *collective* level, however, the passage of time may erode the significance of the transformation. It may not be necessary, far less possible, for future generations to have the same intensity of feeling in relationship to 1934 as do those today, but as Beacham points out, in the absence of institutionalization such as curriculum or another form of social movement as a location for “incorporation” and “maturity,” it is perhaps as easy for the effect to fade with the experience.

We have now seen an instance of direct intervention of media in a community's life with dramatic consequences; however, the vast majority of mass media consumption takes place in a very different context—at home channel-surfing, “consuming” images without any single program having greater weight than another. In these circumstances, is it possible to say that media can serve conversion beyond the vaguest and most passive forms of “awareness”?

### *The Farmer's Wife*

In late September 1998, when most of the country was watching either *Monicagate* or Monday Night Football, a three-night *Frontline* special began to air on PBS. It was an unlikely

audience-grabber, more than six hours of *cinéma vérité* of three years in the life of a struggling young Nebraska farm family with an unspellable, unpronounceable last name: Buschkoetter.

But over that week, people who discovered the series by sheer accident were transfixed and, by their own accounts, transformed:

In a nation with much racial strife and hate, and being black and living on the south side of Chicago, I've become blind to those like you and your beautiful babies simply because all I see is poverty in the black zone. It's easy to become bitter when you're blind and almost don't want to see or hear about someone else's suffering but your own.

It was my intention to see the football game tonight but while turning to the game I saw three little girls with their daddy. "How dear" I said, thinking how sweet it would be to have children of my own. I continue to look and listen. WHAT! a white family, struggling? Later I find myself in tears.

I don't know what happened on the football game but I do know what happened to my heart. Now I know that I must rethink and get rid of my foolish thoughts when it comes to who hurts more or less in this country. We all hurt black or white when you have babies and have no money.

Thank you for sharing your life with me. God bless you and your babies. LOVE  
KELVIN (Frontline 1998)

In the coming weeks, *The Farmer's Wife* website received nearly one million hits, and tens of thousands of emails came to the filmmaker, to *Frontline*, and to the associated site at the Independent Television Service. Viewers posted extraordinarily personal stories, writing as if in private correspondence with the Buschkoetter family:

Dear Darrell & Juanita,<sup>6</sup>

It has been five days since you left our living room. I feel like my closest friends have just moved away. It has also taken me 5 days to pull myself together to write this to you.

In brief, my husband of 11 years and I had, at the best of times, a rocky marriage. We basically stayed together for the kids. We never talked, touched and at some points, cared. Then we saw the pain through other people—You. Wednesday night we sat up until 1:30 am talking. Then the next day we talked again. (Not just hi, pass the catsup and I'm going to bed). We actually shed tears, and opened our hearts up to each other. Something we have not done in years. You forced us to be honest with each other. After hundreds of dollars into failed marriage help, you and PBS were the ones who broke into our souls. Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!!! (Independent Television Service 1998)

---

<sup>6</sup> Juanita Buschkoetter, despite her name, is not a Latina.

Viewers felt an extraordinary personal bond with Darrel and Juanita Buschkoetter, to the degree that some were compelled to go beyond webposts and letters, and actually make contact: one man felt such urgency after seeing the first night's episode that he drove several hours to Nebraska and showed up at the family's door to watch the remaining two segments with them in their living room. Others showed up with carloads of clothing, food, and toys.

I am a sergeant with the New York City Police Department and I watched all three episodes with two other officers that I work with. Before we watched the show we all thought we had tough lives. Now we realize that our lives are relatively easy. We have a proposition for you that might seem silly but we are serious. We would love to travel there during the next harvest season for two weeks and help you on the farm. I am serious about this offer. (ibid.)

Viewers went to great pains to emphasize the connections they had made between the Buschkoettters' situation and their own very different life circumstances. The family received a letter from a prisoner in Massachusetts who had resolved to go back to school after seeing Juanita's struggle to get a college degree. Others posted on the website:

I was very moved by your story and inspired by the strength you've all dealt with your trials. I've lived through a very different set of circumstances, as a Vietnamese immigrant, but we were also poor growing up.

-----  
I'm a firefighter and 7 of us were glued to the TV watching Part 3. We got called out twice to minor emergencies. We ran out to the engine cursing our misfortune and couldn't wait to get cleared and return to quarters and to your riveting story. Afterwards at 3 am we went out on another call—we sat quietly, sleepily in the cab, until someone spoke up, "You know what was really amazing about that film was..." and soon a lively discussion was taking place in the cab of the engine as sirens blared and lights flashed.

-----  
My wife and I are one of those couples that as Darrel stated, live in the city with highrises, etc. I do not watch a lot of television given the hectic pace that my wife and I lead in our lives, but I must have watched your film 6 times. If you are ever in the Baltimore area, PLEASE look us up. We would be honored to be able to refer to you as our friends. If we ever make out to beautiful Nebraska, you can bet that we'll stop by to meet some modern day role models. (ibid.)

And finally, perhaps most poignantly, those who saw their lives exactly paralleled onscreen poured out their stories:

Dear Juanita,

My husband is a third generation farmer. I can't tell you how comforting and strange it was to watch the first part of "The Farmer's Wife" because it was like watching a mirror of our own lives. Three children, 1,200 acres of wheat and in the last seven years I have seen my husband go from half a million net worth and no debt to very little net worth and seemingly insurmountable debt.

I didn't think I was going to get my husband to watch the show. Just two days before I had sat out with him in the pasture (where the kids wouldn't see him) and weep over his losses and feeling like a failure. Once he started watching he became mesmerized. Everything was there—the long hours at the ASCS office, the humiliation of small town talk, the anger and frustration, the heartbreak.

Thank you for your show. It gave me courage to continue. Saving our farm and saving our marriage is one of the hardest things I have ever done. There is a comfort in knowing that we are not alone. I think that only a farmer's wife can understand the strange mixture of heartache, anger, anguish and fear that accompanies being married to a farmer. It is heartbreaking to see your husband work longer and longer hours thinking that is all that he needs to do to make it work. It hurts to see a way of life dying.

My husband left during part of it because it was too painful for him to watch. My girls and I watched it together (they are 16 and 13) and we were tearful because it was like watching our lives. My husband said he needed to know if it turned out okay before he could watch the other two parts. When I told him it looked like it did, I saw hope in his eyes that I haven't seen for a long time. (Frontline 1998)

The broadcast of *The Farmer's Wife* was accompanied by a national outreach campaign focused on education and advocacy around the farm crisis, but that is not our priority here. Rather, the startling impact the broadcast itself had on a mass audience, absent any larger social movement, is what is remarkable. Returning to a conversion perspective, we can single out the following points:

- One has the overwhelming impression that viewers were emotionally blindsided by their experience watching the program—many discovering it purely by chance—and that this strengthened the intensity of their reaction, its quality of *crisis* to use the terminology of conversion. The response of tens of thousands was to leap over the distancing and atomizing effect of television and to assemble

at the only “public” place available to them to testify to their changes of heart: the web. Further, many viewers were so driven to embody the impact of their affective experience that they in effect made a ritual pilgrimage to rural Nebraska to literally *get in touch* with the Buschkoettters. They decisively rejected the objectifying I-It *consumption* of the other’s story in favor of I-Thou *relationship*: “If at all impossible [sic] I would like to keep in touch. You know kind of like a pen pail [sic]” (Frontline 1998).

- As noted above, the Buschkoettters were the “charismatic witness” whose life story activated the *impression point* for conversion in viewers. The family’s on-air revelations and transformations triggered autobiographical re-evaluation for others, even to the point of “re-orientation to the world in general” (Percy 2001) as Chicago correspondent “Kelvin” testifies. Many of these testimonies repent of failed marriages, broken families, and lives broken by addiction and hardship, reinforcing the role of *conviction of sin* in the public narrative of conversion.
- Although the filmmaker’s stated intent had been to “put a human face on statistics” related to the farm crisis, because *The Farmer’s Wife* was not immediately and visibly tied to a social container for *incorporation* of conversions, the great majority of viewers derived only private and individualized meaning from their experience—either as a message meant for their own family’s lives, or as an impetus to help this particular farm family. In other words, there was no *structural availability* for *socio-political conversion* of the broadcast audience (Gelpi 1986). This is not to say that the film did not have social impact through other venues such as advocacy by outreach partners, but the broadcast

audience as such was not faced with a political *point of realization* by the experience of viewing the series.

- Because of the nature of television, the *sustainability* of the conversions experienced by viewers of *The Farmer's Wife* is an open question, at present unresearched. Although the affective experience seems to have taken on quite pronounced qualities of *physical encapsulation*—with viewers writing, “I frankly do not know where to begin. . . . I finished watching part 3 of *The Farmer Wife* last night and sat there after turning off the television for three quarters of an hour before moving, before making a sound” (Sutherland 1998)—supporting forms of *social encapsulation* to maintain and affirm the changes would depend on the specific nature of the change within the context of the life circumstances of the viewer. It certainly merits follow-up study to contact several of those who made public commitments to change, assessing their situations five years later.

In our final case study, *Not in Our Town*, viewer response to a national broadcast—like *The Farmer's Wife*—has taken the form of collective and public transformation—like *The Uprising of '34*—but in long-term and self-sustaining forms of social and ideological encapsulation. Following consideration of this case, we can finally revisit the juxtaposed comments of Winston and Downing about the presence or absence of media “impact” with a more nuanced understanding of what, when, and how media plays a role in transforming lives.

### *Not In Our Town*

In the winter of 1993, a vandal in Billings, Montana, threw a chunk of concrete through the window of a child who had placed a menorah there in celebration of Hanukkah. The boy's

mother, a Billings native, went to the local newspaper for support. Inspired by the story of the Danes who had worn the Star of David during WWII, the Gazette printed a full-page menorah, encouraging readers to put it in their windows. At first only a few hundred displayed the menorah, eliciting more harassment and vandalism. But the Billings police chief, who took a leadership role in the anti-hate campaign, urged citizens not to be intimidated: “Visible signs of support for the Jewish community have to increase, not decrease. For every vandalism that is made, I hope that ten other people put menorahs in their windows” (Not In Our Town). By the end of December, more than 10,000 households—one-third of the city’s total—had become a part of this public witness.

Oakland-based independent producers Patrice O’Neill and Rhian Miller read about the Billings story in the *New York Times*, and produced a half-hour production, *Not In Our Town* (*NIOT*), which aired nationally on PBS in December 1995. The broadcast was accompanied by a year-long organizing campaign which assembled partnerships between national, state and local groups, culminating in hundreds of community screenings during “Not In Our Town Week.” The *NIOT* campaign took advantage of emerging technologies such as email and the World Wide Web (not yet abbreviated to the ubiquitous “web”) to build up an infrastructure. Once the website was launched, *Not In Our Town* campaigns sprang up as far away as Prague; all the action materials could be downloaded without the active involvement, or even knowledge, of the production company.

With the self-perpetuating support of the web and email network in place, national broadcast and community screenings became in effect the beginning, not the end-point, of *Not In Our Town*. What began as a television show about one community’s response to hate rapidly grew into an international movement. When Aryan Nations began a recruitment drive in Grant’s

Pass, Oregon, residents were inspired by Billings' example to design their own logo, printed on bumper stickers and posters: "We Stand Together for a Hate Free Community." Two employees of the Ohio Department of Human Services were moved to counter the annual Klan cross-burning on the lawn of the capitol across the street from their workplace with a statewide "Not in Our Agency" campaign. Bloomington, Illinois posted a "Not In Our Town" road sign at the town's entrance and issued "Not In Our Town" buttons to their police force; nearly a thousand residents signed a pledge against intolerance.

So many communities responded, with such powerful stories, that O'Neill and Miller decided to make a follow-up documentary, *Not In Our Town II*, which aired in December, 1996, one year after the first program's broadcast. If anything, the release of *NIOT II* increased the impact of the first production. Now communities could see that Billings was no anomaly, and learned from each others' examples. For the next six years, despite no further broadcast support from PBS, the producers' telephone kept ringing: in 1999, when three synagogues were firebombed in Sacramento, the *Bee* called for readers to put the Hebrew *l'chaim*, "life," in windows of homes, government, and businesses, citing the Billings newspaper as their inspiration. When in the same year a follower of white supremacist Matt Hale's World Church of the Creator went on a shooting rampage, East Peoria citizens called upon the neighboring Bloomington *Not In Our Town* campaign for help. Their joint efforts culminated in a march along the interstate which links the two communities, the route the shooter took on his hate crime spree. *Not In Our Town* had very evidently taken on a life of its own.

In 1995, knowing nothing of all this activity, nursing student Sandi Lechner watched the original *Not In Our Town* in her Wisconsin living room. She recalls now, "I happened to be home, I don't even know why the tv was on. I just remember sitting there crying through the

entire thing. It dawned on me that people still felt that way [i.e., were violently racist]. I thought that had all died in the sixties.” Although at the time she filed away the experience—“I never did anything political or community-minded in my life”—she now sees Divine design in that chance encounter: “God took control of it. That’s so . . . God” (Lechner 2003).<sup>7</sup> She “never forgot it,” even writing the show’s name in her address book, but she went on with her life.

In 2000, Lechner moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where she had summered as a child. Although somewhat apprehensive about the conservative culture of Greenville, the home of Bob Jones University, she remembers being “sold by the realtor—‘we’ve changed, Greenville led the way in school desegregation’—but it was all a big façade.” As she “started to get clued into the real scene,” she sought out a liberal church and found her “theological niche” at an interracial UMC led by an African American pastor, where she quickly became active.

Lechner’s true point of realization took place September 11, 2001, which “consumed” her—she found herself so shaken by the vengeful local response—“people hating, not understanding”—that she had to go back to Wisconsin for a week. On her return, she had an uncanny spiritual experience, one which she tells others very rarely. Praying at home, she saw a vision of black and white people coming together in a festival, and had the clear message that “God was saying there’s something you’ve got to do.” She worked with her church to organize an interfaith service of prayer and peace, which took place in February 2002. The service was “nice,” she says, but she had the strong sense this hadn’t satisfied the call, that “there was more to do” and it had to move outside the walls of the church to involve the whole community.

It was only now that *Not In Our Town* came back to her—that Greenville, like Billings, could come together to “help themselves. If they can do it, we can do it too.” She intended to buy the tape to show her pastor, but discovered on the website—some seven years after the

---

<sup>7</sup> All subsequent Lechner quotes Lechner 2003.

original broadcast outreach initiative—that Not In Our Town had become far more than a half-hour television show. One could go so far as to say that Lechner found in NIOT a literal answer to her prayer.

Lechner began the Greenville campaign with a series of town meetings involving civic, educational, government, media, religious, and business organizations to form a core group to respond to hate incidents, that “this isn’t what our community is about.” Still, Greenville (twenty miles from *The Uprising of ’34’s* Honea Path) is the only county in South Carolina which continues to refuse recognition to the national holiday for “Communist philanderer” Martin Luther King Jr. When the county council once again voted the initiative down in September 2002, Lechner activated her new Not In Our Town network, and in March of the following year 10,000 people wearing black armbands marched in Greenville; Lechner recounts that some are still wearing the armbands publicly nine months later. Since a commissioner explicitly told Lechner, “there will be no King holiday here until you vote us off,” the organization has begun candidate training for the 2004 elections; Greenville Not In Our Town will be incorporated as a freestanding non-profit organization in early 2004.

Lechner’s new-found visibility has come with some personal risk, including phone calls accusing her of being a “race traitor.” “I look over my shoulder, I’m very careful at county council meetings, when I’m going home late at night. There are some real nutjobs here, when you rile up people with white sheets in their closets, you have to be careful.” Still the worst thing that someone has said to her face was at a council meeting, unintentionally exemplifying the connection between the media and the movement. “I know who you are,” the man hissed at her, emphasizing each word with malice. “You’re PBS.”

In the interests of space, Lechner's is the only *Not In Our Town* story we can consider at any length. The video record from a 2002 NIOT town meeting in Kalispell, Montana, shows the kind of *collective* commitment to change that group viewing of the documentary elicits, particularly in a community where even showing up at a public anti-hate event puts one at significant risk. Like the black armbands in Greenville and the newspaper menorahs in Billings, the social encapsulation provided by the Kalispell "Hands Against Hate" window signs is a visible reinforcement of a new master story. The presentations by community leaders and representatives of the town's "pioneer families" signal that the Kalispell NIOT campaign, although initiated by newcomer/outsider Brenda Kitterman, has reached a new level and that conversion has become normative. People are repeatedly urged to express their new commitment in the behavioral, embodied form of standing—"stand together," "stand up to hate," "don't stand by and allow hate to occur," "stand against violence," "stand with us." Likewise, the movement from vicarious to generative belief is activated, not only in audience members voluntarily "walking the aisle" to come to the microphone to share their testimony, but in all assembled being exhorted to stand *and* speak, a *point of encounter* visibly signaling the termination of the old way: "Take a minute, stand up, look at the people around you, shake their hands, and pledge to them that this won't end tonight, that we will refuse to do nothing. Stand up and hold hands against hate" (Not In Our Town 2002).

As noted, *Not In Our Town* combines many of the salient features related to conversion we have noted in the previous two case studies and those points will not be repeated here. However, a the key element which must be foregrounded in the film's extraordinary capacity to continue not only to provoke individual and collective impression points but to move people from awareness to sustained incorporation is its connection to an ongoing social movement, a

new *reference group* for the potential convert. Additionally, the technology of the web creates new *structural availability* for people like Lechner (and Kitterman, who also discovered NIOT on a websearch) who would not have had access to information about the anti-hate campaign at the time of the original broadcast.

### *Conclusion*

Brian Winston is absolutely correct that “the number of documentaries that have had any demonstrable effect is very small” (1995, 238), and in the foregoing pages we have begun to see why this should be the case. However, if anything Winston’s critique increases the necessity of considering the instances in which this is manifestly *not* so—understanding that this project is best undertaken not in terms of before-and-after quantitative measurement, but through a collection of qualitative evidence not reducible to “anecdote.”

In the foregoing, I have carefully abjured the temptation to say that any given media text has some kind of freestanding life-transforming “impact” on its viewer(s). I hope I have instead made the case that a range of contextual elements determines availability for the kind of radical change that individual or collective conversion entails, *and* that social change media is most certainly a decisive factor in conversion at many points of the process, from the period of awareness straight through to the period of maturity.

I cannot agree, then, with Downing (2001) that activist media—particularly in ephemeral forms such as social change documentary—“lights a flame that, like some trick birthday cake candles, obstinately refuses to be doused” unless it is carefully qualified along the lines suggested above. This certainly *can* be the case, as we saw with Sandi Lechner, but in the

absence of such factors as structural availability, social encapsulation, the catalytic role of one or more (usually marginal) people, and some form of instability or crisis, most probably will *not* be.

At a more fundamental level, the reader might object that my analysis does not make any particular attempt to contest the operations of hegemonic broadcast media or to propose a wholly alternative model for change-based media in a more truly participatory and liberatory Freirian paradigm. This is, very simply, not my brief in this project. I have instead chosen to work within a set of assumptions which sees people as being discursively formed both as individuals and in community, considering the phenomenology of *metanoia* within the contemporary context of the “media culture.” Seeing documentary “impact” through the lens of conversion allows us both to document a set of practices and outline an analysis of media as an agent of formation and transformation, to the end of providing greater insight to those working in the field.

## WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Bobby C. 1994. *Televangelism reconsidered: ritual in the search for human community*. Atlanta: American Academy of Religion.
- Aufderheide, Pat. 2002. NGOs, funders, and filmmakers: jointly crafting tools for social action agendas. Paper delivered at the Our Media Not Theirs II Pre-conference on Alternative Media of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Barcelona; available from [www.comminit.com/st2002/sld-6479.html](http://www.comminit.com/st2002/sld-6479.html); Internet; accessed 30 November 2003.
- Baum, Gregory. 1978. Critical theology. In Conn 1978.
- Beacham, Frank. 2002. *Whitewash: a southern journey through music, mayhem & murder*. New York: self-published by author.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. Interview by author, 25 November 2003.
- Conn, Walter E., ed. 1978. *Conversion: perspectives on personal and social transformation*. New York: Alba House.
- Downing, John D. H. 2001. *Radical media: rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Downton, James V. 1980. An evolutionary theory of spiritual conversion and commitment: the case of Divine Light Mission. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:381–196
- Erikson, Richard M. 1995. *Late have I loved thee: stories of religious conversion and commitment in later life*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Flinn, Frank K. 1999. Conversion: up from evangelicalism or the pentecostal and charismatic experience. In Lamb and Bryant 1999.
- Fowler, James W. 1981. *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Frankl, Razelle. 1987. *Televangelism: the marketing of popular religion*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1978. Conscientisation. In Conn 1978.
- Frontline. 1998. Share your own story. Available from [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/farmerswife/letters/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/farmerswife/letters/); Internet; accessed 21 September 2003.

- Fuchs, Joseph. 1978. Sin and conversion. In Conn 1978.
- Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. 1986. *From darkness to light: aspects of conversion in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Gelpi, Donald L. 1986. The converting Jesuit. *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 18 (January): 1–38.
- Gibbs, Eddie. 1992. Conversion in evangelistic practice. In Malony and Southard 1992.
- Gillespie, V. Bailey. 1991. *The dynamics of religious conversion*. Birmingham, Ala: Religious Education Press.
- Greil, Arthur L., and David R. Rudy. 1984. Social cocoons: encapsulation and identity transformation organizations. *Sociological Inquiry* 54:260–278.
- Hall, Stuart. 1982. The rediscovery of “ideology”: return of the repressed in media studies. In *Culture, society and the media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al., 56–90. London: Methuen.
- Hard Times Productions, ed. 1998. *Three years later: “The Uprising of ‘34” to air on South Carolina public television*. New York: self-published by editors.
- Harding, Susan F. 1987. Convicted by the Holy Spirit: the rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion. *American Ethnologist* 14:167–181.
- Haughton, Rosemary. 1978. Formation and transformation. In Conn 1978.
- Henriot, Peter J. 1978. Social sin and conversion: a theology of the church’s social involvement. In Conn 1978.
- Hoover, Stewart M. 1988. *Mass media religion: the social sources of the electronic church*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. The meaning of religious television: the “700 Club” in the lives of its viewers. In *American evangelicals and the mass media*, ed. Quentin Schultze, 231–249. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.
- Horsfield, Peter G. 1984. *Religious television: the American experience*. New York: Longman.
- Independent Television Service. 1998. Talkback: The Farmer’s Wife. Available from [www.itvs.org/shows/talkback.htm?showID=163](http://www.itvs.org/shows/talkback.htm?showID=163); Internet; accessed 21 September 2003.
- James, William. 2002. *Varieties of religious experience*. centenary ed. London: Routledge.

- Lamb, Christopher, and M. Darrol Bryant, eds. 1999. *Religious conversion: contemporary practices and controversies*. London: Cassell.
- Lamb, Kathy. 1998. "The Uprising of '34" and the impact on a southern town. In *Hard Times Productions 1998*.
- Lechner, Sandi. 2003. Interview by author, 2 December 2003.
- Lindlof, Thomas R., *Natural audiences: qualitative research of media uses and effects*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Timothy P. Meyer. 1987. Mediated communication as ways of seeing, acting and constructing culture: the tools and foundations of qualitative research. In Lindlof 1987.
- Lofland, John, 1977. "Becoming a world-saver" revisited. *American Behavioral Scientist* 20:805-818.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Rodney Stark. 1965. Becoming a world-saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective. *American Sociological Review* 30:862–875.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Norman Skonovd. 1981. Conversion motifs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:373–385.
- Malony, H. Newton, and Samuel Southard, eds. 1992. *Handbook of religious conversion*. Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press.
- Marty, Martin E. 1972. Needed: a Christian interpretation of the media world. *Lutheran World* 19:105–114.
- Morley, David. 1992. *Television, audiences, and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- National Center for Outreach. 2003. Research supports the effects of outreach. *Dialog* 3 (Fall): 1.
- Not In Our Town. n.d. Not in our town. Available at [www.pbs.org/niot](http://www.pbs.org/niot); Internet; accessed 21 November 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. Video documentation, Kalispell, Mont., Not In Our Town/Hands Against Hate meeting 7 April 2002; courtesy The Working Group.
- Parker, Everett. 1961. *Religious television: what to do and how*. New York: Harper & Bros.
- Percy, Martyn, ed. 2001. *Previous convictions: conversion in the present day*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

- Rambo, Lewis. 1993. *Understanding religious conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. Theories of conversion: understanding and interpreting religious change. *Social Compass* 46:259–271.
- Richardson, James T. 1977. Conversion and commitment in contemporary religion. *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (July/August): 799–818.
- Savage, Sara. 2001. A psychology of conversion—from all angles. In Percy 2001.
- Stevenson, Nick. 1995. *Understanding media cultures: social theory and mass communication*. London: Sage.
- Stromberg, Peter G. 1985. The impression point: synthesis of symbol and self. *Ethos* 13 (Spring): 56–74.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Language and self-transformation: a study of the Christian conversion narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sutherland, David. 1998. The Farmer's Wife—letters from viewers. Available from [www.davidsutherland.com/wife\\_letters.html](http://www.davidsutherland.com/wife_letters.html); Internet; accessed 3 December 2003.
- Tippett, Alan R. 1977. Conversion as a dynamic process in Christian mission. *Missiology* 5 (April):203–221.
- Wallis, Jim. 1981. *The call to conversion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Winston, Brian. 1995. *Claiming the real: the Griersonian documentary and its legitimations*. London: British Film Institute.