Video letters, mediation and (proper) distance

A qualitative study of international development communication in practice

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Abstract

This study scrutinizes the trajectory of an international development communication intervention aimed at mediating, rendering public and mobilizing processes of reconnection among estranged citizens across the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The intervention took place in the wider context of post-conflict international development assistance and peacebuilding operations in the region between 1996 and 2006. Known as the Videoletters project, it centered on a documentary television series aimed at promoting the reestablishment of individual and family relationships among ordinary people affected by ethno-political divisions throughout the Western Balkans. Adopted by European bilateral funders for large-scale implementation, Videoletters was categorized as a “tool for reconciliation”.

The study looks into the contextualized potential and limitations of international development communication intervention to attend to the citizens that it is supposed to benefit. The inquiry is theoretically framed by a broader understanding of communication as a right to which citizens are entitled, as a responsibility of practitioners, and as a capability that is socially distributed in unequal ways and has an ambiguous potential. Depending on contextual and institutional conditions and on the forms of mediation privileged/disregarded throughout the process, the deployment of a specific development communication intervention may/may not foster proper distance, and thus strengthen/weaken conditions of justice for the citizens under consideration, subject as they are to the governance structure of international development cooperation.

The study speaks to the lack of qualitative studies identified in the development communication literature of the past ten years, seeking to provide rich empirical details from a process of intervention in order to argue in concrete terms for the study of development communication not as a presumably positive tool, but as an institutionally driven practice that may or may not strengthen conditions of justice, with consequences that will differ depending on the specificity of sociopolitical situations in time and space. By borrowing useful analytical frameworks created for the research of documentary-making, the study brings the political and ethical dimensions of the practice of international development communication to the fore. By linking said practice to a framework of justice, it contributes to a critical agenda for theorization and research that takes accountability into consideration and puts citizens at the center. By linking the theorization of international development communication to a broader understanding of communication as a right and a capability affected by global and local conditions, it contributes to introducing a broader array of explanatory principles into the field of study.
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Chapter 1: 
Introduction to the study

Café Dayton, Sarajevo, 2 April 2005
By April 2005, almost ten years after the Dayton Peace Agreement had put a formal end to armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (from now on, BiH) and almost five years after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime, the sociopolitical situation in the successor states to the former Yugoslavia remained fragile. Violence had erupted in Kosovo in March 2004, and political instability and doubts about the future persisted despite the massive scale of assistance delivered by the international community since 1995.

On 2 April 2005, the Videoletters project premiered at Café Dayton, a tavern in Sarajevo, the capital of BiH. The project had started in 2000 as the independent initiative of two documentary filmmakers based in the Netherlands, premised on a seemingly simple idea: they would travel across the former Yugoslavia seeking people who had lost contact with a friend, relative, neighbor or colleague during the conflict and longed to reconnect, but for some reason had not attempted to make contact. The filmmakers would act as messengers, promoting correspondence and bringing video letters back and forth in order to mediate difficult, emotionally charged conversations. Each case of correspondence would in turn become an episode of a documentary series. In 2004, three episodes of the series were screened as a work-in-progress at the prestigious International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (from now on, IDFA), in the Netherlands. By then, Videoletters had grabbed the attention of the Dutch Foreign Ministry, which funded plans for its large-scale dissemination. This funding added to prior financial support from the UK’s Foreign & Commonwealth Office aimed at coordinating a synchronized broadcast of the documentary series by all the state television channels across the Western Balkans. With the involvement of the British Foreign Office and Dutch Foreign Ministry, the project changed from a small-scale independent endeavor to a large-scale strategic intervention, funded by foreign ministries in a way characteristic of the practice of development communication within broader international development cooperation agendas and priorities. The centerpiece of the project, a 12-episode documentary television series, was scheduled to be broadcast by the state television stations of every successor state to the former Yugoslavia beginning in April 2005. Soon after the Sarajevo premiere, a dedicated Videoletters website was launched in order to facilitate do-it-yourself Internet-based correspondence, and a caravan toured selected
cities in the region in order to call attention to the project in schools and public squares. The project was subsequently described as “a tool for reconciliation”, and pilot-tested in Rwanda between 2006 and 2008.

**Researching Videoletters**

This dissertation retraces the history of the Videoletters project, from inception to implementation to circulation, in order to: a) provide rich empirical detail about the potential, complexities and limitations of the practice of international development communication; and b) explore the contextual and institutional factors that have an impact on that practice. In short, the dissertation chases a process in order to identify what went on in practice. Against an international development cooperation mindset intent on examples of success, quantitative measures of end results and prescriptions for replication that sets the rules of the game for the practice of development communication, I argue that there is much to be learned from widening the scope of research from *visible results to process*. As this study demonstrates, documenting the full trajectory of an international development communication intervention counterbalances deterministic accounts of the presumed power of mediated strategic action to bring about social change. More specifically, analyzing the trajectory of a development communication intervention offers insight into: a) the contextual and institutional conditions under which it operates; b) the differential positionings of key actors in a field of power; c) the types of relationships established among those key actors on the road toward promoting social impact; and d) the sociopolitical distances bridged or widened through those relationships. The premises of this study are that: 1) attention to the situated practice of international development communication brings into focus both its structured context and open-ended quality, and the tensions between structural factors and agentic choices; and 2) attention to instances of mediation among parties to an international development communication intervention brings into focus the ethical and political significance of proximity and distance as a dimension of justice.

A concern with the ethical challenges at issue in mediating communication (at a distance) for the sake of promoting social change underpins this inquiry. From this perspective, international development communication intervention implies adopting communicational avenues that enable citizens not simply to voice their stories, but crucially to be listened to by their governments and by the international community. The critical issue is to whom are citizens to address their claims for justice.  

---

1 Agentic choices or decisions are those made by any individual actor that, as Giddens (1984) maintains, might have done otherwise.

2 Particularly under the extraordinary circumstances of a politically unstable scenario such as the Western Balkans, where the responsibilities of national governments had been taken over by intervening foreign powers capable of bypassing local governance structures.
formulation shifts away from a toolkit approach to international development communication and considers the political and ethical consequences of its institutionally driven practice. This study interrogates the formulation in the specific context of international peacebuilding intervention, which has developed rapidly in recent years in the presence of continued conflict, thus operating as a fertile ground for development communication intervention.

Why development communication?
At the Videoletters premiere held in Sarajevo, the filmmakers brought together the documentary series’ protagonists, their European funders and Western journalists for an event that was a celebration and, at the same time, a press conference and a public relations move. Expectations were high. In an article published by the BBC news website on 8 April 2005, an executive from Bosnia-Herzegovina Television (BHT) was quoted as saying the following about Videoletters: “I think it will have an impact in changing the way people think. They will think less about their country and more about relations between their friends.” The project subsequently made it into the media spotlight in the United States, with coverage by CNN, “Nightline” on ABC News and The New York Times, and the filmmakers achieved recognition, going on to receive the 2005 Néstor Almendros Award for courage in filmmaking at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, held in New York every year. But did Videoletters change the ways in which citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia engaged with each other in the post-conflict scenario? Did it lead to subsequent meetings by estranged parties beyond those actively mediated by the filmmakers in the process of producing the series? Did it equip citizens for dialogue across ethno-political divides? Did it provoke public discussion of the feasibility and value of moving toward region-wide reconciliation? Did it, in its implementation, live up to the moral high ground that Western media coverage attributed to it?

That strategic communication interventions can and must play a positive role in the production of social change is the central tenet of development communication, understood here as a subset of both communication and media studies and of international development cooperation (which is discussed further in Chapter 2). At present, the increasing pressure to demonstrate and communicate aid results (da Costa, 2009; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013), combined with falling development aid budgets and a concern


5 On 3 April 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported: “Development aid fell by 4% in real terms in 2012, following a 2% fall in 2011. The continuing financial crisis and Eurozone turmoil has led several governments to tighten their
with strengthening and institutionalizing the practice and evaluation of
development communication within bilateral and multilateral agencies
voiced by practitioners and academics alike,\(^6\) make for a challenging scenario
for research and theorization.

Also known as communication for development (e.g., Servaes, 2007; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013), communication for social change (e.g., Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006) and communication for development and social change (e.g., McAnany, 2012), development communication\(^7\) is a subfield of communication and media studies, connected to a greater or lesser extent\(^8\) to international development studies. But it is not only an academic discipline. It is also a practice and an institutional project with a geopolitical underpinning, as this dissertation will illustrate. Because of its origin, linked to the wider history of Western development policies (Harding, 1998; Nederveen Pieterse, 2010), the practice has been structured primarily through the institutional influence of the bilateral and multilateral agencies that fund and manage international development cooperation. The political economy of international development communication intervention remains unexplored, but it is commonly assumed that funding is allocated primarily by bilateral agencies dependent on foreign ministries, in the wider context of international development cooperation agendas and priorities.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which gathers the 40 countries that account for 80 percent of world trade and investment, sets the rules for the monitoring and evaluation of international development cooperation allocations, with a focus on results. In the past fifteen years, a significant proportion of Official Development Assistance has been directed to conflict-affected societies or states in particular (Zelizer & Oliphant, 2013). Which proportion of that assistance was directed to development communication intervention is unknown, because aid statistics collated by the OECD do not detail communication/media-bound allocations. We don’t really know what goes on in the process of spending allocations either. A recent literature review of communication for development initiatives in fragile states (Skuse et al., 2013) commissioned by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) concludes

\(^6\) See, e.g. UNICEF & CI (2012) for practitioners, and McAnany (2012) and Lennie & Tacchi (2013) for academics.

\(^7\) How to best name the field remains a matter of debate. For a discussion of that problem, see Enghel (2013). The denomination used in this dissertation as shorthand, development communication, is the one adopted by the International Encyclopedia of Communication in 2008 (listed in the references as Wilkins, 2008).

\(^8\) Viewpoints vary, and scholars may occasionally be more concerned with protecting this or that academic turf than with strengthening interdisciplinary research approaches.
that the quality of the related evidence base for the period 2001-2011 is relatively weak, highlighting the need for more rigorous and longer-term research in order to inform both future interventions and “wider processes of development, humanitarian assistance and conflict mitigation and reduction” (ibid.: 126). In line with my approach in this study (also endorsed by Lennie & Tacchi, 2013), the review calls for formative research rather than summative evidence.

Unlike other fields that clearly involve a dimension of public policymaking, such as education, development communication has not led to the formulation and implementation of policies at the national or international level. Despite the normative efforts of academics, development communication theorization has rarely generated policy frameworks. Thus, the practice of international development communication is largely unregulated, and issues of accountability for its planning, implementation and funding remain understudied. Issues of ethics in the practice remain equally uninvestigated. In this context, the specific sociopolitical consequences of interventions tend to go unrecorded.

**Research problem**

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, in prevailing *development communication* theory, communication and media initiatives are understood to support development intervention. Development is the driving factor in the equation, while communication is subsidiary. As a consequence, more consideration is given to development theory, and less to communication theory. Empirical research within the field has been primarily quantitative, seeking to measure media effects and to provide evidence of success. In line with an orientation toward outcomes and a disregard of processes, minimal attention has been directed toward the contextual and institutional conditions that come into play in the concrete *practice* of international development communication intervention. Communication tends to be considered a powerful tool that always leads to positive results, rather than a civic right and a capability socially distributed in unequal ways and characterized by an ambiguous potential, and the political and ethical dimensions of intervention are often ignored: they may be paid theoretical lip service, but remain under-researched empirically. The processes of *mediation* set in motion by specific interventions – and the negative, contradictory, indirect and/or unintentional impacts that may ensue – remain largely unexplored.

This study looks into the contextualized potential and limitations of a specific international development communication intervention to attend to the citizens that it was supposed to benefit. The inquiry is theoretically framed by an understanding of communication as a right to which citizens are entitled, as a responsibility of practitioners (O’Neill, 2009)
and as a capability that is socially distributed in unequal ways and has an ambiguous potential (Garnham, 1999; García Canclini, 2006; Sassen, 2005, 2008, 2008b). Depending on contextual and institutional conditions and on the processes of mediation privileged/disregarded by implementers,9 the deployment of a specific development communication initiative may/may not foster proper distance (Silverstone, 2004), and thus strengthen/weaken conditions of justice (Fraser,10 2008).

Proper distance refers to the ethical responsibilities at stake in the ways in which development communication interventions mediate social distances, following Silverstone’s (2004, 2005, 2007) argument that the presumed capacity of media and communication technologies to connect does not suffice per se in order to achieve meaningful connections. For Silverstone, the technological capacity to connect does not imply that social connectivity will ensue (also see Garnham, 1999), and therefore an acknowledgement of irreducible differences with others that does not preclude communication, and a duty of care, must also come into play. Extending his argument, proper distance refers in this dissertation to the specific ways in which ethical11 responsibility is played out in the practice of international development communication intervention, as evidenced by implementers’ choices of whom to include/exclude in a given initiative and under which conditions, scales and avenues of mediation adopted, opportunities for reciprocal recognition provided/neglected (Martín Barbero, 2011), and interlocutors privileged/downplayed.12

Justice, following Fraser (2008), refers here to the combined but competing domestic/national and foreign/international scales as the territories in which claims for justice are to be raised in a globalizing world. Fraser’s theoretical model of justice calls attention to the fact that, under global conditions, injustices may not be necessarily or exclusively national in character. According to what she calls the all-subjected principle, “all those who are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it”, and “what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is [...] their joint

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9 Both funders and practitioners.

10 This is a reference to Nancy Fraser, not to be confused with development communication practitioner Colin Fraser, also referenced in this dissertation.

11 For Silverstone’s use of the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’, see (2007: 6-7). In this dissertation, I bracket off the moral, and prioritize attention on the ethical dimension: “Media ethics [...] relates to practice and procedure: [...] to the ways in which the relationships between reporters, film-makers, storytellers and image producers and their subjects and their viewers and listeners are constructed or assumed” (ibid.: 7). The privileging of the ethical is not to say that I deem the moral unimportant, but simply that addressing it adequately exceeds the scope of this dissertation.

12 These pairs – include/exclude, provided/neglected and privileged/downplayed – should not be understood as binaries, but rather as the extremes of a range of possible intermediate senses (following Williams, 1983).
subjections to a structure of governance that sets the ground rules that govern their interaction” (ibid.: 65). The case of the practice of international development communication studied here belongs to the governance structure of international development cooperation. My overarching argument is that the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia named as the “primary target beneficiaries of the project” (FOI, 2013) were subject to that structure “even though the rule-makers are not accountable to those whom they govern” (Fraser, 2008). Political and ethical factors are at issue here. In order to consider those factors, the ways in which the governance structure of international development cooperation operates in situated contexts, and through specific practices, must be rendered visible.

Research purpose
By qualitatively examining the full trajectory of the Videoletters project, this dissertation identifies: a) the contextual and institutional factors linked to the situated practice of international development communication; and b) the processes of mediation established among the key actors engaged in a given intervention. In turn, the analysis of said contextual and institutional factors and instances of mediation: a) illuminates obstacles to the design, implementation and assessment of international development communication interventions that take citizens into account as subjects of rights within a framework of global justice; b) brings to the fore issues of ethics and accountability in the practice and the project of international development communication; and c) critically examines the mainstream theorization of development communication, putting forward a working theoretical framework that incorporates attention to justice under global conditions through the lens of proper distance, and to communication as an unequally distributed right and capability dependent on obligations.

The dissertation starts from qualitative empirical detail in order to argue in concrete terms for the study of development communication intervention not as a presumably positive tool, but rather as a practice that may or may not foster justice and strengthen communication as a civic right and a capability, with consequences that will differ depending on “specific social situations located in time and space” (Outhwaite, 2000).

Research questions
The central research question that I seek to answer in this study is: How did the Videoletters project take place in practice?

With this question, I intend to identify, document and analyze each stage of the Videoletters project from a processual perspective. While the development communication initiative at large is analyzed in terms of the stages of inception, implementation, circulation, end/exit and evaluation, the documentary television series that constituted the project’s central
component is analyzed in terms of production, distribution and reception. In order to produce a rich, situated history of the Videoletters project as a process that unfolded over time under specific circumstances, I reconcile the theoretical and methodological perspectives of development communication studies and documentary-making for social change studies into a combined framework, seeking to record and examine the intended goals, courses of action and outcomes for each stage of the Videoletters project as much as the unintended consequences.

Four sub-questions further specify the central question.

1. **How do contextual conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a development communication intervention?**

   This question points to the ways in which the specific cultural, economic and political conditions of the context intervened shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a concrete international development communication intervention. The factors potentially affecting the embrace or rejection of the Videoletters project are considered. Attention is given to the ways in which a context of unmet human needs and political restrictions might have influenced citizens’ engagement. I explore the extent to which the presumed beneficiaries became aware of the project or not and why, taking into account how state media managers, local authorities and the press responded to the intervention. The main focus here is on the national and regional circumstances within which Videoletters operated.

2. **How do institutional conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a development communication intervention?**

   Here I am interested in identifying the ways in which the priorities, formal requirements, standard ways of operating and expectations of the project’s funders may affect an intervention’s goals, implementation and circulation. Attention is given to the conditions regulating the relationship between Videoletters’ implementers and funders, and to every ensuing procedure and mechanism at play, including goal setting, the timeline for execution, disbursement procedures, reporting requirements and publicity stipulations. Attention is also given to the wider peacebuilding and media development operations going on in the region at the time of the project’s roll-out, including the positioning of the Videoletters filmmakers in the highly competitive landscape of media development initiatives characteristic of the post-conflict scenario at the time. The ways in which the international news media and documentary film festivals responded to the initiative are examined. The main focus here is on the characteristics of international intervention.
3. **Which forms of mediation took place among the core actors engaged in the Videoletters project?**

Here I am interested in unpacking the choices made throughout the process by the project’s implementers and funders in terms of which relevant actors to engage more closely and which to attend to at a distance. I examine whether they privileged bottom-up or top-down approaches to the citizens of the successor states, and which interlocutors were favored and disregarded throughout the process. I map proximity and distance among the project’s implementers and the variety of actors engaged by Videoletters, as well as between stated goals, proposed avenues and actual choices and achievements. Attention is given to how the project’s leaders described and performed their role (as filmmakers? as development practitioners? as representatives of their funders? as do-gooders?), and to the ensuing ethical considerations and professional standards that guided their actions, including the recruitment and management of local and foreign staff. The quality of communication across levels and stages is analyzed to establish whether all connections took place in the spirit of democratic dialogue embodied in the “video letters” correspondence on which the documentary TV series was based.

4. **How do normative understandings of communication influence the embracement and rejection of specific mediated strategies as avenues for the promotion of social change?**

Here I am interested in identifying perceptions of the social value, usefulness and power of communication and media among the primary actors involved in the project and understanding how they determined whether Videoletters was successful as a media-driven intervention for social change. I look into the ways in which filmmakers, donors, the news media and academics represented Videoletters’ merit and adequacy as an avenue to promote reconciliation (or to serve other purposes considered important). I map the embracement and the rejection of Videoletters among the primary agents engaged in the project, distinguishing between arguments for and against the intervention and exploring whether there were connections between embracement/rejection and international/national affiliation.

These four research sub-questions allow me to unpack the central research question – **How did the Videoletters project take place in practice?** – by way of focusing on the process from four distinct angles: the national (and regional) circumstances under which it took place; the institutional expectations, regulations and standard ways of operating of international funders; the
forms of mediation engaged throughout the intervention; and the normative understandings of communication and media as enablers of social change that underpinned action.

**Significance of the study**

The study speaks to the lack of thorough qualitative studies identified in the development communication literature of the past ten years (see Chapter 2), seeking to provide rich empirical detail of the complexity of a process of intervention instead of focusing on a project’s end results. Moreover, it speaks to the shortage of rigorous investigations of the contextual and institutional factors that enable and constrain the practice of international development communication intervention. By borrowing useful analytical frameworks crafted for the research of documentary-making for social change, the study brings the political and ethical dimensions of the practice to the fore. By linking the practice to a framework of justice under global conditions, it contributes towards a critical agenda for theorization and research that takes international accountability into consideration and puts citizens at the center. By linking theorization to an understanding of communication as a right and a capability affected by global and local conditions, it contributes toward introducing a broader array of explanatory principles into the field of study.

**Working conceptual framework**

The working theoretical framework advanced in this study is very briefly introduced here and duly elaborated in Chapter 2. The framework understands development communication not as a tool that can be neutrally applied and replicated, but as an institutionally driven, situated practice that implies instances of mediation among the actors involved. Depending on specific combinations of institutional requirements, contextual conditions and agentic choices, the practice may produce, or fail to produce, proper distance among its key actors: the bilateral funders, the governance structures of the country intervened, and the citizens presumed to benefit from an intervention. The ethical quality and justice standard of specific cases of the practice of international development communication are contingent on how forms of mediated communication enable or stand in the way of proper distance among parties to an intervention.

The working theoretical framework broadly defines mediation as the interposing of media as a means for connecting (distant) parties to a relationship, be it dialogue, the absence of dialogue, the pretense of dialogue, or conflict. Communication is in turn understood as a right to which citizens are entitled, a responsibility of governance structures and media workers, and a capability that is socially distributed in unequal ways and has an ambiguous potential. Understanding communication as a multivalent capability opens
a window for considering issues of justice in its unequal social distribution, and enables a distinction between the potential uses of the media and the uses actually made by citizens, depending on the specifics of an intervention. From that perspective, it is possible to analyze why potentialities are not actualized in a given context, and to consider how to best direct the practice and the project of international development communication intervention towards redressing conditions of global injustice in the institutional project.

**Methodology**

The *purpose* of this study is to document and scrutinize the trajectory of the Videoletters project, with an eye to unpacking the contextual and institutional factors that had an impact on said trajectory and to mapping the forms of mediation that came into play in the process. The *object* of the study is to: a) contextualize the practice of international development communication within a framework that situates citizens at the center and takes communication (as a right and a capability) and justice into account; b) illuminate political and ethical issues at stake in the project and practice of international development communication; and c) advance a critical research agenda for development communication that shifts away from a toolkit approach to the relationship between media and social change, and engages the theorization of mediated intervention under global conditions in a wider-encompassing explanatory framework.

The *approach* is qualitative, through a single case study from the recent past (2000-2005), investigated in retrospect via interviews with a variety of case participants and the collection of documents, including audiovisual material, press clippings, Internet archives, institutional records and project participants’ logs. Fieldwork took place in a number of locations (Marcus, 1995), including Belgrade (Serbia), Sarajevo (BiH), and Amsterdam and The Hague (The Netherlands), between April 2012 and January 2014. Additional queries were made in the United Kingdom, the United States and Rwanda via e-mail and Internet telephony. While the inclusion of Croatia was considered, I chose to exclude it for reasons explained in Chapter 3.

**Limitations**

Issues of validity, reliability, generalizability and quality for the case study, as well as specific limitations of this dissertation, are discussed in detail in Chapter 3. For now, suffice it to say that data-source triangulation was used in order to counteract threats to the validity of the analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Yin, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Creswell, 2013). Data obtained from different stages of fieldwork, referring to different points in the temporal cycle covered by the study, accounting for the views of participants differentially positioned vis-à-vis the case, and corresponding to various sources was compared.
A limitation worth noting already at this point has to do with the fact that, although the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia that Videoletters claimed to benefit are at the center of my inquiry, reaching those citizens who (may have) engaged with the project between 2000 and 2005 – as series’ participants, broadcast audiences, web users or audiences of the caravan tour – was not possible. The only data (beyond anecdotal evidence) referring to these citizens’ engagement with Videoletters that I could locate are the ratings retrieved from the media research industry in Serbia and BiH. In a way, those citizens were ephemeral, if not imagined. In order to tackle the problem, a small group interview with ordinary citizens from the region was conducted (see Chapter 3 for methodological considerations and Chapter 5 for discussion of findings).

**Thesis outline**

In Chapter 1, I introduce the study and its background, providing an introductory account of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The changing political geography of the region and ensuing citizenship regimes, as well as the communication and media landscape during the war(s) (1991-1995) and in the aftermath of the conflict (1996-2006), are considered. In Chapter 2, I review the academic literatures of choice – development communication and documentary-making for social change – as well as smaller sets of problem-specific, region-specific and case-specific literature. Having reviewed the literature, I present my working theoretical framework. In Chapter 3, I describe and substantiate my choice of method; discuss issues of validity, reliability, generalization and quality; introduce and justify the methodologies used; provide an account of the fieldwork process and reflect on my position as a researcher; and address limitations and ethical considerations. In Chapter 4, I present the Videoletters project in detail and give an account of its trajectory from inception to end, thus addressing my main research question. In Chapter 5, I present and discuss findings that speak to research sub-questions 1 and 2, thus analyzing the contextual/national and institutional/international conditions that influenced the project’s trajectory. In Chapter 6, I present and discuss findings that speak to research sub-questions 3 and 4, thus analyzing the forms of mediation privileged and disregarded by the project, and the normative understandings of the power of communication and media to bring about social change that had a bearing on the project’s course. In Chapter 7, I return to the working theoretical framework to consider how it links to the study’s empirical findings, and elaborate my conclusions.
Background to the study: the breakup of the former Yugoslavia

Developing a reasonable understanding of the causes and immediate consequences of the war(s)\(^{13}\) that led to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia for the purpose of this study was not easy. Beginning already in the early 1980s, a large body of literature came to record and to discuss the breakup and its aftermath. In 2005, scholar Sabrina Ramet reflected on a number of the persistent debates and controversies in her review of over one hundred books “relating to the Yugoslav breakups and subsequent conflicts”, and noted the challenge of “making sense of a potential avalanche of work” (Ramet, 2005: ix). Providing a comprehensive account of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and ensuing war(s) is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, given my argument for situating the practice of international development communication in its complex contexts, an introduction to the wider background to my study is a must. Of necessity, this introduction is compact, and there is a risk that I may inadvertently overlook features of the history and debates. I begin with the Yugoslav breakup as it unfolded visibly with the death of Josip Broz, a.k.a. Tito, in 1980.

Tito’s death, the Dayton Peace Agreement and the end of the siege of Sarajevo in a nutshell

As the leader of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Tito founded the Federative People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945. Following his disagreements with Stalin, other Communist states severed relationships with Yugoslavia in 1948. Tito then sought Western assistance and opened contacts with the United Kingdom and United States. Communist Yugoslavia remained independent of Soviet control, and the economy was organized around a mixed socialist-capitalist system. In 1963, Tito changed Yugoslavia’s name into the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. According to its last constitution, from 1974, the Federal Republic was made up of six republics – BiH, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia – and two provinces – Kosovo and Vojvodina. Under this federal arrangement, each Yugoslav republic had its own nationality.

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\(^{13}\) According to Ramet (2005: 307), scholars disagreed “about just how many wars were fought in the period 1991–9”, with most adopting the convention “of describing the fighting during 1991–5 as the War of Yugoslav Succession, while identifying the conflict in Kosovo during 1998–9 as a distinct war, albeit linked with the war of 1991–5.” For summaries of the wars of Yugoslav succession (1991–1995) and the Kosovo crisis (1999) as distinct but related events, see Hupchick and Cox (2001). For a useful timeline spanning twenty years after Tito’s death, see Kurspahic (2003). In this study, the term “war(s)” refers to an armed conflict that encompassed two distinct but related events.
Following Tito’s death, a rotating collective federal presidency among leaders of the republics was established, but increasing national tensions rendered it ineffective (Hupchick & Cox, 2001). For Banac (in Ramet, 2002), the federal system instituted by Tito before his demise, including the provision that leadership would rotate among the republics, was a construction meant to address the failure to integrate the region’s cultural diversity into a “Yugoslav socialist culture”. This system “prompted resistance, which exploded after Tito’s death” (ibid.: xiv).

According to Kurspahic (2003), it was in February 1981 that “the Yugoslav federation faced – and failed – its first test of sustainability”, when Albanian students at Pristina14 University carried out mass protests demanding better conditions and that Kosovo’s status be upgraded from

14 The capital of Kosovo.
an autonomous province within Serbia to a republic equal to the others. The Serbian regime’s response (also discussed by Magas, 1993) was harsh: a number of high school and university students were subject to mass trial and sentenced to prison terms. Moreover, “the other republics treated the events in Kosovo as ‘Serbia’s affair’, accepting Belgrade’s official condemnation of the Albanian ‘counter-revolution’ and concurring with the use of the federal army and special police units in the ensuing years of repression” (ibid., 2003: 29). Not only were the students’ claims repressed by the state apparatus, but the other republics failed to acknowledge that tension in Kosovo spoke to the fragility of the federal system at large.

The events in Albania were followed by political decay. The ruling party, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, lost ground and became disconnected from governmental functions, while regional party organizations gained power in their respective domains. Fragmentation was in progress. The economy deteriorated to the point that annual inflation by 1985 was beyond 100 percent. As Slobodan Milosevic gained power in Serbia, “reforming communism became less of a priority in multinational Yugoslavia than embracing resurgent nationalism” (Hupchick & Cox, 2001). In 1987, Milosevic assumed de facto control of Serbia and adopted a series of policies that, according to Ramet (2002), destroyed any remaining consensus there might have remained in the system, so that “by late 1989, for all practical purposes (legislative, economic, cultural), Yugoslavia had already ceased to exist” (ibid.: 27). In parallel, the Soviet Union’s collapse became apparent following Gorbachev’s failed efforts to reform communism. At that point, Yugoslavia’s economic situation was disastrous: “Inflation ran at 300 percent; financial irresponsibility was rampant; domestic and foreign debt was crushing; and all economic indicators were in decline” (Hupchick & Cox, 2001).

In 1991, Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia, which led to the intervention of the Yugoslav People’s Army led by Milosevic and the so-called Ten-Day War. The short conflict was resolved by way of the Brioni Accord, brokered by the European Commission, and Slovenia’s declaration of independence was recognized by the European Union (from now on, EU) and the United States in 1992. In this way, Slovenia managed to detach itself from the war(s) in a distinct way.15 Croatia also declared its independence in 1991, which also led to the intervention of the Yugoslav People’s Army. But this case had a different outcome: even though the Croats were also a party to the negotiations leading to the Brioni Accord, no agreement was achieved in their case, and tensions with Serbia escalated. In February 1992, international intervention in the war(s) took place for the first time when the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was established in Croatia.

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15 And would go on to enter the EU at an early stage, in 2004.
“as an interim arrangement to create the conditions of peace and security required for the negotiation of an overall settlement of the Yugoslav crisis”. In March 1992, the battle for Bosnian territory between Serbs and Croats broke out. In April of the same year, fighting started around Sarajevo, and the siege of the city began. In July 1995, Bosnian Muslims were massacred by Bosnian Serb troops in Srebenica, a town in the eastern part of BiH. In August 1995, the Croatian Army launched Operation Storm against the Serb Krajina, a self-proclaimed entity within Croatia. Between late August and September of 1995, NATO bombarded Bosnian Serb positions as a strategy to end the siege of Sarajevo. The conflict officially came to an end in December 1995 with the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement. The end of the siege of Sarajevo was declared by the Bosnian government in February 1996, after almost four years of siege warfare.

**Destruction, breakup, fall, disintegration... Babel**

While analysts largely agree on the factors that led to the end of the former Yugoslavia, they choose distinctly different terms to refer to the process. Factors included: the low and unequal economic development of the individual republics and provinces, which precluded growth as a precondition for the federation’s viability and stability (Magas, 1993; Glenny, 1996; Ramet, 2002); the role of the Serbian regime headed by Slobodan Milosevic in negating the foundations of the federation, engaging the Yugoslav National Army in his violent quest for power, and mobilizing Serbs across internal borders on an ethnic basis (ibid.); the contradictions posed by Western intervention during the early stages of the war(s) because of the divisions among countries in terms of the solutions they advocated; and the vulnerability of minority populations in the disputed territories.

For Ramet (2002), the immediate causes of the war included the death of Tito as the loss not only of a unifying symbol but also of a strong leader “capable of imposing unity”. For Magas (1993), his death signaled a point of no return for Yugoslavia, with “Tito” being “a code word not just for communist rule, but also for the postwar international settlement” (ibid.: 318). She argues that the destruction and breakup of Yugoslavia was one of two possible paths at the time of Tito’s death, leading towards repression, where the other possible path would have led to democratization (ibid.: xii-xiii). Instead of destruction and breakup, Glenny (1996) refers to the fall of Yugoslavia.


17 Like Magas, Ramet attributed a key role to Milosevic, who, in her analysis, acted as an enabler of the massive violence that ensued.

18 These divisions would carry over to approaches to media development in the post-conflict scenario.

19 This view is consistent with Sassen’s understanding of capabilities (2008) discussed in Chapter 2.
Ramet (2002) in turn refers to the disintegration of Yugoslavia as a case of failure—namely, the failure to solve the problem of legitimation through political cooperation. She finds a resemblance between the biblical story of the Tower of Babel and that of the Yugoslav federation following Tito’s death. Importantly, in her view, what led to Yugoslavia’s end was the inability to communicate across different political languages in order to cooperate. This resonates with a proposition put forward by anthropologist Alejandro Grimson: “it is likely that, behind acts that we may be willing to classify in a quick and reductive manner—even tragic acts—there may be nothing but babels; that is, apparently incommensurable languages” (Grimson 2011: 147; my translation and emphasis). In line with Ramet’s analysis of the path to disintegration in Yugoslavia, Grimson’s proposition suggests that the apparent incommensurability of hostile accounts may have been a consequence of the absence of political translation of differences. This in turn calls attention to a context void of a shared understanding of communication as a process of relating through differences without violence (see Condit, 2006).

While it is of course crucial to note the economic and political causes of the war(s) briefly related here, it is the differential terms adopted by these analysts to refer to what happened with/to Yugoslavia that interest me here. Destruction refers to the action or process of causing so much damage to something that it no longer exists or cannot be repaired. To break up means to disintegrate or disperse, to disband, to end, to part company, or to be interrupted by interference. To fall is to collapse, which in turn means to fail suddenly or completely. Disintegration refers to the process of losing cohesion or strength, or of coming to pieces. Babel suggests a state of confusion and the lack of translation, calling attention to obstacles to communication as a process of communicating not only across different languages, but also across disparate standpoints, i.e., translation (see Stríphas, 2006; Grimson, 2011). Given the paucity of opportunities to communicate across differences without violence in the presence of the hostile perspectives on the situation related by state powers, how was the everyday practice of communication across the warring federation affected? How did ordinary citizens communicate with each other, or fail to communicate, in their private everyday lives and in the public realm?

20 During the war(s), language was used by political leaders as a divisive tool. As noted by Hammel (2000), in much of the Balkans there is “mutual intelligibility along a dialect continuum”, and “considerable effort has been expended by ethnic politicians to erect symbols of difference through linguistic usage, when speech was otherwise uniform”. In practice, it is impossible to distinguish Serbs from Croats from Bosnians by their speech, if they come from the same locality, “unless they seek to signal their ethnicity by stressing particular language features”. For an intelligent literary representation of the fate of language among former Yugoslavs and its consequences on everyday life, see Dubravka Ugresic’s The ministry of pain (2008: 41-49).

21 I.e., those not directly involved in the production of violence.

22 For a definition of “public realm”, see Lofland (1989).
How did they communicate with their governments? How, if at all, did they communicate with Western interveners? What was the post-conflict communicational scenario in 2005 as Videoletters was rolled out?


Since 1980, the former Yugoslavia has witnessed “multiple processes of disintegration, successful and unsuccessful attempts at secession, and a huge variety of internal political and territorial arrangements” (Shaw & Stiks, 2013). As shown on page 22, at the time of Tito’s death in 1980 the Federal Republic was made up of six republics – BiH, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia – and two provinces – Kosovo and Vojvodina – following the 1974 Constitution. In April 2005, by the time the broadcast of the Videoletters documentary series was starting in the region, Serbia and Montenegro were still united under the official name of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In May 2006, a referendum held in Montenegro resulted in a majority of votes for independence, and by June both countries had become autonomous. Fast-forward, and let us take look at the present political geography of what was once Yugoslavia in a wider map.

Map of the European Union including aspirant countries (2014)


23 Between 1992 and 2003, this union was named the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
As this depiction shows, today the territory of the former Yugoslavia is encapsulated by EU member states. In this picture, borders, mobility, markets, economic prosperity, media systems and citizenship rights are at issue for BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, pending their entry to the EU. Croatia became an EU member on 1 July 2013, while I was still doing fieldwork. Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are still negotiating their candidacy, while BiH and Kosovo “were promised the prospect of joining when they are ready”.24

The respective statuses of Kosovo and BiH are complicated. Kosovo is both an independent state, recognized by a majority of the United Nations (from now on, UN) members states (including 22 out of the 27 member states of the EU), and a territory under the tutelage of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), tasked with ensuring “conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants of Kosovo and advance regional stability in the western Balkans”,25 and of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), tasked with contributing to a secure environment and ensuring public safety and order.26 To date, Serbia does not recognize Kosovo’s independence, declared in 2008, although an agreement brokered by the EU aimed at normalizing relations between both parties was reached in 2013.27 BiH has been formally divided into two entities since the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995: the Bosniak/Bosnian Croat Federation of BiH, where ten administrative units or cantons have either Bosnian Muslim or Croat majority populations; and the Bosnian Serb-led Republika Srpska, where the majority of the population is Serbian (Hozic, 2008). BiH is under the aegis of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), “an ad hoc international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of civilian aspects of the Peace Agreement ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina”,28 and of the EU military operation EUFOR ALTHEA, mandated with supporting “BiH efforts to maintain [a] safe and secure environment” and providing “capacity-building and training support to the BiH Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces”.29 The presence of the military is immediately apparent in Sarajevo, where troops in uniform walk the streets at all hours, as I observed myself

25 See http://www.unmikonline.org/Pages/about.aspx [accessed 12 March 2013].
during fieldwork. I call the reader’s attention to a situation in which formal peace is kept by means of long-standing external intervention, including the threat of military engagement. Given this state of affairs, one could argue that the war(s) are in fact not over, and in light of protests across BiH in February 2014\(^{30}\) we must wonder how the military operation will react if tension between citizens and governments continues to rise. As things stand, communication as a process of relating through differences without violence (Condit, 2006) remains a limited possibility here.

On being a citizen of a successor state to the former Yugoslavia: within and without Europe

Paradoxically, the breakup of Yugoslavia ran parallel to the strengthening and enlargement of the EU via: a) the signature of the Treaty on European Union in 1992; b) the establishment of a single market in 1993; c) the entry of three additional member states and the Schengen Agreement taking effect in 1995; d) the start of membership negotiations with ten countries in Central and Eastern Europe in 1997; and e) the introduction of the euro currency in 1999 (Stiks, 2013). While EU citizenship became increasingly formalized, Yugoslavia disappeared fast and violently as a nation-state, in a process that implied “defining ethnically heterogeneous polities in mono-ethnic terms” (Hammel, 2000) and thus confused citizenship with ethnicity\(^{31}\) towards the production of separate national identities. Questions about the legality and recognition of citizens (Sassen, 2008) and about the role of communication in enabling citizenship practices come to the fore when we consider the proximate past of the region in this light, attentive to the fact that it is both the “political architecture and human geography” (an expression borrowed from Bideleux & Jeffries, 2007) that have been undergoing constant restructuring here. Dubravka Ugresic (2008) makes it crystal clear in her novel The ministry of pain: “Where was I born? In Yugoslavia? In the former Yugoslavia? In Croatia? Shit! Do I have any biography?” (ibid.: 32).

Under Tito, citizenship had been simultaneously federal and republican, and whether Yugoslav citizenship had primacy over republican citizenship was a matter that did not need to be settled. When Yugoslavia dissolved and federal citizenship ceased to exist, republican citizenship, which until then had been irrelevant in practice, became the single criterion for the acquisition of citizenship in the successor states, with immediate consequences for those “residing in a republic whose citizenship they did not

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\(^{31}\) For Ramet (2005: 38), the term “ethnic” is disputed in the context of scholarly debates about the war(s) partly due to different uses of the word, so that “those who fear that the word conjures up images of historical determinism and of hatreds ‘rooted in the mythic lore passed from one generation to another’, typically avoid using the word”. I return to this shortly in this same chapter.
possess and to whose ethnic majority they did not belong” (see Stiks 2013: 20). The lack of correspondence between civic and ethnic identities was defined as an impossibility: belonging to a republic civically but not ethnically was no longer viable. As a consequence, the post-Yugoslav landscape is unique in terms of citizenship (ibid.). For Shaw and Stiks (2013), following Jenson (2007), the question of who belongs and why is important not only because it determines who is a citizen and therefore who has the rights (residence, welfare, property, political) and obligations (military service)32 attached to citizenship, but also because a citizenship regime guides and shapes the ways in which citizens define problems and make claims, i.e., has an impact on how communication may function as a capability.

Shaw and Stiks (2013: 2) explain that, following disintegration, the complex system applicable under Tito’s rule33 “was replaced with an equally complex system of multiple and overlapping citizenship regimes privileging often the dominant ethnic group.” The transition was not smooth, given the war(s), and the civic status of many Yugoslav nationals degraded as soon as the former federal republic started disappearing: many people became “aliens in the place where they had long resided, or simply stateless”34 (ibid.). In the process of determining who were the citizens of the new states, who were the aliens, and who were legal residents, ethnic engineering, i.e., “the intentional policy of governments and lawmakers to influence by legal means and related administrative practices the ethnic composition of their population in favor of their ethnic core group”, came into play. A tool of both exclusion and inclusion, ethnic engineering gave way to outright expulsion or ethnic cleansing, and led to forced migration and internal displacement, resulting in “a widespread exclusion and deprivation of both citizens’ and human rights, and a very large number of de facto or de jure stateless individuals” (ibid.: 7). Among those rights, I argue in this

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32 Bideleux and Jeffries (2007: 13) detail how men were affected by the obligation to serve in the military during the war(s): “[M]any Yugoslav males who had previously thought of themselves simply as Yugoslavs, free to work and reside in any part of former Yugoslavia, in 1992 suddenly found themselves pinned down to the much smaller, narrower and more restrictive ethnic identities specified in each Yugoslav male’s military-service documents (Serb, Croat, Slovene, Bosniak, Montenegrin, etc.). They quickly discovered that they were not only no longer free to move around the Yugoslav lands, but that they were now expected to back (and if necessary fight for) their own ethnic group against other Yugoslav ethnic groups whom they had hitherto regarded as fellow citizens, friends, compatriots or even lovers.” The authors note that public support for war was low throughout the successor states, and that a significant number of men called up to fight refused to serve or eventually deserted.

33 “...whose essence was supposed to be captured in its motto of ‘brotherhood and unity’” (Stiks 2013).

34 Sassen (2008: 293) notes that, “Where citizenship is a lens into the question of rights, immigration is a lens through which we can understand the strains and contradictions in nation-state membership. [...] Immigration is the core of the second major institution for membership in the modern nation-state: alienage.” In her view, “Unlike the ‘citizen’, the [...] alien is constructed in law and through policy as a partial subject”. For the purposes of this dissertation, the question then becomes: how does a partial subject communicate with a citizen? I am thinking here not only of partial subjects and citizens within the successor states, but also of them as, in turn, partial subjects or citizens of the European Union.
dissertation, was the right of citizens to communicate with each other freely and peacefully across, and despite, the divides produced by ethnic engineering. The Videoletters project was in turn premised on the idea that an exemplary appeal to reclaim this right – to reconnect – could be: a) produced by foreigners; b) widely disseminated in the region through state television broadcasters; and c) further facilitated at a distance by affording a platform for Internet-based interaction. Against the precepts of ethnic engineering, the idea was to go from interpersonal correspondence to documentary television series to web-based do-it-yourself reconciliation.

In line with Shaw and Stiks (ibid.), Bideleux and Jeffries (2007: 10) refer to an “ethnocratic” order that made “ethnic collectivism, ethnic discrimination and the preferential status of numerically dominant ethnic groups the very basis of the state, of democratic representation, of public employment and of many (perhaps most) social, political and economic rights and entitlements in the so-called ‘successor states’ of the Balkans”. According to their analysis, the assumption was that “the rights and interests of all individuals (not just members of minorities) should be subordinate to the officially perceived (or even prescribed) rights and interests of the dominant ethnic collectivity” (ibid.: 14). Referring to Yugoslavia’s successor states as a “laboratory of citizenship”, Stiks (2013) explains that new legislation in most states gave privileged status to members of the majority or core ethnic group regardless of where they lived, be it inside or outside their borders, and that “the deprivation of citizenship, and the subsequent loss of basic social and economic rights, has been quite effective in forcing a sizeable number of individuals to leave their habitual places of residence”. This conflicting, violent and uneven transition has implied highly complex and even nightmarish situations on the ground for many former Yugoslav citizens. Stiks categorizes individuals into four different groups resulting from the combination of citizenship legislation, related administrative practices and political activities centered on ethnic solidarity, in a pattern characterized by “confusion and arbitrariness”: the included, the invited, the excluded and the self-excluded. The categorization is thought-provoking: given these unequal positions, under which conditions could development communication intervention play a role in bridging divides, mediating differences and promoting recognition across the region (García Canclini, 2006; Fraser, 2008)?

Importantly for this dissertation, citizenship regimes set conditions not only inward, regulating the relationship between individuals and the polity (Sassen, 2008), but also outward. In the time between 1980 and 2005, neighbors in the region entered a war (Halpern & Kideckel, 2000), thus becoming enemies, and then enemies were rendered neighbors again in the context of formal peace accords, the relative calm that followed, and subsequent “Europeanization”, i.e., “the process of stabilization and
structural reforms necessary for the region’s eventual accession to EU membership” (Stiks 2013). Stiks argues that whether neighbors can become true partners remains an open question, given the fact that “the citizenship practices of Yugoslavia’s accession states within the context of eventual EU enlargement are used both as tools of reconciliation and of fostering divisions among neighbors” (ibid.). This problematic duplicity can be linked to Etienne Balibar’s reflections on the construction of Europe. In 2004, the philosopher highlighted “the emergence, alongside with the formal aspects of ‘European citizenship’ (that is, a system of institutions, rights, and obligations common to the various people associated in the European construction), of a virtual *European apartheid*” (Balibar, 2004). Concerned with contradictory movements of inclusion and exclusion and the stigmatization and repression of populations within European society, he characterized Europe as “always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic, and political affiliations, numerous readings of history, numerous modes of relations with the rest of the world”, arguing that “in reality the Yugoslavian situation is not atypical but rather constitutes a local projection of forms of confrontation and conflict characteristic of all of Europe” (ibid.: 5).35 Balibar described Europe as a “democratic laboratory”36 “where new aspects of democracy are needed, and perhaps likely to be developed”.

From this perspective, it is imperative to consider the political and ethical implications of post-conflict development communication intervention driven by European funding in the former Yugoslavia not only as a function of foreign intervention, but also of internal democratic functioning. In fact, if we think of the domestic/national and foreign/international scales as the combined (though competing) territories in which claims for justice are to be raised in a globalizing world, then international development communication is in fact *development communication at home*. Stiks anticipated in 2011 that Croatian accession to the EU in July 2013 would have a major impact not only on the rest of the Western Balkans, but also on the EU: “At the moment of its adhesion Croatia will bring to the EU almost one million future EU citizens living in neighboring post-Yugoslav but non-EU countries, such as Bosnia (up to 800,000), Serbia and Montenegro combined (around 100,000), and Macedonia (around 10,000)” (Stiks, 2011: 57), totaling 4.5 million new European citizens. What we are looking at is not merely an enlarged public sphere that can be technically sustained through providing access to

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35 Bideleux and Jeffries (2007) also find commonalities between Europe and the successor states to the former Yugoslavia: “Rather than being fundamentally ‘alien’ or ‘essentially different’, the post-Communist Balkans have been a microcosm of Europe as a whole and a very revealing mirror in which Western and Central Europeans have been uncomfortably reminded of the dangerous currents of xenophobia, bigotry, inter-communal violence and racist violence which still lurk not far below the surface in their own societies and cultures” (ibid.: 3).

36 Note the connection to Stiks’ idea of a “laboratory of citizenship” (see page 30).
the Internet (see Balibar, 2004: 205; Silverstone, 2007), but rather a changed communicative space, in which issues of translation, differential claims to justice, and divides in the availability of communication entitlements and citizens’ capabilities (Garnham, 1999) come to the fore.

Notes on ethnicity, identity and culture
As noted earlier, the term “ethnicity” is disputed in the context of scholarly debates about the Balkan war(s) partly due to different uses of the word, and thus avoided on many occasions (Ramet, 2005: 38). Those different uses are entangled with the serious problem of how to understand what led citizens of the former Yugoslavia apart and drove many of them – ordinary people – to engage in violence against one another. This is indeed a complicated matter. Given the fact that violence had collective, factional and individual dimensions, how can structure be differentiated from agency in the analysis? During the war(s), people were maimed, raped, killed, disappeared – that is, human rights were violated in a number of grave ways – and local and international efforts to distinguish victims from victimizers and bring guilty parties to justice are still in progress and remain complicated. Under these circumstances, all interpretations are charged, and arguments become particularly convoluted. So, what should one make of ethnicity? Bideleux and Jeffries (2007) urge researchers to beware of blaming “the much-publicized religious and ethnic heterogeneity of the twentieth-century Balkan states for the recurrent instability and strife which they suffered”. Hammel (2000) calls attention to ethnicity as a dimension “with a specific political history and subject to political manipulation in a context of the collapse of the civil order”. Povrzanovic Frykman (2005) stresses the need to “handle ethnicity with great care”, since “while ethnicity paradigms concern boundary formation, social identity, the cultural contents of group identities and processes of disadvantage and exclusion, they also imply the danger of homogenizing ethnic groups”.

According to these authors, caution is in order here. Although I do not resort to ethnicity, identity or culture as primary conceptual lenses in this dissertation, I discuss how I understand the terms briefly here because they arise in interview statements. The general definition of ethnicity as “the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition” brings to the fore matters of culture and identity. Caution is again in order to avoid reducing reference to culture to a reductive apolitical stance. In this dissertation, I understand culture in relation to processes of signification and notions of identity in social life as a constitutive element of social reality that has a bearing on how we interpret
and make sense of our social experience; not as a sphere autonomous from the
economic or the political, or as a mere reflection of social structures (Quintero
Rivera, 2010). The tensions that characterize the complex relationship
between culture, economy and politics vary depending on specific contexts
in particular societies (Grimson & Caggiano, 2010). In the specific context of
the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, what interests me for the purpose
of this dissertation is the notion of “cultural crisis” as defined by Grimson
(2011). In his view, a cultural crisis arises specifically when a shared sense of
what is common and the imagined “who we are” are temporarily suspended,
leading to a collective feeling of liminality: that something has come to an end,
or that a crucial understanding has become obsolete, without clarity about
which other signifying regime will grant minimum certitude to society (ibid.:
14-15). For Grimson, war is not caused by cultural differences, but instead
leads to the perception of cultural differences previously not considered as such,
and thus transforms the meaning of any distinction (ibid.: 75; my translation).
A cultural crisis renders “a crucial understanding obsolete”, presumably with
enormous consequences for the possibility of “relational communication”
(Hamelink & Hoffmann, 2008; see also Condit, 2006). According to my data,
the Videoletters project in fact argued that it would reintroduce a common
sense and a potential “who we are” into the region through the broadcast of
the documentary television series.

The communication and media landscape before and during
the war(s) (1981-1995)
In her article “Unmaking multiethnicity in Yugoslavia”, Denich (2000)
quotes Pierre Bourdieu to call attention to an element of central importance
in order to understand the communication and media landscape of the
region during the wars: “As Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 138) has pointed out:
‘The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is, the power of making
visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power
par excellence: it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective
structure of society’” (ibid.: 45). In parallel with an escalation of state violence,
the political disintegration of Yugoslavia required that the media actively
argue for separation and aggression as the only possibilities. As I will discuss
shortly, overall, analysts agree that the television and print media outlets of
the three former Yugoslav republics most actively engaged in the conflict
– BiH, Croatia and Serbia – played a highly divisive role in the production
and sustenance of the war(s), be it as a consequence of the forcible control
exerted by the respective governing authorities or of journalistic complicity.

For Allen (1999: 3) “wars are partly what the media make them”.
In his view, the media make sense – that is, they are intelligible – as part of
the political and social world they describe, and “understanding the impact
of the contemporary media is a fundamental aspect of understanding wars
and how they develop, and perhaps, how they might be ended” (ibid.: 4).
The problem of how to study media impact, however, may be insoluble
(Couldry, 2010). Fardon (1999: 65) has highlighted a particular difficulty implied in conflicts marked by ethnicity: “Ethnicity seems to be in the air we breathe so that it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether news reports cover the global phenomenon of ethnicity or whether ethnicity is the covering in which events are globally wrapped. Do reports document ethnicity or do they produce it? Is ethnicity part of the medium in which information is communicated or is it the message? Can we even make the distinction?” Convoluted causal relationships come into focus here.

Tito’s death and the fragmentation of the Yugoslav media system
While discussing the Yugoslav media system in detail is beyond my scope here, its characteristics before and after Tito’s death are worth noting, in that they speak to the context in which US and European development communication intervention in general, and the Videoletters project in particular, would come to operate. Importantly, this was a media system that had been conceived to serve the propaganda and educational agenda of the governing elites and not as a public forum for voicing and debating divergent opinions (Mihelj, 2008: 165). While during the 1960s the system sought a balance between institutional order and freedom, by 1975 a backlash was observable, with several measures taken to neutralize the expression of public opinion (Robinson, 1977: 231). Several years before the breakup, Robinson had stressed how difficult it was for Yugoslav journalists to act as critics where criticism had to be “constructive” as required by the ruling structures (ibid.: 226), and raised “questions about the degree of social criticism” that would be permissible in the future (ibid.: 231). In the federal arrangement, media outlets were controlled by the respective governments of each republic, and once Tito died and federal unity was no longer the rule, they started responding to republican interests: “Instead of maintaining a Titoist unified front throughout Yugoslavia, the media of each republic reported the escalating interrepublic policy conflicts from the viewpoint of its own party leaders”, and the Yugoslav publics “began receiving conflicting information about the same issues” (Denich, 2000: 46). Information that had been concealed in the interest of Yugoslav unity was revealed, and in a short period the situation changed from tight control over the official story to a fragmented and conflicting narrative about what was going on. Mihelj (2008: 165) explains that the institutional arrangement of the mass media, with its limits on freedom of the press and public expression, compounded with high levels of self-censorship, resulted in journalists “used to being the loud-speakers of political authorities”, with the implication that, once the image of unity-in-diversity that had characterized Tito’s Yugoslavia was abandoned and internal differences were redefined as oppositions by politicians, the media system largely followed suit.
The production of war as media content
According to Denich (2000: 47), “The dominant media of each republic attacked nationalism elsewhere, while either ignoring or refraining from criticizing nationalism among their own co-ethnics.” Seaton (1999) explains in some detail how those attacks worked: “The process of elaborating and allocating characteristics to groups of people defined as the enemy, and disseminating a view of them, is critical in the internal mobilization of opinion that is required to move populations towards war with each other. Rhetorics of national and cultural identity are revived and invented, in order to stimulate feelings of homogeneity within groups, and identify the enemies as excluded.”
She notes that this process has been studied primarily with reference to press and broadcasting content and visual images, and in her view, it has been well documented (ibid.: 46). On the contrary, this speaks of a lack of audience studies. Jovanovic (2000: 322) describes how the attacks were manifested in cartoons: “Former ‘brotherly’ nations were not only represented as enemies, but also as inhuman monsters, worthy of perishing for the good of mankind. Consequently massacres, ethnic cleansing, forcible population exchanges, prisoners of war camps, rape, senseless destruction of cities and villages, and other atrocities were considered nothing but unfortunate and unavoidable by-products of just struggle.” In this polarized and mutually exclusive context, as noted by Kurispahic (2003: 51), “multiethnic media projects in Yugoslavia came under intense nationalist pressure”. With the rise of Milosevic during the eighties, Belgrade and Zagreb Radio, for example, which had had a joint program called “Green Megahertz” for more than sixteen years, found it increasingly difficult to agree on what to broadcast and to “maintain ethnic balance in the coverage of sensitive issues.”

Two accounts of state-controlled media during the war(s)
Two books published in English stand out as sources of information about the role of the republican, state-controlled media in BiH, Croatia and Serbia during the war(s): Mark Thompson’s Forging war: The media in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1999), and Kemal Kurspahic’s Prime time crime: Balkan media and war and peace (2003). Both titles have been widely reviewed in academic journals (see, e.g., Williams G., 2000; Harrison, 2001; Evensmo, 2003; Partos, 2003; Thornton, 2003; Radojkovic, 2007; Ryan, 2010), and reviewers have remarked on their commonalities and differences. Both look into the same political triangle – BiH, Croatia and Serbia – and agree on ascribing responsibility to media outlets for misinforming the public and inciting violence in a variety of ways. Among the differences, two are worth highlighting. First, that Thompson is careful to moderate his criticism, concluding that: “It would be misleading to argue that media made the wars happen or were responsible for them. […] Media were and are indispensable conduits for disinformation, propaganda, half-truths and
Kurspahic’s assessment, instead, is more severe: in his view, the media played a crucial role “in perpetrating lies about genocidal threats, awakening forgotten fears and hatreds, and preparing once peaceful neighbors to suspect, hate, confront, and finally kill each other in the last decade of the twentieth century” (2003: xii).

Second, the authors’ methods differed. Thompson, a British journalist who wrote his book originally as a report for Article 1938 funded by the Soros Foundation,39 combined interviews – some of them with partisans, but none of them with professionals “working in media under control of legitimate (though nationalistic) governments in the three ex-Yugoslav republics” (Radojkovic, 2007) – with a large number of secondary sources, including newspapers. Radojkovic has argued that this was problematic, in that Thompson was “to a great extent commenting on media-constructed reality” (ibid.: 345) without acknowledging that was the case. Kurspahic, a Yugoslav journalist who was elected as editor-in-chief of the Sarajevo daily Oslobodjenje by its journalists in 1988 and oversaw its regular publication during the long siege of the city, combined his insider’s account with comprehensive interviews with thirty journalists from BiH, Croatia and Serbia.

I found Kurspahic’s account illuminating in a number of ways. In his discussion of the Serbian case, he shows how Milosevic made sure to have loyal propagandists in charge of the republic’s major media outlets, which gave him almost all-encompassing control of the information circulated. But at the same time, he argues that the Serbian media created Milosevic in the first place, by strategically supporting his rise to power through the party’s hierarchy (2003: 33-42). The author provides evidence of the “manufacturing of news” undertaken by both the Serbian and Croatian media in order to stir ethnic and religious hatred in Bosnia (ibid.: xxiii). He draws on Popov’s analysis, which identified “the same frameworks of propaganda on both sides, repeating: ‘we’ are the victims, ‘they’ are the culprits; there is no way to save ‘ourselves’ other than annihilating and vanquishing ‘them’; it is ‘us’ who have been sanctified, while the ‘others’ have been satanised” (Kurspahic, 2003: xxii). This scenario is in line with Grimson’s proposition (2011) that the setup of a war scenario is shared by the warring parties, in that the reasons generated by groups to differentiate one another in a dispute are mutual.

According to a reviewer, Kurspahic documents the ways in which the ruling parties exerted control over the media through similar methods in Serbia and Croatia by “hiring and firing media executives and editors on the basis of how far they were prepared to toe the official line; imposing

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39 Thompson works for the Soros Foundation today, in the same program that first funded Videoletters in 2000. This raises the question of whether expert consultants go around in circles. See [http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/mark-thompson](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/mark-thompson) [accessed 20 January 2014].
restrictions on the independent sector and suppressing independent-minded media outlets through a range of financial and legal penalties; suing publications and journalists for libel [...] and even using violence against prominent opponents who could not be silenced through other means” (Partos, 2003: 1124). In BiH, nationalists systematically destroyed the media: “they targeted, terrorized, and tore apart the most tolerant and open-minded media in prewar Yugoslavia, with its multiethnic editorial staff and tradition of respect for differences”, leading to the “gradual destruction of the multiethnic alternative in Bosnia, which opened the way for the rise of the extremist Muslim media in the country” (Kurspahic, 2003: xxii-xxiii).40 This context raises questions about the long-term social impact of such a degree of control, particularly in terms of self-censorship and civic silence. The situation described by Kurspahic clearly speaks of three media systems at the service of the ruling governments, and not at the service of citizens. It was with these media systems, and the official processes and political spaces for storytelling that ensued (Hackett & Rolston, 2009), that Videoletters sought to engage in a particular way, as we will see in Chapter 4.

**Yutel**

Besides the republican mass media just discussed, the Yugoslav media system included four pan-Yugoslav media outlets: Radio Yugoslavia; the news agency Tanjun (Telegraph Agency of the New Yugoslavia); the daily newspaper Borba (i.e., “Struggle”), published in Belgrade; and the television station Yutel (Mihelj, 2008; Thompson, 1999). According to Mihelj (ibid.: 167), the information issued by the federal media, “which largely countered the disintegration and supported a vision of Europe that included the whole of Yugoslavia”, did not reach a wide audience directly: it was transmitted through the republican media, which would regularly criticize and delegitimize it in the process. Thompson (1999: 21) describes these pan-Yugoslav media outlets as intended to “service and address the whole federation, without privileging any of its units or nations over others”, suggesting an egalitarian ethos of public broadcasting although a Yugoslav public broadcasting system in the European understanding of the term never existed (see Basic-Hrvatin & Thompson, 2008).

Yutel, established while the federation’s disintegration was already taking place, was short-lived. Kurspahic (2003) explains that the idea was “to establish an all-Yugoslav television that could offer an alternative to […] mainstream ultranationalism”. Yutel’s failed attempt to provide content keen on the coexistence of differences to the whole region is of interest here, because providing that kind of content was also Videoletters’ stated

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40 His approach is praised by Ryan (2010) in his review: “Kurspahic is honest about the failure of the Bosnian media to report all incidents of Bosniac abuse of Serbs and Croats and its lack of sensitivity to non-Muslims” (ibid.: 103).
aim. The station, which sought “to produce one or two hours of news a
day and get all the republics to agree to run it on their Channel 2 evening
program” (ibid.: 56), faced obstacles from the very beginning. Some of
the republics’ broadcasters refused to carry it, and negotiations to use the
system of transmitters belonging to the Yugoslav National Army failed,
since Yutel found the army’s conditions, particularly control of editorial
content, unacceptable. According to Kurspahic, “In the end, only Bosnia
– for obvious reasons of being the most multiethnic and thus the most
vulnerable to media extremism – was ready to accept Yutel, offering it
accommodation and airtime within Sarajevo TV” (ibid.: 57). Despite
hindrances, Yutel was launched in October of 1990, with some hope that
it might reach most of the former Yugoslavia. However, as a journalist
interviewed by Kurspahic recalled, over time “‘Only Bosnia and Macedonia
[two of the more multiethnic republics] accepted a direct broadcast of our
news hour [...] Slovenians were able to watch us with a one-hour delay –
and their signal reached parts of Croatia too – but the reception in Croatia
was the least enthusiastic. Zagreb TV would only broadcast Yutel at 12:30
a.m. when the most persistent viewers fall asleep after a midnight dose of
classical music’” (ibid.: 58-59). I call the reader’s attention to this anecdote,
for history will repeat itself in accounts of the broadcast of the Videoletters
documentary television series. For Mihelj (2008), the station’s limited
reporting capabilities, combined with the reframing of their information
exercised by the republican media, meant that Yutel’s alternative narrative
could hardly rival the mainstream representations on offer.42

Weak opposition/alternative media
A number of independent opposition media outlets existed alongside the
pan-Yugoslav ones just discussed, such as Radio B9243 and the television
station Studio B in Belgrade, or Radio 101 in Zagreb. For Mihelj (2008: 168),
although the representations of the situation that they provided should
not be ignored, since they gave nuance to accounts of nationalist and
pro-war discourses in the media as homogeneous and all-pervasive, “it
also has to be admitted that until political control exerted over them was
eased, they could not seriously rival the mainstream ones”.44 Kurspahic

41 BiH, and Sarajevo in particular, would also be the most hospitable location for Videoletters fifteen
years later.
42 Kurspahic (2003: 54) understands Yutel as “alternative media”, while Mihelj (2008: 167) considers
it “pan-Yugoslav”.
43 Later on involved in the broadcast of Videoletters in Serbia. See Chapter 4.
44 For Williams (2000), suppression did not become systematic until the mid-1990s. However,
“by October 1998 as the situation in Kosovo deteriorated Milosevic launched a crackdown against
independent media and the free flow of information”, including the passing of a new Law on Public
Information that “gave the power to silence media at will through fines and seizure of assets”,

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(2003: 54) adds the weekly *Vreme* and the daily *Borba* to the media outlets that sought to provide an anti-nationalistic option, agreeing with Mihelj on the limitations faced by these efforts: “the problem […] was their limited outreach, the poor consumption of newspapers in increasingly impoverished Serbia, and the deafening noise of the nationalistic press, radio and television” (ibid.: 56). In his view, despite the efforts of the few media outlets and brave individuals who “refused to be manipulated and used in war propaganda” (ibid.: xiii), alternative (i.e., politically independent) media could not counter the overwhelming reach of the state system in an effective way, and the public expression of political independence was seriously curtailed (Thornton, 2003). In that context, could the alternative come from outside?

**Satellites outward and inward**

Since alternatives to nationalistic and belligerent news coverage within the territory of the disintegrating Yugoslavia were scarce, what about reports of events generated abroad? The availability of satellites in terms of the use that citizens of the former Yugoslavia could make of them is interesting in order to think of communication as a capability. According to Seaton (1999: 48), “By 1990, every republic in Yugoslavia had its own satellite service to the world, often transmitting an increasingly rabid local nationalism which was avidly consumed by émigrés at home.” Kolar-Panov (1997) discussed the role of satellite broadcasting as a propaganda tool during the war(s) in her study of the uses of video among Croatian diasporas in Australia: outward, satellite availability was used both to narrate the conflict to diasporas and to wage war in the international arena. But what about inward? According to Kurspahic (2003), “People with satellite dishes could not get alternative sources of information from international broadcasts – BBC, Deutsche Welle, CNN and others – because few people in Serbia spoke English or German and because the international media were busy covering the fall of the Berlin wall and the liberation of Eastern Europe, and they were not paying enough attention to the Balkan tragedy in the making.” He relates a telling anecdote: “A Belgrade colleague and friend told me at the time, ‘You know, I watch the Hungarian TV Journal every evening: I don’t understand a word, just the pictures, so I am spared my portion of state TV poisoning’” (ibid.: 60). Kurspahic’s references to language barriers in Serbia and editorial choices in the West substantiate my proposition that communication is a capability socially distributed in unequal ways, far from solvable by the availability of a given technology. Analyses of leading to the growth of self-censorship. Prosic-Dvornic (2000: 331) suggests that, in retrospect, “it seems reasonable to suppose that a good part of the democratic opposition and some presumably independent media were also under the regime’s control. Their function was to control and pacify the opposition-minded public and potentially ‘dangerous’ (i.e., effective) political leaders.”
the differential ways in which the very same satellite technology was used and appropriated outward and inward further substantiate my proposition that communication is best understood as a capability with an ambiguous potential (Kolar-Panov, 1994).

**International coverage as an echo of national accounts**

As the gravity of the situation in the region escalated, international press coverage increased. Academic literature has dwelled on the matter from a number of angles, including the influence of media coverage on decision-/policymaking regarding military intervention and humanitarian aid, the impact of journalistic frames on audiences' meaning-making, the characteristics of war journalism, narratives of “us” and “them”, and the relationship of audiences to the suffering of distant others, particularly the problem of so-called compassion fatigue. While covering such a wide range is, of course, beyond the scope of this work, I highlight, in what follows, certain aspects of the international coverage of the disintegration of Yugoslavia with a focus on whether it was useful for citizens within the region who could access it. As related by Tesanovic (2000), which will be discussed in more detail shortly, this coverage was of limited use to those seeking to understand what was happening not to distant others, but to themselves.

Bideleux and Jeffries (2007: 15) argue that, during the 1990s, the Western media and certain writers greatly exaggerated “the levels of popular ‘ethnic hatred’, xenophobia and ‘ethnic mobilization’ in countries such as Serbia and Croatia”. Thornton (2003: 722) points out the fact that “distant media begin to report on violent conflict only after ethnically defined hatred has taken hold.” Seaton (1999) notes that “misery which is distant (or in the case, for example, of Bosnia, or Kosova, misery which is made to seem more distant than it is – precisely because of the shared characteristics of misery wherever it occurs) is more frequently explained in the international media as a consequence not of a process, […] but in terms of inevitability, like ethnicity” (ibid.: 55; also see Rolston, 2007 for the case of Northern Ireland). Western media outlets were at a distance, and so was the misery that they unreflectingly referred to in their coverage. As time passed, according to Banks and Murray (1999: 158), “the term ‘ethnic’ (with its more or less grisly derivatives), previously used by the press as a key to understanding the Bosnian conflict”, was instead used to explain the failure of the peace process. A major gap between complex events and over-simplistic accounts can be inferred from these remarks.

Allen (1999) argues that international coverage failed to overcome the problematic take on the conflict adopted by the media outlets from the warring republics: “in former Yugoslavia, the national media played a part in encouraging the emergence of populist nationalisms, and in the creation of mass panics that reinforced closed definitions of community,
and little was done to reverse this trend in international coverage as warfare spread. The ethnicity of ‘Serbs’, ‘Croats’ and ‘Muslims’ was reported as if these were perduring, obvious and a natural focus for group division – the product of biology. Although some newspapers and reporters tried to dig deeper into events, the main thrust of international coverage was not to provide an alternative, more objective commentary on the fighting, but to confirm as ‘facts’ the constructed populist nationalisms of local politicians and war leaders” (ibid.: 39). It was this thrust, or line of reasoning, that the Videoletters project would speak to.

Limits to civic presence

As we have seen, the Yugoslav media system was fragmented, media outlets and journalists were co-opted by the ruling parties, pan-Yugoslav media and politically independent opposition or alternative media ventures had a limited reach, and the quality of international media coverage was poor. In this context, citizens of the successor states arguably lacked relevant and sufficient information in order to be able to understand and act on what was happening to them (Ozlak, 2009; Enghel, 2013). But the fact that narratives emphasizing the contingency of events and displaying them “as parts of an historic, never inevitable, and consequently reversible process” (Seaton, 1999: 61) were not available was only part of the problem. According to Kurspahic (2003: 59): “The Yugoslav public – in spite of the fact that it had a more liberal and better edited press than the rest of Eastern Europe – still had only been exposed to one ruling party and its ideology. What once was the Communist-controlled media became the nationalist-controlled media.” This raises doubts about citizens’ ability to engage critically with the information at hand: “In a country at war the information becomes distorted, deformed, hidden between the lines, partially expressed, confused with other sources, or entirely falsified. The question remains how to read the newspaper, how to look at the TV news, how to listen to comments on the radio” (Jovanovic, 2000: 280-1). According to Jovanovic, this task was difficult for citizens for reasons beyond the poor quality of the information available: “The routinization of war news leads to frequent repetition and broadcasting of violence. Thus the banalization of war-reporting reproduces inertia and indifference publicly. The mass media systematically turns aside critical observations. The more one consumes mass information on the war, the more likely one becomes manipulated” (ibid.: 287).

If we link such a scenario with Allen’s (1999: 4) argument that “the arbitrary and superficial qualities of much international media coverage

45 Sassen (2005, 2008) defines “civic presence” as the condition of being an actor even when lacking in power and argues that it “signals the possibility of a politics”; namely, the possibility that those excluded from the formal political apparatus – be it as a consequence of the denationalization of the state or of other forms of civic void resulting from the reconfiguration of the state – can also make history.
of wars raise the issue of what kind of voice war-affected populations can hope to have”, the limits to civic presence in both domestic/national and foreign/international territories come into view. Given a rather hopeless internal situation, in which a) information was tightly controlled and voice was actively discouraged by the ruling parties and the media through, e.g., hate campaigns that targeted dissenting intellectuals (Petrovic, 2000: 173), and b) existing protests were not covered (Prosic-Dvornic, 2000: 331), could citizens of the warring republics make claims for justice via the international media? I return to this question in the case of Videoletters in Chapter 5.

The media as experienced by those who were there as it all happened (to them)
While media ethnographies corresponding to the war(s) are lacking, at least in the literature published in English, references to the media in everyday life can be found in personal accounts and in works of fiction. Noting that “everyday life during war-time is essentially different from everyday life in peace”, scholar Maja Povrzanovic46 (1993: 143) described how the media pervaded daily activities. Referring to Croatia in 1991, she writes: “Since the beginning of the war in Slovenia, in most Croatian houses television is on all the time. One literally ‘lives from news bulletin to news bulletin’. We can hardly wait to hear the news, but are terrified of hearing it. Even in the peaceful regions, the news is listened a number of times during the day, and watched a number of times in the evening and during the night. For many people, time is conditioned by the schedule of news bulletins and daily activities are planned around the news (It is even so for myself, living in Germany since 1991)”. In Povrzanovic’s view: “The war experiences of the people of Zagreb, of the so-called crisis regions, and of the refugees, vary to such great degree that it is impossible to describe them generally. The only commonality that links these people beside basic values (survival, family, home and nation) and basic fears is the receipt of common radio and TV signals” (ibid.). From this perspective, it looks like radio and television were in a way holding people together, and it is the nature of that togetherness that remains a question mark. The reception of a common television signal, and the presumed togetherness derived from it, would, in turn, be an explicit goal of the Videoletters project.

Watching television was not only about following the news. Entertainment programming played a role. In Dubravka Ugresic’s novel The ministry of pain (2008), a fictional Yugoslav émigré47 living in Amsterdam narrates her return to an unspecified location in the former Yugoslavia to visit her mother: “Then we watched a Brazilian soap opera, Mother trying in vain to clue me in on the plot. Sitting glued to the screen hour after hour,

46 Refered to earlier as Povrzanovic Frykman (2005).
47 Based on real events.
obsessed with the fates of Marisol and Cassandra or whatever their names were – that, like the chatter, was a strategy of self-defence. Mother had three television sets – one in the bedroom, one in the living room and one in ‘the guest room’. This total submersion into the world of cheap soaps, this TV hysteria, TV stupor, this categorical refusal to confront reality, had come with the war, when reality sneaked into households in the form of skimpy subtitles, skimpier even than Marisol or Cassandra’s actual lines. That was all the space it was allowed. Soaps were the foam you spread on fear to put it out, a foam you applied twice daily, preferably in the company of old friends” (ibid.: 105-6). Tellingly, Cassandra was in fact the name of the heroine of a Venezuelan soap opera that was extremely popular in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. According to Ugresic: “When the heroine Cassandra ended up in prison in one of the episodes, the furious people of Kucevo sent a petition (with around 200 signatures!) to the president of Venezuela demanding the immediate release of the innocent Cassandra. They went further still by writing to the Vatican to ask that Cassandra be proclaimed a saint, and then to The Hague tribunal, asking that it be made possible for Cassandra to get a fair trial in Serbia.” Her account is reproduced by Kurspahic (2003: 209) to reflect on the power of television in totalitarian societies (for a wider discussion of the Kucevo anecdote, see Jovanovic, 2001).

In an intense and equivocal engagement, writer and filmmaker Jasmina Tesanovic referred to the national and international media as a potential lifeline, an enraging misinformer, and an informed authority. Two days after NATO had begun air strikes against Serbia, she wrote in her “Diary of a political idiot”, referring to Belgrade: “26 March 1999 – […] the sirens are interrupting me, a terrible wailing up and down. I switch on CNN to see why sirens are going off in Belgrade but they don’t know. Local TV will tell us when it’s all over” (Tesanovic, 2000: 74). On 5 May, she wrote: “I heard on the BBC that we were without light for only six or seven hours, but that’s not true. I don’t know whose propaganda it is, local or foreign, but it doesn’t help us believe news about the Albanians, from either side, when we hear that we have electricity and water because it suits somebody’s purpose to say so. All the news suits somebody” (ibid.: 107). The diary shows a reflexive effort to deal with the media in a critical way, and an ambivalent attitude towards international coverage of what was going on. On 2 June 1999, she wrote: “We were listening eagerly to Radio Free Europe by candlelight. When the power came on, we didn’t turn to CNN, because foreign broadcasts don’t talk about us anymore, though I had a feeling that maybe this would be the day” (ibid.: 129).

48 And even became the subject of international intervention, according to journalistic sources. See http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1998-02-14/news/9802140050_1_banja-luka-bosnia-serb-leader-biljana-plavsic [accessed 14 February 2014].
The Dayton Peace Agreement and the beginning of the aftermath
In November 1995, following three weeks of negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, in the United States, the presidents of BiH, Croatia and Serbia signed the Dayton Peace Agreement, which, as already mentioned, formally divided BiH into two entities: the Bosniak/Bosnian Croat Federation of BiH and the Bosnian Serb-led Republika Srpska. In December, NATO deployed a 60,000-strong peacekeeping force in Bosnia (Kurspahic, 2003: 225). The war(s), however, did not end with the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement and NATO’s entrance into BiH. The exacerbation of ethnic tensions in Kosovo and ensuing NATO military intervention were yet to come. The intervention began in March 1999, and air strikes on Serbian targets, including Belgrade, went on for 78 days. Early in June 1999, Milosevic finally accepted the international peace plan that was on the table, and the already-mentioned NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) entered Kosovo. Fourteen years later, it is still there.49

Although the war(s) did not end with the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement, international communication and media intervention began at that point. Military intervention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, and so-called media assistance (a.k.a. media support and media development, and included in this dissertation under the wider umbrella of development communication50) would coexist – and overlap – for the next ten years. Importantly for this dissertation, Seaton (1999) has argued that “in the changed conditions of contemporary military operations, ‘peace-keepers’ actually depend on the media in a quite novel way […] In today’s untidy conflicts, peace-keepers from outside need the media to demonstrate their success: the media become the agents (not reporters) of achieving goals” (ibid.: 55).

The communication and media landscape in the aftermath of the conflict (1996-2006)
For Thompson and De Luce (2002), the Western governments that sponsored the Dayton Peace Agreement “were initially slow to recognize the role of the media in undermining ethnic existence”, and the agreement in fact lacked sufficient provisions about the restructuring of the media sector in the successor states to the former Yugoslavia (ibid.: 201, 204). But this slowness, they argue, is paradoxical in light of what a report published by

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49 Providing details about this part of the history is beyond the scope of this work. For a critical account, see Noam Chomsky’s article “A review of NATO’s war over Kosovo” (2001) at http://www.chomsky.info/articles/200005--.htm [accessed 17 March 2013].

50 For a thought-provoking discussion of differences, similarities and the interface between media development, media for development and development communication, see Berger (2010). I follow Wilkins’ definition (2008), which understands media development as a particular approach to development communication.
the International Crisis Group (from now on, ICG) in 1997 described as the “frenetic activity” of the international community, which devoted much time, energy and money to media projects.

According to Rhodes (2007), there is a close relationship between the use of the media to foster conflict made by nationalist governments during the war(s), and the attempt to use media to revert the consequences of the war(s) caused by international actors in the aftermath: “the wars in the Balkans were the first in which postwar media technology and techniques, especially television, were so egregiously manipulated, and (...) the projects to address deficits in democracy and civic responsibility, prejudice, and violations of human rights were the first to focus on positive media influence to counteract its misuse” (ibid.: 16). In his view: “The weight given to media assistance in the Balkans ought to be seen in the context of a media boom in the West, when the ‘role of the media’ increasingly aroused the interest, not only of the media itself, but also of international actors: governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, and foundations. […] Media were seen as central to the causes of these problems, and this to their solutions: individual values, choice, and responsibility were increasingly linked to media inputs” (ibid.: 16). The central role attributed to the media by international actors noted by Rhodes is, I argue, connected to what Schiller (2007) has explained as the transformation of information as a commodity and Sassen (2008: 328) has characterized as “the rapid proliferation of global computer-based networks and the digitization of a broad array of economic and political activities”. Simon Haselock, who acted as NATO Spokesman in Sarajevo (1995-1996), Deputy High Representative for Media Affairs in the OHR (1997-2000), Temporary Media Commissioner in Kosovo (2000) and Director of Public Information for UNMIK (2001-2003), speaks in fact of the creation of an “information environment” as a goal of international intervention. Reflecting on the OHR’s position on the media, he says: “The OHR’s ‘big idea’ was essentially to create an information environment that allowed free and open debate and provided a mechanism for reconciliation and the conduct of free and fair elections […] Democratizing the media, it was hoped, would help to democratize Bosnia. How to achieve this, though, was new territory for everyone, despite the experience with media reform efforts in other parts of Eastern Europe” (Haselock, 2010: 3). Paradoxically, in this statement Haselock is highlighting the ideal central role attributed to information and the media while acknowledging that intervention was implemented in an improvised manner.

Overall, the United States and the EU disagreed on whether to support private or public broadcasting, and the idea that “market democracy” and

51 This is in line with Silverstone’s observation that “The media have been seen as strongly influential at times of media innovation and when societies themselves might be seen to be vulnerable to propaganda or influence (both political and commercial) for specific historical or social reasons” (2007: 192).
peace could be promoted simultaneously was not challenged (Thompson & De Luce, 2002; Rhodes, 2007; Allen & Stremlau, 2005). Attention was paid to what the international actors could do – rebuild, support, develop, reform, etc. – at the expense of local expertise, views and strategies (Stremlau, 2004; Allen & Stremlau, 2005; Kurspahic, 2003; Haselock, 2010). Given the diverging views about which goals and strategies to favor, the multiplicity of donors and the large budgets, the logistics of media intervention were complicated, and despite efforts to coordinate allocations, there was a great deal of overlap and rivalry (ICG, 1997; Thompson & De Luce, 2002; Rhodes, 2007), i.e., while purportedly acting to promote democracy, Western interveners failed to communicate with each other cooperatively across disparate standpoints (Striphas, 2006).

Funds were allocated to a variety of projects and initiatives, including support to independent media outlets (radio, television and print), support to public broadcasting, assistance to media institutions (media centers, journalist associations, NGOs), content production, training and education of journalists, and the reform of legal and regulatory frameworks (ICG, 1997; Rhodes, 2007). The total amount of funding spent on communication and media initiatives cannot be determined, since “not all data are accessible or comparable, not all assistance was earmarked as ‘media support’, few ministries have a complete overview of their media activities available” (Rhodes, 2007: 15). However, analysts agree on the fact that the sum was high. The two main funders were the United States and the European Union, among a number of smaller ones. In 1997, the ICG stated: “Indeed, the level of subsidy has risen sharply as new donors with large budgets, such as USAID and the European Commission, have entered the market. Moreover, this level of support is likely to continue at least for the forthcoming year. George Soros’ Open Society Fund says it has a budget of $ 3 million, and this will be increased by $ 2 million if matching funding can be found; USAID says it expects to give between $ 10 and $ 15 million; and the European Commission has earmarked 10 million ECU for the former Yugoslavia, much of which will go to media projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (ICG, 1997: 9). In 2002, Thompson and De Luce remarked: “There is no precise estimate of the vast sums of international aid spent on media projects in Bosnia since 1995, but it almost certainly outpaces donations for judicial reform, exhumation of mass graves, parliamentary reform, and many other projects. The sum is even larger if media assistance projects throughout former Yugoslavia are considered. The massive amount of international aid has shaped Bosnia’s media landscape more than any piece of legislation imposed or amended by the High Representative” (ibid.: 226). In 2007, Rhodes reported that recorded support for media in the Balkans between 1996 and 2006 amounted to EUR 262.2 million, and stressed that “The actual figure is […] significantly higher, as this (total) lacks data from important private foundations and several governmental agencies” (Rhodes, 2007: 15).
Analyses over the years agree on the fact that results were mixed at best. In 1997, the ICG referred to an absence of breakthroughs (ICG, 1997: 9). In 2002, Thompson and De Luce pointed out that the international community had made a number of misjudgments for the particular case of media intervention in Bosnia. In 2003, Kurspahic remarked: “In the five years after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed (1995-2000), with all the investment in a variety of media development programs, not enough has been done to undo more than a decade of the systematic production of hatred” (Kurspahic, 2003: 210). Notably, money continued to be spent regardless. In 2007, Rhodes identified a number of shortcomings and “side effects” across a variety of initiatives, and stated: “Efforts to promote ethnic reconciliation via media projects have met with limited demonstrable success and have inspired cynical and exploitative reactions” (Rhodes, 2007: 25).52

Media intervention took place in the wider context of so-called reconstruction programs. According to Bideleux and Jeffries (2007): “The economic benefits from the major externally funded reconstruction programmes which were launched in the aftermath of the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia between 1991 and 1995 and following the Kosova war in March-June 1999 had run their course by 2003 or 2004. Much of the damage to physical infrastructure had been repaired, and the temporary (artificial) economic stimuli by reconstruction work and by new inflows of economic aid were beginning to dry up. Unemployment rates, which fell temporarily during the reconstruction booms, then started raising again – to official rates exceeding 30 per cent in Bosnia, Serbia and Macedonia and exceeding 50 per cent in Kosova” (ibid.: 4). The authors quote the report The Balkans in Europe’s future, published in April 2005 by the International Commission on the Balkans, which at the time described a scenario of “mass poverty, very extensive unemployment and under-employment, severely damaged social fabrics, glaring inequalities, seriously restricted mobility and (most alarmingly of all) major criminal gangs and networks which engage in widespread racketeering and have a powerful hold on large parts of these economies and societies and even on parts of their security forces, judiciaries and political systems” (ibid.: 4). Notably, April 2005 was not only the time when said report was released (on 14 April in Belgrade) but also the time when the Videoletters project premiered in Sarajevo (on 2 April).

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52 The report authored by Rhodes was highlighted as the most comprehensive on the matter published to date at the conference “Between sustainability and dependence: 20 years of media assistance in Western Balkans” held in Sarajevo in September 2013, which I attended in the context of fieldwork.
Chapter 2: Literature review and working theoretical framework

In this chapter, I present and discuss the literature review that underpins this study, and introduce the working theoretical framework elaborated in order to formulate the analysis of empirical data.

Brief introduction to the overall literature review
The literature review covers five strands: 1) the theorization of, and research on, development communication; 2) research on the impact of documentary film and video on social change; 3) development communication in (post-)conflict situations (i.e., problem-specific literature); 4) development communication in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup (i.e., region-specific literature); and 5) previous studies of the Videoletters project (i.e., case-specific literature).

Strand 1) looks into development communication’s state of the art as a field of study, covering the academic positions and debates in recent years. Strand 2) reviews research on documentary film for social change for the same period, considering how to address political impact methodologically and analytically. Strand 3) looks into studies of development communication initiatives undertaken specifically in post-conflict situations, i.e., categorized based on the type of problem to be addressed. Strand 4) looks particularly into studies of development communication initiatives undertaken in the Western Balkans following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, i.e., categorized according to the specific region (and time) tackled. Finally, strand 5) covers studies of Videoletters published in English. The review of the first two strands is broader in order to identify a) theoretical and research gaps to be addressed, and b) analytical avenues to be adopted in the dissertation. The review of the third and fourth strand is selective in order to bring additional detail to my analytical framework.

The theorization of, and research on, development communication

Development communication in the context of neoliberal digital capitalism
That intentional communication interventions can play a positive role in the production of social change is the central tenet of development communication (Wilkins, 2008). Also known as communication for development (e.g., Servaes, 2007; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013), communication for social change
(e.g., Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006) and communication for development and social change (e.g., McAnany, 2012), development communication is a subfield of communication and media studies, connected to a varying extent to international development studies. But it is not only an academic endeavor – it is also a professional practice and an institutional project. Therefore, in the literature review that follows I scrutinize it from this threefold perspective. While the three dimensions influence each other, the relative power of each differs.

Broadly speaking, the field of study is concerned with the role and value of intentional communication and media-driven initiatives in the production of democratic social change. Throughout its history, the field has focused primarily on the theorization and research of initiatives aimed at supporting international development cooperation intervention. Development has generally been considered the stronger factor in the development communication equation across the three dimensions – study, practice and project – and received greater attention than communication (Quebral, 1988 quoted in Manyozo, 2012; Waisbord, 2008).

The professional practice is concerned with the planning and implementation of communication and media initiatives aimed at achieving a variety of sociopolitical goals, premised on the assumption that strategic communicational action can cause more or less distinct effects. The scale, focus, means and ends of development communication initiatives may vary across a wide range. The practice, generally presumed to be democratizing, has traditionally been funded by bilateral and multilateral development agencies. While internal development communication units exist in some multilateral agencies, such as, e.g., UNICEF and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), at present implementation is mainly subcontracted out to nongovernmental organizations or freelance practitioners.

The institutional project gives shape to the practice and the evaluation of development communication, i.e., it sets the rules of the game. Because of its origin, linked to the wider history of Western development policies (Harding, 1998; Pieterse, 2010), over time the practice has been structured predominantly through the institutional intervention of bilateral and multilateral agencies. Most often development communication initiatives

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53 Development is understood here as “the organized intervention in collective affairs according to a standard of improvement” (Nederveen Pieterse, 2010: 3). What constitutes improvement – and appropriate intervention – is a matter of contestation and negotiation in pertinent international arenas.


55 Although an increasing body of scholarly work shows that privately funded aid is on the rise, bilateral and multilateral aid still represents the most significant part of the picture. See http://www.oecd.org/development/aidtopoorcountriesslipsfurtherasgovernmentstightenbudgets.htm [accessed 22 October 2013] and IDC (2012).
have taken place abroad, in countries other than those funding the initiatives, selected in line with foreign-policy agendas, and the ability to initiate (and terminate) actions has traditionally lain with the funders.

The question of how to theorize and investigate intentional communication and media-driven interventions aimed at tackling social problems and bringing about democratizing change is central to development communication as a field of study. Understanding how this matter has been approached in the academic literature published in English during the ten-year period from 2003 to 2013 is the purpose of review that follows. I seek to clarify how the field has responded in recent years to the ways in which development communication is being enacted or otherwise mobilized by an increasingly wide range of players in a transnational scenario that is arguably under transformation.

Changes in the scenario can be briefly characterized as follows. In recent years, media and information have become commodities crucial for the expansion of global capitalism (Schiller, 2007; Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010), while the shape and strengths of a much-predicated global citizenship presumably in the making remain unclear (Sassen, 2008; Fraser, 2008). Inequality is mounting (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Ortiz & Cummins, 2011), and development is increasingly managed by national states as a service-delivery business subcontracted to the private sector. The privatization of development weakens civil society, forecloses independent and critical research, and pushes decision-makers at the national level to serve private agendas (Barkan, 2013; Wilkins & Enghel, 2014). This new institutional order in formation, well problematized by Sassen (2008), has a normative authority that comes from the world of private power yet installs itself in the public realm, emerging as public policy or public objectives. Particular institutional components of the national state begin to function as the institutional home for the operation of powerful dynamics constitutive of global capital and its markets, thus reorienting state agendas and policy work towards the requirements of the transnational economy. One of those dynamics is the fast digitization of a wide array of economic and political activities, accompanied by “purely

56 Based on conventional distinctions between developing and developed societies, or the South and the North, the reader may think that development theory and policy are irrelevant to the democratic functioning of Western countries. However, in light of the decline of welfare economies and the increasing levels of inequality within and among Western countries (as exemplified by the current status of Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain within the European Union), one should think of development knowledge as increasingly relevant to the West (in line with Ngomba, 2013).

57 Although a few examples of indigenous development communication initiatives exist at the national level, led by a government agency or civil society organization, the number is so small that they must be considered an exception to the rule.

58 Including the liberalization of the telecommunications and media sectors. See Chakravartty & Schiller (2010) for a critical discussion.
technological readings of the technical capacities entailed by digitization” (Sassen, 2008: 329; also see Silverstone, 2007).

The adoption of business principles and practices among development providers in the context of a broad pro-privatization climate has had a number of serious consequences (Anderson et al., 2012). The number of development players has grown, leading to an increasingly “cluttered” landscape (Bellemare, 2014) and to a multiplicity of single-issue agendas, which compete with integrated approaches to justice (IDC, 2012). Moreover, the increasing visibility and influence of “big philanthropy” subtracts attention from the persistence of “the national” as one of several possible framings for citizenship (Sassen, 2008), as well as from the sustained, although changed, importance of national communicative spaces (Christensen, 2010). In parallel, strong discourses about the Internet’s “built-in autonomy from state power and its capacity to enhance democracy from the bottom up via a strengthening of […] access by civil society” (Sassen, 2008: 330) have distracted attention from the fact that digital democracy is an overstated promise rather than a reality (Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010: 676). Against this scenario, how has development communication been researched and theorized in the past ten years? Which theoretical frameworks, concepts, methodologies and research outcomes have predominated? Which scales and relationships have been in focus? Which alternative perspectives have been proposed? Do the explanatory principles employed match the complexity of the above-described scenario? These questions frame my analysis of the literature that follows.

**Methodological approach**

This qualitative literature review covers a selection of peer-reviewed journal articles, peer-reviewed conference papers, book chapters and books published in English during the period from 2003 to early 2013. My aim was to retrieve recent literature that looks into the field’s conceptual definitions, theorization, methodologies and research outcomes. I chose this time span to allow for discussions of globalization and digital capitalism that would reasonably tend to be absent in earlier literature. A total of 32 sources were selected and analyzed: 15 peer-reviewed journal articles, two peer-reviewed conference papers, six books, three edited collections, two book chapters, two commissioned studies and one definition from the International Encyclopedia of Communication. The keywords searched in relevant databases were “communication for development”, “communication for social change”, “communication for development and social change”, and “development...”

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59 These questions are drawn from an analysis developed by Holbert, Weeks and Esralen (2012) for the field of political communication.

60 All of them accepted for International Communication Association (ICA) conferences in the years covered. International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) papers were excluded due to the fact that they are not systematically peer-reviewed as a condition for acceptance.
communication”. The reference lists of the literature found through the database search were then checked for additional sources. In the case of edited collections, only the introductory chapter was closely inspected. Although grey literature, which abounds, was excluded as a general rule, one study commissioned by the World Bank (from now on, WB) and one commissioned by the UN Interagency Group on Communication for Development were included. The WB study was written by an academic, vetted by a committee of experts that included an academic, and subsequently adopted by academics as a reference in several of the sources I reviewed, and therefore I consider it an example of the relationship between the institutional project and the academic discourses that develop along with it (Craig, 2006). The study commissioned by the UN and conducted by academics in turn informed one of the books included in the review. An additional 10 sources were excluded following close inspection, since they did not fulfill the criteria I had set. The resulting literature list is, of course, not exhaustive, but I consider it encompassing enough to be representative of positions and debates about how development communication is theorized and researched in the literature published in English in the field between 2003 and the first quarter of 2013. My description and critique of this literature is organized under four topics: 1) the relationship between histories of development communication, analyses of present conditions and propositions for future research and theorization; 2) definitions of development communication; 3) problematic aspects of the field’s theorization and research identified by academics; and 4) the state of the art of inquiry within the field according to studies of existing research.

From histories of the field to proposals for future research and theorization

How do scholars frame the past, the present and the future of the field? And how does this framing speak to the complex global conditions under which international development communication operates at present? As we will see, the review shows great consistency in accounts of its history, an underdeveloped understanding of its present conditions, and a disparate approach to future alternatives.

The field’s history

A significant number of the sources reviewed historicize the field’s trajectory (Servaes, 2005; Kim, 2005; Roman, 2005; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Manyozo, 2006; Inagaki, 2007; Shah, 2007 and 2008; Wilkins, 2008; Greiner & Singhal, 2009; Kincaid & Figueroa, 2009; McPhail, 2009; Dutta, 2011; and McAnany, 2012). While the specific themes addressed by these

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61 Tacchi et al. (2009); McAnany (2010); Servaes (2011); Agunga (2012); Servaes et al. (2012); Skuse et al. (2013); Lennie & Tacchi (2013).
authors vary, their accounts of the history are quite consistent: the field’s past is generally agreed upon, and referring to it is generally considered an important element of published work. The histories follow a consistent thread, drawing connections between theoretical approaches to development and development communication paradigms. Development theory drives them, while communication theory takes second place. The thread starts with modernization theory, continues with the critique of modernization raised by dependency theory, and ends with alternative approaches. Modernization theory, concerned with growth and progress, is associated with mass-mediated development communication interventions initiated by the Western powers, aimed at poor countries and driven by geopolitical imperatives. Those interventions were researched quantitatively, with a focus on mass media channels and messages, and on the effects of messages on national audiences. Dependency theory, concerned with the mutually constitutive link between development and underdevelopment, is associated with the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s sought to redress media power imbalances in the relationship between the West and “the rest”. The alternative approaches to development that followed from the dependista critique to modernization speak of a concern with democratizing communication by way of community participation and empowerment.

With the shift from the dependista critique to alternative approaches and the appearance of participatory communication, variations in authors’ perspectives begin to appear in the literature analyzed. For example, viewpoints regarding the role of experts in participatory communication processes differ: interventions may be initiated by communication specialists (Servaes, 2005), would be best if organized by ordinary people themselves in local communities (Morris, 2003; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006), or could be devised in collaboration (Greiner & Singhal, 2009). Despite variations, however, the imperative appears to be moral, with “the promise of dialogue” as a horizon (Phillips, 2011; also see Morris, 2003). The interventions are researched qualitatively, with a focus on empowerment (Morris, 2003). A focus on communities implies that the scale of intervention becomes smaller. The uncertain empirical entity of these communities is barely problematized, and attention to national states (and to the citizenship frameworks that ensue), and to transnational funding sources, take second place to interest in localized struggles. But critical observations about the consequences of narrowing down the focus are not absent: White (2004: 14) argues that the isolated efforts of poor communities to improve their situation on their own “play into the hands of the neoliberal promoters of individual efforts in the marketplace”.

62 For discussions of this problem, see, e.g., Silverstone (2004) and Zoettl (2009).
While most authors agree on the democratizing qualities of participatory communication, only three critical views of whether and/or why it gained ground not only in practice but also as part of the institutional project are offered in the literature. Chakravartty (2009: 38) argues that the self-reflexive adoption of localized participatory communication approaches by practitioners in the 1970s and 1980s was parallel to the liberalization and commercialization of media systems, which would come to “change the terms of both institutional politics and everyday cultural practice across post–Cold War market societies”. McAnany (2012) further suggests that the encouragement of participatory communication at the institutional level as from the 1980s may be connected to the advent of neoliberal policies that led to the privatization of public services and a free-market approach to aid allocations, i.e., the institutional discourse in favor of participatory communication may have risen to cover for a change in funding priorities. What Chakravartty (ibid.) identifies as a critical effort of practitioners to respond to the undemocratic aspects of modernization approaches somewhat unaware of wider conditions was, in McAnany’s view, co-opted by development agencies to downplay a restructuring. Waisbord (2008) provides additional detail to this picture by explaining the institutional limits to the adoption of participatory communication by development agencies. In his view, although participatory ideas and experiences were incorporated into the mainstream to a certain extent, “theoretical innovations in the academic field have not been sufficient to change practices and views about communication inside aid organizations” (ibid.: 517), and participation has remained largely limited to involving communities in the implementation of activities rather than engaging them in the assessment of problems and solutions and the making of decisions regarding the goals of interventions. The power of the academic field to exert a democratizing influence on the institutional project is evidenced as rather limited here.

**The field’s present vis-à-vis the present world**

A relationship between globalization (Sassen, 2008), informationalized capitalism (Schiller, 2007) and development communication is acknowledged by some of the authors reviewed. References are made to the role that social movements and citizens’ media may play in redressing the consequences of neoliberalism (White, 2004), to the unsolved social and geographical imbalances in “the rise of the networked society” conceptualized by Castells in the mid-nineties (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006), to the advent of digital capitalism in the context of the neoliberal agenda and the globalization of poverty (Thomas, 2007), and to the potentially problematic consequences of favoring narrow visions of social change driven by commercial agendas and capitalist values (Wilkins, 2008). These references are made from normative standpoints, i.e., derived from a concern with what the role of development communication should be. In-depth attempts at explaining
the influence of the neoliberal project (and of the commodification of media and information) as a key component of globalization on the practice and the project of international development communication are, for the most part, a pending task, not addressed in this set of literature.

This blind spot in theorization is in turn reflected in research: more than 80 percent of the peer-reviewed academic articles on development communication published from 1997 to 2007 “made no mention of globalization”, while more than 40 percent focused on information and communication technologies (from now on, ICTs) (Ogan et al., 2009: 660). While researchers followed the practice in their empirical studies, giving increased attention to projects incorporating ICTs, their analyses remained theoretically grounded in the explanatory principles established in the field’s history. Alert to this problem, Chakravartty (2009) calls for critical attention to the renaissance seen by development communication in the twenty-first century, signaled by “an astonishing acceleration both in the scale of development projects based on information and communication technologies and in its symbolic significance in promising a painless transition to modernity” (ibid.: 37).

**The field’s uncertain future**

At the very start of the period under analysis in this review, Morris (2003) identified diffusion and participation as the field’s two dominant conceptual models, arguing that despite their distinct theoretical roots and emphases on means and ends they tended to inform each other in practice, thus showing potential for cross-pollination and integration. At that point, the way forward for the field lay in establishing a new relationship between the two models by “theorizing across” (ibid.: 243) and incorporating the best of both approaches (also see Roman, 2005: 311 and Inagaki, 2007 for similar calls for convergence63). Since 2003, suggestions for advancing the field of development communication have varied. Some scholars have sought to “think outside the box”, proposing alternative models for conceptualizing the relationship between communication and development (see Shah, 2008 for his “regions in protest” model), strategies for motivating increased individual participation in interventions towards prosocial change (see Greiner & Singhal, 2009 for “invitational social change”) or the search for common ground between intercultural communication – typically concerned with communicating with strangers – and development communication (Kim, 2005). Other calls have instead been of a normative nature. Grappling with the difficulty of positioning themselves as scholars vis-à-vis the practice, Gumucio-Dagron

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63 Calls for intellectual convergence could be considered problematic in that they may limit explanatory diversity and theoretical richness. More productively, the concern with overcoming the qualitative/quantitative divide can be read as an invitation to engage in mixed-methods research (Bryman, 2008).
and Tufte (2006) suggested that experts step down, or at least step back, letting communities determine the most appropriate solutions to their needs, while Dutta (2011) recommended that they side with the powerless, in such a way that the voices of local participants, historically erased, are brought to the fore. Singularly preoccupied with the subsidiary status of communication within the international aid system, and attentive to the materiality of politics, Waisbord (2008: 519) argues for “embracing an analytical perspective that examines organizational dynamics and professional micropolitics to assess how alternatives to the informational paradigm might be effectively institutionalized in development agencies” if communication is ever going to lead, rather than support, development programs.

As from 2009, a concern with how to link development communication with globalization and informationalized capitalism appears in formulations of future research agendas. Importantly, Chakravartty (2009) calls for studies that “critically assess the new lexicon around technology and governance”, and for ethnographic studies that “offer meaningful critiques of the limits (also possibilities) of participatory approaches and the hype around social entrepreneurship as the panacea to inequality in the global age” (ibid.: 38-39). From a more pragmatic and less critical perspective, McAnany (2012) argues for adapting the “social entrepreneurship” paradigm as a way to expand the scope of development communication. Ogan et al. (2009) call for engaging with the concept of globalization in research on the role of ICTs in development, noting that, while empirical studies have moved forward to follow the practice, the theoretical perspectives adopted are still tied to modernization.

The focus, scale and concreteness of these proposals to advance theorization and research obviously vary. While some see the way forward as dependent on achieving theoretical and methodological coherence between diffusion and participation (Morris, 2003; Roman, 2005; Inagaki, 2007), others (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006; Dutta, 2011) insist on the democratizing value of participatory approaches from a normative perspective. Importantly, Waisbord (2008) points out the weak influence of theorization on the institutionalization of participatory development communication within the international aid system, arguing for empirical attention to the unstable conditions under which communication is put into practice across organizations. In what may be seen as a productive contradiction among agendas, in that there is not simply a theoretical indecision at stake there but also a political standing, Chakravartty (2009) calls critical attention to social entrepreneurship hype, while McAnany (2012) suggests that it has lessons to offer. Notably, there are calls for adopting a political-economy approach in order to examine the institutional factors affecting the project and the practice of development communication (Waisbord, 2008) and to critically interrogate the status of the field under global and neoliberal
Definitions of development communication
How do these scholars define development communication? Conceptualizations are either descriptive (at disparate scales) or normative.

As a field of theorization and research
In a definition that includes arguably outdated elements (mass communication, Third World), but that is nonetheless valuable in that it brings the institutional project into view, Kim (2005) states that development communication studies have aimed primarily “at explaining the role of mass media in bringing about social change and economic development in Third World countries”. For Kincaid and Figueroa (2009: 506), the field of study examines communication issues related to efforts to solve problems derived from poverty’s impact on health and infrastructure, “especially in less developed countries.” Here, research is a dimension of focused international development intervention, which identifies the problems and chooses their solutions, and academics are at the service of the institutional project. For Roman (2005: 312), instead, the practice of development communication is so diverse that it cannot be defined with precision and thus grasped theoretically despite the “benevolent willingness” of researchers.

Normative definitions (Manyozo, 2006; Dutta, 2011), while manifesting a concern with facilitating social justice, the right to communication and redistribution, grapple with the problem of scale. Suggestions to limit research to participatory practices involving communities (Manyozo, 2006: 83) or to the level of interventions (Dutta, 2011: 29; 36) are problematic in that they make for a too restricted analytical scope that leaves out a significant proportion of the actual practices, decontextualizing them from national and international governance structures and thus obliterating issues of power. Importantly, Thomas (2007) includes global poverty as a marker of present conditions to be taken into account in inquiries.

As a professional practice
Shah (2007: 2) characterizes development communication “as communication-based interventions for social and economic improvement”, referring to the core practice without addressing who intervenes, where, how, or why. Inagaki (2007: 24) stresses behavior change as the aim of the professional practice. Informational messages are triggers, to be pulled by experts, and the problem to be solved comes down to people’s undesirable conduct, which can be redressed by way of proper messaging. Contra Stuart Hall (Tufte & Høg Hansen, 2014), Inagaki thinks that development communication is a magic bullet. Instead, McPhail (2009: 3) links development communication
not only to media but also to education, thus highlighting a formative dimension rarely taken into account in research (see Lennie & Tacchi, 2013 for a discussion). The problem that McPhail struggles with is how to operationalize “positive social change” without borrowing from social theory in order to consider the interface between the individual and the social: “The change could be economic, personal, as in spiritual, social, cultural, or political” (ibid.).

Practitioners Quarry and Ramírez (2009: 9) adopt an earlier characterization by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada64 from 1998, which emphasizes process over product and focuses on “enhancing people’s ability to manage their own lives”. Here communication for development is a practice with a strong educational component, implemented by professionals driven by an ethical responsibility. Its limitation is that consensus is valued as a goal, thus obviating the possibility that negotiation among parties with competing claims may not necessarily lead to agreement. The implication is that dissent should be managed, rather than enabled. McAnany (2010: 4) uses the term “communication for development and social change” in order to “indicate those actions that use communication, both interpersonal and mediated, to improve the lives of participants to achieve goals in ways that affect both the short (development) and long (social change) term.”65 Importantly, this characterization acknowledges that a development intervention with a limited duration may not of itself lead to social change, understood as a longer process (see also Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). Who is behind “those actions that use communication” remains unclear.

As an institutional project

For Morris (2003), “Communication is a key component of many overseas aid programs”, and development communication, drawing on earlier work by Wilkins, is “the strategic application of communication technologies and processes to promote social change (Wilkins, 2000: 197)”. For Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte (2006: xxi), “communication for development” is “the umbrella term which covers all communication approaches aimed at reaching people living in poverty or in developing countries in order to address pressing social issues.”66 This very general characterization indicates a distance between those who are poor and those who are not, between developed and developing countries, between “providers” and “recipients”, which can be bridged – mediated – through communication. For pressing

64 Themselves also practitioners.
65 This distinction is misleading: interpersonal communication can be mediated. See note 67.
66 Interestingly, the authors are hinting at the possibility that the poor may be living in places other than developing countries, but a straightforward reference to the globalization of poverty (as seen in Thomas, 2007) is absent.
social issues to be addressed, outreach is the starting point. These definitions are useful in that, although who is responsible (and thus accountable) for the project of development communication is assumed rather than rendered explicit, a distance is evident: the world’s poor are overseas, to be reached by way of communication.

For Wilkins (2008), development communication refers to “a process of strategic intervention toward social change, initiated and engaged by organizations and communities”. If broadly defined, this field “incorporates mediated as well as interpersonal channels”; more specifically, media development approaches “include mediated technologies, such as television, radio, and computer systems”. The definition suggests an intermediate level of intervention and calls attention to the strategic aspect of development communication as an institutional project, bringing long-term aims and interests into focus. Moreover, reference to both interpersonal and mediated communication suggests a concern with issues of proximity and distance in the practice of development communication.67

As two-dimensional
While several definitions consider the practice and study of development communication as interlinked, the institutional dimension remains fuzzy. Servaes et al. (2012: 101-102) situate development communication within the framework of sustainable development, within which “communication and information play a strategic and fundamental role by: a) contributing to the interplay of different development factors, b) improving the sharing of knowledge and information, and c) encouraging the participation of all concerned.” Communication and information are understood as connectors, enhancers and motivators, and processes of mediation among a variety of stakeholders appear, even if they are not foregrounded. Participation at a scale beyond the community level is deemed desirable, and attention is given both to implementation and to policymaking. What is lacking is consideration of the fact that communication’s function in the framework described is potential, depending on contextual and institutional factors. The grandiose reference to communication’s fundamental role, which takes for granted a positive contribution, detracts value from an otherwise reasonable description of the ideal scope of development communication and its potential to improve, rather than merely assist, development intervention. Referring to a field of knowledge and practice, Lennie and Tacchi (2013: 4-5)

67 The differentiation between mediated and interpersonal channels proposed by Wilkins (and by McAnany, 2010) would merit reconsideration to account for the fact that interpersonal communication may well be mediated. Interpersonal communication is not the same as communication in person. More and more, certain technologies afford the possibility to engage in mediated interpersonal communication at a (material) distance: what once required a satellite link can now be solved with an Internet connection and Voice over Internet Protocol.
adopt the same definition of communication for development by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada that is favored by Quarry and Ramírez (2009) for its comprehensiveness. While their characterization of the forms and means of communication belonging to the practice and the field of study is broadly encompassing, and the importance of attending to beneficiaries is rightly foregrounded, development communication is still understood as support, and “development” remains the stronger notion in the equation.

Manyozo (2012: 9) in turn refers to the participation of individuals, communities and societies, attempting to grasp a variety of scales but disregarding the structures of governance that link them. Importantly, he raises the matter of who should have a voice in determining the direction of interventions⁶⁸ and pays attention to the national context and to processes of mediation, although without identifying the main actors characteristically involved in the institutional project. For McAnany (2012: 4), communication for development and social change refers to the use of communication in all its forms – both technology and content – to solve problems of marginalization and poverty. Here development communication appears as an institutional project and a civic, rather than professional, practice. Importantly, McAnany indicates that institutionally driven interventions and wider processes of social change have different durations, stressing that people’s participation is a critical factor in making change meaningful and raising a concern with issues of ephemerality versus sustainability in the practice and the project of development communication.

For Waisbord (2008: 505): “Since its beginnings, development communication has been both a field of knowledge and practice. It included academic research as well as programs in international organizations and governments.” This is the characterization that most clearly brings into focus the interrelationship between field and project. Importantly, it also calls attention to the positioning of scholars in a wider context that includes international development agencies, and the governments behind them, as the managers of development communication intervention.

Problems in theorization and research
Academic efforts discussed so far in this literature review to 1) historicize development communication and suggest future directions for theorization and research and 2) to pin down what development communication is or should be foreground a number of unsolved problems within the field of study. How to investigate the social circulation of the conversations and debates that development communication interventions may facilitate remains a crucial question that is rarely addressed in methodological debates or explored empirically (Tufte, 2005, drawing on Spitulnik, 2002). Referring

⁶⁸ A matter of representation, in Nancy Fraser’s (2008) framework of justice.
specifically to the analysis of participatory communication, Jacobson and Storey (2004) argue that scale poses a conceptual problem. In their view, “The participation literature tends to limit itself to processes at the village level, yet certain kinds of change require the involvement of large-scale organizations and support from the state.” The authors suggest, contra White (ibid.), that the theorization of development communication should not disregard the role of the national state as an interested party.

Roman (2005: 311, 323) acknowledges the difficulty of discriminating between contextually bound and generalizable components of development communication intervention and proposes that adhesion to existing theoretical perspectives may stand in the way of critically assessing their usefulness to inform empirical research, thus hindering the social significance of research in the field. This is a view shared by Manyozo (2012: 2, quoting Mansell, 1982), who calls attention to theoretical “superficial revisionism”, i.e., “the usual scholarly rhetoric of tracing the origins and growth of the field of media, communication and development to the dominant (oftentimes Western) development theories”. Such rhetoric is present in several sources reviewed here, as discussed earlier.

For Kim (2005: 569), the problem is that, while the belief in the power of the media to effect change characteristic of the modernization paradigm still underpins the practice, the scope of intervention has been scaled down, from seeking to promote national development to more limited issues-based agendas (also see Waisbord, 2008 and McAnany, 2012). The question of whether this change in extent and focus has made aims “more achievable” remains an empirical question deserving investigation in the context of neoliberal globalization, the privatization of development and the dismantling of structures once available. Moreover, while modernization may have been transcended in theory, it remains influential as part of the institutional project (Shah, 2007; Waisbord, 2008; Manyozo, 2012). For Waisbord, the influence of informational approaches cannot be understood unless the institutional place of communication in international development is taken into account (2008: 507). In his view, “little research has been conducted on development communication from an institutionalist perspective that examines ‘how agencies work’. From this perspective, the premise is that institutional goals and dynamics determine the use of disciplinary and theoretical approaches. The selection of specific communication approaches is not primarily based on their analytical or normative value, but rather, on institutional factors and expectations” (ibid.). The author calls attention to a number of problematic aspects of the institutional influence of funding agencies: the requirement is for large-scale success; the mindset prioritizes achieving rapid results within time-bounded funding cycles; annual earmarking undermines long-term planning and processes; the organizational need for public recognition and prestige pushes
agencies toward adopting controllable approaches to communication; and a technical outlook prevails over a political perspective. In line with Craig’s analysis of communication as a practice (see Working Theoretical Framework in this same chapter), for Waisbord organizations continue to consider communication a subsidiary of development, to be approached technically, preferably through informational approaches disconnected from politics (ibid.: 515). Development communication as a technocratic institutional project comes clearly into view here. Dutta (2011) in turn is critical of the institutionalized model focused on persuasion campaigns aimed at changing individual behaviors that Waisbord (ibid.) characterizes. This is, in his view, a “managerial” understanding of development communication, i.e., a top-down approach to defining problems and determining their solutions. In line with Waisbord’s observation that the technical tends to override the political, Dutta notes that considerations of unequal power tend to be absent from programs.

Servaes et al. (2012) draw on a study by Lennie and Tacchi for UNICEF (2011) to call attention to the substantial gap between the theory—more participatory—and the practice—more focused on delivering information for change through the media. In their view, “decision-and policy-makers [...] often use the lack of ‘empirical evidence’ (read: quantitative measurements) as an ‘excuse’ for their lack of support” for participatory communication (ibid.: 100). The authors are pointing at what Waisbord terms “organizational hypocrisy” (2008, drawing on Brunsson, 2002), a situation in which international development cooperation agencies engage with the “proper” discourse without changing their practices. In a related but more outspokenly critical vein, White (2004: 7) argues that “There is increasing agreement that the fundamental flaw in development theory and practice is the logic which has initiatives of the development process emanating from government or NGO programmes being controlled by urban-technical elites in alliance with international development agencies.” This view highlights a distance between the institutional settings that plan and manage interventions and the supposed beneficiaries that is rarely investigated in empirical research, such that practice and project are at odds with normative ideals of democratization expressed in theory. The author argues that the system should be reorganized focusing on the right to information and communication, with an eye to accountability.69

McAnany (2012, quoting Ogan et al., 2009) draws attention to a decrease in the number of academic journal articles with a development communication focus published in recent years, which, in his view, is

69 Critical of the role of NGOs as mediators of interventions, White argues that a direct democracy approach could solve the problem of differential power, disregarding the national state as an actor that could be engaged in democratizing ways (contra Jacobson and Storey, 2004). This raises the question of the conditions required for the type of “people’s organization” he suggests to materialize.
symptomatic of a decline, and observes a paradoxical situation in which, while the centrality of communication in society has become increasingly apparent, the field of communication for development and social change struggles to substantiate its relevance. The paradox, which may appear to be perplexing, is rather telling, as this dissertation will seek to show.

Lennie and Tacchi (2013) are concerned with currently dominant approaches to development in which “the outcomes of complex interventions are reduced to simple, cause-effect processes and the categorization of things, including people” and “participation and ideas around long-term change are being overcome by an ascendance of accountancy and linear planning models [...] spurred on in part by the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness”. In their view, this leads to “a de-prioritizing of monitoring and evaluation, and a fixation on greater efficiency in the disbursement of aid funding” (ibid.: 2-3). Here, the impact of the institutional project on the practice and research of development communication comes to the fore once again. Importantly, Lennie and Tacchi call attention to the fact that the participatory communication approaches adopted to a limited extent by institutions during the 1990s (Waisbord, 2008; Servaes et al., 2012) are now being superseded by over-simplistic instrumental lines of action.

Studies of existing development communication research
Five studies of development communication research were identified for the 2003-2013 period covered in this literature review. Two of them were published in peer-reviewed academic journals: Morris (2003) and Ogan et al. (2009). Shah (2007) was peer-reviewed and selected for presentation at the 2005 International Communication Association (ICA) conference. Inagaki (2007) is an example of so-called grey literature, commissioned by the WB and included here for a number of reasons noted earlier. The fifth study, by Skuse et al. (2013), looks specifically into communication for development interventions in fragile states.70 I analyzed these studies in order to identify: a) the research questions driving the inquiries; b) the methodology used; c) the results identified by the authors; d) their conclusions; and e) the outstanding implications for future research. Those elements are summarized in Table 1.

Referring to the findings of her research, Morris (2003) notes that, when it comes to ends and means, “Researchers are unlikely to find what they are not looking for and unlikely to look for what they do not believe they

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70 The study identified 83 potentially relevant papers and assessed them for methodological quality, including 26 in the systematic review in the end (19 peer-reviewed, and 7 grey literature). Because the review was commissioned by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid), the search focused on the agency’s composite list of fragile countries, which did not include any of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia (Skuse et al., 2013: 13). Therefore, Bosnia and Kosovo only appear collaterally in articles that compare various conflict scenarios.
can evaluate.” This cautionary tale frames this subsection of the literature review. Given the differences in the ways in which they frame “development communication”, the research questions addressed and the methodologies used, the five studies are hardly comparable. However disparate, and despite certain limitations, they nonetheless illuminate several aspects of existing research, and highlight gaps to be taken into account in future work.

**Brief discussion of limitations**

Morris (2003) presents a thoughtful case, although an explanation of the reasons why she chose to limit it to health-bound interventions would have allowed further consideration of the relevance of her findings to other specialty areas of development communication practice. Inagaki (2007) shows a number of problems in terms of its methodological and analytical stringency, and therefore I refrain from drawing on its conclusions, but use it instead to raise the questions of the influence of agencies’ agendas on research approaches, and of the production and circulation of development communication discourses. Both Shah (2007) and Ogan et al. (2009) base their discussions in literature samples obtained through specific sets of criteria – i.e., through certain ways of defining and operationalizing the field – and it is therefore reasonable to speculate that they would have obtained different results had those criteria been different. Notably, Ogan et al. (2009) miss out on Shah (2007),71 who builds on two of the studies that they use as background (Fair, 1989 and Fair & Shah, 1997) and analyzes a period that greatly overlaps with theirs, covering the interval from 1997 to 2005. Their omission, like the rather uncritical adoption of Inagaki (2007),72 speaks of shortcomings within the field of study, and raises questions about the circulation of knowledge.

71 Because they exclude from their search books, book chapters, conference papers and dissertations on the grounds that “most empirical research published in other forms […] is likely to appear in academic journals first”.

72 For example, Servaes et al. (2012) refer to the study as “a comprehensive assessment commissioned by the World Bank” that reaches “sobering conclusions”. Its adoption as a reference in academic work (see note 61) contradicts McAnany’s view in 2010 that it “would have found wider interest had the author published it in a communication journal”.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Research Questions/ Purpose</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
<th>Inferences for Future Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>Morris (2003)</td>
<td>Compares projects' objectives &amp; outcomes based on diffusion &amp; participatory conceptual models of devcom.</td>
<td>Focuses on empirical studies of health interventions in the developing world (Africa, Latin America, less industrialized Asian countries &amp; indigenous/isolated populations in developed countries). Inductive analysis of 44 studies (1998-2000) [working papers &amp; published studies] The sample is opportunistic &amp; not exhaustive, but the patterns detected are considered relevant.</td>
<td>Media-centered campaigns (leading to interpersonal communication — behavior change) have varying degrees of success. Evidence of success found for participatory projects (predominantly qualitative studies). Most studies claim some success. Few claim complete success. Achievements may be overstated (published studies are biased towards successful campaigns).</td>
<td>There is a move towards theoretical integration between diffusion &amp; participatory conceptual models. There is potential for both approaches to inform one another.</td>
<td>Many studies lack detail about how data was gathered — rigorous evaluation is not possible. Qualitative studies provide scarce details about methodological procedures &amp; scant evidence to warrant claims.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Shah (2007) [ICA conference paper]</td>
<td>Evaluates continuity &amp; change in devcom research in comparison to Fair &amp; Shah, 1997. Considers to which extent the HIV/AIDS pandemic &amp; technological advances in the delivery may account for change in research priorities. Examines the reasons why modernization theory persists despite critique.</td>
<td>Examines articles investigating a) the role of mass communication in &quot;third world” national dev. and b) how news media affect attitudes/behavior/knowledge. Meta-research of 167 studies (1997-2005) [journal articles, book chapters, books] The sample is characterized as “near universe”. What this means is not clear. The studies analyzed were coded for a number of features (Shah, 2007: 6).</td>
<td>University funding for research disappears. Funding from intergovernmental orgs., NGOs &amp; USAID increases. Theories of media impact on national development are absent. Theory, when present, is eclectic. Media effects on national dev. are identified at the individual &amp; structural levels. Research methods are approx. 50% quantitative, 36% qualitative &amp; 12% mixed. Most frequently reported conclusion: dev. theory needs + attention. Lerner’s model and the ensuing faith in the mass media as drivers of modernization persist. Modernization remains a) the methodological blueprint for practice &amp; b) the ideology &amp; discourse supporting foreign policy.</td>
<td>Changes in the political economy of research funding may hinder independent research. International dev. cooperation donors rise as sponsors. Theory is absent or eclectic. The national is disregarded. How do effects on individuals “add up” to effects on structure? Quantitative studies predominate (significant drop in qualitative studies re. 1997). “Dev.” remains the strong concept in the devcom equation, to the detriment of adequate theorization of communication.</td>
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Abbreviations: devcom = development communication; dev. = development; comm. = communication.
Table 1: Summary of the analysis of studies of existing development communication research 2003-2013 (cont.)

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<tr>
<th>Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>Inagaki (2007)</td>
<td>Seeks to contribute “to demonstrate the positive impacts of communication on development activities”.</td>
<td>Surveys peer-reviewed empirical research studies that provide evidence of measurable impacts of comm. on dev. issues in non-OECD countries. 37 studies (2000-2005) [some researchers involved in projects studied as consultants &amp; thus evaluating their own performance] 29 keywords used for selecting the studies but the rationale is unclear &amp; the selection may be slanted,</td>
<td>The participatory approach is mainstream in empirical literature, with interpersonal communication the most prevalent method. Highlights 4 examples of ‘straightforward assessments’ of one-to-one correspondence between intervention &amp; resulting changes. There is a lack of empirical research on the impact of communication for development. Comm. is “an abstract concept not easily rendered operational”. There is a disjuncture between empirical research &amp; critical theoretical discourses (critical qs. raised in theory are not investigated empirically)</td>
<td>Regardless of its methodological limitations and conceptual fuzziness, the study was subsequently adopted by academics to sustain a number of arguments (e.g., McAnany, 2010; Servaes, 2011; Servaes et al., 2012; Skuse et al., 2013; Lennie &amp; Tacchi, 2013 from my literature review). This suggests that studies published by international governance organizations may be taken at face value.</td>
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<td>Ogan et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Is there a decline in academic publishing on devcomm? How does the newer focus on ICT4D appear compared to “traditional” media? How does globalization discourse appear vis-à-vis dev. discourse?</td>
<td>Combines meta-analysis &amp; qualitative content analysis of studies dealing w/ the relationship between comm. &amp; dev. in developing countries. 211 studies (1998-2007) [from peer-reviewed journals only]. Selection comes “close to the complete list published in the field” during the period. What this means is not clear. Coding based on Fair (1989) and Fair and Shah (1997), with changes &amp; additions.</td>
<td>Great decline in published research until 2004, when it resurges w/a large presence of ICT4D studies. 37% of studies use a modernization frame, 18% participatory, 11% combined. ¾ “used no theory in their work” (of which 9% criticized existing theory). 77% discuss media “as a prime mover in the dev. process”</td>
<td>Globalization theory is absent. Following a decline, devcomm literature resurges via a focus on ICT4D projects [in line with Chakravartty (2009) &amp; Nederveen Pieterson (2010)]. Media remains a prime mover. Existing theory is criticized, but new theory is not produced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skuse et al. (2013)</td>
<td>Assesses the contextual/programmatic factors that influence devcomm interventions in fragile states.</td>
<td>Systematic review of 10 peer-rev. qualitative papers + 7 textual/opinion pieces (2001-2011). Uses the Joanna Briggs Inst. meta-aggregative process to assess/categorize/synthesize evidence. Results interpreted applying a realist approach.</td>
<td>Policy &amp; funding commitments are required to allow for early research interventions. Devcomm interventions in Central, West and East Africa are not being researched. For practice in fragile states beyond Northern Africa, there is little quality evidence concerning the role of new and social media.</td>
<td>A broad array of contextual and programmatic factors underpin devcomm implementation and practice in fragile and conflict-affected states, combining to both constrain and provide opportunities for initiatives.</td>
<td>There is a need for more rigorous and longer-term research in the context of devcomm interventions in fragile states.</td>
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</table>

Abbreviations: devcomm = development communication; dev. = development; comm. = communication; ICT4D = information & communication technologies for dev.
What do studies of research tell us about the field of development communication?

According to Shah (2007) and Ogan et al. (2009), quantitative studies predominate. Qualitative studies in turn provide scarce details about their methodological procedures and scant evidence to warrant claims (Morris, 2003). For Morris (ibid.), studies tend to focus on success, at the risk of overstating achievements. Her findings are exemplified by Inagaki (2007), who straightforwardly seeks to identify cases of “positive impact”. Skuse et al. (2013) conclude that the quality of the evidence base for the period 2001-2011 is relatively weak and highlight the need for more rigorous and longer-term research. Overall, the studies indicate that research is mainly media-centric, with media considered to have effects both on individuals and on large structures but scant investigation of the interplay between structure and agency. Social change tends to be predicated on the aggregation of individual decisions. Studies of wider processes, attentive to time and context, are absent, and mediation is taken for granted rather than disaggregated as a relevant analytical dimension. Theory is either absent from the analyses (Shah, 2007; Ogan et al., 2009) or used eclectically (Morris, 2003; Skuse et al., 2013). Critique of existing theory does appear, but it is delinked from efforts toward theory-building.

The practice of development communication is understood to take place at a distance from the locations where it originates: in the developing world (Morris, 2003), Third World countries (Shah, 2007), or non-OECD countries (Inagaki, 2007). Modernization remains the predominant frame (Shah, 2007; Ogan et al., 2009). Attention to “development” predominates in the “development communication” equation: communication, mainly understood as applied media, tends to be considered primarily as a complement to development intervention. National governance structures and their respective media systems are largely ignored. There is no consideration of citizenship, justice or rights as relevant analytical frameworks. Moreover, there is scarce empirical attention to the field’s political economy and to the consequences of the influence of international development cooperation institutions on research.

The study by Skuse et al. (2013) evidences that, in line with the practice of development communication being a component of peacebuilding intervention, an identifiable body of research studies exists even though conflict prevention and peacebuilding are largely absent from the descriptions of the scope of development communication analyzed earlier in this literature review. This absence is striking when we consider the fact that in the past fifteen years a significant proportion of development assistance has been directed to conflict-affected societies or states (Zelizer & Oliphant, 2013). While Skuse et al.’s study (ibid.) documents a shift in the professional practice and institutional project observable in actual research, the shift seems to have gone largely unrecorded in the definitions of the field and its scope analyzed
here, exemplifying a gap between theory and practice noticed by Ogan et al. (2009), Servaes et al. (2012) and McAnany (2012). While empirical research seems to follow what takes place in practice, theory-building in fact seems to lag behind, and modernization approaches persist at the institutional level.

Where do we go from here?
The review brings to the fore a number of important issues. The literature suggests a situation of stalemate, in which academics find it difficult to depart from the development-driven modernization/dependency framework toward critical investigation of the links between neoliberal globalization, informationalized capitalism and the practice and project of development communication. Participatory approaches to practice, considered important for their democratizing potential, have proven difficult to institutionalize within the governance structure of international development cooperation, and their scale and reach remain limited. The problem of scale, recurrently posed to the practice by the project of development communication in that the neoliberal imperative calls for massive reach and measurable outcomes, is rarely addressed from an analytical perspective. This is also the case with the problem of how to theorize the national in connection with international intervention under global conditions.

Definitions of development communication are for the most part descriptive or normative, focusing on the practical aims to be accomplished by the practice and/or the social value of supporting development or democratization through communication and media-driven intervention. Once again manifesting the problem of scale, many of these definitions are either too wide or too narrow in scope. As a rule, conceptualizations are premised on the strong power of mediated communication to play a role in the promotion of social change, however defined. Paradoxically, while communication and media are presumed to bring about positive social change, at the same time they are considered neutral tools that can be used to carry out similar functions in disparate contexts. This contradictory understanding preempts the consideration of negative impacts and the political and ethical aspects of development communication practice. Justice, equality and the end of poverty are foregrounded as a normative concern, but barely incorporated into theory-building efforts seeking to expand or challenge development communication’s mainstream explanatory principles. The obligations of institutions and practitioners that come hand in hand with rights frameworks are rarely acknowledged, obscuring the problem of accountability. Citizenship – in its national, regional and global dimensions – tends to be absent among the concepts used to anchor theoretical considerations, in line with the above-mentioned lack of attention to the role of recipient national states and their governance structures in the deployment of international development cooperation initiatives. Although
development communication implies three dimensions – study, practice, project – these are not always accounted for in definitions and ensuing analytical frameworks. There is a certain amount of confusion between the academic discipline and the practice and between the practice and the project, manifested in a lack of empirical attention to the institutional project dimension73 and to the political economy of development communication at large. Uneven attention to the three dimensions implies a scarcity of explanations of how and why the processes of mutual influence between them unfold as they appear to. The relationships – and ensuing issues of power – between the three dimensions remain understudied.

*Studies of existing research* show that attention to contexts and to processes is disregarded, and attention to effects is favored. Well-documented qualitative research is scarce, and quantitative approaches prevail. Presupposed beneficiaries are expected to change visibly, so that measurement is possible. Variations in the motivations of implementers, their degree of openness to cooperation with local actors and the financial resources allocated to outreach activities, among other factors that are likely to affect impact,74 remain understudied. Because scant attention is given to contexts and processes, the complexities and contradictions characteristic of the practice are seldom accounted for, and the institutional project dimension of interventions tends to remain out of sight. As a consequence, a lack of understanding of the influence of institutional funders on practice prevails. The fact that funders tend to select specific approaches based not on adequate needs assessments and feasibility studies, but rather on institutional factors and expectations, adopting the “proper” discourses proposed by academics without changing their practices, gives way to “organizational hypocrisy”, calling for research at the interface between project statements and actual practice.

**Research on the impact of documentary film and video on social change**

While research on development communication tends to ignore the political, research on documentary for social change embraces it (Whiteman, 2004 and 2007; McHale, 2007; Nisbet & Aufderheide, 2009). Therefore, I argue that combining both approaches is useful in order to bring into view the ways in which the Videoletters project, as a case of international development communication intervention, embraced and disregarded the political. The following review of research into the impact of documentary film and video on social change informs a number of analytical avenues adopted in this dissertation.

73 Interestingly, while disregarded at the more conceptual and empirical level, the institutional dimension becomes prominent as a “guilty party” when academics discuss problems in the field.

74 Drawing on Whiteman (2004) re. the political impact of documentary film.
This strand of the literature review covers a selection of peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2003 and 2013. The terms searched were “documentary”, “film”, “video” and “social change”. The reference lists of the articles found were checked for additional sources. A total of 15 sources were selected and analyzed: 11 peer-reviewed journal articles, two books, one book chapter, and a definition from the International Encyclopedia of Communication. It is important to note here that, had my search included “participatory” as a criterion, literature drawing a connection between development communication and film/video for change would have been found. To give one example, the Fogo Process, initiated on Fogo Island by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and Memorial University of Newfoundland in the late 1960s, remains a recurrent, rich illustration of the use of film for social change in which attention was given not only to the content of the finished movie, but also to the process of filmmaking. It is also important to note that various aspects of the relationship between documentary and social change have long concerned visual/media anthropologists. A much-studied example of the production of video documentary as a tool for political influence is the Video in the Villages project, started by Vincent Carelli in 1987 with indigenous communities in the Brazilian section of the Amazonas (for a recent discussion, see Aufderheide, 2008). I do not review these two strands of literature here because: a) studies of “participatory development communication” tend to focus on small-scale interventions allowing subjects varying degrees of involvement as producers of media content, which was not the case for the Videoletters project; and b) visual/media ethnographies tend to be concerned primarily with issues of identity and representation, which are not a focus of my dissertation.

**Documentary-making and the mediation of social conflict: production, dissemination and reception**

Whiteman (2004: 51) notes that “investigations of the political impact of documentary film have typically been guided by a quite narrow ‘individualistic model’ of impact, assessing the impact of a finished film on individual citizens and within the dominant public discourse.” Alternatively, he proposes a “coalition model” that: 1) conceptualizes films not merely

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75 Additionally, two studies of the social impact of documentaries and one study of the ethical challenges faced by documentary filmmakers, all commissioned by US-based foundations, plus an edited book on “video for change” written by practitioners, were identified and excluded. I stick here to peer-reviewed academic literature.

76 Examples of recent discussions of the Fogo Process include Crocker (2008) and Quarry & Ramirez (2009).

77 The theorization of processes of mediation by anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (1991) based on her study of indigenous media informs my working theoretical framework in this chapter.
as a product for consumption, but as part of a process that incorporates production and distribution; 2) considers the full range of impacts on producers, participants, activist organizations and decision-makers rather than focusing exclusively on citizens; and 3) takes into account “the role of films in the efforts of social movements to create and sustain alternative spheres of public discourse” (ibid.: 52).

Whiteman reviews studies of the political impact of film from the 1980s, highlighting their mixed results and their primary focus on films broadcast on television and on “possible cognitive and attitudinal effects on individual viewers” (ibid.: 52). Alternatively, he argues for a model that incorporates the entire filmmaking process into the inquiry, encompasses the larger political context in order to identify impacts on social actors other than citizen-viewers, and considers the influence of a film on spheres of public discourse other than the mainstream (ibid.: 54). This model clearly brings into focus the political dimension of documentary-making. Moreover, it stresses the importance of following a process for the duration, with an eye to the wider context in which it unfolds. For Whiteman, “the making of a documentary film is […] an intervention into an ongoing social and political process”, which could therefore act as a catalyst in several different ways (ibid.: 54). Mediation comes to the fore here. The production of a film may foster increased communication between individuals and organizations and strengthen the practice of making rights claims. The dissemination of a film could be used to create spaces “within which citizens can encounter, discuss, and decide to act on the issues raised in the film” (ibid.: 55). Reactions to a film among citizens may in turn have an effect on decision-makers.

Whiteman identifies three sets of factors that affect a documentary’s level of political impact: 1) variations in the motivations of producers, their degree of openness to cooperation with activist groups, and the financial resources available for outreach activities; 2) the uses of a documentary by activist groups to present it in various public spaces, engage grass-roots audiences and reach decision-makers; and 3) distribution strategies, particularly the context provided for a presentation (ranging from minimal, as in a typical television broadcast, to follow-up discussions to more elaborate introductions and post-exhibition debates or conversations) and the extent to which audiences are presented with a variety of meaningful options for action. Based on the application of the proposed model to three case studies of documentaries with different trajectories, Whiteman argues convincingly that it provides “a framework for a much more holistic understanding of the nature of documentary impact” than typical studies of effects on audiences. The framework in fact informs my study of the trajectory of the Videoletters project.

In a subsequent article, Whiteman (2007) notes that, despite producers’ aspirations to change the world, alter the political agenda and influence the popular understanding of issues, the actual extent of political
impact of social-issue documentaries has often been questioned (this is in line with Winston, 2008, to be discussed shortly). But at the same time, producers and major foundations are paying increasing attention to “outreach strategies”, and there is growing recognition by activists of “documentaries as vehicles for social change” (ibid.: 62). Reiterating his criticism of existing studies that are “limited in their narrow focus on the impact of completed documentaries on the mass public”, here he proposes an “issue-centered model” for the analysis of political impact, in which the starting point for an assessment shifts from the documentary-making process to the issue examined in it. From this perspective, the producers “can be understood as being immersed in a larger policy process and a social-issue documentary can be conceptualized as an intervention into a complex and ongoing network of activists and policy makers concerned about the issue raised in the documentary” (ibid.: 63). Here, production and distribution are conceptualized “as an intervention into a policy process”, and impact can potentially take place throughout. Whiteman’s assumption is that, the deeper and broader the linkages to the relevant issue network, and the more components of the network that put the documentary to work, the greater the opportunity for political impact. Anticipating critique, the author explains that even if in this model impact on individual citizens is less central, it is still very important, and lists four types of potential effects: \textit{cognitive} (increased knowledge about an issue); \textit{salience}, when the extent to which an issue is considered important increases; \textit{attitudinal} (the attitude towards an issue changes); and \textit{behavioral} (action to address the issue is stimulated). Particularly interesting here is the idea of salience, which can be related to Tufte’s (2005) remark that not enough is known about the subtleties of the social circulation of development communication-driven media discourse. I see Whiteman’s second model as complementary to his previous formulation, and use it in this dissertation accordingly.

McHale’s (2007: 195) standpoint is that “video and film documentary can be a powerful, humanizing form of communication, especially when used in conjunction with other forms of communication activism.” He reviews existing research on the use of video/film documentary as an activist tool, noting that it is scarce compared to work on media effects in general and highlighting the same studies of the political impact of film from the 1980s discussed by Whiteman (2004), appreciative of the fact that they “were sensitive to the context in which viewers saw these films (e.g., taking into account whether people watched them alone or with other people and the location where they watched the films)” (McHale, 2007: 197). He also looks into the scholarship on the use of media by activists, finding that “there exists little on the use of documentary video/film for that purpose” (ibid.). Drawing on Whiteman (2004) and his own prior work, he examines the development, production and distribution stages of a video documentary
that he directed, arguing that video: a) can be “an especially effective tool of social action for reaching the general public, other activists, politicians, and the media”; and b) has the potential to educate people, mobilize advocates, aid lobbying efforts and facilitate media coverage. In his view, an additional reason why video/film can effectively fulfill those functions is that it humanizes the topic “by showing the individual human beings involved” (McHale, 2007: 199). The author provides a rich, detailed account of every stage of the documentary-making process, from which he derives a number of lessons learned. Of interest for my research are his observations that activists should facilitate media coverage of their documentary projects, that the nature of a particular media market may facilitate or be an obstacle to a campaign advocating for social justice, and that it may be easier to persuade people when the case being made via a film is very clear – a simple and compelling truth – rather than in complex cases. These remarks are of use in analyzing the Videoletters project, expanding the notion of a media market into a “media development” environment.

Brian Winston, acknowledged internationally for his research into ethics in documentary, is wary of the idea that documentaries lead to positive social effects. In his view: “the fact remains that the number of documentaries that have had any demonstrable effect is very small. For a form that for the better part of a century has justified its practices by claiming social amelioration as its objective, this constitutes pretty slim pickings” (2008: 260). He argues that: “in the long term, vague appeals to the public interest and the ‘consent defense’ are dangerous for factual film-makers. Such ideas leave them primed to exploit the powerless and vulnerable to being manipulated by the powerful and the deviant” (ibid.). He is calling attention to two ethics, one that governs the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject, and one that governs the relationship between filmmaker and audience. Given these two ethics, he is concerned with “the moral difficulty of balancing free speech, informed consent and the public right to know against individual hurt” (ibid.: 261), that is, with the ethical challenge of treating the subjects of a documentary in a sensible way not simply during production, but crucially at the point of publicity and distribution. Said challenge comes, for him, from the fact that “concentrating on personalized social problems inevitably requires that some measure or other of private misery and distress be, if not exploited, then at least exposed” (ibid.: 54). Concerned with what cannot be seen about the production process, Winston moreover calls attention to the relationships established between filmmaker and participants prior to filming – the possibility that there may have been

78 “Consent defense” refers to the fact that documentary makers can argue that they obtained informed consent from their subjects in order to produce and disseminate a film about them.

a preexisting relationship that was not filmed, and that the filmmaker may have asked participants to re-enact or enact actions. The two ethics are again in focus here – there is a tension regarding what matters the most: the means or the end? In prior work, Winston (2005: 181) makes the straightforward argument that “production means mediation” and proposes that “the central question for documentary is how much mediation is ethical?” These considerations, which outline very clearly the ethical difficulties involved in resorting to media in order to mediate sociopolitical problems, inform my analysis of the production and dissemination of the Videoletters television documentary series.

In their introduction to a symposium issue of *Mass Communication & Society* that investigates “the forms, functions, and impacts of documentary film”, editors Nisbet and Aufderheide (2009: 450) raise a number of questions aimed at a research agenda for documentary film. Importantly for my dissertation, they ask: “what are the economic, social, and cultural contexts that influence the form, distribution, and reach of a documentary film?” (ibid.: 451). Another set of questions looks into the actions, choices and motivations of the social actors involved – filmmakers, other stakeholders and publics: “How do […] documentary filmmakers and producers identify their roles? Do they define themselves as journalists, artists, storytellers, historians, satirists, and/or entertainers? With each of these roles, what sort of ethical considerations and professional standards guide the production, content, and strategic use of a film? How do publics and stakeholders perceive the authority, intentions, or objectivity of these films’ producers?” (ibid.: 452). In connection with what they see as “documentary’s interface with civil society and democracy questions”, they ask: “how and when do documentaries function as vehicles to engage people not only as viewers but as members of affected publics and participants in the public sphere? In what ways can a film be used as a tool to sponsor or facilitate public deliberation? How do such efforts differ from advocacy or cause-related documentary efforts?” (ibid.: 454). Nisbet and Aufderheide differentiate between “advocacy work and film campaigns designed to more broadly inform and create relevant ‘publics’”, drawing on Dewey’s “concept of people who share a common problem (typically caused by private or government action) and who find solutions for it together”. While they see advocacy films as designed to mobilize the like-minded, “films designed to inform and provoke publics alert a wider public to a problem”. In their view, this can be done by reframing the problem so that it links to a wider set of values or can be addressed in an alternative manner. Such films “are often deliberately designed to speak across existing lines of political difference” (ibid.: 454), calling for close examination of, and theoretical clarity on, “how documentary film can ethically and effectively promote public life and civic culture” (ibid.: 456). This is precisely the case with the Videoletters project.
Zoellner (2009: 508) engages with the tradition of media production studies to explore “how documentary texts are created both as a consequence of the industry framework (structure) and of individual actions and decisions (agency)”. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of social fields and forms of capital, she notes that “there are various tools and strategies that strengthen a producer’s position in the highly competitive production landscape” (ibid.: 514), emphasizing that a person’s position of power and social and symbolic capital in a field determine their capacity for action. Because power and capital are unevenly distributed, factors such as personal relationships with commissioning editors and a track record of previous audience or award success, as well as press attention, will strengthen a position. In the author’s view, however, capital is of secondary importance “if the producer doesn’t have a project that matches the broadcaster’s needs and interests” (ibid.: 519). These considerations are useful to analyze how and why the Videoleters project came to be chosen for funding in a “media development” environment in which several initiatives were competing for institutional support from international funders. The interplay of structure and agency comes into view as a contextualized negotiation among documentary-makers and funders. Zoellner highlights four criteria for the selection and rejection of ideas: originality (has it been done before, and what is new about it), angle (the particular viewpoint or perspective), case study (real people’s life stories, be they examples or illustrations of specific issues or “the core of events around which the whole project idea is centered”), and extraordinariness (what makes a project stand out). Moreover, she notes that “a documentary project […] relies on processes that are still evolving to accompany and portray them with the camera” (ibid.: 526). In this sense, documentary-making has to do with both “being there” at the right time, and “staying there” for the duration. Timing and time thus appear as important dimensions.

Schiller (2009: 478) analyzes “the circulation and contingent social production of meaning” of a specific documentary, exploring how impact is produced through the work of distribution. In her view, such work can potentially mold debates and facilitate public discussion. She introduces the notion of “the mediatic mediation of the social body”, i.e., “the mass media’s intervention into creating social belonging and recognition through representation and exclusion on television and in print media” (ibid.: 479). Schiller pays attention to her case’s financing, broadcast, participation in film festivals and theatrical distribution and focuses on the efforts of distributors and activists to grant a wide reach and shape reception. She argues that the discursive frameworks created around the film by distributors and activists influenced the ways in which audiences understood it, and proposes that a compelling narrative is not enough – the work of distributors, exhibitors, activists and media makers is in fact required in order to bolster a documentary’s authority. She is interested in the off-screen trajectory of the
film and builds on “scholarship that emphasizes the work of film distribution as a form of ‘media agency’ (Himpele, 1996)” (ibid.: 481). According to her analysis, social actors who circulate a given documentary “depend on and presuppose the existence of particular ‘interpretive communities’, with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation.” Inspired by Marcus (1995), she follows the thing, i.e., the documentary, across a number of sites, and her account draws “attention to the importance of context in shaping what kind of work activists and distributors perform” (Schiller 2009: 482). Intriguingly for my dissertation, she documents how the same film was viewed in different but interconnected ways in two different sites – Venezuela, where the documentary was filmed and its storyline belonged, and New York, with its connotation of tending to “the global spotlight” and “worldwide significance”. Schiller calls attention to the many ways in which documentaries, as media representations of events, are framed by distributors and activists, in line with “Bill Nichols’ insight that the indexical image cannot guarantee its own meaning (Nichols, 1994: 33).”80 She notes that the work of distribution is full of ironies and complexities, such that widespread critical acclaim does not guarantee broadcasting or theatrical release, and considers press kits and film reviews as relevant to her analysis. Schiller highlights that “Scholars acknowledge that in and of themselves, documentaries may not on their own exert the authority to influence their interpretation; rather, it is the connections that the people who circulate and experience the film draw to broader social movements, the political climate, and life experience and conditions of the audience that encourage people to view the historical world in a particular way, and perhaps engage in political action themselves” (ibid.: 499). A number of processes of mediation come into view here.

Problem-specific, region-specific and case-specific literature
Having covered the wider spectrum of development communication as a field of study and complemented it with studies of the impact of documentary film and video on social change, I move on to the literature more closely connected to my case from three increasingly specific angles: development communication in conflict situations, development communication in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup, and the Videoletters project.

Development communication in (post-)conflict situations
According Skuse et al. (2013), development communication in post-conflict scenarios “may help to explain stability interventions, anticorruption measures, better governance, promote the rule of law, as well

80 And Stuart Hall’s argument in 1980 that “There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding”, highlighted by Durham Peters (2001).
as efforts to maintain the peace-building dialogue necessary to stop a slide back into open conflict (ibid.: 74). However, the authors find that “the bulk of examples of C4D interventions reside in the realm of self-assessed project evaluations characterized by relatively low reliability and poor methodological quality” (ibid.: 127).

In an earlier study analyzing 13 cases of media peacebuilding projects carried out in conflict areas in different parts of the world, Terzis and Vassiliadou (2008) note the prevailing arguments about the media’s dual role in conflict situations – that they can both incite hate and violence and promote peaceful resolution – and call attention to the fact that “these two implicit media paths are not necessarily oppositional and mutually exclusive, but can rather coexist in most media landscapes” (ibid.: 375). The authors stress that “since no two ethno-political conflicts or media environments are the same” (ibid.: 376), approaches will necessarily vary. Attentive to process, they identify five stages of media intervention projects: pre-project assessment and planning, project planning/design, choice of partners and staff, monitoring and evaluation, and end/exit. Those stages are used as a guideline to analyze the Videoletters project’s components in terms of strategy and evaluation in Chapter 4.

Terzis and Vassiliadou call attention to the influence of funding on the process and outcome of media interventions, and to the fact that the aims and the views of a conflict (and thus the desirable solution to it) of the variety of players involved in a given media intervention – local, regional, national, and international, official and unofficial, public and private – are likely to be contrasting. The authors argue that all media projects are indeed interventions, and as such “they make a difference (to the better or worse)” (ibid.: 387, in line with Whiteman, 2004). This view strengthens the case for documenting and analyzing intentional development communication interventions in depth instead of merely checking for successful outcomes. The authors conclude that “experience in the field of media and conflict transformation proves that efforts limited only to the media often fail to address some of the ‘structural’ factors that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, and because of that these factors most of the times ‘neutralise’ even the best efforts of media peace-building interventions” (ibid.). Attention to influential contextual and institutional factors is therefore crucial in order to make sense of the trajectory of any given intervention.

Himelfarb (2009: 11) calls attention to the deepening reliance on media as a tool in the peace-builder’s toolkit: “Whether you are the military,

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81 References to documentary and film are absent in the review. Video is accounted for as a type of participatory media particularly effective in rural areas if combined with outreach activities. TV, linked to relation to edutainment, is classified as a national/local traditional medium, also adequate for reaching rural areas (although not always accessible to the poor). Reconciliation, linked to to radio soap opera as a specific type of edutainment, is seen to require long-term commitment and a thorough understanding of the political/social dynamics of the region in question.
a government, a non-governmental organization or an international organization such as the UN, media is a part of your modus operandi." The author points to the importance given in the US Army’s doctrine for peace and stability operations82 to “information engagement”, i.e., “informing the local populace and influencing attitudes”. The need to engage with civilian populations when carrying out stability operations is marked by a tension between the Army’s “interest in winning ‘hearts and minds’ and its interest in supporting independent media”, which is at the core of the debate among peacebuilding media practitioners (ibid.: 13). In Himelfarb’s view, that tension is evidenced in the conflation of strategic communications, which is about controlling the message, and media development, which is aimed at advancing a pluralistic media sector. In post-conflict scenarios where military intervention plays a role, this conflation will arguably extend to other forms of intervention as well.

Looking into the post-conflict scenario in Northern Ireland, Rolston (2007; also see Hackett & Rolston, 2009) provides important insights. While purists may argue that research on Northern Ireland does not belong to a discussion of development communication, since it refers to a developed, donor country, these studies are included here from the perspective that the successor states in the former Yugoslavia are in fact part of Europe, and therefore there are commonalities to be considered. Moreover, this choice connects to my argument in Chapter 1 that all international development communication is development communication at home. In an assessment of the potential role of television in conflict transformation, the author analyzes a series of three reality programs called “Facing the truth” produced by the BBC as one example of broadcasters’ attempts to report peace. Rolston notes that the programs brought together victims and perpetrators with the expectation that the encounters would conclude with forgiveness/regret, symbolized by a final handshake. The focus was on the interpersonal encounters among participants. While self-disclosure was encouraged, consideration of the structural causes of conflict and violence was avoided, in what Rolston terms “a denial of a political approach” (ibid.: 359). However, allowing the space for individual victims to tell their stories was not the ultimate point of the programs: “the value of ‘Facing the truth’ lay in the example the series provided to society of the possibility and benefits of dialogue” (ibid.). Rolston argues that with its emphasis on storytelling and civilized coexistence as the way forward, the program “closed down the space for the range of victims’ voices which exist in society”: those who seek justice through a formal truth-recovery mechanism or judicial proceedings or recognition for some victims but not all, those who cannot forgive, and even those who seek vengeance.

82 Released in 2008 and informed by the US military engagement in the Balkans throughout the 1990s (and then in Afghanistan and Iraq).
In his view, “the problem of media involvement in conflict transformation is more fundamental than a question of genre” (ibid.: 360). While the genres utilized by broadcasters vary, initiatives have in common that framing and editorial control remain in the hands of the media, a powerful institution “which, despite a self-image to the contrary, was not neutral in the previous political conflict.” He argues that, if the media are to contribute to conflict transformation, they should explore ways to shift in the direction of allowing victims and survivors to speak without manipulation, in programming that provides adequate contextualization of the conflict.

In an examination of the potential and limitations of official and unofficial processes of storytelling for victims of political violence, Hackett and Rolston (2009) note that establishing mechanisms and spaces to enable the stories of victims to be told and listened to sympathetically is difficult and complex. Concerned with how victims’ agency is exerted through storytelling, the authors take the stand that storytelling is both an individual and collective process with a transformative potential that needs the right political context in which to operate (ibid.: 356-357). However, even if the context favors opportunities for storytelling, a “receptive audience is not guaranteed” (ibid.: 357): a society may not be willing or ready to hear certain stories. At times, testimony may take place in the face of official denial. Occasionally, it will take place in the context of “an overriding official concern to see reconciliation as the outcome of testimony” (ibid.: 365). Unequal communicative competences will make it more difficult for certain individuals to tell their story, and projects should pay attention to process if they are to enable “the emergence of both individual stories and a collective voice” (ibid.: 368). Both unofficial and official storytelling mechanisms have strengths and weaknesses. When official processes have an agenda of reconciliation, the stories of victims may be a means to that end and thus not fully acknowledged in their own right, and victims may be forced into an official narrative. According to Hackett and Rolston, because official processes “frequently draw on the content, expertise and local knowledge of unofficial processes” (ibid.: 371), they would benefit from strengthening the links with those unofficial processes. In their view, while an official narrative that examines the underlying causes of a conflict would not resolve the past or render it uncontested, it has the potential to “stimulate a wider curiosity about the ‘painful past’” (ibid.: 317). However, there are no blueprints for realizing such potential, and what a process may provoke at best or at worse will depend on a number of contextual factors.

Development communication in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup

Despite the massive scale of assistance allocated to the region by Western funders documented in Chapter 1, sound academic literature published in
English that looks into development communication initiatives in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup is not abundant. Moreover, some of the scarce literature available lacks analytical depth and provides limited insights into the matter.83 One of the two studies84 referring to the Balkans identified by Skuse et al. (2013) is of interest for my dissertation. Curtis (2000) “notes that the factors that contribute to the success of such activities need to be further evaluated. In order to be successful, peace building initiatives require an understanding of the local context and culture within which they are operating. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that if local media interventions are not viewed as impartial they are likely to be viewed with suspicion by audiences” (Skuse et al., 2013: 18).

Although Curtis (2000) is concerned with local media projects undertaken in post-conflict settings with the support of foreign donors, which is not the case of the Videoletters project, initiated and supported by foreigners, the article is relevant here nonetheless for a number of reasons. The author notes that a general consensus that (local) media projects are an effective way of contributing to peacemaking coexists with the absence “of work that explains why this is the case or that outlines the explicit linkages between local media and peacebuilding” (ibid.: 142). Focusing on peacebuilding media projects in support of development initiatives, Curtis shows a correlation between low rankings in the Human Development Index85 and the occurrence of violent conflict, such that peacebuilding becomes a prerequisite of development. While this explains the engagement of international development cooperation actors in peacebuilding, for Curtis there is an important difference in the way in which peacebuilding and development priorities are set: while in the first case “the overall criterion for selection […] is political […] , development projects […] often overlook the fragile political context” (ibid.: 147; also see Waisbord 2008 on technical solutions to political problems). This differential engagement with the political will also appear in connection with the Videoletters project’s duality as a documentary-making initiative and a development communication intervention, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

83 This is the case with Bratic (2006, 2008), Shinar (2007) and Shinar and Bratic (2011). See Skuse et al. (2013) on Bratic (2008). According to Bratic (2006: 487-488), until 2005 no academic study had “attempted to bring together the variety of peace-oriented media projects”. This, if accurate, would mean that academic theorization and research on “peace media projects” is relatively new.

84 The other study, authored by Erni (2009), focusing on the legality of media interventions carried out by foreign agencies, military forces and media organizations in post-conflict settings “explores the cases of Cambodia, Bosnia and Kosovo to demonstrate the potential for the diverse agendas of parties involved in media interventions to stifle healthy development in the post-war media space” (Skuse et al., 2013: 19).

85 A composite statistic of life expectancy at birth, education (years of schooling), and standard of living according to income, used since 1990 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to rank countries into four tiers of human development.
Curtis finds it problematic that a fast expansion of local media peacebuilding projects “has not been accompanied by a parallel sophistication in evaluation”. In line with the “organizational hypocrisy” identified by Waisbord (2008), many donor agencies do not conduct formal evaluations of projects, resorting instead to anecdotal evidence or ad hoc approaches, “although they often speak of the need to develop more systematic mechanisms to assess impact” (Curtis, 2000: 153). In Curtis’ view, there are several reasons for the lack of evaluations, including the facts that goals such as changing attitudes and perceptions and helping to heal psycho-social injuries cannot be measured via quantitative indicators, and that it is difficult to attribute a particular change to a specific project in a context where many simultaneous factors interplay. This is a strange analysis, which suggests that international agencies will rather not evaluate what does not have measurable direct effects – a matter that would merit further inquiry.

While Curtis’ view is that projects can potentially make a contribution, success is by no means guaranteed: donor rivalry and overlap, and the inability to coordinate donor efforts, are among the reasons he identifies for failure in Bosnia. For the author, because “media is never perceived as a neutral force in a post-conflict environment, so donors must carefully examine the impact of the project on local politics as well as the impact of local politics on the project”, and play close attention to the possibility that “peace’ broadcasting may threaten and antagonise certain local authorities and actors”. In his analysis, “political obstacles may be minimised if donors try to collaborate with a spectrum of local NGOS and groups to help gain a better political reading of the situation” (ibid.: 162). This is in line with Whiteman’s (2004) views in his “coalition model” of documentary-making.

Allen and Stremlau (2005) call attention to “the asymmetrical power relations between large human rights organisations with substantial lobbying power in rich countries and poorer countries with leadership that is regarded as weak and semi-autocratic at best” (ibid.: 230). They also note that “foreign ‘experts’, often in line with rich countries, are increasingly defining and dominating processes such as ‘truth’ and ‘justice’” (ibid.). This raises the question of what kinds of spaces and opportunities for communication are afforded to citizens in the processes of mediation involved. Importantly for this dissertation, Allen and Stremlau stress that “whatever the rhetoric about promoting freedom of expression, the situation on the ground is often muddled, contradictory and sometimes hypocritical” (ibid.). Therefore, studying what is said by international donors and practitioners is not enough, and actual practices must be investigated as well.
Previous studies of the Videoletters project

The only academic study published in English that I could locate that researched the Videoletters project empirically is an M.Sc. thesis written by Jora Wolterink in 2006 for the Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN), based in The Netherlands. The thesis investigates the Videoletters project as a case of “media for reconciliation” as part of a wider exploration of the ways in which NGOs used media-based projects as a tool for reconciliation in BiH: “the message of the filmmakers was explicitly clear: Reconnect! They wanted to set an example for all those citizens in former Yugoslavia who for one reason or another were separated and have not found each other again. By encouraging these people to reconnect and at the same time providing the practical means for them to actually do so, the filmmakers intended to serve a higher goal, to contribute to the reconciliation process within Bosnian society” (ibid.: 3-4).

Following a typology developed by Howard (2002) for the Canadian NGO Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS), Wolterink classified Videoletters as a “type five” media intervention, i.e., an intervention “specifically intent upon transforming attitudes, promoting reconciliation and reducing conflict” in which “media workers may play a role themselves as conciliators in the field” (ibid.: 11). In order to assess the project’s reach and impact, Wolterink used in-depth interviews with members of the project’s staff and with “inhabitants of Sarajevo who were familiar with Videoletters”86 (ibid.: 26), a survey and on-site observations. A non-specified number of members of the project’s staff and a total of 15 inhabitants of Sarajevo were interviewed – most of them Bosniak, some Serbian and some Croatian, and all of them young in age on average (although why this was the case is not explained). A total of 194 survey responses were collected in three towns in BiH visited by the Videoletters caravan:87 Pale, Srebrenica and Visegrad. The survey was distributed to schoolchildren, who used it as an interview guide to ask questions to relatives. The lack of procedural detail and reflexive discussion of issues of representativeness regarding the choice of interview informants and survey sample makes it difficult to assess the study’s methodological soundness – particularly problematic is the lack of clear differentiation between empirical information gathered directly by the author and anecdotal information provided by project staff. Nonetheless, the study is useful in that it raises questions regarding the project’s trajectory, and points at avenues for further research. Bearing these limitations in mind, I incorporate a number of Wolterink’s findings, listed below, as a secondary source into my description and analysis of the project:

86 Some of the interviewees were shown an episode of Videoletters as part of the interview.
87 Wolterink conducted her research in cooperation with the Videoletters’ implementers and traveled with the project’s caravan during part of its tour of the region.
• The need for reconnection that the project was premised on may not have been such in the case of BiH – Wolterink’s research suggested that logistical obstacles to communication derived from the conflict had been overcome by 2005, and the people she surveyed had contacted former relationships by phone if not in person;
• The television series may have offered an opportunity for people to see “the other” across ethnic divides in a positive light;
• Survey respondents were more familiar with the television series than with the “tools for reconciliation” provided by the project via publicly accessible Internet booths and the website;
• Viewing an episode of the series led to a variety of reactions, from considering the message patronizing to feeling moved to share personal histories of lost contacts;
• The series was perceived as political despite efforts by the project’s staff to present it as a human-interest, apolitical initiative;
• Ordinary people in BiH were less impressed with the project than international media.

Besides Wolterink’s study, a number of peer-reviewed articles and books refer to the Videoletters project. Strikingly, none of these references (a number of which assume that the project was exemplary) are grounded in empirical research. They resort instead to the project’s international press coverage and/or website as their only sources, without acknowledging the limitations implied. Because claims about the project are made in the absence of independent investigation, relying exclusively on secondary sources, their reliability is at issue. However, inasmuch as they speak to how the project was received beyond the region it was supposed to serve, and exemplify how the practice of development communication influences the field of study, I analyze them in Chapter 6: Daiute and Turniski (2005); Hochheimer (2007; 2011); London (2007); Smyth, Etherton and Best (2010); Best, Long, Etherton and Smyth (2011); Stauffacher, Drake, Currion and Steinberge (2005); Nassar and Tatevossian (2010).88

**Working theoretical framework**

**International development communication: tool or trouble?**

As recognized in the literature reviewed, international development communication intervention takes place abroad, i.e. at a distance, in countries selected

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88 In addition to this literature, a report authored by Rens Twijnstra in 2007 for submission to the University of Utrecht and the Dutch development organization Oxfam Novib discusses the Videoletters Rwanda Pilot Project.
by Western\textsuperscript{89} funders according to geopolitical priorities and foreign-policy agendas. The ability to initiate and terminate interventions lies with the funders, who set “the rules of the game” through their foreign ministries or other bilateral agencies, thus shaping the practice of development communication through their respective institutional projects. Although the impact of this state of affairs was theoretically problematized and critiqued by dependency scholars decades ago (see Gumucio Dagron & Tufte, 2006: xviii-xix and McAnany, 2012: 66-86 for discussions), how it works in practice has been less studied empirically.\textsuperscript{90} Communication tends to be understood as a media-driven tool ancillary to development that can be implemented to exert a positive influence on the task of effecting social change, and intervention tends to be evaluated at project scale, thus brushing aside geopolitical considerations. Moreover, in the context of digital capitalism, characterized by the privatization of development, the absence of in-house institutional capacity in government agencies and an overriding concern with public relations, project and practice constitute an unregulated “marketplace”, for which issues of ethics and accountability remain largely unexplored.

Attentive to this context, I argue in this dissertation that empirical attention to the interplay between institutional project and practice in specific contexts is crucial in order to: a) grasp the role of international development communication as go-between in the relationship between funders and recipients; b) analyze specific international development communication initiatives in their complexity; and c) theorize development communication in a way that takes into account present neoliberal conditions. Starting from a close reading and critique of the field’s predominantly mainstream approaches to theorization and research in recent years, I put forward a conceptualization of the relationship between international development communication intervention and social change that goes beyond the toolkit approach and pays particular attention to issues of politics, ethics and justice in the global context. Considering initiatives as charged with the power to cause positive effects regardless of the context at issue forecloses attention to undemocratic operational procedures, unforeseen outcomes, the responsibility of funders and implementers, and the impact of intervention on international relationships. Instead, considering international development communication as a context-dependent form of intervention with an ambiguous potential

\textsuperscript{89} Although in recent years new donors have emerged, such as Brazil, China, India or Turkey, international development cooperation remains primarily a Western enterprise. See http://www.oecd.org/about/membersandpartners/ [accessed 28 July 2014].

\textsuperscript{90} This may be partly due to the decrease in university funding for independent research and the increase in funding from bilateral and multilateral organizations tied to specific agendas, which shapes the scope of studies.
brings to the fore its political nature and enables attention to processes of mediation at differential levels. In the process of framing a problem and favoring a solution, and at the same time communicating about problem and solution in particular ways, development communication intervention mediates the complex relationship between international funders, national and local governance structures (including, but not limited to, their media systems), and citizens on both ends – the “giving” and “receiving” nation states. It follows from this argument that a critical approach to research should involve considering how and why development communication interventions make a difference (for better or for worse) on the quality of the relationship among these parties in terms of global justice. In order to tackle this problem, a relational theoretical framework is needed. In what follows, I propose a working framework aimed at illuminating issues of global justice in the deployment of communication “for social change” by focusing on mediation, practice, and proper distance.

Rethinking the medium, or international development communication as a form of mediation

Although mediation as such is rarely taken into account as an analytical variable in the development communication literature reviewed, it is implicit in the practice. Processes of mediation connect funders – via the governmental or intergovernmental agencies acting on behalf of “the world’s most advanced countries”, in OECD jargon – to presumed beneficiaries – the citizens of “developing countries” – by way of specific projects and their implementers. But this connection between international funders and citizens from a recipient country is not the only one established in the deployment of an intervention, as this dissertation will demonstrate. Several other types of mediation at a variety of levels also take place. Seeking to explain how those processes are organized and unfold is crucial in order to understand the role played by international development communication under global conditions, and to identify and analyze its political and ethical consequences across scales. It is a paradox of communication and media studies that, while media are widely seen as key institutions in the “project of time, space and life management” (Silverstone, 2005: 194), not enough attention is given to the ways in which mediation is socially produced and becomes politically effective. If we understand mediation “as a central component of the management of both state and global politics and that of everyday life”, then a critical engagement with how it works in practice is in order (Silverstone, 2007: 180).

91 In media-centric approaches, overblown attention to the media’s presumed strong power (to bring about economic development, to connect regardless of social distances and material divides, etc.) is tied to a self-contradictory lack of consideration of the use of media as an instrument for interference in social processes (Halloran, 1970; Pasquali, 2007).
But what is mediation? Generally understood as “getting in between” in order to overcome conflict and reach mutual understanding and agreement in ordinary language, media and communication research instead often interprets mediated communication as “shaped by the inexorable logic of global capitalism” (Livingstone, 2009: 5). Notably, its three central meanings – 1) acting as an intermediary (e.g., the political act of reconciling adversaries); 2) intermediate (indirect) agency between otherwise separated parties to a relationship; and 3) a formal way of directly expressing otherwise unexpressed relations – refer to actions included in the concept of communication: reconciling opponents, bridging distances and stating the unstated (Williams, 1983), i.e., mediation is intrinsic to communication (Livingstone, 2009; Thompson, 1995; Silverstone, 2005) and at the same time distinct from it. As a distinct concept, it calls for attention to practice, to the interface between micro- and macro-contexts, and to the interrelation between social structures and agents. While some scholars apply it to analyze power struggles in line with Williams’ first meaning,92 others attend to his second meaning, concerning themselves with the ethical and political relevance of the ways in which the media transform physical and symbolic distance and time and space, thus connecting otherwise separated parties (see Williams, 1983: 205). A third analytical use of the notion of mediation is that it “serves to bridge formerly distinct spheres of inquiry into mass and interpersonal communication” (Livingstone, 2009: 13; Silverstone, 2005), i.e., conceptualizing mediation in terms of its social influence implies exploring the link between the private and the public, the individual and the collective.

The question of how to understand media arises at this point. Ginsburg (1991) offers a productive definition, in that it retains attention to mediation: “an intervening substance, through which a force acts or an effect is produced; an agency, means or instrument.” In her view, media content, if produced by members of a collective in order to communicate a culture, could “mediate (one hopes) across gaps of space, time, knowledge, and prejudice”, connect the private and public spheres, and ideally work “toward creating understanding between two groups separated by space and social practice”, i.e., mediation is the likely product not only of certain types of media content, but also of certain processes of content production and dissemination characterized by civic engagement. Like Ginsburg, other scholars have proposed that, given a high degree of social distance, media could be used to bridge it (Samarajiva & Shields, 1997). In the presence of failures to communicate, certain types of media may be used in particular ways in order to mediate between parties (Silverstone, 2007). Putting media in between could afford estranged parties the possibility of entering into a dialogue (Hutchby, 2001).

92 Such as Latin American scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero.
However, we must bear in mind that neither the content, the form nor the medium of choice guarantee that a given invitation to communicate will be accepted (Durham Peters, 2001), much in the same way that communication initiatives do not necessarily deliver development or intrinsically promote civic presence and advance justice (Berger, 2010; Sassen, 2008 and 2008b; Fraser, 2008). Taking into account that the outcome of any mediated communication initiative in terms of its potential to bridge a distance is in principle uncertain implies making a crucial analytical distinction. Silverstone (1999: 12; also see García Canclini, 2006) expresses this mixed and contradictory potential very clearly: “the media provide us, in significant degree, both tools and troubles: the concepts, categories and technologies with which to construct and defend distances; the concepts, categories and technologies to construct and sustain connections.” This observation applies to international development communication intervention as well. It is usually framed as a tool, but should also be framed as “trouble”. If we think of development communication intervention as a process of mediation that goes beyond the point of contact between media texts and their recipients (Silverstone, 1999: 13), the analytical frame widens and additional elements come into view. From this perspective, because linearity in media effects or influence cannot simply be presumed, it is impossible to read from one level of the process of mediation to another (Silverstone, 2005: 191). As Silverstone has argued for the case of media studies, a concern with development communication intervention as a process of mediation is justified by the need “to understand [...] how meanings emerge, where and with what consequences. We need to be able to identify those moments where the process appears to break down. Where it is distorted by technology or intention. We need to understand its politics: its vulnerability to the exercise of power; its dependence on the work of institutions as well as individuals; and its own power to persuade and to claim attention and response” (Silverstone, 1999: 18). The perspective offered by Silverstone brings into view the role of mediated communication in the exercise of power as “both producer and product of hierarchy” and evidences that all mediated communication is political: “seeking to persuade, seeking to define one reality as opposed to another, including and excluding while at the same time informing or entertaining” (Silverstone, 2005: 190). Power in turn can be thought of “as the differential capacity to mobilize meaning” (ibid.: 191) for specific purposes.

García Canclini (2006) adds spatial nuance to the range of scholarly views of mediation discussed so far (Livingstone, 2009 drawing on Williams, 1983; Ginsburg, 1991; Silverstone, 1999, 2005, 2007) when he argues that:

93 In his view, “these tools are perhaps most in evidence, and therefore most contentious, when a nation is, or feels itself, to be at war” (ibid.). This indeed appears to have been the case for the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia and its aftermath, as discussed in Chapter 1.
“communicational theories remind us that the connection and disconnect with others are part of our constitution as individual and collective subjects. Therefore, the inter-space, the space between, is decisive” (ibid.: 26). If we apply this perspective to international development communication, the analysis of mediation is not only a matter of identifying connections as relationships that link “points of contact” across distances. It is also a question of scrutinizing the disjunctions – i.e., the lack of correspondence – among parties to an intervention. This can be done by taking into account the spaces between those parties – the inter-spaces – that a specific development communication intervention may create or do away with. If spaces are created, they may enable communication between parties. If they are done away with, the ensuing gaps are likely to lead to disconnects.

Taking into account Ginsburg’s (1991) characterization of media production and broadcasting as related interventions into gaps (of time, space, knowledge and prejudice), García Canclini’s (2006) attention to the function of inter-spaces that oscillate between connections and disconnects, and Silverstone’s (1999, 2005) invitation to understand mediation as a political process that plays out through specific practices, in this dissertation mediation is considered in two interrelated but distinct senses. On the one hand, as the interposing of some thing as a means for connecting parties (Nicholls, 2007) – with an eye to the institutional, technological and symbolic means involved in the process. What is interposed, in my argument, is precisely the practice of development communication as mobilized by international foreign-policy intervention. From this perspective, it is relevant to analyze the process of deployment of the Videoletters project in detail (i.e., taking into account the agentic, contextual and institutional factors that had a bearing on it) in order to identify the distances it produced, bridged or kept as different types of media-bound action were mobilized to fill or occupy the in-between space among parties to the conflict that it sought to govern. Those parties are understood here to be not simply the multiple ordinary citizens across the former Yugoslavia who lost touch with each other as a consequence of the violent conflict (and were deemed by funders and implementers to be in need of reconciliation), but also the nation-states involved in the project on the so-called “giving” and “receiving” ends, and their relevant governance structures.

On the other hand, I understand mediation as the media-supported production of connections or disconnects among parties to a dialogue or to the absence of dialogue. If we bring into focus the in-between space between parties to an international development communication intervention, we can analyze the ways in which the media as an intervening substance may afford

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94 Silverstone (2007: 90) was also thinking of media as an intervening substance in his earlier empirical research on the mediating role of minority media in Europe. However, unlike García Canclini
opportunities to bridge a preexistent distance or alternatively keep or widen such distance. Mediated intervention may allow the parties to delineate their differences without giving up on the possibility of communication (Grimson, 2011), but it could also fill or occupy the in-between space in such a way that no rapprochement is effected\textsuperscript{95} and other purposes are served instead. For the case of Videoleters, I will seek to identify the in-between space potentially opened or foreclosed through development communication intervention among the variety of relevant actors involved. While the opening of in-between space may enable dialogue that does not necessarily imply consensus as an “end product” and draw fair attention to diverging viewpoints (including the voicing of impermissible discourses; see Christensen, 2010 and Hackett & Rolston, 2009), its foreclosing may hinder accountability and thus stand in the way of justice.

This twofold understanding of mediation is in line with Silverstone’s argument for a dialectical approach, such that we think about processes of communication “as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded” (2005: 189). That is, giving analytical attention to mediation requires: a) that we understand how processes of communication change the sociocultural conditions that support them, as well as the ways in which individual and institutional participants relate to those conditions and to each other; and b) that we take into account “the social as in turn a mediator”, such that institutions and technologies, as well as the meanings that they deliver, are mediated in the sociopolitical processes of communication (ibid.).

\textbf{Analyzing mediation through the lens of practice}

For Silverstone (2007: 42), far from being a matter of content, mediation is “actually constituted in the practices of those who produce the sounds and images, the narratives and the spectacles, as well as, crucially, those who receive them.” The notion of “practice” calls attention to agentic decisions not as mere sets of individual actions but rather as “modes of relation, of mutual action” (Taylor, 1971, quoted in Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012: 5), and to the structured contexts in which they take place. Practices are “arrays of human activity” (Schatzki, 2000: 11) that can be recognized as patterns and as performances. As patterns, they endure between and across specific moments of enactment, “as a recognizable conjunction of elements, consequently figuring as an entity which can be spoken about and […] drawn upon as a set of resources” when practicing further. As performances, they take place as successive acts of “doing”, which are always situated (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012: 7). Significantly, “understanding

\textsuperscript{95} Provokingly, Grimson (ibid.) notes that even the setup of a war scenario is shared, in that the reasons generated by groups to differentiate each other in a dispute are mutual, –i.e., there is correspondence.
specific practices always involves apprehending material configurations” (Schatzki et al. 2000).

Within the social sciences, efforts to conceptualize the relationship between agency and structure have led to theories of practice. Although the debate about the relative power of structure over agency and vice versa remains complicated and far from being settled, attention to practice is nonetheless understood to have potential for unraveling aspects of social change⁹⁶ (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012; McLeod & Thomson, 2009). What interests me in particular is the idea that practices are at the center of the relationship between the agency exercised by human subjects and the conditions set by social structures, and can be observed regardless of disagreements about what motivates them. To put it clearly, structure and agency intersect at the point of practice (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012: 5). Besides rendering visible the distinction and connection between micro- and macro-levels, a focus on practice also calls attention to the arrangements and interdependencies that appear in a given social field (Schatzki, 2000: 15). A social field is a space in which a set of positions, hierarchized according to several dimensions, is distributed (Bourdieu, 1990; Chevallier & Chauviré, 2011). While the positions exist in relation to each other, they are not static. In fact, social fields must be understood dynamically: they impose certain conditions but are plastic, can be modified and will adjust to change (Chevallier & Chauviré 2011: 77). Analytically, it is therefore important to identify the acts of position-taking of key actors at different stages of specific processes of mediation. Because all relationships are mediated by power structures (Bourdieu, 1990: 196), attention must also be given to the distances between positions within a given structure, and to the ways in which a specific intervention may shorten and lengthen those distances in varying ways.

**But what is practice?**

The “practice turn” in contemporary social theory argued by Schatzki et al. in 2000 has been generally overlooked in development communication studies, but increasingly taken up in recent years by communication and media scholars seeking to address the relationship between media and practice at varying levels (see Bräuchler & Postill, 2010 for a recent collection).⁹⁷ Importantly for this dissertation, Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee argue for attention to the interplay between structure and agency in media

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⁹⁶ Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) and Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus (1990) have informed contemporary efforts to account for change in society. Chicago sociology and de Certeau’s study of everyday life practices also adopt the concept of practice as a central theoretical category (Styhre, 2003: 395).

⁹⁷ While I focus on literature from 2006 and 2010 that explicitly links “communication” and “media” to practice, there are important precedents from the perspective of anthropology. See, e.g., Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin (2002).
production, noting that “media making can be instrumental – in other words, subject to market control or more broadly influenced by powerful social forces – and yet at the same time exist as a zone of relative autonomy and counter-intuitive expression” (2008: 21). In this view, media production is an ambiguous practice, open to more than one outcome: it can contribute to sustaining certain “rules of the game” and relations of power, and at the same time be free to act independently at some levels; and it can include elements that stay the same (continuity and reproduction) alongside elements that change (novelty and distinction).

Postill’s (2010: 15, 18, 26) argument that “media practitioners, practices and technologies migrate and circulate across field boundaries unevenly, with some practical elements exhibiting a greater in-built ‘detachability’ and ‘reproducibility’ than others” is an interesting proposition when considered from the perspective of digital capitalism, in that it may help us render visible the increasingly blurring boundaries between advertising and a number of other media-bound practices, including development communication.

Also thought-provoking is the ambitious question of how media practices anchor, control or organize others, raised by Couldry (2010) drawing on Swidler (2000). That is, which media practices “are defined as part of a larger practice which provides its key reference points”, and how “changes in the former automatically cause reformulation of the latter’s aims” (ibid.: 42). While his reference to an automatic reformulation betrays a mechanistic understanding of causation in processes of social change, the idea that media practices may anchor a wider practice that provides its key reference points makes sense for the case of international development communication. If one of the main things that the media do is “anchor other practices through the ‘authoritative’ representations and enactments of key terms and categories that they provide”, then it is necessary to investigate where, for whom and in which ways this anchoring role works, and what its consequences are for the organization of specific practices (ibid.: 42-43; also see Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010).

A crucial point is made by Craig in arguing that communication is a practice that involves “not only engaging in certain activities but also thinking and talking about those activities in particular ways” (2006: 38-39), i.e., there is a relationship between specific practices and the normative discourses that develop along with them in order to communicate about them, such that the discourses become a constitutive part of the practices, making them meaningful and regulating their conduct (ibid.: 39). Craig argues that in the traditional scientific-technological perspective, “the application of theory to practice is technological. Scientific theory describes underlying

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99 E.g., political marketing, lobbying and campaigning as part of the wider practice of politics.
mechanisms that explain how things work, and practice, using theory-based tools and techniques, can exploit that scientific understanding to produce desired outcomes.” Applied to communication, this perspective “cultivates an ‘effects’ orientation” visible in much of the development communication literature reviewed in this dissertation. But this is not all. Craig insightfully observes that “practice involves much more than using conscious techniques to achieve predetermined goals”, and argues that, in fact, “a practice derives its value from more than just the ‘external’ goods or pragmatic outcomes it produces” (ibid.: 44, drawing on MacIntyre). This raises the question of what the additional value of international development communication interventions may be for the foreign ministries that fund initiatives. Craig’s perspective adds a new dimension to the confusion between development communication and public relations among decision-makers that expert practitioners have pointed out for years (see, e.g., Fraser, 2007; Quarry & Ramírez, 2009; Balit, 2012). If instead of a confusion of purposes we think of an overlap, what comes into view is the possibility that initiatives aimed at doing good may be endorsed partly because of their potential to make funders look good by doing “the right thing”, thus establishing an inherent tension between possible uses of communication.

Understanding communication in its complexity
While there is no single right way to think about communication, adopting a specific theoretical standpoint has real-world effects in terms of its analytical power or lack thereof (Shepherd et al., 2006). To investigate development communication intervention in its complexity, a multidimensional approach to communication is necessary, so that we can make distinctions between different aspects but at the same time make sense of those aspects. I propose thinking about communication in five ways, namely as a) multi-scalar, b) mediated by media, c) a function of proper distance, d) a right of citizens that is tied to a responsibility of governance structures, and e) a social capability with an ambiguous potential.

To approach communication as multi-scalar, we must understand interpersonal communication (face-to-face and mediated) and mass-mediated communication (Thompson, 1995; Mosco, 2009) as differential but interrelated avenues for social interaction. Such an understanding transcends the divide between studies of interpersonal and mass communication, challenged by several theorists from Raymond Williams and onwards (Williams, 1983; Jones & Holmes, 2012). Rather than setting apart interpersonal communication, which limits the explanatory potential of media and communication studies (Mosco, 2009: 149), it can be considered as a sphere within which social praxis can also be examined, thus drawing a connection between individual experience and its social dimensions. Communication’s ambiguous potential to facilitate the recognition of others and meaningful
social attachments on the one hand, and to foster rejection and isolation on the other, then comes more clearly into focus. From the perspective that the communicative practices of citizens as rights-bearing subjects (Sassen, 2005, 2008) – and the “particular ways of being human” that ensue – can only be understood in the context of the social relationships in which they take place (Mosco, 2009; Torrico Villanueva, 2004), interpersonal and (mass-) mediated communication can be considered distinct, yet interrelated forms that afford “a particular array of opportunities and problems” (Pearce, 1989; also see Silverstone, 1999). Although (mass) communication does not per se afford interpersonal communication, it may, given adequate conditions, enable the circulation of discourses previously impermissible within a given context. This is in line with McMahan’s view (2004: 34) that “there exist no pure instances of interpersonal communication or mass communication, instances in which one is not, in some capacity, influenced by the other.”

**How do the media mediate communication?**

That the media are closely related to, but distinct from, processes of communication as forms of social contact was well argued by Williams (1983) in his analysis of the history of communication. Subsequently, sociologist John Thompson\(^\text{100}\) (1995) famously claimed that the use of “communication media” involves forms of action and interaction in the social world that are different from those afforded by face-to-face communication, such as the possibility to act for others who are physically absent, or to act in response to others who are at a distance. This contention, however, is empirically complicated by the Videoletters project: in playing the role of “postmen” who delivered the video letters that they were carrying, the filmmakers were in fact using media to act for others who were physically absent *in person.* Another dimension of mediated proximity and distance, such that messages required a messenger who could put them in context and facilitate their reception, was at play in this case. This calls attention to “the procedures of delivery” of international development communication intervention as ways in which a relationship carried out at a distance is enacted and a “distant presence” is projected (see Barton & Hall, 2000: 7-18 for the case of letter writing). The relationship carried out at a distance that is enacted links the country that intervenes with the country “assisted”, thus acting as a form of indirect agency between otherwise separated parties (in line with Williams, 1983). In the process, the country that intervenes projects its “distant presence” as a do-gooder. From this perspective, the role of the messenger and the acts of position-taking implied in the practice of “delivering the message” become crucial. From an analytical standpoint, the need for an

\(^{100}\) Not to be confused with British journalist and consultant Mark Thompson, also quoted in this dissertation.
open-ended understanding of the ways in which media can be mobilized to mediate interaction comes into view. That is, rather than selecting potential ways in which media are supposed to mediate communication from a pre-established taxonomy, seeking to identify and unpack situated instances in practice seems to have more explanatory potential.

Contending that the properties of different technical media enable and constrain the types of symbolic production and exchange that are actually possible, Thompson identified the degree of space-time distination that they allow as one of the four general attributes according to which different media could be analyzed (ibid., 2005: 19). It is especially interesting for this dissertation that in doing so he seems to have been thinking of mediated distination, i.e., the possibility to keep something at a distance through the use of “communication media”, as a quality. Turning that idea on its head, I analyze in this study the opportunities for proximity that international development communication intervention – mediated as it is – may enable or foreclose, with an eye to analyzing the paradoxical status of justice across borders under global conditions (Fraser, 2008).

If we think of the Videoleet project’s initial action, intended to reconnect individuals or families across the successor states to the former Yugoslavia, the first question to consider is whether the back-and-forth of video-based correspondence may have widened the in-between space (García Canclini, 2006) among estranged parties in such a way that dialogue came into view as a concrete possibility. Did the messengers’ mediation give distationed parties an adequate opportunity to delineate their difficulties and differences in the process of communicating? If we consider Videoleet’s subsequent actions to scale up its reach, the question becomes whether the opportunities, means and spaces provided were adequate not only for citizens to reconnect with each other, but also to communicate with their national governments (or alternatively, with their self-appointed international helpers) about the problem at issue.

While Thompson (1995) initially somewhat dismissed (mass-) mediated communication as a form of non-dialogical quasi-interaction, in later work he conceded that “mediated quasi-interaction” is a particular form of mediated interaction that “creates a certain kind of social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange”, as well as “distinctive kinds of interpersonal relationships, social bonds and intimacy” (2005: 32-34). This latter perspective raises an

101 The other attributes are: the degree of fixation of the symbolic form that the media allow, and thus the extent to which they enable a message to be altered or revised; the degree of reproduction they allow; and the skills, competences and forms of knowledge required to encode and decode messages.

102 He defined “mediated quasi-interaction” as “the production and reception of materials such as books, newspapers, radio and television programmes, films, videos, etc.”
outstanding question for the case of Videoletters: what forms of interaction and types of social relationships did the project propose? While the purpose of the (mass-)mediated communication strategy deployed by the project was purportedly to spark off region-wide peaceful communication at different levels of interaction, from the interpersonal to the social, my analysis will show that the funding governments also sought to a) enact their relationship with the successor states in specific ways and b) link to their own citizens (and, by extension, to the international community) by “projecting a distant presence” in the Western Balkans.

At this point, the relationship between communication and “the obstacles of time and space” (Durham Peters, 2001) comes into view. It is an analytically problematic relationship, in that proposed understandings tend to associate the technological characteristics of particular types of media with distinct sorts of proximity and distance, of which Thompson’s early work is a prominent example (see Jones & Holmes, 2012 for a discussion of technological determinism), and to consider speed as an indisputable virtue. Williams (1983) showed well how over time the notion of communications became decoupled from the idea of spatiality inherent in transport (and, presumably at that point, the idea of time began to compress). Intriguingly for this dissertation, Durham Peters (ibid.) contends that it was in fact with the emergence of the “media of transmission and recording” – post office, telegraph, telephone, camera, phonograph and radio – that the idea of communication as a person-to-person activity became possible, precisely at the point when, “thanks to electricity, communication […] could take place regardless of impediments such as distance or embodiment”. This proposition resonates with what the Videoletters project set out to do in producing the documentary series. If time and place are obstacles that can be redressed by resorting to media, we are left with the more intractable “problem of intersubjectivity or breakdowns in mutual understanding”103 (Durham Peters, 2001) and the challenge of how to attend to it. This is a complex problem, sensibly addressed by Silverstone (2004) in its ethical and political dimensions.

**Proximity and distance as a political problem**

With the notion of “proper distance”, Silverstone voiced his unease about the elision of spatial and social distance (ibid.: 7), arguing that distance “is not just a material, a geographical or even a social category” but also a moral category, and that overcoming it requires more than technology. In line with Grimson’s (2011) understanding of dialogue not as a tool toward consensus, but as a process that may allow parties in conflict to distinguish

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103 The reference to breakdowns in mutual understanding is not intended to claim that understanding or consensus should be the (normative) goal of communicative processes.
between them, i.e., to recognize each other as different without giving up on the possibility of communication. Silverstone draws on the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to argue for “distance in which there is recognition of the irreducible difference of the other as well as a sharing of identity with her or him” (2004: 8). He claims that “the morality that media and communication technologies enable is easily, and often, presumed to be a function of their capacity to connect. That is what they do. They bring us together. And that connection is sufficient, it is said, for us to relate to each other as human, moral beings” (ibid.: 17). In the case of Videoletters, this proposition calls attention to the fact that judging the project based exclusively on the idea around which it revolved, even if it was a compelling idea, is far from enough; studying the idea’s execution is crucial.

For Silverstone, given “the problem of how we can behave responsibly in our dealings with mediated others”, any media technologies that promise a resolution of the irresolvable “ambiguities that we confront in our dealings with each other – as neighbors and strangers” and lead us to believe that they have the capacity to solve those ambiguities “must be challenged” (ibid.: 23). In the case under study here, Europe is the “neighbor”, and the successor states to the former Yugoslavia are the “strangers”. Bearing this in mind, the Videoletters project has to be put to the test in the context of its implementation, with an eye to scrutinizing issues of ethics in the practice of development communication and of accountability in its institutional management from a transnational perspective. What is at issue is “a duty of care, obligation and responsibility” (ibid.: 47). Silverstone’s view that the “technologizing of the social” has “both created and masked the improper distance which has allowed responsibility for the other to be denied, and for care for the other to be dissolved” (ibid.: 17) calls attention to the ethics of proximity and distance between parties to an international development communication intervention (at a variety of scales), and to the diverse, complex and oftentimes contradictory ways in which media actually “mediate” distances.

Silverstone raises the problem of “how to deal with the new spatial distance introduced into human affairs by the power that media and communications technology has given us” (ibid.: 153) and suggests that the notion of proper distance can be used “as a measure for ethical positioning in media work” (ibid.: 23). Addressing the problem is essential in order to counteract “those arguments, most recently in the analysis of the supposed miraculous capacity of the internet, that mistake connection

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104 Also see Mouffe (2005).

105 He sees a relationship of cause and effect between that “stretching of action” and the lessening of “the expectation of responsibility and reciprocity that action and communication in face-to-face settings conventionally require” (ibid.: 11) that, in my view, it would be best to approach as an empirical question.
for closeness, and closeness for commitment, and which confuse reciprocity for responsibility” (Silverstone, 2007: 173). My proposition, expanding on his work, is that the concept of proper distance can be used to assess the presence or absence of justice in international development communication.

I am referring here to the ethical responsibilities at stake in the ways in which development communication interventions mediate social but also geopolitical distances, following Silverstone’s argument that the presumed capacity of media and communication technologies to connect does not suffice per se in order to achieve meaningful social connectivity, and therefore a duty of care must also come into play (ibid.: 2004, 2005, 2007). Extending his argument, proper distance also refers in this theoretical framework to the concrete ways in which ethical responsibility is brought into action in practice, as evidenced by implementers’ choices of whom to include/exclude in the span of a given initiative and under which conditions, scales and avenues of mediation chosen, opportunities for reciprocal recognition provided/neglected (Martín Barbero, 2011), and interlocutors privileged/downplayed.

**Communication as a right of citizens and a responsibility of institutions and their officers**

Attention to communication as a right of citizens (Richards, Thomas, & Nain, 2001) brings into focus the structured contexts that enable and constrain communicative practices within a society: the regional, national and local communication infrastructures and systems and the media landscapes, but also the wider political, cultural and economic conditions, particularly, the presence or absence of opportunities, means and spaces for citizens to make claims and see them through, so that in the presence of competing claims they will all be fairly addressed (Fraser, 2008). The practice of international development communication is understood here as a distinct form of intervention into said structured contexts.

Citizens’ opportunities to engage in development communication initiatives as rights-bearing subjects (Sassen, 2005, 2008) are understood here in the context of Fraser’s three-dimensional model of justice, which incorporates “the political dimension of representation alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition” (Fraser 2008: 15; also see García Canclini, 2006). In this model, justice refers to “parity of participation”, and “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction” (ibid.: 16). From this perspective, two distinct fields relevant to the analysis of Videoletters come into view: a sociopolitical field, constituted by the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia tackled by the project, and a geopolitical field, constituted by the funding and receiving countries, and the wider
“Western world” addressed. In these fields, inclusion and exclusion are at stake: which stories can be told? Who listens to them? Which structures of silence are at work? Importantly for this dissertation, Fraser’s model of justice calls attention to the scope and limitations of citizens’ rights in contexts in which national and transnational interests and agendas become increasingly entangled. Did the Videoletters project enable cross-border, public discussion about the impact of the conflict on citizens’ everyday lives in the region? Did it allow citizens to fulfill their presumed need to resume interpersonal communication across ethno-political divides? Did it give them effective visibility and voice in the international stage? Moreover, Fraser’s framework calls attention “not only to the ‘what’ of justice, but also to the ‘whom’ and the ‘how’” (ibid.: 28). In the case of Videoletters, that implies looking into not only the stated purpose and form of the project, but also to the process of implementation in itself and to the ensuing relationships between funders, national governance structures and presumed beneficiaries.

A rights-based approach to communication, however, is not sufficient to sustain an analysis of international development communication in terms of justice, in that it focuses closely on ideals at the expense of material realities. As well argued by O’Neill (2009: 168), “unless at least some others had a duty to receive communications”, there is no right to communicate, but merely “a right to try to communicate”. A framework of rights will therefore be strengthened if combined with an obligation-based approach that pays “more active and deliberate attention to the circumstances and conditions within which free and genuine communication can be established and preserved” (ibid.). Like O’Neill, Silverstone also argues that, while rights are, of course, important, “they need a framework of obligations, of what one ought to do, of a conception of the good or of virtue, in order to be meaningful and decidable”, bearing in mind that “communication can be wrong, perhaps even bad, even if it does not affect or challenge rights.” While a rights-based approach focuses on the recipients of communication, an obligation-based approach focuses on the agent and the action, “and both individuals’ and institutions’ capacity to act” (Silverstone, 2007: 155). By combining both, the relationship among recipients and agents comes into view.

While bringing them together in a theoretical framework clarifies the fact that the ultimate significance of rights depends upon the degree to which they are observed (and that they are therefore contingent on governance), we are still left with the problem of how to specify the practical scope of a human right to communicate (Hamelink, 1998, 2012; Dakrouy & Hoffmann, 2010), particularly given the fact that the link between rights and obligations remains unrecognized in actual practice (Hamelink, 1998, 2012). My position here is that working with the notion of “capabilities” can be useful.
Communication as a capability
The capability approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum to theorize the relationship between well-being, development and justice (Robeyns, 2011) has been influential for policy and evaluation and further elaborated theoretically and empirically by academics in several fields. However, it remains largely unnoticed in sociology, arguably due to its reputation as a tool suitable for policy and practice but with limited explanatory potential (Kremakova, 2013: 394). Against this tendency, sociologist Saskia Sassen (2008) considers capabilities as a constitutive element of an analytics of social change, defining them as “collective productions whose development entails time, making, competition, and conflicts, and whose utilities are, in principle, multivalent because they are conditioned on the character of the relational systems within which they function”. Crucially for my analysis of international development communication intervention in this dissertation, Sassen argues that “certain capabilities can be shifted towards objectives other than the original ones for which they were developed”, and thus “a given capability can contribute to a very different relational system from the one it originates in”. From this perspective, if capabilities “jump tracks” they may become part of different organizing logics, changing valence to the point of shifting from constituting a critical element to its opposite.

While Sassen draws on Sen’s and Nussbaum’s capability approach, she expands the construct, which according to its proponents implies a strong positive valence, to include negative qualities. This is a crucial analytical distinction, which renders visible the fact that, under certain circumstances, development communication intervention may be self-defeating. Importantly for this dissertation, Sassen argues that, in order to analyze social change, “the critical issue is the intermediation that capabilities produce between the old and the new orders”. While she is concerned with social change at the macro-structural level of social systems, her conceptualization of a capability as a collective production with multivalent utilities depending on the relational system in which it functions is in my view useful to analyze international development communication, in that it calls critical attention to the ambiguous potential of intervention, the intermediation it produces, and the possibility that it may shift to objectives other than those originally envisioned.

Thought-provoking work linking Sen’s capabilities approach to the study of communication done by Nicholas Garnham (1999; revisited by Couldry in 2009) complements and further specifies Sassen’s conceptualization for my analytical purposes. Addressing the relationship

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106 While the so-called capability approach has gained traction in recent years among researchers of “information and communication technologies for development” (see, e.g., Bass et. al., 2013; Kleine, 2011; Oosterlaken & van den Hoven, 2011; Zheng, 2009), those studies are of limited interest here, in that they tend to technological determinism.
between communication, citizenship and social policy in terms of inequality, Garnham links rights to capabilities and argues that communication should be understood as an essential service and thus included among the forms of welfare to which citizens are entitled. Adopting Sen’s differentiation between realized functionings (what a person is actually able to do) and the set of available alternatives (the person’s real opportunities to do certain things), he rightly observes that what makes communication usable is not access “in a crude sense”, but the distribution of social resources. Even if a full capability set were on offer, people’s ability to take advantage of it would vary depending on a number of preexisting factors. This is critical. Garnham is calling attention to the fact that guaranteeing the principle of equal opportunities without acknowledging and questioning gaps in social positions is a rather limited approach to social justice (see Dubet, 2011). If we apply this idea to the analysis of international development communication intervention, it follows that a general offer of communication contents (such as an exemplary documentary series on television) or tools (such as a do-it-yourself Internet media platform) is far from sufficient to enable communication in the face of differential circumstances. From this perspective, it becomes clear that an intervention cannot be analyzed solely in terms of the range of communication options made available: taking into account “the ability of people actually to make use of these options, to achieve the relevant functionings” (ibid.: 121) is crucial.

If we consider international development communication intervention as the potential enabler of a range of functionings to which citizens are entitled, we can therefore judge it on the basis of how well or badly it serves the communicational needs of the citizens it seeks to address and “how the relevant capabilities are, in fact, socially distributed” (ibid.) from a justice perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on provision, which implies analyzing a presumed problem and its proposed solution from the supply side only, a capability approach calls attention to what citizens do – or fail to do – with the opportunities presented, making it possible to identify the obstacles standing in the way of the ideal uses envisioned by planners. From this perspective, the more intractable inhibitors, barriers, disadvantages or restrictions related to structural social stratification come into view. Garnham refers, for example, to “being in a state of contactability, an ability that, if absent, will affect other important functionings” (ibid.: 123). The focus is less on communication’s potential and more on people’s ability to actualize it, depending on contextual conditions. This in turn resonates with Silverstone’s (2007) insistence on the obligation to ensure that the voice of the other is capable of being heard. In his view, this requires attention not only to the regulatory infrastructure of national and international communication networks, but moreover requires that we reflect upon “the nature of communication, its limits and possibilities, in any given setting.
For without understanding both the politics and the power of mediated communication, and without addressing the norms of professional practice, such obligations will be stillborn” (ibid.: 157).

**Does international development communication strengthen or weaken conditions of justice?**

Silverstone’s reference to the obligation to ensure that the voice of the other is capable of being heard brings us back to the question raised at the start of this section: how (and why) does international development communication intervention make a difference in the quality of the relationship among the parties involved, in terms of global justice? And how (and to whom) does it communicate what it supposedly does? Following Fraser (2008), I am interested here in the combined but competing domestic/national and foreign/international scales as the territories in which claims for justice are to be raised in a globalizing world. Fraser’s work calls attention to the fact that, under global conditions, injustices may not be necessarily or exclusively national in character. According to what she calls the all-subjected principle, “all those who are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it”, and “what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is […] their joint subjections to a structure of governance that sets the ground rules that govern their interaction” (ibid.: 65). The case of the practice of development communication studied here belongs to the governance structure of international development cooperation. My argument is that the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia named as the “primary target beneficiaries of the project” (FOI, 2013) were subject to that structure “even though the rule-makers are not accountable to those whom they govern” (Fraser, 2008), with their right to communication, and the social capability that ensues, at stake. Depending on contextual conditions, institutional “rules of the game”, the explicit and implicit agendas and goals of international funders, and the processes of mediation privileged/disregarded during implementation, the deployment of a specific development communication initiative may/may not foster proper distance (Silverstone, 2004), and thus strengthen/weaken conditions of justice (Fraser, 2008).
Chapter 3: Method

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to document and scrutinize the trajectory of the Videoletters project, with an eye to unpacking the contextual and institutional factors that had an impact on said trajectory and to mapping the forms of mediation that came into play in the process. The object of the study is to a) contextualize the practice of international development communication within a framework that situates citizens at the center and takes communication (as a right and a capability) and justice into account; b) illuminate political and ethical issues at stake in the project and practice of international development communication; and c) advance a critical research agenda for development communication that shifts away from a toolkit approach to the relationship between media and social change, and engages the theorization of mediated intervention under global conditions in a wider-encompassing explanatory framework. The approach is qualitative, through a single case study from the recent past, which I investigated in retrospect through interviews with participants and analysis of documents.

The study was designed to answer the research questions raised in Chapter 1, which I restate here in a more concise manner. The central research question is: How did the Videoletters project take place in practice? To answer it, I documented and analyzed the Videoletters project as a contextually and institutionally situated process. I used four sub-questions to unpack this central question.

1. **How do contextual conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of an international development communication intervention?**

   This question pointed to identifying the specific political, economic and cultural conditions at play in the region where the project was implemented and to analyzing the ways in which they shaped its trajectory. The focus was on the national and regional circumstances.

2. **How do institutional conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a development communication intervention?**

   This question pointed to identifying and analyzing the ways in which bilateral funders’ priorities, formal requirements, standard ways of operating and expectations affect the trajectory of a specific initiative. The focus was on the characteristics of international intervention.
3. Which forms of mediation took place among the core actors engaged in the Videoletters project?

This question pointed to establishing and examining the choices made along the process by the project’s implementers and funders, in terms of which relevant actors to engage more closely and which ones to attend to at a distance. The focus was on issues of accountability and ethics.

4. How do normative understandings of communication influence the embracement and rejection of specific mediated strategies as avenues for the promotion of social change?

This question pointed to identifying the understandings of the social value, usefulness and power of communication and media among the project’s key actors, and analyzing how they shape the trajectory of a specific intervention. The focus was on normative criteria.

In this chapter, I substantiate my choice of a qualitative research approach, a case study design and a single case study in order to tackle these questions from the theoretical perspective put forward in Chapter 2; I discuss issues of validity, reliability and generalization; I introduce and justify the methodologies used; I explain my approach to analyzing and interpreting data; I provide an account of the fieldwork process and brief reflections on my position as a researcher; and I address limitations and ethical considerations.

**Qualitative research approach and case study design**

I chose a qualitative research approach because it places emphasis on context and process and includes people’s notions and understandings as part of the object of study (Bryman, 2008; Flick, 2009). Within a qualitative approach, the case study is a form of empirical enquiry aimed at exploring and trying to explain how or why a social phenomenon works through an in-depth picture of it that will enable analytical insights (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Thomas, 2011). More specifically, a case study makes it possible to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, “especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. Given a complex situation characterized by “many more variables of interest than data points”, a case study relies on multiple data sources in order to allow triangulation and benefit “from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (Yin, 2009: 18). Importantly, a case study has a twofold nature: it is both an object of study and a product of the inquiry (Creswell, 2013: 97).
My choice of a single case study was warranted for a number of reasons. According to Yin (2009: 52), such a decision “is eminently justifiable […] where the case represents a) a critical test of existing theory, b) a rare or unique circumstance, or c) a representative or typical case, or where the case serves a d) revelatory or e) longitudinal purpose.” These conditions apply to the Videoletters project. To begin with, the study does put the development communication literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to the test, seeking to illuminate its strengths and weaknesses as a step towards contributing to an agenda for critical research. As regards the case’s rarity and representativeness, it can be argued that the Videoletters project is characterized by a duality. On the one hand, it is rare in two ways: first, because it raised a large amount of funding, which is unusual in the context of ever-shrinking budgets, and second because it achieved visibility in the international press and among academics. These combined characteristics are infrequent, yet they also make this an appealing case. Paradoxically, while the case initially appeared as atypical, it became apparent over the course of research that Videoletters is representative or typical of how international development cooperation plays out in practice in several ways, as subsequent chapters will show. While, as an object of study (Creswell, 2013), the case does not have a revelatory nature, in that development communication interventions that share similarities with how the Videoletters project was envisioned, funded and implemented are very likely to exist even if they remain largely understudied, as a product of the inquiry (ibid.) it does, as my analysis will illustrate. Last but not least, there is a longitudinal purpose to the study: my argument is that revisiting the Videoletters project in retrospect enables a wider perspective that was not immediately available while the project was being rolled out, or soon thereafter.

If distinguished in terms of the intent of the analysis, a single case study is instrumental “when the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue”, and intrinsic when “the focus is on the case itself”, e.g., when evaluating a program (Creswell, 2013: 99-100). Importantly, I chose Videoletters as my case from an instrumental perspective. It was not my purpose to evaluate the project per se, but rather to understand it in its complexity as a situated example of the practice and the project of international development communication.

Validity and reliability
How to define and assess validity and reliability in order to judge the merits of research is a contested matter between the qualitative and quantitative camps on the one hand, and among qualitative researchers themselves on
Discussions among qualitative researchers cover a broad range and standpoints vary, from sticking to the meaning that these criteria have in quantitative research (e.g., Mason, 1996) to proposing alternative criteria (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this dissertation, I take into account the understandings of validity and reliability discussed below in the wider context of a concern with the quality of research.

**Validity**
The matter of validity can be characterized as “a question of whether the researchers see what they think they see” (Flick, 2009: 387). Three potential errors must be avoided in this respect: seeing relations or principles that are not correct, rejecting relations or principles that are in fact correct, and asking the wrong questions. In other words, the risk lies in drawing inaccurate interpretations or interrogations from the data collected (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 177; Yin, 2009: 43). Inaccuracy can be prevented by acting sensitively in the field while gathering data, and by writing research accounts accurately when reporting findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; also see Altheide & Johnson, 1998).

Construct validity refers to the degree to which inferences can legitimately be made from the operationalizations adopted in a study to the concepts or theoretical constructs on which those operationalizations were based. From a “definitionalist” perspective, the way to assure construct validity is to define a construct so precisely that it can be operationalized in a straightforward manner – an either/or approach. Instead, from a relational perspective, which I adopt here, construct validity is to be ensured by thinking carefully about how observed patterns link with the theoretical patterns adopted in such a way that we do not take the conceptual underpinnings of our empirical work for granted (Yin, 2009; Trochim, 2006).

**Reliability**
Reliability consists in “demonstrating that the operations of a study – such as the data collection procedures – can be repeated, with the same results” (Yin, 2009: 40). The point is to ensure that a different researcher could in principle conduct the same study once again by repeating its procedures, and arrive at the same results. The emphasis is on making it possible to repeat the same case (and not on aiming to replicate its results through a different study) by documenting the procedures followed in detail. Importantly, reliability “gains its importance as a criterion for assessing qualitative research only

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107 My overall position here is in line with Creswell, who, rather than “advocating the acceptance of qualitative research in a ‘quantitative’ world”, argues that it is a legitimate mode of inquiry “without apology or comparisons to quantitative research” (2013: 6).

108 For a summary, see Bryman (2008).
against the background of a specific theory of the issue under study and about the use of methods” (Flick, 2009: 386-387).

**Generalization**
External validity, which consists in “defining the domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized” (Yin, 2009: 40), is a matter of generalizing a particular set of results to some broader theory, i.e., of analytic generalization.

In analytic generalization, a previously developed theoretical framework is contrasted to the empirical results of a case study in order to broaden it (Yin, 2009: 38, 43).

As a consequence of the all too common mix-up between statistical and analytical generalization (Yin, 2009: 43), the “power of example” characteristic of carefully researched and well-documented empirical case studies tends to be underestimated (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This is an important point, which links to the matter of external validity: more analytical attention to the “power of example” can make for more explanatory theory while still respecting the particularity of the case studied. Small (2009: 22) puts it like this: “extrapolation is in fact based on the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events’ (Mitchell, 1983: 190). The natural question is how to determine that an analysis is ‘valid’.

**Criteria for quality in a study beyond validation**
Among proponents of attention to the quality of case studies (such as Thomas, 2011), there are important ways to assess the merits and limitations of this research approach (e.g., Flick, 2009; Small, 2009; and Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Quality indicators include: the clarity of the writing, the clarity of the outline and rationale for the significance of the problem and questions being addressed, the effectiveness of the methods chosen, the adequacy of the account of both the research process and the researcher’s experience, and the formulation of the main claims (clarity of the relations established between claims and evidence) (Hammersley, 2005). Critical appraisal of all aspects of the study, including the investigator’s role, is another standard of quality (Creswell, 2013). An additional criterion is whether different voices are heard throughout the research account (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001).

Triangulation is a validation strategy that has a bearing on quality. Data-source triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, different points in the temporal cycle covered, the accounts of participants differentially positioned vis-à-vis the case, and various sources (Creswell, 2009)
For Hammersley and Atkinson, triangulation involves “not the combination of different kinds of data per se, but rather an attempt to relate different sorts of data in such a way as to counteract various possible threats to the validity of our analysis” (ibid.: 184). In other words, the matter is not merely to check the accuracy of data, but rather to discover which inferences arising from the data seem more likely to be valid. More metaphorically, triangulation can be understood as the collation of different analytical methods to ensure that a study is viewed from several angles and vantage points (Thomas, 2011).

Another validation strategy proposed to increase the quality of studies is member checking, i.e., the act of soliciting the participants’ views of the credibility of the researchers’ findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). This, although desirable when feasible, would have proven problematic in my case, inasmuch as professional reputations and issues of accountability appeared to be at stake for a number of my interviewees. For Hammersley and Atkinson (2007): “the consequences of feeding back data and analyses must be taken into account, both for the researcher and for others. This practice is sometimes advocated on ethical grounds, but a commitment to openness should be tempered by a sense of political realism” (ibid.: 183). Political realism prevailed in my case. Moreover, while, for certain accounts of aspects of the project that were contradictory or contested, member checking might have clarified factual detail, I evaluated that it was more important for analytical purposes to let those differences show.

Methodologies
The main methodologies used in this dissertation were a) semi-structured interviews (including a small-group interview) and b) the collection of documents as sources of evidence. I specifically sought to use multiple sources of evidence in order to allow for data triangulation.

Fieldwork took place in a number of locations (Marcus, 1995), including Belgrade (Serbia), Sarajevo (BiH), and Amsterdam and The Hague (The Netherlands). Additional queries were made in the United Kingdom, the United States and Rwanda via e-mail and Internet telephony. While I initially thought of including Croatia as well, it soon became evident that this fourth site would add little to my inquiry, and therefore I excluded it on the grounds that the project’s operation concentrated on Serbia and BiH, and only reached Croatia to a lesser extent. Belgrade was the headquarters of the project’s regional operation, while Sarajevo was its symbolic stage for public relations purposes, as well as the only location where the project was in fact welcomed by a state broadcaster. Amsterdam was the project’s control center, while The Hague was the place where its largest diplomatic and financial endorsement came from. Interviews and the on-site collection of documents took place in two stages: the first one between April 2012
and July 2013, and the second one between September 2013 and January 2014. Certain documents were collected via Internet searches and e-mail communication before, in between and after fieldtrips.

**Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews were used in order to ask a variety of case participants about a) factual aspects of the Videoletters project and b) their opinions regarding the initiative. While certain interviews were in-depth, others were shorter and more focused (Yin, 2009: 106-109). All interviews were conducted following an interview guide. A particular guide was developed for the initial in-depth interview with the filmmakers (attached as Appendix 1). All other guides included a number of common questions (included as Appendix 2) plus a number of questions specific to each type of interviewee, pertinent to his/her role or position in the project. Additional questions were occasionally added on the spot to follow up on discovery during conversation. All the questions asked are available in recordings, since all the interviews were audiotaped. I kept interview notes in a fieldwork diary when deemed useful to register contextual detail or to highlight clues, connections or potential inferences, but my focus overall was on listening closely to respondents.

I conducted a total of twenty-four (24) individual semi-structured interviews, plus a joint interview with the two (2) filmmakers (see Appendix 3 for a full list). All interviewees gave their informed consent – the filmmakers consented orally, for reasons to be discussed shortly in this same chapter, and everybody else signed an informed-consent form (see Appendix 4). One interview was conducted in Serbian, with the assistance of an interpreter, and then translated into English in transcription by a Serbian research assistant. All other interviews were conducted in English, although those interviewees who appeared to have a lower level of proficiency in the language were asked if they would prefer an interpreter. All interviews were conducted in person with the exception of three that were conducted via Internet telephony. Interviews in person took place in Amsterdam and The Hague in The Netherlands, Belgrade in Serbia, and Sarajevo in BiH.

The interview sampling during the first stage of fieldwork was purposive, i.e., strategic, but at the same time exploratory: I sought to interview people who had engaged in Videoletters and thus could provide information and views relevant to my research questions, but was also trying to obtain a panoramic view of the project, and therefore opted for variety in sources. I then sought out more specific interviews purposely during the second stage of fieldwork. Although I did not seek to use snowball sampling110

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110 A technique for finding research subjects where one subject gives the researcher the name of another, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on, with the sample group growing like a rolling snowball (Atkinson & Flint, 2004).
in a systematic manner, a number of the interviewees voluntarily suggested additional people for me to talk to (and/or other sources of evidence, thus acting as informants rather than respondents; see Yin, 2009: 109).

Access
In my search for respondents, certain people could be located but it was difficult or impossible to engage them. Others could not be located. In the case of those who could not be located, the impossibility may be partly attributed to the lingering post-conflict environment, where people “can be highly suspicious of outsiders and express a preference to refrain from exposure” (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). A number of e-mail queries and Facebook requests to project participants that were left unanswered may speak to this problem. In BiH in particular, a number of difficulties conspired to complicate the search for interviewees: phone numbers and e-mail addresses from 2005 posted on the Videoletters website were no longer valid; many combinations of names and surnames are so common that a search would trigger too many people to be approached; hiring a fixer who could assist with searches on location by making phone calls or writing e-mails was expensive – and beyond my research budget – in the aftermath of prior international intervention in the region: everybody I approached asked for a blanket rate of EUR 100 per day regardless of results.

In the case of those people whom I managed to locate but failed to engage, the most likely explanation is that they had second thoughts about how to speak about the project, particularly, how to raise critical views in light of the project’s narrative of success. Notably, three people who originally agreed to be interviewed then changed their minds. One of them interrupted communication after having asked me to clarify my aims and warned me that “it was not all good news” (e-mail communication).

Certain types of interviewees remained harder to access than others, and the process of tracking them down illuminated in a way the processes of mediation – and the ensuing proximities and distances – characteristic of the project’s trajectory. Representatives of the United Kingdom’s Foreign & Commonwealth Office (from now on, FCO) could not be identified or approached due to bureaucratic safeguards. Relevant representatives of the Serbian state broadcaster remained inaccessible – I only managed to identify a potential interviewee and retrieve her contact details at a very late stage, once my fieldtrip had ended. Series participants were hard to locate without the assistance of the filmmakers – I reached one by myself and another one thanks to the only contact data provided by one of the filmmakers, but the few others I located by myself were unresponsive. Last but not least, the citizens supposedly targeted by the project were the most elusive category, as will be discussed in the next subsection. Despite these limitations in terms of access to interviewees, I still managed to cover the whole spectrum of
types of participants engaged in the project, even if with some imbalances in terms of representation.

**Small-group interview**
Although in this dissertation I am ultimately concerned with establishing whether the Videoletters project did benefit the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia that it supposedly intended to help, as soon as I started fieldwork it became obvious that these citizens would be impossible to reach. The audiences of the television broadcast and caravan-based public screenings of the documentary series were no longer there, and had never been approached by Videoletters through any form of systematic research. Given this difficulty, I chose to conduct a small-group interview. My purpose was to investigate, by proxy, whether the series might have been moving for viewers, responded to a perceived social need to reconnect, and led to discussion about the consequences of the conflict on relationships among ordinary citizens back in 2005. I sought to bring forth different viewpoints on a Videoletters episode, and to facilitate the expression of various perspectives on the sensitive theme of communication across ethno-political divides, which are usual aims of group interviews (Kvale, 2007: 72). The small-group interview was held in Belgrade, and included six people: four women and two men, in their late 20s-early 30s, convened by a Croat national living and working in the city who was one of the group participants himself.

To spark the discussion, the group watched one episode of the Videoletters series, “Vlada & Ivica”, on a portable DVD player. I chose that episode from those available because I figured it was the least problematic – or most neutral – of all, showing a rather untroubled process of reconnection with a “happy ending” (see Chapter 4 for a short description). I also presumed that, because the small group was being convened in Belgrade by a common friend, it would be somehow homogeneous, and therefore a story about a Serbian and a Croatian family resuming their friendship would work reasonably well. As the analysis of the group discussion in Chapter 5 will show, my assumptions were wrong. The questions I used to prompt discussion can be found in Appendix 5.

**Documents collected as sources of evidence**
The variety of documents that I collected provided specific factual details, useful to specify or corroborate information provided by interviewees, as well as clues leading to analytical insights (Yin, 2009: 101-104). The different types of documents retrieved are presented below.

111 This person had already given me language assistance in the interview with the Serbian broadcaster, and offered to gather the group members belonging to his immediate network, and to provide a suitable location.
• The documentary television series: I obtained six episodes of the television series with English subtitles from the filmmakers, to whom I paid a nominal fee for three sets of copies. I also obtained the synopses in English of sixteen episodes from an informant (see Appendix 6).

• Project press material: The project’s press release in English and a DVD containing promotional material were obtained via informants.

• Press clippings and other press coverage: I retrieved three sets of press clippings, corresponding to the Serbian print media, the Bosnian print media and the international press, respectively. Serbian and Bosnian press clippings were retrieved from Ebart,112 a private, fee-based media archive based in Belgrade, and Infobiro, a digital archive of Bosnian print media established by Mediacentar Sarajevo.113 The search services were provided at a cost. “Videoletters” was the only search term used. The search was intentionally narrow in scope because of language limitations and the need for assistance with the categorization and analysis. Eleven articles were retrieved from Ebart, and thirteen articles were retrieved from Infobiro. As regards the international press, web-published articles by The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, the BBC and Agence France Press (AFP) were retrieved. International television coverage by CNN and ABC News, the news division of the American Broadcasting Company (a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company), was also retrieved. The CNN coverage was retrieved in the form of a rushed transcript published online of a program aired online on 25 November 2005, where the network’s UN correspondent, Richard Roth, had a segment interviewing the filmmakers. The ABC News coverage was retrieved in the form of a DVD copy of the 11 July 2005 broadcast of “Nightline”, a late-night weekly news program anchored on that date by Chris Bury. The DVD was purchased from ABC News on demand via Amazon.

• Project reports to and from bilateral funders and related official documents: A narrative project report produced by the filmmakers for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (from now on, MFA) was obtained at the time of interviewing them. Written in Dutch, and impossible to translate for budget reasons, I only used it to identify the names of potential interviewees and retrieve a few other factual details. Documentation from the Media Task Force was retrieved through Internet searches. A Freedom of Information (from now on, FOI) request submitted to the UK’s FCO114 resulted in a 23-page digital file containing information about

112 See http://www.arhiv.rs/ [accessed 14 August 2014].
the project, accompanied by an official letter. A formal query submitted to the Dutch MFA[115] was redirected to a Ministry representative who gave me an interview in lieu of producing any official information. An e-mail query submitted to the European Cultural Foundation resulted in being sent a project grant application form. An e-mail query to the Open Society Foundations was dismissed.

- **Web archive:** While the Videoletters project’s website, located at www.videoletters.net in 2010, was turned into a static homepage at an early stage of my research and then resold, it remains available as archived by the Internet Archive Wayback Machine.

- **Additional audiovisual material:** I also located a one-hour-long television program in Dutch that included two of series episodes, which I could not analyze due to language limitations.[116] Footage of two precedents of the Videoletters project, Balkan Bridges and UNTV’s Video Letters, were found online. A third precedent, the 1991 TV film “Dear video”, was obtained through its director. See Chapter 4 for more details and discussion of these.

**Analysis and interpretation of data**

**Interviews:** People’s responses to interviews, like any other data, are subject to common threats to validity such as bias, poor recall or imprecise articulation, and must therefore be analyzed carefully, taking into account the particular contexts in which they took place and the social position of the interviewees (Yin, 2009: 109; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 109). Moreover, it may be in a person’s interest to manipulate or misdescribe his or her actions or views, or to counter the researcher’s questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 182-183).

Bearing these considerations in mind, I analyzed the interviews by initially identifying central themes, meaningful patterns and similarities and differences among responses. This was the first step toward structuring the data around my research questions and reflecting on findings from a theoretical perspective. On the one hand, I sought to construct the history of Videoletters in a rich but factually accurate way by collating and contrasting the accounts of several interviewers, and on the other hand I sifted through data to establish the most significant references to my theoretical framework as evidenced in the interviews – be they to support the framework or to challenge it. In the case of inconsistent or contradictory accounts of factual matters that could not be consolidated, where relevant, I chose to walk

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115 See [http://www.government.nl/ministries/bz/contact](http://www.government.nl/ministries/bz/contact) [accessed 11 August 2014].

readers through them (following Spitulnik, 2010: 114-116) and highlight the conjectural quality of ensuing inferences.

In line with what Hammersley and Atkinson characterize as “a distinctive analytic mentality” (2007: 230), I made an effort to analyze interviews without jumping to quick conclusions, by paying attention to appearances while not taking them at face value, seeking to understand people’s views without treating them as obviously true or false, and examining the circumstances in which people acted, “including much that they may not be aware of themselves, yet without losing sight of what they do attend to.”

Press clippings: The Serbian and Bosnian news articles were read and analyzed by a research assistant, – an M.Sc. graduate from Serbia with a command of the language – following a simple review form adapted from Ryan (1991), attached as Appendix 7. The regional and international press clippings were compared to establish which aspects of the project were foregrounded or obliterated, and which actors were granted or denied a voice. I used a similar approach with articles from the international media. The content of all press clippings was compared to the project’s press materials for similarities.

Documents: Written documents were read closely with three main purposes: to identify factual detail, to corroborate information from other sources, and to tease out analytical insights. Inasmuch as some of the evidence I analyzed reflected communication among specific parties for particular purposes (Yin, 2009: 105), caution regarding its accuracy and validity applied. As with interviews, in the case of inconsistent or contradictory accounts of relevant factual matters that could not be consolidated, I walked readers through them (following Spitulnik, 2010: 114-116) and highlighted the conjectural quality of ensuing inferences.

Notes on the fieldwork process

First stage of fieldwork: April 2012 to July 2013
During this first stage, I visited Amsterdam twice (April and October 2012), Belgrade twice (August and October 2012), and Sarajevo once (October 2012). My fieldwork began with an in-depth interview with the Videolets filmmakers. I had previously been in contact with one of them in 2005, when I conducted a phone interview from Buenos Aires for an article published in Malmö University’s web magazine on communication for development.117 In 2010, as I started my doctoral candidacy, I contacted the same filmmaker.118


118 The identities of the filmmakers cannot really be kept anonymous since they are publicly available and can easily be retrieved online, even though I do not name them in the dissertation.
again, this time to ask for one set of DVD copies of the episodes of the documentary series available with English subtitles, which were sent to me in the mail. In 2011, I contacted the filmmaker once more to ask for two more sets of DVD copies, which were delivered at the same cost as before. At that time, I explained that I would soon be asking both filmmakers for an interview – I knew from 2005 that they were a couple at the time, but did not refer to this in 2011 for the sake of avoiding assumptions. Finally, early in April 2012 I e-mailed them separately, explaining my interest in Videoletters and requesting an interview with each of them in person, for which I suggested that I could come to Amsterdam. I thought of interviewing them separately because I figured this would make for richer data, and allow for variation in viewpoints. My idea, however, was not well received by one of them. I understood later that s/he may have felt or thought that I was seeking to cross-examine them. S/he reacted strongly, suggesting that there was nothing new for them to say, that there was probably nothing new for me to ask about the project that had not been asked of them before, and that I should put and interview them via Skype (e-mail correspondence, 4 April 2012). Despite the difficult start, they eventually agreed to a joint interview in person, which took place in their home in Amsterdam on 18 April 2012. It was a long conversation, which lasted longer than the time I had asked for. After I had raised all my questions, and as I was getting ready to leave, they actually asked me to restart my recorder to say a few more things.

While I hoped that the filmmakers would cooperate with my research and have a facilitating role, acting as key informants to help me identify and locate other relevant actors engaged with the project throughout, I anticipated, however, that they might instead act as gatekeepers – a problem discussed by, e.g., Groger, Mayberry and Straker (1999). This in fact turned out to be the case. In October 2012, after having ignored all my attempts at e-mail communication post-interview, one of them unexpectedly volunteered the phone number of a protagonist from the series while I was in Belgrade, which allowed me to arrange an interview. But prior and subsequent requests for assistance with contact information were ignored. Instead, I reached interviewees by combing the videoletters.net website archived in the Wayback Machine, Google searches to retrieve e-mail addresses, and the use of LinkedIn, which turned out to be a very effective tool for this purpose.

After transcribing and analyzing my long interview with the filmmakers, and following an initial exploratory trip to Belgrade, other interviews followed. In this round of fieldwork, I interviewed three project crew members: one in Belgrade, and two in Amsterdam. Two of them participated in the Videoletters caravan, and one of them assisted the filmmakers with a variety of technical matters throughout the project. The three of them were born and raised in the former Yugoslavia. An e-mail attempt to reach nine people who were named on the project’s website as
local contacts in several locations in Serbia, BiH and Croatia in 2005 was mostly unsuccessful. I only managed to reach one of those local people, who declined my request for an interview and referred me instead to the caravan’s Belgrade-based political operator, whom I interviewed (a situation that suggested that some project staff members were more authorized to speak for the project than others). I also interviewed a website user, – i.e., an “ordinary citizen” who had created a personal profile on the website – in Belgrade. This person turned out to be a friend of a member of the project crew. S/he was in possession of a Videoletters DVD containing a trailer of the documentary series, which had been part of a press kit, and kindly gave it to me when we met. Moreover, I interviewed a representative of one of the two Serbian broadcasters in Belgrade, and a representative of the Bosnian broadcaster in Sarajevo. Additionally, I conducted an interview with the former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force in Amsterdam.

Besides the semi-structured interviews, at this first stage of fieldwork a number of informal conversations provided additional insights regarding the context in which Videoletters took place. In Sarajevo, I spoke with two representatives from media development initiatives funded by international cooperation in the aftermath of the breakup that remain sustainable to date, and with a prominent documentary-maker. In Belgrade, I spoke with a former practitioner engaged in international media development initiatives in the region in the aftermath of the conflict, and with a couple of ordinary citizens, in order to get a sense of their information and media use habits, views about the political situation, and socioeconomic status.

At this stage, I also had e-mail contact with Videoletters’ press coordinator, currently living abroad, who forwarded me the project’s press release in English and some other information from his files. This person was not a member of the project crew, but acted on behalf of Godwin Communications, a third-party public relations and communications agency based in Belgrade hired by Videoletters in advance of its Sarajevo premiere. Additionally, I interviewed, via Skype, an M.Sc. graduate who studied Videoletters for a master’s thesis completed in 2006 and traveled with the caravan as an embedded researcher and crew assistant in 2005.

**Second stage of fieldwork: September 2013 to January 2014**

During this second stage, I visited Belgrade and Sarajevo once (September 2013), and Amsterdam one last time, including a day trip to The Hague (November 2013). At this stage, I interviewed five members of the project’s crew: two of them in Amsterdam – one Dutch and one born and raised in the former Yugoslavia – two of them in Belgrade, and one in Sarajevo. I also interviewed a participant from the series in Belgrade. Additionally, I interviewed the representatives of Nielsen Serbia and Mareco Index Bosnia, to discuss the broadcast ratings. While in Sarajevo, I attended the conference
“Between sustainability and dependence: 20 years of media assistance in the Western Balkans”, organized by the Analitika Center for Social Research in cooperation with organizations from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Aaron Rhodes, the author of a report that I use as a source in this dissertation (Rhodes, 2007), gave the conference’s keynote lecture and discussed the enduring impact of the shortcomings of international media assistance in the region between 1995 and 2005. In The Netherlands, I interviewed one of the creators of the Videoletters website on behalf of Mediamatic, and two representatives of the Dutch MFA.

Via Skype, I interviewed two of the people who worked in the pilot testing of the Videoletters concept in Rwanda, one based in The Netherlands and the other one in Rwanda. These two interviews were rich. However, because the attempt to implement Videoletters in Rwanda differed from the trajectory of Videoletters in the former Yugoslavia in a number of significant ways, and also because the project team was so small that it would be impossible to quote the people interviewed without giving away their identities, I use the Rwandan case to a very limited extent in this dissertation.

Limitations
A number of limitations had a bearing on the study. In order to keep the study manageable within the time and budget available, I dropped my efforts to gain access to certain types of interviewees when they became obviously complicated (as discussed earlier in this chapter). While I argue that the resulting constellation of interviewees does still cover the various types of project participants relevant to my analysis, I acknowledge that some types may be underrepresented, thus making certain inferences more speculative than others or potentially leaving certain details unresolved. The project’s Rwanda component, although originally included within the scope of my research and actually tackled at the stage of data collection, was largely left unexamined in the end, because an adequate analysis would have exceeded the purposes of the dissertation.

Last but not least, although re-interviewing the filmmakers toward the end of the fieldwork process may have helped clarify certain contested facts and viewpoints about the project, I chose not to pursue that path. This dilemma did not have a clear-cut way out. In the end, I based my decision on the fact that, according to my analysis, the voice of the filmmakers had been privileged in a number of ways over the course of the project, and I had already given them enough voice as it was without re-interviewing them. This was in line with the political realism advised by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) referred to earlier in this chapter.
Why this study?
I first came across the Videoletters project in 2004. At the time, I was working as a film producer in my hometown, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and had two international co-productions under development, one of them with a Dutch associate, Ilse Hughan.119 I had started up in film as a producer of participatory documentaries, and I was in the process (as a distance student) of writing my master’s thesis in Communication for Development for Malmö University in Sweden. In the thesis, I compared two participatory documentary-making projects that I had produced, and sought to identify and analyze the contextual and institutional differences that had led to variations in take-up among the participants in each case. Although by then I was mainly producing fiction films for theatrical distribution, I remained interested in documentary-making news, and frequent contact with Hughan implied ready access to information about Dutch film festivals.120 Browsing the IDFA website, I learned about the filmmakers’ presentation of Videoletters as a work-in-progress at the festival’s 2004 edition.121

Early in 2005, once I graduated from the master’s program in Malmö, its director invited me to engage as an editor in launching the course’s communication for development web magazine, Glocal Times.122 For the second issue of the web magazine, focused on the Balkans,123 I contacted the Videoletters team via videoletters.net and arranged to interview one of them by phone as the basis for an article. At the time, I found the project – and its self-generating, media-spun narrative – extremely interesting. On paper, it looked like a dream project that would cover all the bases. In retrospect, re-reading my article as input toward my dissertation proposal, I was surprised and amused to find that, despite my critical take on media-centric approaches, I headlined the piece with reference to media effects.

I have learned from experience that, among documentary makers, the best of intentions are immediately muddled by “reality” once a project goes from planning to pre-production, when ideals – narrative, ethical, political – are put to the test both by contested viewpoints and interests among participants, and by a number of contextual conditions. I have also learned from experience that funders, distributors and policymakers tend to have a major influence on the trajectory and outcome of audiovisual projects, and that it requires a great deal of creativity and tenacity to try


120 Hughan herself had worked for years on the sale and distribution of documentaries before shifting into the production of so-called independent filmmaking in Latin America.


123 Where a number of the master’s students were conducting research at the time.
to work around the limitations imposed by those powerful players. In this sense, structure tends to beat agency. But I also have learned from experience that audiences may at times be moved by films – if not to take direct action to solve a social problem, at least to discuss the problem in wider circles beyond a screening.

That the influence of the feelings, emotions and/or impulses to act that a given viewing experience may provoke in a given number of individuals can contribute to wider, collective conversations as a first step in the direction of meaningful action toward social change is too neat a story to be true. Most days, a political-economy outlook makes me think that it actually comes down to wishful thinking. At the same time, however, I believe that, as noted by Nederveen Pieterse (2001) in his discussion of development theory, a story of the uselessness of stories is a thin story, and that there are lessons to be learned from becoming aware of “the meanings of trying as well as of failure”. Personally, it is an enduring curiosity about what happens in the zone delimited by varying constellations of intentions, actual possibilities and reactions involved in the making of communication and media-driven interventions that underpins this dissertation. Professionally, the question of what kind of academic work may strengthen development communication as a critical mode of intervention with the potential to change unjust global conditions is what pushed me forward.

**Ethical considerations**

**Informed consent**

Written informed consent was requested from all interviewees but two through a consent form that included information about the purpose, methods and intended uses of my research, and explained that participation was voluntary (see Appendix 4). In the case of the filmmakers, I requested their oral consent, which they gave me, asking in exchange that I make sure to send them a copy of the final dissertation when ready. They also authorized my use of the six DVD copies of episodes of the Videoletters television series, which I bought from them at a nominal cost, for research purposes. I did not request their written informed consent at the time of interviewing them because one of them had been very reluctant to agree to an appointment in person, and I thought that requesting a signature up front might have been met with resistance. Every other interviewee signed a consent form. Signature was requested on a form in English, but a translation was offered to interviewees.

**Confidentiality**

While the names of all interviewees have been kept confidential in the dissertation, the anonymity of some of them cannot be guaranteed. In the case of the two filmmakers, this is because their names appear in
information about Videoletters that is easily searchable online.\footnote{Kvale (2007: 7) notes that at present interviews have become part of the common culture, quoting Atkinson and Silverman’s reference to the “interview society” (1997).} In the case of interviewees who held or still hold public positions, I argue that identifying their institutional affiliation at the time of the project is necessary in order to illuminate issues of power and position-taking in the field. I am aware that this gives away details that make them potentially identifiable for readers seeking to locate them.

**Consequences**

The research I conducted was not considered likely to harm participants, based on the examination and approval of my dissertation proposal in 2011. Karlstad University does not require that approval for the data collection involved in studies be sought from an institutional review board as long as no risk for participants is envisioned. From a macro-ethics perspective (Kvale, 2007: 30-31; also see Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005), it is important to stress that knowledge produced through interviews for this dissertation may raise issues of institutional responsibility and organizational accountability. As suggested by Kvale (ibid.), such macro-level ethical issues would be best approached through public discussion of the social consequences and uses of the knowledge produced.
Chapter 4: The Videoletters project

How did the Videoletters project take place in practice? In this chapter, I address the study’s central research question by documenting and analyzing Videoletters as a process. From a development communication perspective, I look into the project’s stages defined as *inception*, *implementation*, *circulation*, *end/exit* and *evaluation*. To add detail to this perspective, and in order to bring into view the project’s ethical and political dimensions, I examine the *production*, *distribution* and *reception* of the Videoletters documentary television series – which I consider an outstanding component of the intervention – from the viewpoint of studies of documentary-making for social change. This combined approach enables me to produce a rich, situated description of the Videoletters project as a process that unfolded over time under specific circumstances.

Starting from a snapshot of a project fact sheet issued in 2005, I introduce the actors involved in the project and establish its components (and corresponding media technologies), geographical span and timeline. I then examine the project’s inception, looking into the origin of the idea and its precedents in theory and in practice. Following from those precedents, I define “video letters” – the form of correspondence facilitated by the project’s proponents – and “videoletters” – the episodes of the documentary television series produced based on each case of correspondence, and analyze one of those cases/episodes to provide an example. Next, I scrutinize the production, distribution and reception of the Videoletters documentary television series as the outstanding component of the project and consider factors in the shift from “documentary television series” to “tool for reconciliation” that took place when the project was scaled up in line with the expectations of funders. Finally, I examine issues of strategy and evaluation throughout the intervention’s stages, and map the intervention’s circulation beyond the series’ distribution – at documentary film festivals, in the media and in academic work.

**What was Videoletters?**

Based on the fact sheet that follows, Videoletters was a media-driven multi-scalar intervention. The snapshot, which shows how the project was described by its implementers at videoletters.net in 2005, is used as a point of departure for the characterization and analysis of the project. Some of the actions listed in the fact sheet in fact never materialized (the Internet booths and talk shows on radio and television), while others materialized to a limited, almost nominal extent (the telephone helplines) or in a modified and restricted manner (the caravan consisted of only one bus, not all the countries of the former Yugoslavia were
crisscrossed, and the website only served informational purposes in the end). Despite the shortcomings, the image of an integrated intervention designed to cover all the (media) bases would endure, as we will see.

The Videoletters fact sheet

Videoletters Fact Sheet
Videoletters project

co-authors and directors
Videoletters was created by the Media Art and Future Research Group (the Netherlands), directors of "The making of the revolution", an award winning documentary on the fall of the Milosevic regime. Draper and Van den Broek are independent documentary makers.

filming
1999 - 2004

sponsors
The Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs, The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, The British Embassy Belgrade, European Cultural Foundation, Press Neo, Open Society Institute, Cine Netherlands, Swiss Embassy Bosnia and Herzegovina, OTG, SBS4U, Lijn Internet, Polycom/QConferencing

Videoletters, the TV series
20 episodes of 25 minutes
In each episode, former friends, colleagues or neighbours separated by the war in the Former Yugoslavia exchange videoletters. Step by step, they establish what once was a close relationship. Some meet again for the first time since the war.

Videoletters, the website
From April 2, a special internet site will be launched on www.videoletters.net enabling people to post their own videoletters. A powerful search engine will facilitate the quest for a lost friend. The site will also include projects for schools and former soldiers, help for traumatized people and live discussions on truth and reconciliation. The first episode of Videoletters will be broadcasted live on the internet. Until April 2, this site will only contain general information about the Videoletters project.

Videoletters, the caravan
Buses equipped with internet connections and webcams will crisscross the countries of the Former Yugoslavia in order to allow people to record their own videoletters and post them on the special website.

Videoletters, internet counters
Permanent internet counters also equipped with webcams will be installed throughout the countries involved in the project. They will be free of charge and are designed to help people record and post their videoletters or look for one of their lost friend on the website.

Videoletters helplines
Telephone helpline will be accessible also to people experiencing trauma or emotional problems after each broadcast.

Videoletters talk shows
Talk shows on truth and reconciliation will be organized on radio and TV following the broadcast of Videoletters.

Videoletters ambassadors
Famous artists, sportmen and musicians of all nationalities will promote Videoletters on internet, radio and TV.

Videoletters gala premiere
April 2 2005 in “Cafe Sur Dayton”, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Videoletters broadcast
From April 7 2005 until June 2005 on all public TV channels of countries of Former Yugoslavia.
Actors involved in the project
Videoletters involved primary and secondary actors. I define primary actors as those of central importance for the project to take place: 1) the filmmakers, who were the project’s proponents and implementers; 2) the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia that the project was meant to benefit (with the citizens who participated directly in the documentary television series as a particular case); 3) the project’s international supporter and bilateral funders, who provided the institutional endorsement, money and diplomatic support required to operate; and 4) the state broadcasters in the successor states, called on to air the documentary television series. Secondary actors are those that played a supporting role in the implementation or the circulation of the project. At the level of implementation, secondary actors were: 1) the makers of the Videoletters website; and 2) the Videoletters caravan crew. At the level of circulation, they were: 1) the international documentary film festivals; 2) the news media in the successor states to the former Yugoslavia; and 3) the international news media.

Primary actors
Table 2 below introduces the project’s primary actors at a glance. A characterization of each of them follows.

Table 2: Primary actors engaged in the Videoletters project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International proponents &amp; implementers</th>
<th>Citizens of the successor states125</th>
<th>International supporters &amp; funders</th>
<th>Broadcasters in the successor states</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The filmmakers: proponents and implementers
The project was created and put into practice by two documentary filmmakers based in Amsterdam. Shortly before producing and directing the Videoletters

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125 Following the methodological rationale presented in Chapter 3, this table focuses on Serbia and BiH as the two successor states most dealt with by the project.
documentary television series, they had made two other documentaries focusing on the former Yugoslavia. “Circus Sarajevo”, produced by Dutch public broadcaster VPRO in 2000, looked into the contradictory consequences of the arrival of international development experts to the capital of BiH. “The making of the revolution”, produced by the Dutch documentary production company Selfmade Films, followed the Serbian youth movement Otpor! (Resistance!) in the weeks preceding the fall of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime in October 2000. Released in 2001 at the Amnesty International Film Festival held in Amsterdam, the film was awarded the European Parliament’s Special Prix Europa in the category of TV non-fiction. With Videoletters, the filmmakers would go on to achieve further recognition: in 2005 they received the Néstor Almendros Award for courage in filmmaking at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, held in New York every year. Since then, they have not released new work. While they had previous experience in documentary-making, and specifically in the Western Balkans, they did not have a background as planners, implementers or evaluators of large-scale media-driven initiatives for social change. For the purpose of receiving and managing the Dutch funding obtained for the project, they created a legal foundation under the name of Videoletters, based in Amsterdam. I interviewed them together in Amsterdam in April 2012, as the starting point of my fieldwork.

The citizens of the successor states, a.k.a. the beneficiaries
According to Videoletters’ plans and statements, “The primary target beneficiaries of the project are the citizens of the former Yugoslavia” (FCO, 2013). The project thought of these citizens as a) residents of a war-torn region, b) television viewers and c) web users, who were victims of their respective states and therefore required international assistance in order to fulfill their need to communicate across ethno-political divides. A number

126 The 50-minute documentary can be viewed online at [http://www.geschiedenis24.nl/speler.program.3181395.html](http://www.geschiedenis24.nl/speler.program.3181395.html). Most of the dialogue is in English.


130 Created by Human Rights Watch and the Film Society of Lincoln Center to honor the cinematographer’s legacy as a human rights advocate.

131 This was not the case with the British funding. Documentation provided by the FCO names the filmmakers as individual grantees.

132 I met them once more at a seminar organized by Malmö University’s master’s program in Communication for Development in February 2013, where they presented Videoletters to students.

133 García Canclini (2007) notes that each individual has overlapping identities as a reader, spectator and Internet user.
of sources offer us a glimpse of these citizens’ living conditions by 2005, when the project was rolled out.

A survey of six countries conducted in November 2004 showed that the region’s citizens distrusted the governments in office as much as the opposition, and could not see any credible alternatives to the status quo, which was perceived as extremely negative (ICB, 2005: 7; also see Abrasheva, 2008). According to the International Commission on the Balkans, by April 2005 the region’s situation was bleak: “economic growth […] is low or non-existent; unemployment is high; corruption is pervasive; and the public is pessimistic and distrustful towards its nascent democratic institutions” (ICB, 2005: 7). In terms of their relationships with the European Union, the Commission referred to Serbia and Bosnia, together with Montenegro and Kosovo, as “the losers in the accession game” (ibid.: 14). In these countries’ constitutional frameworks, shaped by the same elites that had been actively involved in the region’s violent breakup, power was still based on ethnic-group affiliation. State governments were weak, and the provision of several public services that would normally be their responsibility was in the hands of international authorities instead.

Bosnian citizens

According to the Agency for Statistics of BiH, by June 2005 the country had a population of nearly 3,843,000 inhabitants. Its three nationalities – Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats – were distributed in ethnically homogenized territorial units within a federative democratic republic divided into two main administrative entities, the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska (Jusic & Dzihana, 2008; IDEA, 2007). Less than a third of Bosnia’s working-age population was in the labor force, compared to an average of 64 percent in the EU. According to Freedom House’s 2005 scores, the country was “partly free”.134 Corruption in the judiciary, police forces and civil service remained a major problem, with the country ranked 82nd (out of 146) in the Transparency International 2004 Corruption Perceptions Index. According to the International Commission on the Balkans, there was “often an irresistible temptation for both international representatives and local governments to shift accountability onto one another” (ICB, 2005: 17), and as a consequence citizens lacked a clear idea of who was responsible for what. In the presence of political parties identified with ethnic groups, ethnicity remained the most important key for voters, and nationalistic parties were consistently successful in elections characterized by low turnouts (IDEA, 2007). Data from 2006 shows that ethnicity was a factor not only in voting but also in reading patterns, such that the

newspapers based in one region where an ethnic group was predominant were not read in other areas or by other groups (Jusic, 2010). In Freedom House’s view, journalism continued “to be plagued by a relatively low standard of professional ethics, a reliance on foreign donations for survival, and the consideration that most media outlets appeal only to narrow ethnic constituencies”. Moreover, the audience was ethnically divided: the rating of the state channel that broadcast Videoletters, BHT1, was around 10 percent in the Federation of BiH and 3 percent in the Republika Srpska (Jusic & Dzihana, 2008). Among a total of 1,100,000 households, 95 percent had a television receiver. According to Sarajevo-based research company Mareco Index Bosnia, the audience share at the national level in 2005 was 24.8 for the state broadcasting system, 30.8 for foreign television stations and 40.6 for local/regional television stations, with a steady decrease in shares for the state broadcaster. By 2005, there were approximately 1,500,000 mobile-phone subscribers in the country, and Internet penetration was 20.8 percent – these were primarily dial-up connections, and not broadband (Jusic, 2010).

**Serbian citizens**

According to census figures from 2002, Serbia (without counting Kosovo but including Montenegro) had a population of nearly 7,498,000 inhabitants, of which approximately 83 percent were Serbs, 4 percent ethnic Hungarians (particularly in the Vojvodina region), and less than 2 percent Bosniaks135 (IDEA, 2007). Freedom House’s assessments of the country for 2004 and 2005 speak of a complicated scenario.136 In 2004, Serbia’s relations with the United States and the EU were weak as a consequence of its reluctance to cooperate with the ICTY137 and to resolve the status of Kosovo. Corruption was high, and economic progress had stalled. The nationalist Serbian Radical Party, a Milosevic ally, remained one of the two most popular political organizations. Legislation was restrictive and unfavorable to the growth of the civil sector. The Serbian government maintained control of state media, particularly television, which had a high degree of influence: although data for 2005 could not be located, figures for 2003 and 2009 show it was the most widespread and popular medium by far, with a typical viewer spending more time in front of the television than any European citizen (Matic & Rankovic, 2010). According to Freedom House, tabloids, “increasingly engaged in promoting hate speech to boost their popularity and sell more copies”, were very popular.

135 A bit more than 1 percent of the population declared a Yugoslav nationality in that census.


137 The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, a UN court of law established to deal with the war crimes that took place during the breakup in the 1990s, based in The Netherlands.
Hate speech was still not prosecuted despite recurring occurrences (and B92 was in fact repeatedly harassed by government members during that year). Internet became relatively accessible only by late 2005,\textsuperscript{138} when Serbia had 1 million Internet users, i.e., 13.3 percent of the population. According to a survey, by 2005 around 300,000 citizens – i.e., approximately 4 percent of the population – spent at least one hour online daily. The prevalence of connectivity was higher in Belgrade, followed by the Vojvodina.\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{The series’ protagonists}

A small but significant number of citizens from the region participated directly in the documentary television series. I say \textit{significant} because without their participation the project at large would not have existed. In agreeing to attempt video letter correspondence with distantiated others, they also consented to going public with their personal (his)stories, thus becoming documentary examples. In the context of the series, their experiences of disconnect were presented as characteristic of what happened to other fellow citizens from the region during the breakup, and as exemplary illustrations of how communication across ethno-political divides could be resumed in the aftermath. The precise number of participants in the series could not be established over the course of my research. While the filmmakers have spoken of a total of 20 episodes, and this figure has been repeated by some sources, other data suggests that at most 16 episodes were produced. Among the six episodes to which I had direct access, some involved only two protagonists (individuals communicating with each other), and others involved several (families), covering a variety of locations. The filmmakers’ rationale for contacting potential participants for the series could not be established over the course of my research either. My interviews suggest that they resorted to their network of close contacts at least in some cases: one interviewee knew one of the filmmakers as an extended family acquaintance, and another one was approached on behalf of the filmmakers by a former Otpor! member who was a common friend.

\textit{The project’s international supporter and funders}

Videoletters had one decisive international supporter, the Media Task Force of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, which did not provide financial resources directly, but crucially lobbied the project’s British and Dutch funders. The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe was the international conflict-prevention strategy for the region adopted in June 1999 at the initiative of the European Union. By bringing together more than forty partner countries and organizations, it sought to strengthen efforts

\textsuperscript{138} Due to the adoption of ADSL technology and lower prices.

\textsuperscript{139} Estimate based on figures for 2008 (see Matic & Rankovic, 2010).
aimed at fostering peace, democracy, human rights and economic prosperity as requisites for stability. More specifically, the Media Task Force, a collaborative effort aimed at providing assistance to the development of free, independent, professional and diverse media in the region, brought together all relevant actors in the field of media assistance: donor countries, international (non-governmental) organizations as well as recipient countries represented by the chairmen of National Working Groups. Pushing for the transformation of state broadcasting into public service broadcasting was an outstanding area of action. In the Task Force’s view, the international community should “continue political pressure, to ensure that transformation takes place” (MTF Strategy 2001-2004). Other areas of action were the promotion of regional cooperation to advance mutual understanding, and of archiving, to allow the media and the public access to past content that could contribute to contextualization and understanding, especially when linked regionally through the Internet (MTF Strategy 2001-2004). An outstanding objective was to balance “the regularly negative coverage of ethnic and religious minorities” through more tolerant reporting (MTF Strategy 2001-2004).

In order to allow for the representation of recipient countries, the Task Force established local Media Working Groups in each successor state that included professional and civil society representatives. While governmental representatives were also incorporated in some cases, the participation of state-owned media authorities was generally limited (with the consequence that the managers of state broadcasters would not have known about Videoletters via this mechanism). Projects to be put forward for funding were reviewed and selected by the Task Force and then proposed to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of funders in consultation with the local Working Groups (MTF Progress Report 2003). Between its establishment in 1999 and its phasing out in 2006, 35 projects received funding as a result of cooperation under its umbrella. Projects received funding as a result of cooperation under its umbrella, including Videoletters, which was referred to as an example of “high quality television production.” Though expensive, said production was considered of utmost importance given the reach of television (ibid.). I interviewed the Task Force’s former Executive Secretary in Amsterdam as part of my fieldwork.


141 Published online at http://www.stabilitypact.org/media/strategy01-04.asp (accessed 3 April 2014).


Funders large and small

As far as it could be established over the course of my research, Videoletters was funded by two private foundations and two bilateral donors. Start-up funding was provided in 2001 by the Open Society Foundations’ (from now on, OSF) Network Media Program – which was based in London, United Kingdom, at the time of my query in 2013, but located in Budapest, Hungary, in the aftermath of the Yugoslav breakup (MTF, Overview 2004). Outstanding funding was provided by the United Kingdom’s FCO in 2003 in the first place, followed by the MFA of the Netherlands in 2004. A small amount of additional funding was provided by the European Cultural Foundation, based in Amsterdam, in 2004. The total amount of funding exceeded EUR 1.3 million. The exact number is unknown because the OSF claimed to have no record of the amount or any other documentation they could share (although they did have a record of having supported the project). Establishing the provenance and extent of funding is important to show that the project counted on a significant amount of economic resources. But let us look into each of the funders in some more detail.

- **OSF’s Media Program, United Kingdom:** Formerly known as the Open Society Institute, founded by business magnate George Soros, the OSF funded the Videoletters project through its Media Program in 2001 (e-mail correspondence with the Program’s director). While the amount could not be established, documentation by the Media Task Force indicates that it did not exceed EUR 60,000 (MTF Overview 2004). The Open Society Institute was one of the largest private foundations active in the region at the time, and therefore an influential actor (see Chapter 1).

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144 While other so-called “sponsors” are named in the fact sheet shown on page 121, the specifics of their contributions could not be established. Given the reasonable assumption that in most cases they either provided in-kind services or assistance on location, inquiries were pursued to a limited extent.

145 Recently reformulated as the Program on Independent Journalism. See http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/independent-journalism/background [accessed 18 February 2014].

146 By 2003, Videoletters had secured a budget of EUR 240,000 from Press Now, the OSF and the United Kingdom combined. Since the United Kingdom provided EUR 180,000, it follows that EUR 60,000 was granted by Press Now and the OSF, but the respective shares could not be established. Press Now was created in 1993 to assist independent media in the former Yugoslavia offering an alternative to state propaganda, and expanded in 2004 to conflict zones in transitional countries. In 2011, it merged with other organizations to form Free Press Unlimited. It was not possible to obtain information about Videoletters from the merged body. See http://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/our-history [accessed 3 March 2014].

147 Published online at http://www.stabilitypact.org/media/overview%20MTF%20projects2004-2.pdf [accessed 3 April 2014].
• The FCO, United Kingdom: The British Government funded Videoletters through its Global Conflict Prevention Pool’s (GCPP) Balkan Strategy,148 headquartered in London, and the British Embassy in Belgrade. The amount was EUR 180,000. According to information released by the FCO in October 2013, funding was granted in September 2003 and fully disbursed by 2004. At the time, the Office of the High Representative in BiH was being run by British liberal democrat politician Paddy Ashdown (Hozic, 2008). The money was earmarked for organizing and monitoring the broadcasting of the series in all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, launching a publicity and promotion campaign in order to ensure major impact, and producing a survey on the impact of Videoletters.149 While the FCO would not provide the name of any representatives for interviews, following an FOI request it released a redacted selection of information about the project from their records.

• The MFA, The Netherlands: The Dutch Government funded Videoletters through its Western Balkans Division to the amount of EUR 1.14 million.150 Funding was granted in October 2004, with a deadline for implementation by June 2008 (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2011). The money was earmarked for a variety of actions: organizing the broadcast; organizing a gala for donors, press and launch of the project; filming Videoletters ambassadors; organizing talk shows on truth and reconciliation on television, radio and the Internet; building booths with Internet access and web cams across the region; buses with computers and Internet access driving to remote areas in the region; telephone helplines; establishing a website (ECF grant application form). These actions evidence a certain degree of overlap with the purposes of the British funding, as well as a mix between development communication and public relations aims. I interviewed two representatives of the Ministry in The Netherlands as part of my fieldwork.

• The European Cultural Foundation, The Netherlands: The Foundation funded Videoletters with EUR 18,000 in 2005 (e-mail correspondence with ECF Grants Administrator). The money was earmarked for convening and training a multi-ethnic group of artists from the region to act as promoters and facilitators of the project’s website (an action that did not materialize).


149 This goes to show that at least part of the funding was destined for evaluation.

150 According to the grant application form submitted by the Videoletters foundation to the European Cultural Foundation, the exact amount was EUR 1,138,668.
In Serbia, the Videoletters documentary television series was broadcast partly by the state broadcasting corporation, Radio Television Serbia (RTS), and partly by private broadcaster B92. According to information posted on videoletters.net and retrieved through the Wayback Machine, the broadcast was scheduled on Thursdays at 22:30 on RTS’ Channel 2, starting on 7 April and ending on 26 May 2005. Ratings obtained from Belgrade-based Nielsen Audience Measurement-AGB Strategic Research show that the start hour varied, with a couple of episodes pushed to 23:00 or later, and irregular hours for another four, aired a bit before or after 22:30. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 6, RTS refused to broadcast a number of the series’ episodes, and those were broadcast instead by B92. Created in the early 1990s as a Belgrade-based radio station, B92 became a symbol of independent journalism widely endorsed by international funders during Milosevic’s regime. It grew into a television broadcaster in 2000, focusing on investigative journalism and the coverage of politically sensitive matters (such as Serbian responsibility for war crimes). According to Nielsen ratings, B92 broadcast Videoletters on Saturdays at 15:00, starting on 21 May and ending on 26 June. I interviewed B92’s Chief Executive Officer in Belgrade as part of my fieldwork. RTS’ director when Videoletters was broadcast in 2005, Aleksandar Tijanić, was still in office when I did my fieldwork (until his death in October 2013) but could not be approached.

In BiH, the Videoletters documentary television series was broadcast solely by Radio Television Bosnia-Herzegovina (BHRT), the statewide public broadcaster that constitutes the Bosnian state broadcasting system together with the entity broadcasters, Radio TV of the Federation of BiH and Radio TV of Republika Srpska. Videoletters was broadcast by the channel BHT1, which was mandated with covering both entities and used the three official languages of BiH – Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian – in an equal manner. According to its 2006 annual report, while at the time BHT1 reached 93 percent of the country’s territory, its ratings were much lower (Basic-Hrvatin

151 See http://www.b92.net/about_us/ [accessed 18 February 2014].

152 Faced with shutdowns by the government, in 1996 the radio station adopted the newly released RealAudio format to stream their programming over the Internet in real time, with the support of Dutch Internet provider XS4ALL, which is listed in the Video letters series’ credits as a project supporter.

153 When I inquired into the possibility of interviewing him, a Serbian journalist told me: “Aleksandar Tijanić is still the director of the Serbian public television. He is very intelligent, loud, cynic, but aggressive, politically questionable (and they say, morally too). […] People in Serbia mainly do not like him. He was a good journalist, but also one of Milosevic’s ministers of information (in ’94-’96, I think), very close to the ex-first lady of Serbia, Mirjana Markovic, who is probably one of the most hated persons in Serbia […] And when he became the first man of RTS it was an unwelcome placing for the civil society and democratic corpus.”

154 For its current website, see http://www.bhrt.ba/bht1/ [accessed 3 March 2014].
& Thompson, 2008). According to information posted on videoletters.net, and confirmed through BHT1 archive records, the series was broadcast on Thursdays at 21:00 between 7 April and 7 July 2005. Ratings obtained from Mareco Index Bosnia show that the channel also programmed a repetition on Saturday afternoons that would soon be discontinued – according to an interviewee, because the filmmakers would not authorize it. BHT1 was keen on supporting the project, to the extent that a representative from the channel was present when the series screened as a work-in-progress at the IDFA in 2004, and endorsed the project in interviews with the international and national press. I interviewed three BHT1 staff members who were involved with the Videoletters broadcast in different capacities in Sarajevo, at BHRT’s headquarters.

Secondary actors
Secondary actors played a role in supporting the project’s implementation and circulation. Two types of secondary actors were engaged by the filmmakers in support of the project’s implementation: to develop the website and to man the caravan. Three types of secondary actors played a role in making the project known.

Support for implementation

The makers of the Videoletters website: The Videoletters website, videoletters.net,\(^{155}\) was commissioned by the filmmakers from Mediamatic Lab, an agency based in Amsterdam that designed interactive websites and new-media applications to encourage interaction, collaboration and knowledge-sharing.\(^{156}\) A team of three people worked closely in the design of the Videoletters website – Mediamatic Lab’s founder, a partner, and a designer. Additional staff were contracted in order to edit the website’s content, initially in Amsterdam and then in Belgrade as part of the caravan’s staffing. Mediamatic and the Videoletters foundation co-applied for the European Cultural Foundation grant, and whether it was one or the other that hired the Amsterdam-based editorial staff could not be clarified. Although I established contact with the three Mediamatic members who created the website, only one effectively agreed to an interview in the end. I also interviewed one of the people hired to edit the website’s content in Amsterdam.

The Videoletters caravan crew: According to data obtained during fieldwork, the caravan crew was recruited partly in Amsterdam and partly in Belgrade. Besides Dutch and Serbian staff, it also included a Bosniak member,

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\(^{155}\) For the website as archived by the Wayback Machine, go to http://web.archive.org/web/*/videoletters.net [accessed 3 March 2014].

\(^{156}\) See http://www.mediamatic.net/8845/nl/videoletters [accessed 20 February 2014].

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representing BHRT during part of the itinerary as an embedded reporter, and a Croatian member. Members had a varied background. The staff recruited in The Netherlands included a music band, brought along to play live in each of the caravan’s public appearances in order to add a so called “feel-good” element to visits to cities and towns (interview A). At least part of the staff recruited in Belgrade was hired impromptu, by asking local contacts to spread the word and come up with candidates. Besides the caravan’s staff, according to videoletters.net a number of people acted as local project coordinators in Skopje (Macedonia), Ljubljana/Zagreb (Slovenia/Croatia), Sarajevo (BiH), Pogdorica (Montenegro), Pristina (Kosovo) and Belgrade (Serbia). At least some of these coordinators traveled with the caravan as part of the crew. Intensive attempts to interview the local coordinator for Sarajevo, who has gone on to become a government minister in one of the two entities, failed. I did interview the contact person for Belgrade, a former Otpor! member, who was not listed as a contact person on videoletters.net to avoid online harassment from nationalists (s/he appeared instead as a “friend” of Videoletters). I also interviewed four of the caravan’s staff members: two in Amsterdam, and two in Belgrade.

Support for circulation

International documentary film festivals: Two international documentary film festivals served as the setting for communicating qualities about the Videoletters project between 2004 and 2005. In 2004, IDFA, regarded as one of the most international and respected forums in the documentary film festival circuit (Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2011), was where episodes of the series were first shown in public and the Dutch Government’s funding for the project was announced. Attended by more than 2,000 people, including 120 programming and commissioning editors, the IDFA 2004 exposed Videoletters to the wider documentary-making international community. Scholar Patricia Aufderheide (2005) highlighted the project in her account of the festival in Dox, a leading European magazine on documentary filmmaking supported by the European Union’s Culture Program. In 2005, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, held every year in New York to highlight films that portray human rights concerns, was where the filmmakers were granted the Néstor Almendros Prize, subsequently highlighted by international media coverage. Arguably, the meaning of Videoletters as documentary-making for social change was shaped by its privileged inclusion in these two festivals (Schiller, 2009). Three of my interviewees – besides the filmmakers themselves – attended the IDFA presentation.

The news media in Serbia and BiH: According to material retrieved from the digital media archives, Infobiro in BiH and Ebart in Serbia, a number of newspapers and magazines from these successor states covered the project.
Although the coverage retrieved cannot be considered fully encompassing (the scope of the search was restricted due to language limitations), it is relevant to my query in that it shows how the project was framed for readers by the printed media of both countries, allowing comparison between these and with the international coverage. While my analysis will show that the influence of press coverage in the successor states is likely to have been insignificant, since the information provided to citizens was scant and poor in quality, it was important to look into it in connection with the project’s concern with getting the media’s attention. From this perspective, the national media were a target of the intervention as much as the citizens named as beneficiaries.

The international news media: The project got television, radio and print news coverage in the United States, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, which was in turn reproduced elsewhere.\textsuperscript{157} The coverage retrieved illustrates how the project was framed for readers outside the region where it was implemented, the so-called global audience, but also, importantly, because the amount and extent of international media attention were considered a measure of success by bilateral donors (and a reliable data source by academics). Again, from this perspective, the international media were a target of the intervention as much as the citizens of the successor states named as beneficiaries.

The project’s components
Having introduced the primary and secondary actors engaged in Videoletters, we now turn to the project’s four component elements: 1) the production of “video letters” and “videoletters”; 2) the broadcast of the documentary television series through the national television stations of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia; 3) the design, launch and facilitation of an interactive website in English and “Dobardanski”\textsuperscript{158}; and 4) a tour of 13 selected cities/towns in the successor states in order to screen series episodes in public spaces and facilitate their face-to-face discussion.

The first and central component was the making of the documentary television series by way of the mediation and recording of interpersonal video correspondence among individuals or families. This component was managed by the filmmakers in the small-scale characteristic of much independent documentary production. While interpersonal mediation


\textsuperscript{158} An invented official language for the project that mixed elements from the language(s) spoken in the former Yugoslavia in an attempt to counteract divisive connotations (discussed in Note 20).
and recording took place primarily across the Balkans, editing took place at a later stage in Amsterdam, with the assistance of a translator. This first component is central in that the intervention as a whole was premised on what could/should be done with, and starting from, the series. The second component was the broadcast of the series through the national television stations of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia. The filmmakers’ intention was to persuade the broadcasters to air the series simultaneously, as a way of symbolizing that they could collaborate, i.e., work in sync and share a unified message. This ambitious component implied contested negotiations with the broadcasters of Serbia and Croatia, with diplomatic assistance from the Dutch bilateral funder. The filmmakers were introduced to the broadcasters by the Media Task Force and then handled the negotiation themselves, but resorted to high-level diplomatic assistance at difficult turns in the process.

The third component was the design, launch and facilitation of an interactive website, supposedly aimed at facilitating do-it-yourself reconciliation via the Internet, but largely used as a public relations tool in the end, to communicate about the project and maximize media coverage. The site, videoletters.net, was published in English and in “Dobardanski”. The fourth component was a bus tour of 13 selected cities and towns in the former Yugoslavia in order to screen episodes of the series in public spaces and facilitate their face-to-face discussion. The Videoletters caravan, a bus and a truck carrying the staff and their equipment visited 13 selected locations in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia in two rounds, the first one from 30 May to 12 June, and the second one from 4 to 25 July 2005 (see Appendix 8 for details). Screenings were organized with permission from local authorities as required in order to operate, and occasionally engaged the mayor in the production of a simple video letter aimed at greeting citizens on the next stop in the tour. Despite the fact that the project was depicted as a “documentary for social change” endeavor, the filmmakers did not seek to involve intermediate organizations or interest groups in these screenings (contra Whiteman 2004 and 2007), limiting themselves to formal engagement with local authorities, which was in turn highlighted in press releases.

An additional, transversal component of the project was a public relations campaign aimed at attracting favorable media coverage, apparent in the documentation released by the UK’s FCO. As this study will show, this component was actively implemented, and the positive media attention achieved by the project was considered crucial by the United Kingdom’s representative who reported on the project to the FCO.

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159 One interviewee explained that his encounter took place in a third country, since both parties to the correspondence thought that would be safer than meeting in Serbia or Croatia at the time.
The project’s media technologies of choice

Videoletters’ four component elements resorted to three distinct media technologies: 1) video, which was used both for the promotion of interpersonal correspondence and for the making of the documentary television series; 2) television, which was used for broadcasting the series (both in the region, through the state television channels, and to the West, via the coverage of so-called global news media); and the Internet (purportedly intended to promote interpersonal correspondence and social networking on a broad scale, but actually used mostly to publicize the project).

When I first started working on this study in 2010, one of the typical reactions to presentations of my case and research purpose was to note that video was passé and to suggest that I would do best to study some thing having to do with “new technologies”. This called my attention to the presence of technological determinism as “a pervasive commonsensical assumption” within communication and media studies, and rendered visible the challenge of effectively decoupling the different media technologies engaged by the project from the idea that they would trigger effects “of their own accord” (Jones & Holmes, 2011: 217).

The Internet was in fact the least-useful and least-used technology among those employed by Videoletters, in terms of serving the region’s citizens. Importantly, the Videoletters website, launched in April 2005, preceded the fast rise of social media. When YouTube, widely considered one of the major social-media platforms currently available, was launched officially in November 2005 (after having become available in beta test mode in May 2005), videoletters.net was already up and running. Localized versions of YouTube for 38 countries were only launched in 2007, and the platform’s provision of large opportunities for rendering video content viral did not exist in 2005. Facebook was created in 2004 but membership was originally restricted to Harvard College students in the United States and gradually expanded to other universities

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160 Another typical reaction was to argue that the former Yugoslavia was passé, betraying a narrow understanding of the temporality of social-change processes and a lack of knowledge about the EU’s ongoing enlargement procedures and politics. As the wave of protests in Bosnia early in 2014 has shown, the unresolved promise of accession to the European Union in the context of a Europe in crisis has consequences in the present. See https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/igor-%C5%A1tiks-sre%C4%87ko-horvat/new-balkan-revolts-from-protests-to-plenums-and-beyond for a discussion [accessed 17 August 2014].

161 “Going viral” refers to “relating to or involving an image, video, piece of information, etc. that is circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another”. See http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/viral?q=viral.

162 Other video hosting websites that were launched before YouTube include Metacafe in 2003 and Vimeo in 2004. Both still exist, but are less popular than YouTube.

163 Friendster, which went live in 2002 as one of the first social networking sites, rapidly lost popularity to MySpace, launched as a social networking site in January 2004 and popular in North America by 2005.
in the country before reaching abroad and opening up to everyone in September 2006.\footnote{164 Twitter was introduced publicly in July 2006.} To put it clearly: most of the online affordances and social uses of the Internet that a Western reader of this dissertation is likely to take for granted today were \emph{not in place} at the time when the Videoletters website was launched. Plus, the differential impact of the war on the infrastructures and economies of Serbia and BiH meant that there were notorious differences between both countries in terms of sheer access. There were differences in terms of access to connectivity and equipment as well between Europe and the former Yugoslavia, which were not taken into account in the website’s design.\footnote{165 As Goran Gajić's film “Dear Video” from 1991 shows with razor-sharp humor.}

It was an Internet of low penetration, listservs, anonymity and hate speech that was at work in the region by 2005. And, even if adequate access and regulations had been in place, the promise of instantaneousness linked to Internet connectivity was out of line with the slow tempo of coming to terms with the post-conflict scenario. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, because the instantaneousness of current digital technologies was not available, and thus the type of time compression that they afford remained out of reach, the filmmakers could take the time to act as postmen, bringing correspondence back and forth and in the process enabling the opening up of small but possibly significant communicative spaces. From this perspective, offline video, the medium considered passé by early respondents to my study, was in fact the most enabling one in terms of its potential to promote reconnections, even if this potential led to unrealizable expectations regarding the project’s larger-scale ambitions. As Durham Peters (2006: 124) has noted, “Forms alone of communication matter less than what is done with them.”

The project’s (geographical) span

From the perspective of its production, funding and implementation, the Videoletters project covered a geographical span that included Amsterdam and The Hague in The Netherlands, London in the United Kingdom, and Serbia and BiH in the Western Balkans.\footnote{166 The broadcast of the documentary television series is said to have taken place in all the successor states to the former Yugoslavia, but nothing beyond project purpose statements and anecdotal evidence supports the claim. My fieldwork, limited to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, shows some evidence of the broadcast in Croatia but not elsewhere, and further investigation would be required to establish the veracity of the claim.} If we use a wider lens and take the project’s international circulation into account, the geographical span widens to include the United States, with New York as a significant location. After the intervention in the Western Balkans ended, the first component of Videoletters – i.e., the facilitation of “video letters” – was pilot-tested in
Kigali, Rwanda, thus expanding the project’s reach. Such expansion, even if ephemeral in practice, further fed accounts of Videoletters as a replicable tool for reconciliation.

Locating the project’s span across sites draws attention to the importance of context in shaping how it was received in different but interconnected ways among “particular ‘interpretive communities’, with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation” (Schiller, 2009: 481): *in the end, Videoletters gained recognition and authority in specific circles in the West*. Moreover, attention to the project’s geographical span is important as a lens into the distances and proximities that characterized the relationship between the Videoletters project’s primary actors.

**Videoletters’ (geographical) span**

![Map of Videoletters' geographical span](image)

**The project’s timeline**

Videoletters took place at two different velocities, gathering speed following bilateral adoption. While the first component was developed at a slow pace in parallel with the search for funding, over a period of approximately three years, the other three components were deployed at great speed between November 2004 (when the funding from the Dutch MFA was announced) and July 2005 (when the regional broadcasting drew to a close). The race against time characteristic of components 2, 3 and 4 was evident in interviewees’ accounts on the one hand, and in the start and end dates of the broadcast and caravan tour retrieved from documents. The following illustration situates the project’s components in time.
Attention to the project’s speed is important in that it brings into view the differential durations of international development communication intervention and social-change processes (McAnany, 2012). There is a stark contrast between the duration of the intervention – short and fast – and the tempo of the post-conflict sociopolitical transition – long and slow – which raises questions regarding the presumed power of media technologies to speed up social change.

The project’s inception
Having established the project’s actors, component elements, media technologies of choice, geographical span and timeline, I now consider its stages, beginning with inception.

An original idea?
The question of where the idea for Videoletters came from is relevant in connection with the reasons why the project came to be chosen for large-scale bilateral funding in an environment in which plenty of media-driven initiatives were competing for support (Zoellner, 2009). According to the Task Force’s former Executive Secretary, originality was one of the reasons why Videoletters stood out among the many projects aimed at reconciliation that reached his desk between 2002 and 2003: “the forth and most important reason why it stood out was that the idea was very original” (interview D). The filmmakers did not acknowledge any precedents when I asked them if they had used video...
letters before, or seen them used. Their account of where the idea came from varied depending on sources. According to a journalist who covered the Sarajevo premiere, the idea came from an encounter: “Film-maker [name] explained the initial inspiration. ‘We met Samir, a Muslim living in Sarajevo, who was depressed from the war at having to dodge snipers all the time,’ he said. ‘He was also depressed about not having heard from his best friend, who happened to be a Serb. He was so desperate that he decided to commit suicide. He went up onto his roof to wait for a sniper to kill him. Nothing happened for an hour so he finally gave up. But it turned out that Samir himself had never tried getting in touch with his friend either. This was the seed of the idea’” (Korver, 2005).167 In an interview published by Share International, the same filmmaker tells a different story, claiming that the event that triggered the idea was a U2 concert held in Sarajevo168 for which the train from Mostar ran for the first time since the war (see Eliot, 2005 for the full anecdote).

Interviewed in 2012, the filmmakers explained that they came up with the idea around 1995, while visiting the sister of one of them: “We found out basically that people we were talking to, especially around Sarajevo, they were only living like 10 kilometers away from each other, that they were afraid to phone their own old friend, or to go to them and ask them […] what happened, how do you feel, what did you do during the war, did you become a nationalist, and they were so afraid actually to, first of all to lose the friend, by hearing the answer for example ‘you idiot’, and ‘I hate you because you’re a Muslim now’, and […] when we […] were traveling to the others, and just asking the same questions, […] then we found out that they had exactly the same, the same answer, like ‘I don’t trust them any more’, and ‘I don’t believe’, and ‘I believe that he became a big nationalist’, etc. etc.” (interview A). In any case, whether the project’s implementers and their funders were aware or not, a number of precedents existed: not just as a format, but as a format quite specific to the region. I look into those precedents in what follows.

**Precedents in scholarly work: an empirically based theoretical definition**

Video letters had been defined in academic literature before the filmmakers’ project saw the light. Intriguingly, the conceptualization had to do with the conflict in the Balkans as well, although from a different angle. According to Kolar-Panov (1997), video letters came into being because of a combination of factors: “The […] advance in video technology (the camcorder), and possibility of travel to the homeland produced a new mode of communication

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168 The concert was held in 1997. See [http://www.webcitation.org/5nCW7PBJZ](http://www.webcitation.org/5nCW7PBJZ) for an example of its media coverage [accessed 5 August 2014].
between the ones abroad and the ones left behind, a form of video production which I have called a ‘video letter’” (ibid.: 57). In her study “Video, war and the diasporic imagination”, Kolar-Panov argued: “The term ‘video letter’ has been utilized by others, e.g., Tom O’Regan (1990: 82). However, it has not been defined. Video letters as used here signifies a video tape which is a mixture of a personal letter and snapshots with the added effect of an oral communication. This form of personal communication is partly comparable to the videophone with the exception that the immediacy of the telephone is not present. Science fiction (novels and films) has utilized this form, first by descriptions of either video letters left by the deceased as messages to friends and family or as audio-visual history of whole civilisations. Whichever is the case, the fascination with audio-visual communication remains, as shown by film and television productions which nowadays inevitably include some form of reference to video” (1997: 229). Kolar-Panov’s characterization highlighted the combination of elements that made a video letter unique: part personal letter and part oral communication, it enabled contact at a distance without the immediacy of the telephone. The video letters she identified in science-fiction literature bridged the past and the future, and included an element of fascination with audiovisual communication. These two characteristics would in turn apply to the Videoletters project – the former as intent, and the latter as Western reception of the project’s idea. On the one hand, the filmmakers argued that video-based correspondence could, and would, bridge the multiethnic past prior to the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia with a peaceful future. On the other hand, an element of fascination with the type of communication embodied in the documentary series was evident in the reaction of funders, the international media and academics to the idea.

For Kolar-Panov, watching a video letter was a unique practice that implied the likelihood of experiencing strong emotions and the possibility of bypassing the obstacles of time and space, even if only ephemerally: “The practice of watching these ad hoc assembled ethnic videos at home is different from any other practices described in media-related research, […] since the home atmosphere of viewing ethnic videos allowed for interruption by comments and story-telling. […] Many tears were shed when suddenly on the television screen someone recognized a relative or a friend, or when a grandmother or mother or sister appeared on the screen and filled the room with emotionally charged messages to a sister, daughter or grandmother, some of whom they had never met or had not seen for a long time. Time and space lost their meaning and those present were transported 12,000 km into another culture, and often back in time. Families and friends were reunited in an instant, if only just for a moment or two. A number of the people interviewed commented that these tapes provided them with a strong sense of belonging” (ibid.: 59). Similar scenes of two families watching video letters together, and being “reunited in an instant”, can be seen in the Videoletters episode “Vlada & Ivica”.
Kolar-Panov identified what she defined as video letters in the late 1980s in the course of her research into the relationships between ethnicity, media technologies and nationalism among former Yugoslav communities living in Australia and Canada. Concerned with the relation between diaspora, homeland and country of residence, she argued that the circulation of the video letters among these different but interconnected sites could be analyzed as a process both personal and public, with cultural and political consequences. The spread and adoption of the so-called “new technology” of the day was a factor in the emergence of the video letters: “With the development and availability of more affordable production equipment, video cameras, camcorders and VCRs have slowly become accepted by the community (alongside photography and the telephone) and are used as a means of personal communication. However, the use of video equipment did not come with a ‘Big Bang’ since video comfortably fitted into the cultural spaces occupied by the existing technologies, and has done so in such a way that it has not significantly affected their patterns of use” (ibid.: 60). As it spread, video enabled personal communication at a distance in what Kolar-Panov saw as a process of cultural continuity made possible by changes in the availability and affordability of the technology. When the Videoletters project was launched in 2005, the “new technology” of the day was instead the Internet, and a component of the project was premised on the assumption that, if the technology was available, the expected type of adoption would follow – the collective need to reconnect was taken for granted, and making the technology available was viewed as the pathway to the reestablishment of one-to-one communication across ethno-political divides.

For Kolar-Panov, the format allowed for great variation, partly because each letter was personal, but also because they included a patchwork of home-recorded television programming from Australia, Canada, Croatia and Macedonia (ibid.: 61). The ways in which the personal and the national combined in specific ways in each video letter accounted for variation in the common diaspora-homeland-country of residence experience. Based on her extensive participation in viewing such video letters, Kolar-Panov argued that they should be considered an ethno-specific video genre. While assessing whether there is analytical value in such categorization is not at issue here, her observation is consistent with the fact that the format appears in a number of media products specific to the former Yugoslavia, which I introduce and discuss in the next subsection: a fiction film for TV produced by a Yugoslav director at an early stage of the breakup, and a live TV program and a(never) development communication intervention produced by international funders in the aftermath. Kolar-Panov’s research, conducted in the early nineties, raises the question of whether the genre might have been recognized by elderly citizens of the former Yugoslavia as something that they were familiar with, when it reappeared in “new clothes” in 2005. This
possibility contrasts with the presumed newness of the idea that was a factor in donors’ decision to grant large-scale funding to the Videoletters project, raising the question of lack of knowledge among Western decision-makers. I’ll return to that question later. Let us now look at the precedents in practice.

Precedents in practice
Beyond Kolar-Panov’s study, I identified three concrete precedents of the Videoletters project. The first precedent is “Dear Video” (“Video jela, zelen bor”), a film written by Branko Vukojevic and directed by Goran Gajić in 1991 for RTV Serbia. The International Movie Data Base\(^{169}\) summarizes the film’s plot as follows: “‘Dear Video’ is a black epistolary comedy […] constructed around the video ‘correspondence’ between two branches of a family, one living in Germany and pursuing ‘modern’ life and the other one living in a little village in Yugoslavia clinging to tradition. Through the home video ‘letters’ sent back and forth, petty jealousies, love liaisons and financial squabbles drive the family to the brink of war, a situation that reflects the collapsing state of affairs in what was then Yugoslavia.” In Gajić’s film, the exchange of video letters served an inverted purpose, communicating toward conflict rather than reconciliation.

The second precedent was brought to my attention by one of my interviewees, who, when first approached about arranging an encounter, replied: “Dear Florencia, I remember being thrilled by the idea of videoletters. Not much before that, Serbia had a chance to see a public broadcast of some dramatic live video links between famous Yugoslav writers, musicians, artists who found themselves on the ‘opposite sides’ during the war and haven’t been in contact ever since […] That has created a big stir. Then came the video letters” (e-mail correspondence). The interviewee was referring to “Balkan Bridges”, a series produced by Internews Sarajevo\(^{170}\) in the late 1990s with substantial funding from European sources within the context of a USAID grant aimed at “creating an infrastructure of free, democratic and tolerant electronic media in Bosnia-Herzegovina” (Internews, 2000)\(^{171}\). According to an Internews report for USAID issued in 2000, the series “employed video conferencing technology to link ordinary individuals to talk about common issues”. It was “shown on OBN, the 19 stations in Internews’ courier distribution system as well as in FRY” (ibid.).\(^{172}\) Fourteen episodes of “Balkan Bridges”


\(^{170}\) Internews is an international non-profit organization formed in 1982, which works in BiH in cooperation with Mediacentar Sarajevo. See [http://www.internews.org/where-we-work/europe/bosnia-herzegovina](http://www.internews.org/where-we-work/europe/bosnia-herzegovina) and [http://www.internews.ba/](http://www.internews.ba/) [accessed 27 August 2014].


\(^{172}\) The Open Broadcast Network, established by the Office of the High Representative in 1996 in Sarajevo, BiH, with support from the European Commission. The network was privatized in 2000. See [http://www.obn.ba/](http://www.obn.ba/) [accessed 27 August 2014].
were broadcast: “Each episode showed a videoconference link that connected cultural figures, political analysts and ordinary citizens in direct dialog to discuss key social and political events” \(^{173}\) (Wolterink, 2006: 89). The episode that my interviewee recalled was one in which the Bosnian Serb musician Goran Bregovic, who left Sarajevo during the conflict, communicated via videoconference satellite link with the Bosnian Muslim poet Abdulah Sidran, who remained: \(^{174}\) “It was a big deal. It was a big deal because they were […] it was very emotional” (interview H). S/he saw continuity between “Balkan Bridges” and Videoletters in that both initiatives resorted to video-based communication to restore social relationships, even if the former was live, therefore implying \textit{time in between immediacy}, and the latter one was asynchronous, therefore allowing \textit{time in between} exchanges (Molyneaux, O’Donnell & Milliken, 2011).

The third precedent is noted by Andrew Johnstone in research for a master’s thesis in Documentary Film in International Development: the “Video Letters” series that UN Television (UNTV) produced during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. \(^{175}\) According to Johnstone, who worked for UNTV in 1994-95 and participated in the production of the series, “The concept was fairly simple, two people separated by the conflict would speak to each other through the new fangled gizmo of telly and this would help remind people of the communities that the war was tearing apart.” I call the reader’s attention to the fact that this description pretty much applies to the Dutch Videoletters projects as well. Two examples subtitled in English of the UNTV Video Letters can be found online. \(^{176}\) The UNTV Video Letters series is obviously similar to the Dutch Videoletters project in purpose, approach and funding structure.

The fact that the proponents of Videoletters were not aware of these precedents is intriguing, particularly the third one, given the close similarities. Was Videoletters a case of “reinventing the wheel”? That the project’s supporter and bilateral funders found it original speaks of a problematic absence of knowledge-sharing mechanisms at the institutional level \(^{177}\) (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). That said, if we bracket off these considerations, what the “Balkan Bridges”, UNTV and Videoletters

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173 Wolterink discusses in some detail an episode as a high-profile example of “Balkan Bridges”, in which musician Goran Bregovic, in Belgrade, Serbia, engages in a videoconference satellite link discussion with fellow Davorin Popovic, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The episode, archived by UNESCO under the rubric “culture of peace”, can be viewed online in its original language at http://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/index.php?=films_details&pg=33&id=2120.


177 Such as a common donor-country platform, where a body of knowledge regarding previous development communication interventions can be accessed (da Costa 2009).
interventions show is that the idea of building bridges through mediated communication was strong among international funders and practitioners in the aftermath of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia over a period of ten years. Contra this faith in the power of media to do good by breeding communication (discussed in Chapter 3), at an early stage of the breakup, Yugoslav filmmaker Goran Gajić issued an early reminder of the fact that, as argued by Silverstone (1999), “the media provide us, in significant degree, both tools and troubles”. In his fictional film, inspired by real events, communication is a capability that goes in the direction not of rapport, but of misunderstanding, and video-based correspondence actually breeds not proximity, but distance. In what follows, I take an intermission in the consideration of Videoleters as a process in order to define “video letters” and “videoletters” from the perspective of mediated correspondence and present and analyze one example in some detail.

‘Video letters’ and ‘videoletters’: definitions and examples
In the Videoleters project, a “video letter” was a videotaped message from one person living somewhere in the successor states to the former Yugoslavia to another person that s/he used to coexist with until the conflict that characterized the region’s breakup displaced one of them, or otherwise distanitiated them. Each taped “video letter” was delivered personally by the filmmakers, who traveled across the region by car and filmed the process of reestablishing correspondence.

Based on the exchange of “video letters” among several people, the “videoletters” were then created – that is, a number of episodes of a documentary series for television were made. In each episode, the story of two people or families re-engaging in correspondence was told. The idea was that watching the documentary series on television would in turn inspire audiences to seek to reconnect with estranged others.

Focusing primarily on the video technology, one could of course think about the “video letters” and “videoletters” as varieties of video communication for maintaining social relationships (Molyneaux, O’Donnell & Milliken, 2011). But it is the idea of correspondence that interests me more here. Durham Peters (2001) argues that Stuart Hall’s remark regarding television, that “There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding” (Hall, 1980), is equally true of all situations concerning interpretation. In distanitiated communication such as letter writing, there is no necessary correspondence
either: pauses in conversation can be dilated, and “communication may be infinitely deferred”. Moreover, when in dialogue with the distant, “the speaker must hold both ends of the conversation. The call must contain or anticipate the response”.\textsuperscript{178} Interestingly for this dissertation, he argues that, before the 1850s, letters were “both privately addressed and publicly accessible”. In his view, the principle of privacy that eventually came to characterize postal systems was “an effort to contain dissemination” of ideas allowed by media. In his historical account, “person-to-person communication, once recorded and transmitted, can break free of its senders and receivers”. This kind of dissemination – correspondence privately addressed but publicly accessible – was in fact at the heart of the Videoletters documentary series.

Arguing for an understanding of letter writing as a social practice in its own right, Barton and Hall (2000) stress its flexibility as a mode of communication and call attention to the role of the messenger, i.e., “the person who carries the letters, and who is sometimes responsible for reading them, acting upon them and, today in some circumstances obtaining proof that they have been received.” In the case of Videoletters, the filmmakers were indeed responsible for obtaining proof that messages had been received. Arguably, that was what producing the documentary series was about, in a nutshell. But it was also what their wider intervention as development communicators was about, as the analysis will show: the message that they were responsible for delivering, from that perspective, was not that reconciliation is possible, but that communication mediated at a distance works to do good. While the recipients of the former were arguably the citizens of the successor states, the recipients of the latter were a Western audience embodied in the international documentary film-making community, the international press, and English-speaking academics.

\textbf{Six videoletters in a nutshell}
I had access to six episodes, provided by the filmmakers as DVD copies: 1) Emil & Saša; 2) Vlada & Ivica; 3) Mujesira & Jovisa; 4) Nenad & Rudjer; 5) Ivana & Senad; 6) Lala & Mira. These are presumably the only episodes available with English subtitles, and therefore they comprise the audiovisual content that circulated internationally. They all start with an opening text aimed at a generic international audience,\textsuperscript{179} which appears in five successive silent placards running for 45 seconds:

\textsuperscript{178} Durham Peters argues that “Perhaps all dialogue involves each partner’s enacting the response of the other”, and goes on to propose that “Dialogic ideology keeps us from seeing that expressive acts occurring over distances and without immediate assurance of reply can be desperate and daring acts of dignity”. If we think about a) the protagonists of the Videoletters series and b) the state broadcasters from that perspective, the thoughts and feelings they might have intended to express to Europe come into view as an empirical question.

\textsuperscript{179} And thus likely to have been different – or perhaps absent – in the versions broadcast in the former Yugoslavia.
• “In 1991 the war broke out in Yugoslavia. Hundreds of thousands of people died. Many were forced to leave their homes. 
• Today Yugoslavia doesn’t exist anymore. Its citizens now live in five separate countries. They barely have any cross-border contacts. 
• (Episode’s title) is one of twenty of the Videoletters TV-series. 
• The episodes were broadcasted from the 7th of April 2005 on all public channels. 
• This has not happened since the war and it is a unique event in the broadcasting history of Former Yugoslavia.”

The placards sketch out a complex process as if it were a simple story. Absent an explanation of the war’s causes, they amount to a decontextualized frame for what the viewer is about to see (this in line with Rolston, 2007). Death, displacement, separation and the lack of cross-border contacts are highlighted as the consequences of the breakup, and the media system’s power to promote “togetherness” is foregrounded. In a grandiose self-reference, the simultaneous broadcast of the series across the successor states is framed as a “unique event” in the history of the region. This, however, is inaccurate: in 2005, “To Sam Ja”, a reality television show originally aired on Macedonian public television, was also being broadcast throughout the region. Featuring cast members from the former Yugoslav republics who lived together under the same roof, the show was aired by commercial television stations in Serbia, BiH, Croatia and Slovenia, widely advertised as “the first Balkan reality show” and moreover carried by a satellite channel and therefore accessible to, and viewed by, a global audience (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2009).

Four of the six Videoletters episodes subtitled in English are stories of reconnection, i.e., they combine recording and connecting in order to show how distanced parties exchanged video letters, reestablished correspondence and met again after separation: Emil & Saša; Vlada & Ivica; Nenad & Rudjer; and Lala & Mira. The other two episodes tell the story of searching for a lost other, with different endings: Ivana & Senad, where the person lost is actually found; and Mujesira & Jovisa, where resolution is not possible. Emil & Saša was the project’s starting point and flagship episode, and therefore I analyze it in some detail in what follows.

According to a Dutch journalist, “(The filmmakers) started out with a pilot video letter in 1999 from Emil and Saša, two boys from Republika Srpska (RS), one of Bosnia’s two constituent entities. The boys had been inseparable

180 Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo). As noted in Chapter 1, in April 2005, when the series went on air, Serbia and Montenegro was still one single country.

181 Reconnect was the project’s motto for publicity purposes, and in fact a much more accurate reference to what the exchange of video letters visibly facilitated among series participants than reconciliation.
since childhood, but the war pulled them in different directions” (Buruma, 2005). The filmmakers themselves referred to this episode extensively when I interviewed them, since it was crucial for the project in a number of ways. On the one hand, it made them realize that initial contacts would be the most difficult ones to produce: when approached, Emil thought that their idea was great and suggested Saša as the person he could correspond with, but asked them to contact him and ask him to be the first to deliver a letter (interview A). On the other hand, it was the episode used to pitch the idea to potential funders, and which showed the filmmakers that viewers experienced strong emotions: “We had to convince the organizations who would pay us for a series like that that this could work, so we had this one episode of Emil & Saša, not subtitled, only Dutch, the short version, so we were going around from organization to organization […] and then we would ask an interpreter to translate the episode, and then always the interpreter would cry, so these people who worked for the organization were like ‘wow, this must be powerful, because OK, she is translating it, but what is so powerful about it’, and for us it was all the time a proof” (interview A).

Moreover, “Emil & Saša” was one of the three episodes screened as work in progress at the 2004 IDFA where funding for the project from the Dutch government was announced. However, according to Wolterink (2006), it was excluded from the broadcast in the former Yugoslavia: “one episode was considered not to be suitable to [be] broadcast by the makers of Videoletters themselves. They expected that the episode about Emil and Saša would maybe cause unrest in Bosnia. Saša denies having committed war crimes in the episode, but later on it turned out he lied in the episode: he was serving in the Serbian army as a guard when a group of Bosnian Muslims was killed. During the launch of the Videoletters project Saša came to Sarajevo, upset and confused and threatening the authors of Videoletters. This incident convinced the makers of the fact that it would be better for everyone not to broadcast the episode” (ibid.: 97-98). Paradoxically, although it was not aired in the successor states due to its sensitive nature, the episode was highlighted by the international press as an example of a difficult conversation that could take place (cfr. Schiller, 2009; Hackett & Rolston, 2009). An article published by The New York Times described it as follows: “Emil and Saša’ recounts how the war separated two youths who grew up in Pale, the wartime capital of the Serb-dominated area of Bosnia. Emil, whose father is Muslim, fled to the Netherlands, while Saša, whose father is Serb, was recruited into the Bosnian Serb Army. Now Saša reaches out with a video letter, but Emil is troubled by rumors that Saša killed a Muslim acquaintance in the war. Saša fervently denies the accusation and Emil

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finally agrees to talk it all over in person” (Riding, 2005). Paradoxically, although the episode could not be seen by audiences in the successor states, it circulated in the West as an example of how the project could reestablish correspondence.

‘Emil & Saša’ as a case of video-based mediated correspondence

The trajectory of letter-based correspondence can be analyzed in order to gain insights into social change processes, considering on the one hand how the letters enable the expression of a variety of emotions that would otherwise not be easily expressible aloud, and on the other how parties communicate during arguments or misunderstandings, i.e., how the correspondence serves as an in-between space for the negotiation of differences (Barton & Hall, 2000; Ahearn, 2001). Such an analytical approach draws attention to the ways in which broader social transformations are both reflected in, and shaped by, letters (Ahearn, ibid.). This strategy informs the following discussion of “Emil & Saša” as a case of video-based correspondence emblematic of what the Videoletters project could facilitate in private but not communicate in public in the absence of a favorable political context. The episode has three protagonists: Emil, Saša, and the filmmaker, who carries the letters, listens to each correspondent, and occasionally asks them questions. While Emil and Saša are obvious protagonists, the role of the filmmaker both as postman and as interlocutor is less apparent, but nonetheless crucial for the development of the story, which consists of a process of mediation between both correspondents. From this perspective, the “tool for reconciliation” does not lie in the exchange of video letters per se, but rather in the mediation process facilitated by the filmmaker, i.e., what makes a difference is not the technological medium, but human agency. In other words, there would be no communication without the messenger.

The episode brings into view the war’s disruptive impact on the lives of both Emil and Saša in terms of time, space, trust and happiness. The disruption is described by Emil: “Once war began, people walked around like zombies [...] As if they were dreaming. It was unreal. That atmosphere stayed. As if you had stepped into another dimension. Everything is the same, people are the same, but it’s a completely different world.” Time appears on the one hand in connection with how things used to be before the war broke out – Emil and Saša lived next door to one another and were always together, and those memories are all that is left in the aftermath – and on the other in connection with the consequences of the war, which seem unsolvable. Emil reflects: “When I left, I didn’t know it would be forever.” Saša talks about being a suspected perpetrator: “I carry something in my soul, because of that. I can’t get rid of it,

184 I am referring here to the filmmaker who speaks the language(s).
for the rest of my life. It hurts.” The past is something that Emil and Saša still have in common. Space, like time, appears in connection to the shared past – the marketplace in Sarajevo where as young friends Emil and Saša had coffee together, notably a space in which they were both welcome – and also in connection with Emil’s displacement to the Netherlands: “a foreign country among foreign people”, says Saša; a place where “nobody offers cigarettes” the way they used to in Yugoslavia. The present spatial context cannot really accommodate them both: “When you go to a café [in Sarajevo] and they say ‘Turks are not welcome here’, then you start to doubt everything.” Confidence is definitely in question, and the loss of mutual trust is the form of distance most difficult to overcome. Speaking about Saša, Emil says: “I heard that during the war he did something, so I couldn’t think logically anymore.” And he adds: “I’m afraid that I never really knew him. […] Then my life is a big lie.” There is hardly any happiness there. Having been in the army, Saša says: “You feel an emptiness deep inside. Everything looks artificial, you see. You go out. But even with all the money in the world nothing makes you happy, not like in the old days.” Emil contends: “I feel bad about his suffering. But I feel good that he’s still a human being. That’s why he suffers.”

Labels are a problem for both of them, in different but related ways. Emil says: “They saw me as a Muslim, although my mum is Serbian.” Being seen as a Muslim implied the denial of his right to be (existential), and to be where he used to live (civic): “I saw people looking at me in a different way. Like I shouldn’t be there, like I shouldn’t exist.” It also implied the interference of others, once in exile, when he tried to communicate with Saša by phone: “When I phoned, some girl there with you asked me: ‘Are you a Muslim?’ I said ‘yes’, and she hung up. I was disappointed, also in you.” In connection with his being a suspected perpetrator of war crimes, Saša says: “It’s important to come out of war as a human being. I couldn’t even do that. Because of this gossip, I came out of the war as scum.” The possibility that Saša’s recruitment by the Serbian army may have led him to engage in war crimes clearly imposes a limit to the achievement of reconciliation. Emil wants to know if what he’s heard about him is true, and Saša denies any responsibility: “When his mother Desa came for a visit, she told me that this man from Rogatica, who lost his brother, claimed that I was the one who killed him. But that’s nonsense.” The problem goes beyond reconnecting. Broader issues of truth and justice are at stake, and the filmmakers’ involvement in the process – that is, the presence of a camera as witness, and the potential legal and political uses of the recorded material – is unlikely to help resolve them (for a discussion of this problem in the case of Northern Ireland, see Rolston 2007 and Hackett & Rolston 2009).

But the exchange of video letters and the conversations with the filmmaker that accompany the acts of correspondence appear to facilitate both individual reflexivity and interpersonal dialogue between Emil and
Saša. The negative effects of the collective identities imposed on both of them by the war, however, linger on. They are not just childhood friends, but also Muslim and Serb. Referring to the killing of which Saša is suspected, Emil suggests that there can be no forgiveness if there is no repentance: “But if he doesn’t feel guilty, if he thinks this was acceptable, then he isn’t the man I knew.” Saša, in turn, acknowledges the fact that resuming a conversation does not necessarily imply reaching mutual understanding: “We’ll certainly talk one day. But my story will be the same.” When Emil and Saša do meet in person after having communicated through video letters, it becomes obvious that perspective-taking doesn’t come easy, as Emil tells Saša: “I tried to put myself in your situation, now you should try to understand my situation.” Empathy does not come easy.

The episode proposes a rich and complex view of a process of communication between two people who cared for each other before the conflict broke out but who struggle to reconcile their experiences of the war. Interestingly, although there is a reencounter, there is no “happy ending”, and the episode’s conclusion can be seen as an opening rather than as closure: Emil and Saša reach a point where they can face each other, although there are still outstanding unresolved differences among them. In that sense, the episode manages hope carefully, and “encounter” is not presented as equaling “resolution” (contra Rolston, 2007). This balanced approach to storytelling contrasts with the rather grandiose claims made about the project’s effectiveness and success at a later stage. By showing that post-conflict dialogue among estranged parties is a process that 1) takes time, 2) has ups and downs and 3) may not bring closure, the episode puts forward a narrative that illustrates well the back and forth of interpersonal communication in connection with wider sociopolitical events. This back and forth suggests that, given a conflictive sociopolitical situation that affects individuals, the lack of immediacy characteristic of the form of communication adopted – the fact that, of necessity, there was time in between one letter and its reply, and that responses could be considered in conversation with a third-party messenger rather than blurted out – was both beneficial and productive for the participants.

Having established the differences and connections between “video letters” and “videoletters”, I now return to my analysis of the project’s stages. By looking into the production, distribution and reception of Videoletters’ main component, the documentary television series, I will cover aspects of its implementation and circulation.

The production, distribution and reception of the Videoletters documentary television series

The Videoletters documentary television series was produced following an independent logic, in line with the filmmakers’ previous experience, and then scheduled for broadcast seeking to emulate public service models in the
European Union, with the purported goals of: a) reuniting viewers across ethno-political divides in the act of watching; and b) promoting region-wide coordination among state broadcasters so that they would communicate the joint message that reconciliation was possible. While the filmmakers were represented in international press coverage, and recognized through the Néstor Almendros prize, as the makers of a “documentary for social change”, which suggests both an independent and an activist disposition, distribution was planned in terms of a standard television documentary while seeking to promote regional collaboration among political enemies as a governance strategy. Reception was, in turn, evaluated from a market perspective, via ratings, in line with the concern with quantitative measures characteristic of international development cooperation in recent years. The series’ outstanding characteristics in terms of its production, distribution and reception, summarized in Table 3, are discussed in more detail in what follows.

Table 3: The Videoletters documentary series: production, distribution and reception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Reception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent-like: low profile, small crew, presumably low cost.</td>
<td>Traditional: broadcasting “to all” through state channels.</td>
<td>Audiences: understood as consumers + measured quantitatively through ratings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of protagonists opportunistic.</td>
<td>Accent on simultaneous regional broadcasting (symbolism/ governance) – national/local political/audience differences disregarded.</td>
<td>Impact/success = number of viewers. No focus groups to obtain qualitative detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency an advantage.</td>
<td>Scattered public screenings in 12 cities/towns (no screenings for special-interest audiences).</td>
<td>Ratings were average in Serbia and low in BiH (as compared with usual ratings for those channels’ slots).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting took approx. 3 years.</td>
<td>No copies to local media archives or public libraries.</td>
<td>Two international documentary film festivals gave episodes of the series exposure, but no sales to international broadcasters followed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End scenes produced separately, at the request of (as expected by) funders.</td>
<td>Two international documentary film festivals gave episodes of the series exposure, but no sales to international broadcasters followed.</td>
<td>1 hr. special program for Dutch public television (2007).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Production
The production of the series started in 2000, in an experimental way characteristic of much independent documentary-making. The first episode made by the filmmakers was “Emil & Saša” (Buruma, 2005). With this exchange of video-based correspondence, the filmmakers tried out the concept and produced a pilot episode that would eventually prove crucial for fundraising: it gave them something to show for what they were trying to do, and at the same time allowed them to gather immediate reactions from the viewers they approached in the process of seeking financial support.
The filmmakers seem to have had at least two competitive advantages that facilitated the series' production. The first one was language proficiency. In their view, the fact that one of them spoke the language facilitated trust, even if such trust was possible because B hid the fact that s/he had been born in the region: “Always the beginning is ‘how come did you speak the language?’, people would ask, and then B […] could not tell them ‘I was born in Belgrade’, so […] s/he would tell that s/he has a Russian grandfather, a Hungarian grandmother, so s/he’s a kind of mix, so s/he was safe, for them s/he was safe” (interview A). The second advantage was a network of contacts in Belgrade, partly due to family ties and partly established while producing “The making of the revolution”, which they used to identify and approach potential protagonists.

Episodes were produced over a stretch of time, in parallel with fund-raising. Although no clear timeline could be established, production is likely to have continued at least until 2003. In some cases, “end reunions” for video-letter exchanges that had been shot at an earlier time were produced at a later stage. Most of the shooting took place within the Balkans, but in some cases the protagonists were living abroad (as was the case with Emil, based in the Netherlands), or a reencounter was shot at a neutral place where the protagonists would feel safe. This was the case with “Vlada and Ivica”, whose protagonists met in Hungary (interview N).

According to the filmmakers, strategies varied for the production of each episode: “there are so many variations, that actually the best answer to your question how did we do it is in all the possible ways” (interview A). This variety is in fact reflected in the six episodes I had access to.

In line with what is typical of much independent documentary-making, production appears to have required a simple kit and small crew. One camera was used by the protagonists to record their letters, and another by one of the filmmakers to film the protagonists as they went about recording. The other filmmaker acted as interviewer. Other than the filmmaker doubling as cameraman, a boom operator is likely to have been present when reencounters were shot, but the production structure remains unclear due to a lack of information: against standard practice, the series’ closing credits do not specify the roles of the crew members listed. What they do show, anyway, is that the crew was small. These details are relevant because they speak of a low-cost production structure.

As mentioned earlier, how many episodes were in fact produced remains unclear. While the filmmakers have spoken of 20 episodes, a list of only 16 episodes with their synopses was posted on videoletters.net and circulated as part of the project’s press kit, of which 12 episodes were given to BHT1 for broadcasting, not including “Emil & Saša”, according to Wolterink (2006). This brings the total number of episodes effectively circulated to 13 (with a duration of 24 minutes each).
Distribution
The documentary television series was aired in Serbia and BiH between April and July 2005, as described earlier in this chapter. This broadcast was the series’ main form of distribution, in line with the Media Task Force’s goals – to push state broadcasters toward a public service model, to promote regional cooperation among said broadcasters as an avenue for understanding, and to balance xenophobic coverage with storytelling that exemplified tolerance.

In a more direct but smaller-scale approach to distribution, screenings were held in public spaces in twelve of the thirteen cities/towns in the region visited by the Videoletters caravan.185 It is particularly striking that public broadcasters from Europe were not interested in the television series, since the IDFA’s film market, where the project was featured as a work-in-progress in 2004 and under “Docs for sale”186 in 2005, is considered the most significant one in the region (Ellis & McLane, 2006). The Dutch public broadcaster VPRO only showed a one-hour-long program that included two videoletters in 2007.187

Reception
Little is known about how the broadcast was received by audiences in the successor states besides what can be inferred from the ratings retrieved and the anecdotal evidence provided by the filmmakers. This indicates a gap between the project’s stated goals and their fulfillment to be considered in more detail in subsequent chapters. To put it briefly, for now: the absence of rigorous quali-quantitative data about audience reactions does in fact speak of other project results being prioritized. The fact that ratings were commissioned from the local media industry suggests that there was a quantitative concern: what mattered was not what citizens could and would do with what the series proposed (Garnham, 1999), but rather how many viewers watched the broadcast. Overall ratings for Serbia indicate that the series’ average reach, i.e., the cumulative percentage of the population counted as viewers at least once during a specified interval, was 6.29 percent for the RTS 2 broadcast, and 3.19 percent for B92 – approximately 671,000 people. According to Nielsen’s representative, this was the standard response for the slot in which the series was aired. Ratings for the broadcast of the first three episodes for Bosnia show an average reach of 3.87 percent – approximately 57,300 people. On the whole, audiences were small.

185 One visit was not welcome.
186 See [http://www.idfa.nl/industry/docs-for-sale.aspx](http://www.idfa.nl/industry/docs-for-sale.aspx) [accessed 14 August 2014].
The shift from documentary television series to ‘tool for reconciliation’, or how Videoletters became an intervention

While Videoletters was originally envisioned as a documentary television series, over time it shifted to become an ambitious development communication intervention.

In an early version of its website dating from 2004, the project was described as “a unique television project”. Although the use of the Internet for follow-up discussion was already mentioned there, the purpose was still clearly limited to producing and airing the documentary television series.

At which point and for which reasons did the project shift from documentary television series to tool for reconciliation?

While the changed representation appears to be linked to the attainment of bilateral support, the question of whether the project’s span was expanded in order to meet the requirements for large-scale funding lingers. The information about the project released by the United Kingdom’s FCO corresponding to 2003 and 2004 speaks of Videoletters as “a reconciliation and conflict prevention tool”, and of the series as “a unique tool for discussion on war, nationalism and multicultural society”. A year later, the grant application to the European Cultural Foundation speaks grandiosely of “a unique multimedia project developed by [filmmakers] as a reconciliation and
conflict-resolution tool for post-war countries. In the Balkans, it focuses on countries of former Yugoslavia.” Notably, once the project was represented as a “tool for reconciliation”, the emphasis changed from “documentary television series” to “documentary-making for social change”.

The focus on “producing social change” rather than “producing television content” would eventually add to the characterization of the filmmakers as courageous heroes, suggesting a case of activism when it fact it was a case of documentary-making for television (alternatively presented as “human interest” or “politically newsworthy” depending on whether the interlocutor was the Balkans’ press, for which the political implications needed to be toned down, or the international press). The insistence on the “tool” and on “reconciliation” speaks of techno-political expertise in line with the agenda of international intervention. The change in language and ensuing change in representation were characterized by the adoption of development communication jargon, suggesting that an expert may have assisted the filmmakers with the formulation of proposals and subsequent narratives about the project. However, I could not establish whether that was actually the case over the course of my research.

Strategy and evaluation throughout the intervention’s stages
(based on Terzis and Vassiliadou, 2008)
Videoletters started out without feasibility studies or preliminary assessments of the contextual conditions to be intervened, driven solely by the power of the idea that people could reconnect via video letters. Precedents of the use of video letters in the region were not acknowledged. That the filmmakers would adopt an experimental approach was only to be expected: that is what
they knew how to do from their previous independent experience. Most of the “video letters” were in fact produced before large-scale funding was secured, i.e., in advance of committing to the project’s second to fourth components. Following the same line of reasoning, the lack of strategic planning, piloting, adequate monitoring and evaluation and careful exit strategies, as well as the poor approach to staffing, the absence of dialogue with local stakeholders and the privileging of foreign (distant) providers identified over the course of research could all be attributed to the filmmakers’ lack of experience in organizing and managing international large-scale, multi-component media-driven projects such as Videoletters.

This line of analysis, however, would be reductionistic. On the one hand, because the filmmakers worked hard to convince funders that what they intended to do was worth doing, they therefore must have been aware, at least to a certain extent, of what they were getting themselves into. On the other hand because, as agents endowed with financial means and diplomatic support to implement the project, they could have chosen to do a number of things differently. To put it simply: they had options, including plenty of financial resources and diplomatic support. This said, they are not solely accountable for the poor approach to implementation. Videoletters must be seen not as a case of loose freelance do-gooders acting on their own initiative, but as an example of international intervention via the selection of third-party providers in a “marketplace of ideas”. This perspective draws attention to the institutional responsibility of bilateral funders and raises an important question: why did the filmmakers receive large-scale funding from the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, and thus the mandate and the diplomatic support to go ahead with their proposed plan, if they did not have the expertise required? How were their project proposals, including their qualifications not only as filmmakers but specifically as development communication practitioners, assessed by bilateral funders in advance of granting funding?

The project’s lack of an organized strategy went hand in hand with a disregard of evaluation throughout the process, which in fact is in line with a documented lack of appreciation of the value and importance of development communication and its research and evaluation among funders (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013: 74). Besides the already-mentioned lack of feasibility studies and preliminary assessments of contextual conditions, there was no monitoring of the various components as they were rolled out, and therefore no space for correcting mistakes or improving conditions once implementation was happening. There was no independent evaluation at the end either, and therefore no well-grounded information for funders to analyze errors and derive best-practice recommendations for future projects. The filmmakers produced narrative reports for the funders based on anecdotal evidence – one in English for the United Kingdom’s FCO, which was redacted from the information I was given access to; another one
in English for the European Cultural Foundation, which would not give me access to it and insisted that I request it from the filmmakers instead; and one in Dutch for the MFA, of which I received an abridged version from the filmmakers but did not have the resources to translate.

As regards exit strategies, there were none. The project just ended when the caravan completed its tour, and providers (web) and staff (caravan) were dismissed. No copies of the series were donated to local media centers or libraries in the region for archiving and future use, and the website was discontinued.

The intervention’s circulation beyond broadcasting
Besides the distribution of the documentary television series, which is, of course, a crucial element of the project’s wider circulation, Videoletters was made known in a number of other ways. On the one hand, although there was no obvious marketing strategy in the strictly commercial sense of the term, there was a public relations and media strategy that implied packaging the project to appeal to the press. An agency called Godwin Communications, based in Belgrade, was hired; a press agent worked for the project on behalf of the agency; and a press release and a press kit that included a DVD and other promotional materials – posters and flyers – were produced.\(^\text{188}\) The Sarajevo premiere was clearly organized as a press conference, besides serving other purposes. Moreover, Videoletters’ inclusion in the program of the two prestigious international documentary festivals already mentioned, the IDFA (Amsterdam) and the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (New York), also served to make the project known. The project’s circulation was in fact closely connected to its fifth, transversal component, which was not explicit but is evident in project documents and was actively implemented: a public relations campaign aimed at attracting favorable media coverage not only in the region where Videoletters was deployed, but also “abroad”, i.e., at home in the funding countries and their Western allies, where advertising in fact proved to be more effective, as we will see in subsequent chapters. International visibility and praise arose from a circle that encompassed the filmmakers, journalists and academics. A thought-provoking example of how the project circulated in an encapsulated way can be found in Volcic and Andrejevic (2009: 8). The scholars refer to Videoletters based on a newswire from The Associated Press (2005),\(^\text{189}\) which was, in turn, based on a press release provided by Onasa,\(^\text{190}\) a news agency based in Sarajevo. What the filmmakers did on location to communicate about the project traveled back to the West, where the idea came from.

\(^{188}\) One of the representatives of the Dutch MFA handed over samples of those materials to me during the interview, and flyers are referred to in the e-mail report of the Sarajevo premiere produced by a representative of the United Kingdom’s FCO.


Chapter 5: Videoletters in context

In this chapter, I address research sub-questions 1 and 2 in order to consider the national and regional circumstances within which the intervention operated, as well as the institutional conditions that shaped it and the international reception that framed it for certain audiences.

The national and regional circumstances

How do contextual conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a development communication intervention? This question points to the ways in which the specific cultural, economic and political conditions of the context intervened shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a specific international development communication intervention. The factors potentially affecting the embracement or rejection of the Videoletters project are considered. Attention is given to the ways in which a context of unmet human needs and political restrictions might have influenced citizens’ engagement. I explore extent to which the presumed beneficiaries became aware of the project or not and why, taking into account how state media managers, local authorities and the press responded to the intervention. The main focus here is on the national and regional circumstances within which Videoletters operated.

The need to communicate

Based on their work in the region in 1999 and 2000, the filmmakers came to think that ordinary people needed to reconnect with dear but distantiated others across ethno-political divides. From the perspective that the need was shared by most citizens, there were plenty of potential participants for the video-based correspondence envisaged: “many people, actually all the people have somebody like that, so it’s very easy to find the people, because you just go out in the street and then you [say] ‘hey, do you have a Muslim-Serb-Croat friend that you don’t see anymore’, so they all say ‘yes, I have one’, but then, to be filmed, that’s the second thing” (interview A). However, “video letters” were difficult to produce because people were afraid of taking the first step toward resuming correspondence, according to the filmmakers. But the problem may have been a matter of priorities. In the harsh post-conflict scenario, should attention to communication take precedence, or was that a luxury? The filmmakers conceded that they met divergent opinions: “And, [it is frustrating] of course that the same reason that we did not get the money in the beginning is also a real reason. So, I would sit with a group of women in Mostar and they would say
‘Why do we have to talk about these video letters? Why don’t you bring us milk? My children do not have enough to eat.’ And, you know? I would go like ‘Yeah [...] You are so right’ (interview Ab). The question of whether priorities for assistance should be determined by the interests and agendas of funders or take into account the input of the citizens considered in need of help comes into view here. Videoleters’ proponents chose the former over the latter, which would have an impact on the proximity/distance between the project and its supposed beneficiaries, as we will see.

That there was an actual need among ordinary citizens of the former Yugoslavia for reconnecting with distanced others and that establishing correspondence via “video letters” would be a productive way to do so was Videoleters’ first premise. The second premise was that watching examples of such correspondence would move audiences emotionally, and ideally move them to act. The first time the filmmakers showed a trailer of the series to a viewer in the region, to their surprise, s/he sympathized with “the other”, i.e., with the protagonist of a different ethnic polity who stayed in the region during the conflict, and was antagonistic toward the one who fled to a foreign country. This was despite the fact that the latter was a co-national:191 “A:192 we made kind of a short version for Dutch TV, we were in Bosnia, [...] and we were sitting with this communist style woman [...] B: she’s a Muslim. A: [...] and she was listening [to] the whole thing, she was crying, and we were like ‘oh my god, this is actually our first time that we show it to somebody from here, which is our plan’193 [...] A: that was a big lesson for us, that, how it works with people. B: yeah, because actually I didn’t feel comfortable at all while she was watching and crying, [...] I thought, OK, now we have a Serb who denies that he has done it, and, you know, and she said ‘this Emil in Holland he should shut up, what does he know, he has not been here’ [...] and then I said, ‘but this Saša, what do you think’, and then she said ‘it doesn’t matter, of course he did it, we all did things, who cares about that, but you see, the friendship is destroyed forever’” (interview A). The filmmakers’ anecdote exemplifies the assumption that they would eventually manage to convey to their bilateral funders: if a single individual viewer was moved by a trailer, similar reactions to the series could be expected from a wider audience. (In turn, the same assumption would lead the Serbian and Croatian television stations to resist the push for a simultaneous broadcast.)

191 Yet another variety of distance (and proximity) regarding ethno-political belonging appears here, such that in the view of those who stayed in the region during the conflict, those who fled could not understand what happened there in their absence.

192 A and B in direct quotes from the interview to the filmmakers refers to the fact that the speaker has changed although the conversation continues.

193 Notably, the filmmakers were in fact about to show the preview to Dutch audiences via a satellite link, i.e., they were about to broadcast for their own national media space.
A few interviewees from the successor states shared the filmmakers’ firmly held opinion that the project spoke to a collective need. For a staff member of the Bosnian broadcaster, Videoletters brought optimism to a complex post-conflict scenario in which people experienced mixed feelings that could not be expressed in public: “As you know, we have in BiH [a] very ugly [...] war [...] lots of crime has happened, [...] and lots of people [feel] shame to talk about the past. They don’t know how they will deal [...] with the situation, but also, when they are alone, they [feel emotions toward their] neighbors, [their] relatives, [their] family. Before the war, and also after the war, you have a lot of mixed marriages. And you don’t know who is who. You don’t have [ethnically pure] streets or [towns] in BiH before. But after aggression, everything is changed and people, they moved, some of them they wish, some of them they must. But they have some kind of emotion [toward] others, you know. But they’re scared, they’re ashamed, and they don’t know what will happen in other side. [...] And especially in some kind of small village or in some place where [...] a real war crime [has happened], for the people [it] was very difficult to talk, but they think about each other, because they have, from long period before, [a] good relationship.” For this interviewee, optimism arose from the possibility to see people reconnect: “You have a feeling that you are sad, but at the same time, you know, you have hope that something will change [...] For me personally this is a message of hope” (interview B). Following from the project’s second premise – that audiences would be moved to seek to reconnect with estranged others themselves – the third premise was that, once the need became evident to viewers, they could be directed to a website and adopt a standard do-it-yourself procedure. A multiplier effect was expected from the television broadcast, which could, in turn, be channeled through the Internet. However, this assumption proved to be misguided. According to an interviewee from the region, there was a need to reconnect with dear ones, but in private, and with face-to-face help. People feared that, if they went public, “new” neighbors in localities homogenized via ethnic engineering might react negatively to their wish to communicate with “others” (interview B). There was no safe political space in everyday life for the matter to be visibly addressed (Hackett & Rolston, 2009).

Proximities and distances
A tension between proximities and distances was inherent to the intervention from the start. A variety of distances were at work. The filmmakers’ provenance and purpose implied an initial, specific distance to be bridged: “they were very afraid – afraid to be filmed, afraid of us, because we [were] from Holland, ‘hey, the Hague, Tribunal’.” But fear of proximate nationals, and of the distanctiated, was also at work: “[people were] afraid of their own people, that they would be angry because they [were speaking] to a former or [current] enemy, afraid of their own friends,
afraid of themselves” (interview A). Three types of distance come into view here: a pre-emptive distance from the Dutch, generally seen as connected to The Netherlands’ active involvement in (the trial of) war crimes; a precautionary distance from ethno-politically defined neighbors who may not share one’s feelings for others across divides; and a preventive distance from distantiated “others”, who may not want to get back in touch following the violent reorganization of civic affiliations and everyday geographies. Given these distances and the risks they implied, “doing nothing”, i.e. not acting, was probably seen by most people as the safest route. Moreover, a fourth type of distance was produced through international intervention once the large amounts of money that were being spent by funders amid unclear and sometimes contradictory beneficiary selection criteria (CDA, 2006) became obvious to locals. According to the filmmakers, some people they approached tried to twist their stories to match the criteria for inclusion in the project: “in those countries they sometimes also wanted money, so they started to lie” (interview A). In this ad hoc map of distances, two types of actors are notoriously absent – the governance structures of the successor states (including the media system) and civil society. Once we acknowledge their absence, the fact that the Videoletters project started out by bypassing both of them instead of engaging them as relevant interlocutors comes into focus.

The state broadcasters
Although at the stage of production Videoletters bypassed national governance structures (including the media system) by acting solo in independent filmmaking fashion, the state broadcasters were eventually approached to air the series. The filmmakers’ assumption was that their offer of free-of-charge programming to stations strapped for cash, and thus struggling to fill their schedules, would simply be accepted: “we had to convince all the TV stations that they should show it, and in the beginning I was like ‘oh, that’s easy, you know, we’ll give it away’ […] we thought ‘come on, they will show it’, but then I never realized, if I had known how difficult that would be, my god, it was even more difficult than the film” (interview A). This over-

194 In July 2014, the Netherlands was ruled liable for the deaths of about 300 victims of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia. See http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/17/world/europe/court-finds-netherlands-responsible-for-srebrenica-deaths.html?_r=0 [accessed 24 August 2014].

195 Whether people should be paid to participate in project activities is a matter of debate among international development practitioners and recipients (see Anderson et al., 2012 for a thoughtful discussion). On the one hand, there is a question of whether paying for engagement could hinder meaningful participation. On the other hand, because engagement requires time and effort from participants, giving them money or another form of remuneration could well be considered a gesture of respect for their contribution. Whether bilateral funding reaches local beneficiaries or mostly remains in the hands of foreign implementers is at stake. The Videoletters project did not make payments to series participants, who were given a Dutch souvenir as a token of gratitude and promised a DVD copy of the episode that would result from their involvement.
simplistic and presumptuous approach shows a lack of understanding of the role that the state broadcasters had played during the conflict, discussed in Chapter 1. The relationship between national(istic) politics and the media system and the ensuing absence of official mechanisms and spaces for telling stories about the conflict and its consequences were not taken into account (Rolston, 2007; Hackett & Rolston, 2009).

Notably, the broadcasters’ resistance, which took the filmmakers by surprise, was unsurprising for B92’s Chief Executive Officer: “new authorities, democratic government, did not change the matrix of attitude towards the causes of war and to the war culprits, thus what happened […] with Videoletters and public broadcasters was to be expected. The same matrix was still up and running. So it was still functioning, and this matrix says that the culprits are the others, and that reconciliation is not an option, just the apology of the other side […], and punishment, etc. That’s something we were permanently coping with, even with the projects produced from here” (interview I). Had the filmmakers engaged in consultation with local media experts and representatives of politically independent media outlets before approaching the state broadcasters, they could have grasped what was in fact well-known by insider analysts. The political management of governmental media systems across the successor states at that point in time pointed at the rejection of the Videoletters project as the most likely scenario.

Only one of the successor state broadcasters accepted the proposal. While the Croatian and Serbian television stations refused to air the complete series on the grounds that it was contrary to national interests, one of the three channels of the Bosnian state broadcaster – a split media system tending to an equally split polity – saw the possibility to air a series that addressed all of the country’s constituencies as a way of bringing them together: “Why did the Bosnian television decide to broadcast the Videoletters? Because this is a good project, and this project has same idea what we had at that time: to collect people to establish […] some real strong TV station, […] and the channel […] this [was] a first after the war, you know, that we [would provide coverage] with one signal to whole area. […] They sent information to our director, and we saw this as a chance, because all our programs at that time in BHT1 were to inform people in [all of] Bosnia […]. People in Banja Luka or Mostar, in Prijedor or Srebrenica or Sarajevo, they [could] watch the same program: [the] same football match, [the] same documentary project, or [the] same music, you know… so slowly they [could] […] they [could] start again living together” [interview B].

According to the Videoletters fact sheet, the series’ broadcast would be complemented by live talk show discussions of each episode in connection with the conflict and its consequences. However, there was no political space at official levels for endorsing dialogue across national borders (Hackett & Rolston, 2009): “actually what we were hoping for, or not even hoping for, I
thought it would automatically happen, because they all the time have talk shows, they talk about you-don’t-want-to-know for hours, it’s the cheapest TV possible, and they just do it all the time, so we said ‘OK, we’ll give you the Videoletters, it’s a nice 20 minutes, it’s not too long, you can invite guests and talk about it, and even more, because they are showing it simultaneously, you can cross, you know, you can talk with a Croat, because everybody is watching the same episode. Well, […] there [were] no talk shows, there was nothing, and that was so frustrating” (interview A). Asked why they thought the talk shows did not materialize, they referred to laziness on the part of the broadcasters, once again betraying a patronizing attitude and a lack of understanding of the complexity of the process at hand: “I guess we should have made the talk shows as well, or donate money for it, or just pay for it, something like that”196 (interview A). The broadcasters were not consulted about the financial and political feasibility of organizing such talk shows. Instead, the filmmakers reasoned on the basis of financial arguments: the series would be accepted because it was free of charge, and the talk shows would be produced because it was the cheapest television possible. While the Serbian and Croatian broadcasters are likely to have disregarded the idea of the talk shows for the same reason they rejected the full series, i.e., a concern that audiences might take up the message of reconciliation, the former manager of BHT1 spoke of lacking the human, technical and economic resources to produce live discussions (interview S).197

Once again, that the televised discussions did not happen seemed only reasonable to B92’s Chief Executive Officer: “I suppose they tried to make a more comprehensive presentation merely in BiH. I think that only in BiH everything else went along with [the Videoletters project], some events and debates and so on, while in other areas, either Croatia or Serbia, there wasn’t any. […] And that brings us back to what I was talking about – it is very important that the wider social community stand behind the project, and that it should be, those programs should be the product of that community’s desire and only then that community could put pressure on the media. The same matrix occurred here: it means that the Serbs and Croats [broadcast the series] formally and did just what they liked. In Bosnia, everything was probably [broadcast]. I don’t know. I’m not sure, but I guess, there’s no reason not to.” In this analysis, the fact that civil society was not involved in the project was one important reason why the filmmakers failed to achieve their goal. In pursuing the broadcast as their main dissemination strategy, the project disregarded the more or less organized spaces in which

196 Why they did not is not clear, since part of the Dutch funding was earmarked for this.

197 That this would have been the case seemed obvious to me, as I interviewed him in a building that had not seen maintenance since the start of the siege, with worn-out carpets peeling off the floors, cracked pain on the walls, and no heating. Since the Dutch MFA funding was earmarked in part for organizing the talk shows, why they failed to materialize, at least in the case of Bosnia, remains unclear.
citizens were seeking to build peace from the bottom up, thus missing an opportunity to promote its embracement and galvanize support.

Besides misevaluating the political context, the filmmakers ignored other important contextual information. Data on viewership (introduced in Chapter 4) suggested that trying to air the series through the successor state television stations was not necessarily the most productive avenue for reaching a wide audience across the region, given the well-documented variation in viewer preferences across locations. The disregard for such data, combined with the absence of systematic pretesting of audience response to the series (Mody, 1991), made for an uninformed choice of avenue. While the Bosnian broadcaster was keen on showing the series, it was with a certain anxiety derived from the fact that it was not possible to pilot-test reactions: “If you see [this] from [the point of view] of [the] TV station, you know, you see some good project, […] but you are scared, […] [what] it will look like, […], especially [if] we don’t have time to test, […] our viewers, how they will accept this” (interview B).

The audience(s)

Little is known about how the broadcast of the series was received by audiences across the region. Importantly, those audiences could not be reached through my research: while the ratings retrieved testify to the fact that they had once existed, they were not there any longer by the time I started fieldwork. I only found one ordinary citizen – i.e., a person who was not involved with the project in any capacity – who had seen Videoletters. Most of my interviewees could not speak in an informed manner about audience reactions. According to the former manager of BHT 1, ratings in BiH were very poor, and people who watched the series did not react in any outstanding way: “I think the reaction of the people would be, so called, normal. The human reaction […]. Normal people, [who] are, I think are the majority of viewers, they would be reacting normally. That means that they would see it as a human story and […] it would help them to accept and to understand that the war was senseless” (interview S).

The fact that audiences were no longer “there” left me with a number of questions about the series’ take-up in the region that could not be answered. To make sense of whether the broadcast may have a) been moving for viewers, b) responded to a perceived need to reconnect, and c) led to discussion about the consequences of the conflict on relationships, I organized a small-group interview (see Chapter 3 for methodological details). The discussion that followed the shared viewing of “Vlada & Ivica” was illuminating. To begin with, asked if the episode of Videoletters they had just seen related in any way to their personal lives, all members answered affirmatively. One said: “being disconnected with loved ones in any way […]. Definitely.” Asked if there was anything about the episode that they disliked, two participants referred to having anticipated that the conflict would be
blamed on one or the other “side”, i.e., they expected that the story told would point at a guilty party:

- “I was afraid that at some point it was going to be about placing the blame; for a split second I thought it was going to be like that, but it turned out to be good.”
- “Yes, I thought that they [were] going to blame the Serbs, like how they did stuff […] because I have seen so many things like that. People blame each other.”

Asked what they liked about the episode, participants referred to several ways in which it worked well:

- “I liked that they understand each other, and they were feeling the same, emotionally, and they understand the blame, they understand, they love each other still.” For this viewer, affection had endured despite what had happened in the intervening period of time during which the families had not communicated.
- Moreover, affection could endure through time despite the pressure to the contrary exerted by the mass media: “Both families succeed to beat the mass media of the period, and they still [hold onto] their hearts and memories, they didn’t believe the media who were serving their own propaganda.” Interestingly, watching the episode provoked a reference to the negative role of the media.
- “I liked the simplicity of the communication, […] not too much explained, from the other side it’s the same, and even when they saw each other at the end, that was the first time, their connection; and I also felt that there were no ‘booms’, just the simple understanding, nonverbal, between them. So, it was very nice and touching.” There is a clear reference here to both parties being on different sides, and to “the other” as opposing “the same”, plus a sense that words can and do complicate things. The participant appreciated the fact that the episode did not make a big deal of the reencounter between both parties.

Asked about their viewing habits at the time of Videoletters’ broadcast in 2005, the group agreed on the fact that they were not watching much or any television – partly because they were students living in dorms and did not have television sets. One specified: “(In 2005) I [didn’t] watch TV at all. Maybe some comedian. Nothing political.” Referring to the question of whether people in general might have watched Videoletters or not, and why, two obstacles were considered: the choice of distribution channels, and the point in time.
• “Maybe the problem at that time [was] that not so many people knew about this project because it was broadcast on a small TV [station], this TV was really important in the 90s, but after the fall of Milosevic it became minimal.”198

• “Maybe 2005 was not so close, because the war ended in 1995, the changes came in 2000,199 and 2005 is five years, so people who had friends before, they had already connected, or tried.” Time and distance/proximity appear intermingled here. The conjecture that people’s need to reconnect may have been attended to by the time Videoletters was aired raises the question of the project’s timeliness.200 Another group member put it slightly differently, recognizing that the issue remains a long-lasting problem: “This subject is always a topic here, because of lots of wars and so on, but maybe they were a little late.”

While one participant argued that, following changes in national television in Serbia after the fall of Milosevic, “one could see that the other side201 also suffered”, another one disagreed: “Did you ever see something on national TV that they are actually blaming Serbs? You can’t see that often. You can’t see it. You can see it on B92, but not on national TV.” This refers to the impermissibility of critical views in the official space of state broadcasting. For this participant, the Serbian state media kept certain narratives about the conflict out of view (a possibility analyzed by Rolston, 2007 and Hackett & Rolston, 2009). Talking about the potential reasons why the Serbian state broadcaster refused to show some episodes of the series, one participant explained: “It seems like they202 were blaming us, I mean Serbs, I’m not sure I am a Serb, I am, but I’m not; anyway […] So, it seems like they were blaming Serbs for doing something. That’s why they don’t want to put that on national television in Serbia.” This quote illustrates the convoluted character of national identifications, and suggests that something about the episode, in which a Serbian and a Croatian family reconnect, made the group defensive. Another participant said: “They, in a way, they are blaming Serbs. I mean, they are not, but […]” When I sought clarification, not much was said. To the question of whether anybody found that the episode was judgmental of Serbs, the answer was that the episode in question was fine, but one should be able to see all episodes in order to be sure. A hidden agenda was suspected, and,

198 Referring to the broadcast by B92.
199 With the fall of Milosevic.
200 And would be echoed by the observations of a crew member regarding public screenings, as we will see shortly.
201 Once again, the reference to distinct sides – the “othering” – is notable here.
202 Referring to the Videoletters.
absent the possibility of watching the full series, mistrust was in order. A participant referred to a more general uneasiness with media accounts of the conflict: “There’s always someone who’s going to be offended by this or that. It’s like a sense of placing the blame, but not actually doing it.” Unresolved issues regarding truth, responsibility and justice appeared to make it difficult for participants to actually trust the episode.

When members disclosed their national identities, it turned out that only one of the six members of the group identified as Serbian:203 “I was born in Bosnia, he is from Croatia”. “We are from Kosovo”. “Another Bosnian”. Given the differences, how did the episode viewed speak to their personal experiences? One participant wondered about how other nationalities or ethnic groups were portrayed in the series, and appeared to be more concerned with differences than with commonalities: “So, we have a story about Croats and Serbs, but we didn’t hear a story about Bosnians […] We have to watch them all, to know exactly what was going on there.” Significantly, she added: “This is fine, but I can’t relate myself to it, because […] I know, it’s difficult, people lose connections, I know, but I can’t really feel it, because I wasn’t there. I was on the other side, so […]” A number of important matters are raised here. There is an acknowledgement of a certain (moral) imperative to feel for — to sympathize with, commiserate, be sorry for — others who suffered. But at the same time, there is recognition that such sympathy is hard to come by when one was on the opposite side of a confrontation. The strong influence of “othering” is once again striking here, particularly because it is being discussed among a small group of friends who appear to like each other and to be close despite their disparate provenance and experiences of the conflict. In this sense, there is a duality: closeness among “others” appears in fact to be taking place in their everyday life, but mixed feelings about the idea (and the feasibility) of experiencing sympathy for a more abstract “other” seem to be in action as well. Interestingly, reflexivity about this duality appeared over the course of the discussion, speaking to the possibility that the filmmakers may have been on to something when they envisioned broadcasts and screenings followed by discussions. Had constructive televised discussions taken place, they might have added reflexivity to the viewing experience. However, the reflection of this participant also suggests that the idea of the whole former Yugoslavia watching Videoletters at once as a way of reuniting was overly simplistic, in that a number of particularities are likely to have mattered to even the most reflexive of audiences. The group discussion shows that, even if relating across ethno-political definitions was happening in practice on an everyday level, it was still difficult to think of relating to abstract “others”.

203 Which makes the comments about Serbs being blamed in the episode at once more interesting and more difficult to understand.
The (moral) imperative for sympathy appeared to be more relevant in connection with one’s own specific experience of the conflict, in which national or ethnic group affiliation was a strong factor: “For me, it is more important and hard to think about Albanians, because that was my story. So, with Croats and stuff I don’t have a problem […] but it was very interesting when at university we got some questionnaire about attitudes about Albanians, and I was like […] I like to think about myself as ‘not prejudiced’, but when I read those sentences, like ‘Do you think Albanians are like this or like that’, I really felt that I had some strange feelings. Like ‘ok, I wouldn’t hurt anyone, but […]’ So, it really needs some time for humans to get to that point of reconnection. I am ready to try, but I think it’s difficult for us.” The importance of time – of a distancing in time from painful events but without forgetting them – for a changed perspective to potentially open up appears here. Taking this into account, the great speed with which the Videoletters project was rolled out – its ephemerality – is very likely to have rendered inconsequential a great deal of the intervention. A slower and longer-lasting roll-out, with a more sustained offer of assisted opportunities to seek reconnection with distantiated others, would have been in order.

The same participant added: “And also I felt that it’s not that simple. Because I started with a firm ‘I don’t have anything against them’, and I think it’s wrong. And that’s what I liked from the video, the sincerity, when the man talks about how you become a little bit nationalist. Because I think that is the real path to reconnection. First, to admit that you really felt something like that, because it’s natural.” Here, reconnection is a process that requires coming to terms with one’s own positioning vis-à-vis nationalistic standpoints. This person had obviously thought about the problem before, and separately from, viewing the episode, and it is interesting that seeing someone on screen acknowledge his own nationalistic bias may have encouraged her to talk about the problem in the group. Again, this suggests that it’s not viewing certain content per se, but viewing with others and talking about it, which may hold the potential for constructive conversations about a socially and personally difficult matter. Another group participant said straightforwardly that, in the event of the series being shown on TV again today, she would not watch, because her main concern at present is to work on herself – finalize her studies, seek a job, etc. That is, to look forward, not backward. Focusing on the present and disregarding the past was her strategy toward a better future. But at the same time she conceded, looking right at me: “Now that I know you, I will probably watch. But someone has to tell me.” This suggests that the presence of a mediator to introduce an episode and facilitate a subsequent discussion in a small group may make a difference. The need for a “messenger” who makes

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204 See Volcic and Andrejevic (2009) for a related discussion of the problem of subtracting the social from the individual as a strategy to address conflict through the media.
The problematic relationship between past and future tenses, and between social and individual scales, appeared in yet another opinion: “I think people are fed up with that story, so they just want to move forward, they don’t want to think about it anymore. They just want to forget about it, not really to forget, but to overcome all these problems and troubles they had, and just move forward. So that, you know, you can go to vacation in Croatia, or [...] you can’t go there talking about ‘you Serbs, you Croatians, you did that, we did that, I am sorry, no I am not sorry’.” The problem of how to manage the complex tension between what societies should remember and forget, pursue and let go of comes into view here. There is a sense that continuing to talk about social problems that originated years earlier, even if they remain unresolved, interferes with making progress – and also with moving around the region in a “normal” way.

An interesting question was raised by one participant at this point in the conversation. What if the main target audience were not ordinary citizens, but hardcore nationalists? Would the Videoletters strategy work with them? “It would be more interesting to hear the nationalist side, how they feel. I would be impressed if they are touched by these words, like, to recognize some normal level of life. To put themselves at the level of normal people, that they had friends before, and not generalizing – Croatians, Muslims, some general artificial enemy. I wonder: can they focus on some small stuff, like personal connections before the breakup, and personal friendship with somebody?" The question, sensible and extremely relevant, speaks to the difference between ordinary citizens of the former Yugoslavia who were not directly involved in war crimes, and those actively involved in the production of the war. Who would in fact be moved by the series, and who would not? And how should one engage with those who would not be moved? Moreover, the question discriminates between the fact of being visibly moved after viewing an episode and actually taking a stand against divisive circumstances as a consequence. This is a crucial difference: the filmmakers spoke of witnessing the managers of the state television stations being visibly moved by a preview of the series, but later refusing to air it on the grounds that it was contrary to national interests.

In connection with the hypothetical rebroadcast of the series, the expression “fed up” appeared again: “Because we actually did go through it all. That’s why I wouldn’t like to watch it again on TV. I am a pacifist, I don’t see myself belonging to one or this or the third side, but [...] I’m very fed up with the whole topic.” A sense of the conflictive situation having lingered for too long appears here, combined with an effort to keep the problem at a distance, as if it was only affecting others despite – or rather, in combination with – a history of displacement and loss to which the group participant
had referred separately. Again, keeping both the past and the social body at a distance appears as a strategy here. For one group member, showing the series on television again would open a window for “the game of placing the blame”, with the risk that right-wing parties might use the material for their own purposes, and good intentions would backfire: “No one would perceive it on [an] emotional level, which I believe is the point of the whole series.” A fear of media content being manipulated for political purposes regardless of honorable aims appears here.

As a whole, the rich group discussion illuminated a number of my research concerns. Notably, participants referred to the complexity involved in dealing with feelings, attitudes and ideas about national identities and ethno-political belongings in light of personal experiences of conflict. A strong distrust of the role of state media in the conflict and its aftermath permeated the conversation. There was a fear of the nationalism that media could foster, combined with a disregard for its coverage of political matters. Distance appeared as an outstanding theme, in a number of ways: in connection with the passing of time, as required in order to move on from more nationalistic viewpoints toward reconciliation; in connection with “the other side” in the conflict, as something difficult to overcome; in connection with the consequences of the conflict for everyday life, as something necessary in order to move forward. Importantly, there was a sense of the need to get over problematic feelings and ideas about the conflict combined with a sense of the impossibility to let go. While the various group members expressed discomfort, resistance and doubts during the conversation, the Videoletters episode seemed to work well as a rightful provocation for discussion of the topic of how to communicate with the “other” in the aftermath of the conflict.

**Internet access and uses**
An interviewee who worked at the Videoletters production office in Amsterdam early in 2005 explained that, in preparation for the Sarajevo premiere, the series’ protagonists were contacted by phone because, at the time, not everyone was using e-mail (interview G). Although these phone calls were made in parallel with the creation of the website, in neighboring office spaces, the site’s developers remained unaware of the fact, which hinted at limited Internet penetration in the region. Oblivious to local conditions, the Videoletters website was tested in Amsterdam, and launched in the successor states as a fait accompli. But Internet connectivity was far from widely accessible for most citizens in the successor states, as noted earlier, and also far from being a popular medium for social interaction or civic involvement in everyday life. Pointing at the tension between citizens’ private needs and the project’s push for public display (Rolston, 1997), the filmmakers noted that it was difficult to convince
people in the region to create a public profile on the website: “people had to make a profile, and become somebody, and nobody wanted to be [somebody]” (interview A).

The gap between what people could allow themselves to do in the private and public realms was acknowledged by the former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force: “And people weren’t at that time thinking about connecting to each other through the Internet. I mean, if they would or if they wanted, they would use phone, or mail, or friends or something like that. So, it was idealistic and, I think, also maybe too […] Yeah, apparently not the way people wanted […] It didn’t touch with what people wanted. I mean, they […] I don’t think people were ready to expose online that they were looking for somebody. […] I think it didn’t respond to an existing, to a method that people wanted to use. Maybe the need was there. I can still imagine the need was there, but not quite so openly. […] I mean, if you would post there, ‘I’m looking for Slavo’, it would be for everybody to see. You couldn’t try to find [out] if Slavo [was] online, and then send a private message, or something like that” (interview D). At that point, most citizens of the successor states were not familiar with Internet-based interpersonal communication: “people were simply not ready to use that kind of social media yet. Right now I guess it would be different, I think people find each other on Facebook” (ibid.). According to this interviewee, the lack of consideration of the socio-technical reality of the region played a role in making the website largely unusable: “Who could think that you could [create] a fairly heavy slow-loading website and expect people in a region hardly connected from broadband to even, you know, seriously use that. […] Plus the basic fact of Internet penetration, and the fact that it was a heavy website with a lot of coding behind it” (ibid.).

For the project’s Belgrade-based political operator, the website didn’t work partly because people didn’t know how to use the Internet, but also because those who knew how to use it, used it for nationalistic purposes: “we also have a problem of, you know, that’s [an] open site, and radical guys who wrote very bad things about me, about […] [the] people from Bosnia involved there. Every day I [had to] contact the administrator of the site to ask ‘please delete, delete, delete, spam’ […] It’s a good idea now, but in 2005 […] maybe 80 percent was negative reaction […]. Some Chetnik or Ustasha […]. They [would] put [a] national symbol and then [a] lot of bad words there, and we [had to] delete that. That’s the problem” (interview C). Part of this statement is confirmed by Volcic and Andrejevic (2009: 12), and part of it is contradicted. For them, despite the fact that

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205 A former Otpor! member who, as described by a crew member, was in charge of securing support for the caravan tour from city majors and local newspapers through his political connections (interview U).
penetration was low, the Internet was in fact used by viewers in the region in connection with television programming: the reality show “To Sam Ja” had an interactive website, visited by some 340,000 people in the first three days after it premiered in 2004.206 But, rather than promote communication and understanding among young viewers in the region, which was the advertised purpose of “To Sam Ja”, its online presence veered toward hate speech. According to Volcic and Andrejevic, “The occasional manifestations and ethnic tension on the show were echoed and amplified in the anonymous free-for-all on the listservs” devoted to discussing it. Online stereotyping was blatant “under the cover of anonymity” (ibid.: 16). This observation is in line with the problem faced by the Videoletters project. A series’ protagonist recalls a discussion posted on the website that got ugly, and reflects: “I don’t like to [get involved] in any forum, because it’s stupid to talk with people that you cannot see, and they can [say] anything they want, [but face-to-face, I don’t think they would say those things]” (interview N).

The situation on the ground

Spotlight on Sarajevo

The filmmakers conceded that choosing the location for the project’s premiere was not easy in light of the region’s political situation. Belgrade, where the project’s regional operation was in fact headquartered, was a no-go. Eventually, Sarajevo was selected, with a café symbolically called Dayton chosen for its borderline position between the two entities: “We organized it after a long, long debate where to do the premiere, because you can’t do it in Belgrade, the Croats will never, will not come, and you cannot do it there. There is a little place, it’s called Dayton and it’s in no-man’s-land, just behind Sarajevo and before Republika Srpska, so the first time after the war, people, families could meet there, and it’s a little café.” One of the series’ protagonists recalled feeling sorrow and sadness when s/he returned to Sarajevo for the first time after the siege for the project’s premiere and found it destroyed. The city, once famous for its multiculturalism, and known as the “capital of the world” thanks to the 1984 Olympics, was in bad shape in 2005 – and it is still in bad shape today, as I could see for myself during fieldwork. The interviewee remembered feeling uneasy at a dinner for project participants that was a feast: “maybe as much food in one night as Sarajevans were having in a month” (interview I). The discomfort caused by the stark contrast between local shortages and foreign excess contrasted with the joy felt when s/he met the other participants from the series and they all recognized each other as part of the project.

The cities and towns visited by the caravan

Where the project came from, and to whose agenda and interests it responded, is very likely to have been unclear to citizens who came across the caravan, which looked Serbian at first sight because the bus carrying the crew had Serbian number plates. Serbia was in fact the location favored by the filmmakers for all organizational purposes, most probably because one of the filmmakers and her/his “video sister”,207 who was the project’s financial manager, were from there and thus had strong networks in place.

The way in which the caravan was organized suggests that practical decisions were made without an understanding or acknowledgement of how they would be interpreted depending on location. The caravan’s bus not only had Serbian plates, but also a Serbian driver unwilling to hide the vehicle’s provenance: “A: we worked from Serbia, because this was the best country to do it from, best organized, in a certain way, and cheap, […] and for that reason we had Belgrade number plates [in the end].” The filmmakers speak of having tried to convince the bus driver and the crew to scrap the plates, without success. B: “and then finally it happened, that because of the number plates, in Makarska [Croatia], he208 was almost beaten up with the crew […], and then, […] everybody came like ‘I’m so sorry, now we realize’ […] A: not even the beating up was the biggest thing, it was like, you want to be well-received in a place, […] you want to be welcome, […] but because of some stupid number plates” (interview A). While in Makarska, Videoletters was unwelcome to the point that the city’s mayor withdrew permission for the project to operate, and public activities could not be held, in the most extreme case of local rejection. That the caravan appeared to be Serbian is very likely to have prevented people from approaching it in ten of the thirteen cities or towns visited. It may not have been an obstacle in Visegrad, located in the Republika Srpska, or in Brcko, which is formally part of both the Federation and the Republika, but everywhere else it must reasonably have led to apprehension among citizens, as acknowledged by the filmmakers themselves: “[people] didn’t come sometimes, because [of this]” (interview A). But there was another reason likely to have kept people at a distance. A crew member interviewed explained that things in the region were not like in Holland, particularly in small towns, and that therefore: “When we come with the caravan [to] some small place, it’s like a shock. It looks really friendly, everybody is friendly and everything is friendly, but people do not trust it, because this is not usual” (interview Q). The caravan’s presence stood out as an oddity in the region.

207 The expression was used by a representative of the Dutch MFA who was interviewed. She was living in the region and working on the ongoing reconstruction efforts when the filmmakers produced “Circus Sarajevo”, where she appears as a protagonist, and is named in the grant application to the European Cultural Foundation as a representative of a Belgrade-based company that partnered with Videoletters and Mediamatic to seek funding.

208 The bus driver, who was from Serbia.
As it traveled, the caravan made visible stark inequalities between the resources available to the foreign staff of Videoletters and to the project’s presumed beneficiaries. The filmmakers recalled being questioned by an ordinary citizen: “And we are so poor and what, the band is playing here in nice suits. You know how much I earn? And I would think, ‘oh fuck, yeah, that’s true’, you know?” (interview A). Like the matter of how to communicate the project’s provenance, the fact that Videoletters was obviously displaying the availability of economic resources that were not accessible to citizens across the region seems to have occurred to the filmmakers only as an afterthought. One of the crew members recalled how the staff always had dinner outdoors, by the side of the bus, in the public eye: “That was really strange, in the city center, all these people eating, you know, cooking and eating” (interview Q). In a number of ways, the caravan’s organization and management seem to have been insensitive to the life circumstances of the citizens that the project sought to serve. When Videoletters toured these thirteen locations, reaching out to people in a direct way, the problem of contrasting priorities –i.e., the distance between what the project thought people needed and what citizens themselves actually did need – came into view: “if the economic situation is really bad, forget about communication. Because people don’t have time to deal with that” (interview A).

Small audiences in public spaces

According to a caravan crew member, those who attended public screenings of episodes of the series showed one of four distinct reactions: “When we got to project the films, there were like four reactions, I would say. They were not in large numbers enough to make it representative. […] There were
young people who said, ‘Well, I’ve already seen a film on television. This is really not our problem. Very interesting, or not so interesting, or anything, but listen, we’re worried about jobs.’ […] This was one of the reactions. ‘This is maybe our parents’ problems, but that’s not for us. It was already ten years ago.’ Then there were, of course, people, also older people, who saw the films and said, ‘We already did this. Of course, our friends on the other side, yeah, we called them. Of course! Those are our friends.’ Then there were people who could not even look at the films. […] We were in Croatia, I think. And it starts, and just from the tone of voice, a mother hears that they’re talking Serbian, or the Serbian accent, and picks up her children and says, ‘We’re not gonna watch this. This is not for us.’ And that was, in fact, of course, a very important reaction of all the people who did not come to the screenings, but we did not get to see. […] The fourth was that there were actually people who enjoyed it, […] that it touched. In fact, our first, very first night in Pale and the very last one in Visegrad were, I guess, very good projections with lots of people watching” (interview N).

The audience reactions described by the interviewee refer to: 1) generational differences (and perhaps an inter-generational disconnect), with younger citizens showing a pressing concern with the present and the future and a disinterest in the conflict and its consequences; 2) Videoletters as a belated intervention, in that a number of people had already reconnected with distantiated others by their own means by the time the series was circulated; 3) Videoletters as a too-early intervention, in that a number of people would still not even consider watching a documentary portraying an ethnic-national “other”; and 4) a part of the audience for which both the timing and the content of the intervention were right, in that they could watch episodes of the series and be emotionally moved by them. In connection with the third type of reaction, a representative of the Dutch MFA recalled: “I remember some of the cities where we had lots of veterans, who were against reconciliation. They would oppose screenings of the Videoletters. […] Not everybody was, let’s say, happy to see the movie” (interview M).

In other words, there was no such thing as a single, region-wide audience that could simply be moved to action by this documentary television series. Had these reactions been explored and identified in advance of deciding on a circulation strategy, the series’ potential to promote reflexivity and discussion could probably have been developed in more productive ways through a variety of distribution avenues.

National media coverage
Despite the fact that Videoletters had a dedicated press manager (hired through Belgrade-based Godwin Communications) and actively sought to publicize the project, according to a crew member, “when we came in with
the bus making this tour, nobody had heard of the project.” The analysis of a sample of the Serbian and Bosnian news coverage reveals reasons for this disconnect.

**The Serbian press**
The sample of Serbian press clippings retrieved for Serbia includes ten articles, published by six different outlets: *Danas*, *Glas Javnosti*, *Dnevnik*, *Blic*, *Politika* (all dailies) and *Evropa* (a magazine, started in 2004 and closed down in 2008). Five of them were based in Belgrade, where the project was headquartered but did not hold any public activities, while *Dnevnik* was based in Novi Sad, the second-largest city in Serbia, which was not visited by the Videoletters caravan. *Dnevnik* and *Blic* were owned by German and Swiss media groups, respectively, in 2005. Paradoxically, *Danas*, which published four out of the ten articles retrieved and showed support for Videoletters, was suffering from a circulation in decline. As the only Serbian daily that at the time was continuing to make an effort to provide professional and independent reporting, it was facing financial and distribution problems (Marko, 2012: 13). Articles were published between 3 March and 29 September 2005. Only three of the pieces were authored: two by the same *Danas* journalist and one by Videoletters’ press representative. The other texts were either initialed only or unsigned. The authored pieces were an interview with the filmmakers, and coverage of the incident in Makarska (Croatia), where the mayor withdrew his permission for the Videoletters caravan to conduct activities, reportedly following anonymous threats to demonstrate against the project. The other two pieces published by *Danas* were directly sourced from the project’s press manager: an account of a “video letter” from the mayor of Srebrenica (BiH) to everyone in the region, and a summary of the project arguing that the series’ broadcast in Serbia “wasn’t always at the ideal time, but [it had an] enviable rating”. All articles were published in the daily’s rear section, indicating that the project’s coverage was not given great priority. Notably, none of the pieces included the voices of the participants in the Videoletters series, or the views of audiences or citizens interacting with the project’s caravan. The articles include no references whatsoever to the actual content of the documentary television series, except for a few mentions made by the filmmakers. Two articles were published by *Glas Javnosti*: one mentions the prize awarded to the filmmakers in New York without conveying any information about the project, and the other refers to the above-mentioned incident in Makarska without providing enough background information for the reader to understand why Videoletters was being opposed by anonymous detractors. Once again, the voices of series participants and the views of

209 Number of articles published per month: March: 1; April: 3; May: 1; June: 2; July: 2; September: 1.
audiences or citizens engaged in the caravan’s activities are absent, and so are references to the actual content of the series.

The remaining four articles appeared in different publications. The piece signed by the project’s press representative predictably praises Videoletters. The other three give information about the project along the lines of its press kit: one includes a supportive quote from the Dutch ambassador in Belgrade, and the other quotes a filmmaker. Once more, none of the articles included the voices of the series participants, of audiences, or of people engaged by the caravan along its tour. Only one article provides a brief summary of what the series was about, while claiming that it had already achieved success in Europe. This could be seen as the exception that proves the rule: most articles did not provide sufficient information for an unknowing reader to understand what Videoletters was about. Overall, Serbian press coverage of Videoletters was rather unclear. Neither the series’ broadcast schedule nor the caravan’s activities in Serbia and Montenegro were announced in advance. The pieces tended to focus on the filmmakers at the expense of the citizens of the region that the project was supposed to serve – with occasional references to official authorities, be they a foreign ambassador or a local mayor, but a complete absence of ordinary people. Where coverage referred to the project being rejected in Croatia, there was no explanation as to why. Faced with coverage of these characteristics, not even a curious and engaged reader would have found it easy to make sense of what Videoletters was about.

The Bosnian press
The sample of press clippings retrieved for BiH includes nine articles, published by six different outlets: *Dnevni Avaz, Oslobodenje* (internationally respected for its role during the conflict, but facing financial constraints and the consequences thereof by 2005), *Slobodna Bosna* (a weekly), *Dani, Nezavisne Novine* and *Start*. Five of the outlets were based in Sarajevo, where the project was launched in early April 2005, but no other public activities were held after that date, and *Nezavisne Novine* was based in Banja Luka. This is the second-largest city in the country, located in Republika Srpska, which was not visited by the Videoletters caravan; the daily, however, was at the time distributed in the federation market. The earliest piece was published on 24 March 2005, and the latest on 8 June of the same year.210 Seven of the nine articles can be grouped into two distinct clusters. In the first cluster, three articles, all published on 1 April 2005, announce the start of the broadcast of the series along similar lines. Two of them quote the director of state television channel BHT1, one quotes the Dutch ambassador and two quote the filmmakers. In one of them, both the BHT1 director

210 Articles published per month: March: 1; April: 5; May: 0; June: 3.
and one of the filmmakers refer to the project as apolitical: the former declares that there is nothing political about it, while the latter says, “we don’t care about high politics”. In the same article, the filmmaker says that famous musician Rambo Amadeus\textsuperscript{211} was so impressed by the project that he performed a benefit concert.\textsuperscript{212} This is contradicted by Amadeus in an interview published on 5 April, saying that his first free concert ever for the people of Sarajevo was paid for with Dutch funds via the Videoletters project.

Two of the articles in the first cluster stress the inclusion of Bosnians in the project as protagonists in the series and as crew members. In the second cluster, four articles, published between 24 March and 8 June, refer to the presentation of Videoletters in Srebrenica as part of the official opening of a youth center, describing it as a campaign from the Netherlands. A ninth article, published late in April, is critical of the Croatian broadcast, raising the question of why the eight episodes of the series scheduled in that country were being aired after midnight.

While the Bosnian press appeared to be more receptive to the project than the Serbian press in that the information provided about the broadcast of the series is clearer, coverage mostly echoed the project’s statements, and the problem of voice remained unresolved. That most articles can be grouped into two distinct clusters, referring to the same news and published around the same dates, indicates that they followed the project’s press releases. The articles including quotes give voice to the filmmakers while ignoring the citizens that the project was supposed to serve – with occasional references to official authorities, either an ambassador or a television director, but a complete absence of ordinary people.

**Informing the public?**

That press coverage of the project was poor and therefore could not play a role in informing the public about the Videoletters project in any significant way is not surprising. The ways in which the news media worked before and during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, discussed in Chapter 1, had not changed much in 2005. It was precisely a shortage of autonomous professional reporting in a context of mounting financial constraints and enduring political control of media outlets that international intervention in the region was said to be tackling. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, readership was fragmented among too many publications, and tended to follow ethno-political lines. This combination of factors implies a distance between the successor states’ press media and the audience at large that Videoletters sought to engage.

\textsuperscript{211} See http://ramboamadeus.com/ [accessed 20 March 2014].

\textsuperscript{212} Held as part of the Videoletters launch in Sarajevo.
Recapping: How did the national/regional context influence the trajectory of Videoletters?
The findings discussed show that the Videoletters project operated in the presence of a number of important contextual conditions:

- State broadcasters continued to function in line with their role during the war(s), and therefore programming decisions were made based on a political rationale, which led the Serbian (and Croatian) state channel to refuse to engage in a collaborative broadcast and to communicate a message of reconciliation.

- Because viewership for the state broadcasters was fragmented, a massive audience could not be reached by “adding up” their channels: while RTS Serbia remained strong and influential, BHT1 had poor ratings in the Federation of BiH and even lower ones in the Republika Srpska. As a consequence, in terms of attempting to reach a wide audience, the Serbian refusal to show the full Videoletters series was more significant than the Bosnian acceptance.

- Internet penetration was low, at approximately 13 percent in Serbia and 20 percent in Bosnia, but with a predominance of dial-up connections in the latter, contra the broadband required by the Videoletters website for functionality. But access was not the only obstacle: since hate speech and pro-nationalistic raging were common among those who used the web (a problem aggravated by the anonymity enabled by listservs), the online space was in principle geared toward resistance to international initiatives and reconciliation discourses.

- Print media in Serbia and Bosnia had a limited and fragmented circulation that responded to ethno-political divides among readers, and was therefore an unsuitable channel for informing citizens at large about the project.

- Citizens showed great distrust for politicians, which went hand in hand with a general distrust for the media.

- The need to communicate with distanced others, even though present at least to some extent, competed with other pressing needs, such as poverty, destroyed infrastructure, the search for the remains of relatives presumed dead during the conflict, related judicial processes, and unemployment. Moreover, the need coexisted with fear and contradictions, and collided with the nationalistic attitudes endorsed by political authorities in government.

Other contextual conditions that had a bearing on the project were the product of foreign intervention in the region, which generated a variety of difficult reactions: frustration at the display of wealth and resources, suspicion regarding hidden agendas, and confusion regarding who was in charge of what. The unclear origin and purposes of the Videoletters project, which
combined Dutch and British official support with headquarters in Serbia, engaged local mayors in specific locations for public relations purposes, and displayed an array of financial and technological resources, is likely to have led to resistance, distrust or confusion among citizens.

The intervention’s institutional setup and international circulation

How do institutional conditions shape the inception, implementation and circulation of a development communication intervention? Here I am interested in identifying the ways in which the priorities, formal requirements, standard ways of operating and expectations of the project’s funders may affect an intervention’s goals, implementation and circulation. Attention is given to the conditions regulating the relationship between Videoletters’ implementers and funders, and to every ensuing procedure and mechanism at play, including goal setting, the timeline for execution, disbursement procedures, reporting requirements and publicity stipulations. Attention is also given to the wider peacebuilding and media development operations going on in the region at the time of the project’s roll-out, including the positioning of the Videoletters filmmakers in the highly competitive landscape of “media development initiatives” characteristic of the post-conflict scenario at the time. The ways in which the international news media and documentary film festivals responded to the initiative are examined. The main focus here is on the characteristics of international intervention.

From institutional support to bilateral funding

According to the filmmakers, the search for funding for the project implied hard work and included several failed attempts, partly because their previous documentary, “Circus Sarajevo”,\(^{213}\) was critical of the business approach to aid intervention in the region. However, considering the total amount of funding they raised, and the carte blanche given to them by their bilateral funders, the fact that fundraising required their time and effort becomes a minor detail in the wider trajectory of the project. The first step toward securing large-scale funding was getting the attention of the Media Task Force. The Task Force’s former Executive Secretary recalls how this happened: “I was responsible on behalf of a number of ministries of foreign affairs to identify good projects that could help reconciliation particularly involving media, meaning supporting newspapers that had a decent editorial line, helping to produce programs for radio and TV that were showing or delving into the past, etc. And then, at some point, I got a project proposal on my desk called Videoletters. This project kind of stood out from many of the other

projects. The first reason why it stood out was that it was a project that was not conceived by any other media from Serbia, or Bosnia, or Croatia, but it was conceived actually here by two filmmakers, documentary makers from Amsterdam. [The] second reason why it stood out was that […] one of them had originated from Serbia. [The] third reason [was] […] that they actually had already made a successful documentary […] in Bosnia. […] OK. So, they have a track record in making interesting stuff, […] documentary [films] […] I was in that sense charmed by the quality of what they could do. And the fourth and most important reason why it stood out was that the idea was very original. […] [The] fifth reason it stood out was that it was unusually complicated, involving a lot of mind, [a] fair amount of money, and it was an ambitious idea, but it was good. So I met [the filmmakers], was like many other people charmed with their enthusiasm and commitment to it, so I kind of decided to put my weight, a little bit of weight that I had, behind it. The main thing they were looking for was money. […] They had made a pilot […] but were obviously looking for funds to make a whole series out of it. And they had tried a bit with the Brits, and they tried a bit with some other donors in that field, and had not really made the step towards […] I mean, the entry in the higher echelons of those ministries that could kind of circumvent the bureaucracy a little bit and get them the money they needed” (interview D).

The Task Force acted both as a clearinghouse, collecting information about interesting projects and distributing it among funders, and as a catalyst for implementation. Its former Executive Secretary chose to support the filmmakers because: a) they were Dutch, and not from the former Yugoslavia; b) one of them was originally from the former Yugoslavia, which meant that s/he could speak the language(s) and had connections in the region; c) they had a record of producing/directing in the region; d) the idea was considered original; and e) the project was ambitious. That video letters had been used in the region before is not something he seemed to be aware of, despite his crucial role as a broker. Once he was on board, his power – what he refers to as his “weight” – brought about results: the filmmakers got access to decision-makers within the structures of the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and things became easier. To begin with, the Task Force’s Executive Secretary helped the filmmakers close an agreement with the United Kingdom’s FCO: “Then they applied with the Brits and provided a usual project proposal, but [they] are very good filmmakers, but not experienced in fundraising or project proposal writing in the traditional sense of the word and the way these things should be done, and following all kinds of formats and procedures and stuff like that. So I made a large number of phone calls to the FCO and counterparts there trying to move that proposal forward, eventually helping a little bit to accept it” (interview D).

While it was not possible to interview any representatives from the United Kingdom’s FCO, information gathered from the documentation
obtained through an FOI request states that Videoletters was chosen for funding on a number of grounds, including that: a) the filmmakers had produced other “big” TV series “abroad” (e.g., the prize-winning “The making of the revolution”) and had a lot of experience with the media; and b) audience reaction to the series had been tested in small groups. More strategically, the project was funded because it would presumably help prevent conflict, in line with the FCO’s agenda: “It fits the sub-strategy as it helps people to come to terms with the recent past and links divided communities, promotes the use of regional networks, and supports a responsible media.” Notably, the project was also considered worthy of financial support because “There are good public diplomacy opportunities. Support from the UK government will be acknowledged at the end of each programme. Representatives of the FCO will be invited to attend the premiere of the series. Television stations outside the FY have taken an interest in Videoletters” (FCO, 2013). As it appears, the British funding was granted on the strength of the filmmakers’ prior experience and success (as expressed in awards) as such, without further evaluation of whether they had the competencies required to manage an initiative of the scale and characteristics proposed, such as proven practical experience in the work of organizing and facilitating dialogue processes (IDEA, 2007) or managing conflict negotiations, which they would have needed to engage with the state broadcasters in a productive manner.

The Media Task Force’s Executive Secretary also introduced the filmmakers to the representative214 of the Dutch MFA who would become a champion of the project: “I arranged the meeting between [the filmmakers] on the one hand, myself and three people from the Dutch Foreign Ministry, who were involved in this type of reconciliation projects. And I actually remember that meeting very well. They were there, formal, ties, suits, everything, thinking, ‘OK. Here’s another pitch for a project […] Well, whatever, we have to listen, because [the Executive Secretary] is here, and fine, these two people are also Dutch, so OK, whatever […]’ And they were listening kind of, you know, politely to what [the filmmakers] had to say, and they were still, you know, hesitant. And then [filmmaker A] opened his MacBook and showed that pilot. And the pilot lasted ten minutes and after that they were in tears. And that was the moment that I knew this [was] gonna work. I mean, they were touched by that pilot, and more or less immediately said, ‘We’re gonna help you.’” This was a crucial instance in which the pilot’s influence on the right individual viewers – the fact that it moved the individuals with the power to decide – enabled the filmmakers to secure a large amount of funding and a great deal of diplomatic backing.

214 The former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force referred to this representative as “one of those people you need in the Foreign Ministry to make something happen” (interview D).
The meeting in The Hague, which took place in the summer of 2004, is also recalled by the Ministry’s representative: “I had just received my appointment as coordinator for the Balkans Unit, and then they contacted me through one of the junior staff members […] who was dealing with Kosovo. She said […] to talk to them. Well, I was brand new, so why not. So, they came with their laptop that contained one of their documentaries, and they showed it to us while they were having their coffee at the Ministry’s restaurant here […] And I also invited an advisor from the Communications Department and Human Rights Department, it was four of us, we were watching the documentary and then, well, we asked them in the end […] to give an additional explanation to their project proposal” (interview O). According to this interviewee, the Videoletters project “fit with the theme of reconciliation”, which was one of five main areas of action of the Ministry’s then-new policy line for the Western Balkans, which was in turn informed by a new policy line for conflict regions drafted by the Ministry of Development Cooperation. As discussed in Chapter 2, here peacebuilding and development cooperation did in fact go together (Curtis, 2000). At the time of the meeting in The Hague, the Balkans Unit had just started executing a budget of EUR 60 million. Asked if the Unit financed other communication and media-driven interventions at the time, the interviewee gave a vague answer: “We tried to finance as [many] projects as possible and equally share through the five or seven themes of the policy note that we cast for the Western Balkans” (interview O).

Like the former Executive Secretary of the Task Force, the Ministry’s representative conceded that the filmmakers lacked experience in submitting proposals to bilateral funders: “Their main narrative proposal was not too strong. They needed some guidance, especially on the management field, how to manage a project like that. […] The first request was for, I guess, 0.9 million euros, but when I was assessing their project proposal I did find a couple of weaknesses that should be solved before it was possible to execute the project, or before it was possible for us to grant the subsidy. So I asked their attention to those weaknesses, and advised them to, well, to draft a slightly new proposal dealing with at least the appointment of […] the person who was not from the cultural field or their artistic field, but just who was able to manage it from the managerial point of view as well, from a financial point of view. And then […] they came with [the filmmaker’s sister] […] In the answer the project proposal turned out to be 1.3 million euros” (interview O). I call the reader’s attention to the fact that the Ministry’s representative noticed weaknesses in terms of management skills in the first version of the project proposal, but was satisfied with the way in which those were addressed on paper in the second version: add a manager, and stir.
The funders’ requirements for granting support

As regards monitoring and evaluation, the United Kingdom’s FCO requirements were surprisingly simple, according to the documentation retrieved: “[The filmmakers] will produce reports of the project, and a survey at the end on how effective the series was. Posts should monitor the progress of the broadcast of the series in their respective countries, and public response to the series.” Which form precisely this monitoring was supposed to take was not specified. A final narrative and financial report was expected by 31 October 2004, including “a description of the project activities and outcomes, showing the extent to which the project objectives have been achieved, with details of any further work or planned follow-up and an assessment of the impact of the project” and “a broad accounting record of expenditure.” Under the rubric of public diplomacy, the FCO also requested the following: “1) We request the acknowledgement of our grant be included in your Annual Report. 2) Grantee organisation should also acknowledge the support of the British Embassy as appropriate, in materials that refer to the project, or in public presentations about the project. Please provide the Embassy with a copy of any publicity materials, press articles or photographs that are generated as a result of the project and include them with interim narrative reports” (FCO, 2013). The full funding was disbursed in advance of the reporting deadline: EUR 60,000 in September 2003 and the rest (EUR 118,410) in March 2004.

In the case of The Netherlands, the reporting requirements were as follows according to the Ministry’s representative: “Well, every six months a financial and a narrative report, progress report. Financial report is quite simple: how much money did you receive, what amount of money did you spend on what issues. If they had to reallocate money from one budget line to the other budget line that was more than 5,000 euros, they had to ask permission from me. And the narrative report – what did they do so far. And there’s also always a final report and a final financial report and if they all, if they are, well, OK in my eyes, they receive their final payment. Five percent of the total, […] after an advance payment up to 95%.” (interview O) Advance payments worked as follows: “It’s quite simple. If the project takes, well, for instance, two years, you have the possibility of granting them advance payments up to 80% in tranches of six months.” (interview O) While according to documentation the UK’s FCO funding was granted to the filmmakers as individuals, in the case of the Dutch MFA it was necessary for them to set up a foundation: “Well, dealing with huge sums of money, and 1.3 million [euros] is quite a lot, we need a legal entity to do business with. A legal entity could be a foundation. […] Legal entities can hire persons, it’s in the Dutch legal system. Otherwise it could be a hypothetical contract relationship with the Ministry, for that they could become in the end civil servants of the Ministry and that is, well, something they don’t want and we
The project’s duration
When I interviewed them, the filmmakers complained about the rushed time schedules imposed by funders: “What they basically do is they spend 1.3 million euros, they want to have it finished by the end of the year because of their administration, and they don’t want any responsibility, and they only want you to act according to the rules. So, ‘Have you spent the money, can you please write a report about it’, and no support at all. So, if we would for example knock on the door and say ‘Listen, we want to do this, but it takes some more time, and we want to set it up in a proper way’, they would say ‘Can you do it in time?, otherwise forget about it’, you know” (interview A).

Their statement merits unpacking. That they were in a rush to prepare for the project’s launch in Sarajevo was confirmed by several interviewees, who referred to frantic activity in Amsterdam to edit episodes, develop the website and contact participants in the series in advance of the event. Neither the filmmakers nor the Ministry’s representative explained how and why the April 2005 date for the project’s launch was decided, or why the caravan’s two tours were so short. It may well have been that the time schedule to disburse the Dutch funding was tight, and limited to a one-year cycle, following standard procedure (Waisbord, 2008). However, this could not be established, because the Ministry’s representative who oversaw Videoletters insisted that he did not remember the precise time schedule and could not check it up for me because he did not remember the project’s identification number either: “I don’t know. I think it took a little bit more than one year, because, well, organizing a tour through all the countries, organizing events with local people, […], attracting them by festivals, parties, music, etc., but also overcoming severe troubles.” (interview O) According to an evaluation of the Dutch policy for the Western Balkans from 2004 to 2008 published by the Ministry (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2011: 150), the time schedule for Videoletters went from October 2004 to June 2008, which contradicts the filmmakers’ account and the vague recollection of the Ministry’s representative. Available data indicates that, following the initial meeting in The Hague in July 2004, the funding was made public in November 2004, the project was launched in April 2005, and the caravan completed its second and last tour in July 2005, at which point most project activity, if not all, ended. In practice, the time frame was one year.

As regards the United Kingdom’s FCO funding, the filmmakers’ complaint does not apply. The money, which was earmarked for organizing the region-wide broadcast through the successor state television stations, was

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215 Identified as project DZO 10831.
granted in September 2003, and the FCO expected the initiative’s outcome to be in place one year later, by October 2004. But this was not the case according to the project’s evaluation form: “Although the project started in September 2003, the meeting with the public broadcasters from across the former Yugoslavia, to agree on a simultaneous launch of the series, took place on 1 April 2004. It took another year before the series was officially launched” (FCO, 2013). The document states that, when the project failed to deliver on time, the FCO just waited until they did.

Happy endings?
According to the filmmakers, funders requested that encounters among the series’ protagonists be produced for each episode: a “happy ending” was expected. Whether the purpose was to show that face-to-face reencounters were in fact possible or to make the audience “feel good” about the outcome of sad and complicated stories is unclear. The request may also have had to do with framing the intervention as successful. Although these “happy endings” were something that the filmmakers said they were not really interested in, they played along: “we did the meeting between the people, and we did that because they [...] wanted us to do it, [...] they said ‘oh’, because Emil and Saša did not meet in the first place, the first editing, so they were all asking about this meeting, and this is typical of all these TV shows you see all over the world where people (meet), and then the camera moves close to the tears, and la la la la la, so we kind of promised all the organizations we [would] do the meeting, [...] a nice happy [ending], [...] a feel-good moment. [...] so the end of an episode in most of the cases will be a meeting, but for us it was not interesting at all, and we kind of more left the people, than get into it” (interview A). We can see hints of organizational hypocrisy here (Waisbord, 2008), with the filmmakers disagreeing with a requirement but complying, and also a situation in which the funders appear to have the power to frame the “official” story to be told by the series (Rolston, 2007).

Institutional and diplomatic support during implementation
Despite the filmmakers’ claim that they received “no support at all” from their bilateral donors, the Dutch Ministry provided diplomatic assistance in the negotiations with broadcasters and to facilitate the caravan’s circulation in the region, and the UK’s FCO allowed a considerable delay in delivering on their commitments. The Media Task Force also did everything it could to assist Videoletters once funding from the UK’s FCO and Dutch MFA was

216 That the filmmakers in fact showed the encounters in a brief and sober way can be observed, e.g., toward the end of the “Emil & Saša” episode. The two protagonists drive to café Dayton for their meeting, but their encounter soon gives way to the episode’s end credits, and the viewer is only shown very brief glimpses of the conversation.
in place, supporting the project’s efforts to convince the state broadcasters from the successor states to agree to a joint broadcast: “In my job there was also a collaboration project, aimed at collaboration between those stations in the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) context. And I thought, OK, the EBU could be the vehicle to try to push this, because at least all these stations are still members of the EBU, they attach value to their EBU membership, EBU themselves was fine with it, so we used EBU channels to try and set up a meeting between all those heads of television stations, and we decided, OK, if we’re gonna visit them all individually, we’re gonna have endless talks; if we’re gonna try and bring them together in Sarajevo the Serbs won’t come, etc. So we decided, OK, let’s bring them all to Amsterdam. So we decided to bring them all to Amsterdam, and I asked the former head of the Dutch public television station […] to chair that meeting, which he did very, very well” (interview D).

Later on, once the broadcasters had received the full series, and the Serbian and Croatian state television managers refused to air certain episodes, the Dutch MFA intervened: “So, then we tried to intervene and, I don’t know, whether it was due to our diplomatic intervening or due to some other issues, because we played on different levels and different chess boards. […] Thanks to some organized interventions by [the filmmakers], by our embassies, by some other people, we were able to create a situation where more or less all the documentaries were [broadcast] at the same time by the public broadcasting companies. Also due to the fact that one of the commercial broadcasting companies in Serbia showed some interest […] well, I think that was the final argument for the public broadcasting company to stay with their initial process.”217 The Ministry’s representative conceded that diplomatic pressure to try to secure the broadcast was exerted behind the scenes: “We kept it quiet. We did this in silence, not taking some publicity for that” (interview O). The former Dutch ambassador in Croatia was also involved: “they wanted to show Videoletters on all national channels in the former Yugoslavia, and there I supported them a lot in contacts with the Ministry for Communication, and the broadcasters” (interview M). The Media Task Force and the bilateral funders shared the view that the broadcast via the region’s state television channels was a valuable goal, and were ready to side with the filmmakers so that it would be achieved. While the initial game plan was to lure the broadcasters into agreeing, once these resisted the matter was approached as a bilateral confrontation, and the strategy of choice was to exert diplomatic pressure.

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217 This reference to B92’s interest in showing the series instead of the Serbian state broadcasters made by the Ministry’s representative suggests that the offer to B92 was used as leverage with RTS.
Narrative and financial reports

While the UK’s FCO noted that the quality of the reports delivered by the project was poor, and that the high standard of the documentary television series was not met when it came to the project’s administration and reporting, the representative of the Dutch MFA declared that he was satisfied. Holding on to a copy of the report in Dutch produced by the filmmakers during the interview, he praised the financial reporting: “They acted quite well, the staff of [the “video sister”] and their accounting firm or […] accountant who assisted them in their financial affairs. The project was executed quite well, managed quite well, and I always asked our embassy to take a look for us in there. So, I had also other information from the other side which convinced me that it was going quite well.” (interview O) The combination of the filmmakers’ self-reporting and the accounts from ambassadors in the region was sufficient for the Ministry’s representative to evaluate the intervention positively.

The former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force, on the other hand, acknowledged the lack of professional, independent evaluation of the project: “The response that I remember was impressionistic. At best […] You know, from people writing, or stuff like that” (interview D). In his view, this was partly because the project’s characteristics did not match the type of quantitative evaluation expected by funders under the OECD umbrella: “It’s the fate of socially relevant projects with difficult-to-measure results, difficult to quantify outreaching objectives that can only be described in fairly vague terms like reconciliation. I mean, if I have development projects from the point of view of [the] OECD, kind of [points of view] where I build [a] bridge or a road, I can project how much it [costs], how many cars would pass by, when it will be delivered, etc. And it’s a fairly linear project where you can easily, you know, put in quantifiable, verifiable results. And projects like these, but also projects in the field of advocacy are far more difficult, in that sense, and everybody in that field, of course, is struggling to find those parameters and coming up with basic, with lots of nonsense indicators simply to justify their projects. Everybody knows it’s nonsense, but because it has to be put in a locked frame they do it, and they come up with these nonsense indicators.” (interview D)

The interviewee elaborated further: “The Videoletters project […], if you would put it forward now, you would have to write down well, it’s gonna be tons of outputs, 26 episodes. Fine, I mean, that’s verifiable and they are made, but then, when it comes to impact, and results and whether you reached the objectives of peace in the world […] ‘Even if you can show that twenty thousand people have watched that program […] Suppose you could see that twenty thousand people watched the program, that would be nice but it doesn’t still say anything, and no donor is prepared to allow for a budget in which a baseline survey about attitudes towards Serbs is included in every single project, and then a survey to see if that attitude has changed,
which would be the only real way to measure change. Then the project would be far too expensive and we don’t wanna fund it. So, that’s kind of a catch 22.” (interview D) In his view, the fact that funders make no provision for the evaluation of initiatives implies that we are left with nothing but impressionistic evidence of success, which in turn implies the risk that future funding will be cut because there is no evidence that they are worth the expense. “There is no money for evaluation of those, or single project evaluations for each and every activity with such […] goals, reconciliation, advocacy, awareness, all those beautiful phrases. You can’t really measure it. And does that make them useless? No, absolutely not. The only trouble is you can only have impressionistic evidence of their success. And that’s a risk in a time of financial constraints and declining funds for development aid. Because those projects are the first ones out, while they may, at least some of them may be extremely useful.” (interview D) Impressionistic evidence, however, did not seem to be a problem for the UK’s FCO, which produced the project’s own fact sheet and a press clipping from the International Herald Tribune as documentation when I requested an evaluation. The narrative report that they received from the implementers, however, was redacted: I was not allowed access to it.

The Task Force’s former Executive Secretary is right in that the absence of adequate monitoring and evaluation of the type aimed at determining “through systematic, regular research, the value that primary stakeholders place on development programmes and activities, and their outcomes” (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013) was not a characteristic peculiar to the Videoletters project. In his analysis of 37 evaluations of media support projects carried out in the Balkans between 1995 and 2005, Rhodes stresses that almost all formal reports “generally provide no substantive impact assessment, and thus claim success based mainly on activities completed (‘output’). The rationale is that training was provided, therefore the project was successful.” (2007: 10) Moreover, according to Rhodes, “almost all of the formal reports and assessments claim success, improvement, and progress. Failure is rarely reported or framed in a ‘politically correct’ language” (ibid.). It is not possible to establish if this was also the case for Videoletters, but the fact that I was denied access to the reports produced in English raises the possibility that failure may have been discussed in them. If not, why deny access?

A word about transparency
According to O’Neill (2009: 170), transparency “demands that public bodies make publicly available certain parts of information about their activities, either regularly or on demand, apart from specific categories of reserved information”. Transparency requirements “can be used to obtain information that can be used to hold public institutions and officials to account, so can (for example), be used to expose and deter […] corruption
or poor performance” (ibid.). Importantly, transparency by itself “may not improve or secure communication – let alone accountability” (ibid.). In this view, attention to transparency implies a focus on informational content rather than communicative action. These considerations are important to analyze the reactions of Videoletters’ funders to my inquiries. The UK’s FCO responded by releasing a selection of the information available about the project and censoring the implementers’ report. Moreover, it refused to communicate with me face-to-face about the project, by dodging my request to produce the name and contact details of one or more potential interviewees: “With regards to seeking to identify and interview the FCO’s liaison for Videoletters back in 2004-2005, section 40 of the Freedom of Information Act exempts the release of personal data and prevents us from making the liaison’s name public. However we shall endeavour to contact the individual if still employed by the FCO, forwarding your request for an interview” (official response to FOI 2000 request 0883-13). As the reader will have guessed, the “individual” in question never appeared.

The Dutch MFA, interestingly, adopted the opposite approach. I was granted an interview, in which the interviewee dodged a number of my questions –particularly those related to the project’s website – and claimed he could not remember the project’s identification number, and therefore could not specify its implementation timeline. Moreover, he argued that the project’s file may soon be destroyed in the process of cleaning up a great deal of the Ministry’s paper archives as part of a switch to a digital system. One must, of course, wonder how difficult it can actually be for a former coordinator of a unit funded with EUR 60 million to access the files of the projects he oversaw eight years ago. The alternatives that come to mind are equally worrying: was the difficulty exaggerated in an attempt to discourage me, or is the Ministry a complete administrative mess?

The same considerations apply to Videoletters’ smaller funders. The OSF claimed to have a record of having supported the project but no other details whatsoever, despite the fact that it is one of the two main funders of the “Publish what you fund” initiative,218 “a not-for-profit organisation that campaigns for aid transparency – more and better information about aid”. The OSF officer who answered my e-mail query simply ignored my attempts to follow up after I asked her to kindly explain why the information about the project was no longer available. The European Cultural Foundation in turn acted along the lines of the UK’s FCO: I was given the project’s grant application but refused the implementers’ report, and the officer who answered my e-mail query insisted that if I wanted the report I should request it from the filmmakers instead. This was consistent with the Dutch representative’s

insistence that I should contact the filmmakers to ask them for the project’s identification number and return to him after that, which turned out not to be necessary, since the information was in fact publicly available in a publication released by the Ministry. When I interviewed the filmmakers, they readily volunteered a copy of their narrative report to the Dutch MFA, aware that I did not speak the language, but did not mention their reports in English for the UK’s FCO and the European Cultural Foundation. A combination of selective transparency and censored information was the rule of thumb across the board.

Ownership of the project and its outputs and outcomes
The filmmakers considered that the idea belonged to them and seemed to think that they were the only people capable of adequately using video letters to promote communication among distanced others: “many tried to copy us, and in the beginning we were afraid, like oh, now they are going to do it and then they are going to do it in a bad way, but after a while I wasn’t afraid at all, because it’s so difficult to make it” (interview A). Because of the nature of the project, part documentary filmmaking and part development communication intervention, it is not clear whether they considered the series’ idea or some other element of the project to be their own. But in any case, who should benefit from a “tool for reconciliation” developed with bilateral funds?

As far as it can be inferred from available data, the filmmakers’ funding requests were structured in such a way that copyright for the television series remained with them – the OSF did not make any information about their funding requirements available, but it seems unlikely that they would have requested copyright for the series, or asked that it remain in the public domain. When I asked the representative of the Dutch MFA who owned the Videoletters website, given the fact that the filmmakers had received public funding from the Dutch government in order to create it and maintain it and it no longer exists, he answered: “Technically, we granted a subsidy, so it’s their project and they executed it on their, within their legal entity of their own name, of their own responsibility.” According to him, there was no requirement that the website should remain publicly available: “Not publicly available. It should be kept available for inspection or whatsoever, I guess for ten years or something. I’m not sure of that […] We always have a regulation that we could inspect and look into their financial records and other records […]. They are not allowed to keep anything from us, but we hardly use that authority” (interview O). According to his technical analysis, the project and all its outcomes and outputs belonged to its proponents. And, since the UK funding was earmarked mainly to organize the broadcast, the FCO could not have had a claim on any outputs. The question remains: shouldn’t a “tool for reconciliation” ostensibly developed for the citizens
of the former Yugoslavia and funded by bilateral agencies with taxpayers’ money be readily available to citizens on both ends?

The problem of ownership is connected with the project’s potential appropriation in the region where it was implemented, as well as its potential replication in other contexts. An interviewee from the successor countries said that it was sad that such a good project had no continuity, and wondered why it was not appropriated and further pursued locally: “It’s a shame that nobody from this area, ex-Yugoslavia, [uses] this idea to follow this story. I don’t know why” (interview B). It is possible that this did not happen because the filmmakers understood the project to belong to them, and thought that there should be no spin-offs unless they were in charge. This same interviewee had the very interesting idea that a follow-up series could be produced today, returning to the protagonists to learn what happened with the relationships over time following the reconnections facilitated by Videoletters.

However, if the original implementers are not interested in continuity or adaptation but consider themselves the owners, what to do then? Should the concept be leased, with Videoletters treated as a brand from which they can profit?: “People are telling you ‘wow, you are famous now, you should do this, you should do that, and you should make an organization, you should make a big office’, and it was possible at that time, we were so popular that there was even an organization, or [several] of them, they came to us and they said ‘We want to implement the Videoletters project [on] our project, do you say yes to it?’”, and then we [would] say ‘Of course we don’t, because we don’t want to continue’. ‘Yes, but if you do it, we will get three hundred thousand euros more, if we just can use your name”’ (interview A). Since copies of the series are not deposited in regional media archives or libraries for educational and research purposes, the responsibility for granting access to the material is entirely at the discretion of the filmmakers, who have kept it.

The pilot-testing of Videoletters in Rwanda raised related questions. Could the idea be appropriated for peacebuilding purposes by third parties not related to the filmmakers? Is the filmmakers’ permission required for replication? Is any of the know-how related to the production of video-letter exchanges proprietary? If yes, should it reasonably belong to the filmmakers or to the bilateral funders? Is giving advice to others on how to implement the “tool” in other contexts a form of continuity of the original project? This was the filmmakers’ view: “two guys came to us one day and they said ‘we want to do Videoletters in Rwanda, do you allow us?’ […] [They were] Dutch guys, one was a student and the other one was a filmmaker and […] they wanted to steal the idea, actually, and then they came to a certain organization, and the organization said ‘listen, if you want to do this, you have to first contact the Videoleters people’ […] and then we said
‘yes, you can do it, but I will be the coach’.” (interview A) The fact that the filmmakers are de facto entitled to consider the idea their own property as a consequence of the funders’ rules evidences a problematic aspect of the practice and the institutional project, which begs for revision. Moreover, in light of the fact that video letters had been used several times before, claiming ownership of the idea verges on the absurd.

**International reception**

While the project’s deployment was structured in a number of significant ways through the institutional expectations and regulations of its bilateral funders, its international reception was framed via the inclusion in documentary film festivals and press coverage.

*International documentary film festivals*

Videoletters’ international exposure as a valuable and courageous case of ‘documentary-making for social change’ took place in the two famed documentary film festivals described in Chapter 4: the IDFA, in Amsterdam, in November 2004, and Human Rights Watch, in New York, in June 2005. With the project’s inclusion in the lineup of these festivals, combined with the prestigious prize received in New York, the filmmakers stepped into a “beam of light” that led to media coverage. In her account of IDFA 2004 for *Dox*, scholar Patricia Aufderheide referred to the project as “remarkable work”, to the three episodes of the series shown as “crisply and creatively edited” and to the forthcoming broadcast as “unprecedented”. The filmmakers were characterized as dedicated and hard-working “independents” who “not only created the series, but also negotiated the unprecedented simultaneous broadcast” and “are also creating a website”. The making of the series was described as a bit of a quest, and its content was characterized as moving: “The segments are both troubling and affecting.” The involvement of the Dutch government was referred to as “support” for the filmmakers’ initiative, and the intervention was depicted as the bearer of hope: “At the IDFA premiere, the representative of Bosnian public television tried to express his hope for the series, but was unable to speak through his shaking sobs” (2005: 14-15). In this account, the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia were far from being the subject, and the project was considered not a bilateral intervention, but an independent effort of laudable individuals, and deemed valuable in advance of its actual implementation. According to a representative of the Dutch MFA, the project’s inclusion in the IDFA “was a possibility to grant, to create some publicity for [the filmmakers], so I asked one of our, the director generals to give a speech and to give them the subsidy” (interview O).
'The idea is simple'
Additional international exposure came with the Sarajevo launch, in April 2005, which was covered by the BBC, leading to a television news segment and an online article. The article, entitled “Videoletters restore Balkan bonds” (Prodger, 2005), introduces the series and the broadcast, describing one episode in detail to the point of disclosing the surnames of the two protagonist families, and quoting the filmmakers and the BHT1 director. The focus is on the project and its makers. As in the Dox piece, the initiative is described as already successful based on the production of the series, in advance of the roll-out of every other component. In May 2005, the global news agency Agence France Press, which at the time distributed stories to approximately 2,900 customers worldwide, circulated an article entitled “Reconciling the Balkans through video letters” that introduces the series, the broadcast and the website along similar lines.

The Human Rights Film Festival in turn brought about coverage by The New York Times, repurposed for publication in the International Herald Tribune as well. The articles, published in June 2005 and authored by the same journalist, were entitled “Video Letters Reconcile Lost Friends in the Balkans” and “Videoletters – knitting loose ends in Balkans” (Riding, 2005). The focus is on the filmmakers’ doing good (and ensuing prize), and the project is characterized as “extraordinary” and “unusual”. According to this account, the project grew “bolstered by good ratings” – a statement that is far from reality – and the Dutch government intended to expand it to Israel/Palestine, Russia and Africa.


![Image of The New York Times article](image)

Source: Videoletters narrative report to the Dutch MFA.
Notably, the articles by BBC News, the AFP and the *International Herald Tribune*, though written by different authors, all included the same remark about the project: “The idea is simple.” The comment appeared as though it were written by the journalists themselves and not as a direct quote, but the striking similarity suggests it must have come from the filmmakers and was adopted as a sound bite.

As was the case with the Serbian and Bosnian press coverage, the focus was on the filmmakers, with the occasional addition of a quote by the BHT1 representative. While the citizens of the former Yugoslavia who participated in the series or were otherwise engaged in the project never featured in the articles, stills from the shooting of the series showing and naming some of the series participants were used to illustrate the stories. In the image above, the caption for the photo on the first page of the article reads: “A scene from ‘Mujesira and Jovisa’, an episode in ‘Videoletters’. Mujesira, a Muslim, sent a video to her former neighbors, Serbs.”

Following the New York prize, Videoletters was also covered by television news: in July 2005 it featured in a segment of the US television program ABC News, which referred to the project as a smashing success, and in November 2005 in a segment of CNN International, which characterized the series as “much more real than reality TV”. According to the filmmakers, journalists asked them for a success story: “What journalists wanted from us at that time, I said we have been interviewed a thousand times, it’s a success story, if you read The *New York Times* about us, then, you know, everybody, and that’s what they want, also even still, I have people, all the newspapers, all the programs, they want success stories, it’s great, and of course we kind of gave them what they wanted, we said ‘yes, it was a great success’. B: it was also a great success. A: it’s not only a great success. B: no.” (interview A) The international coverage, as we will see in Chapter 6, was considered by the UK’s FCO as a measure of the project’s success.

Recapping: How did the project’s institutional set-up and international reception influence the trajectory of Videoletters?
The project was adopted for large-scale support by the UK’s FCO and the Dutch MFA at the recommendation of the Media Task Force, in a process that became remarkably swift once the umbrella body in charge of screening the media-driven projects on offer decided to endorse it. Although the filmmakers lacked experience in formulating project proposals at the bilateral level, they were assisted by institutional representatives in order to overcome the limitation.

The formal stipulations established by the British and Dutch funders in their agreements with the Videoletters project were surprisingly simple,

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219 The *International Herald Tribune* actually says: “The idea was simple.”
making for relative freedom for the filmmakers to operate: the disbursement of funds was not tied to mechanisms of systematic and impartial monitoring and evaluation of progress, failures to deliver according to commitments were not penalized, and self-narratives were accepted as suitable assessments of performance. But freedom came with stipulations: in a concession that evidenced the shift from creative independence to institutional convention, the filmmakers adjusted the content of the series to the funders' expectations, including “happy endings” as an element of the reconciliation narrative to be foregrounded.

Following the Dutch funding, the project was deployed at great speed, in a period of one year from the first meeting between funder and implementer to the completion of activities on the ground. In line with the large budget allocated to the project, the Dutch MFA also provided diplomatic support and participated in public relations events as required. The project’s outputs and outcomes appear to belong to the filmmakers, who refer to the idea as their private property despite the fact that bilateral funding derived from taxpayers’ contributions was crucial for Videoletters to materialize. When approached for this study, the UK’s FCO, the Dutch MFA, and the filmmakers themselves insisted on accounts of successful aspects while minimizing errors and shortcomings, and refused to share selected project documentation. In accordance with the successes narratives of implementers and funders, the project was eagerly embraced by international documentary film festivals and press outlets. Although the project’s outstanding public relations actions preceded deployment on the ground, media coverage represented Videoletters as a success, and hailed the filmmakers as heroes.
Chapter 6: Processes of mediation and ideas about communication

Processes of mediation

Which forms of mediation took place among the core actors engaged in the Videoletters project? Here I am interested in unpacking the choices made throughout the process by the project’s implementers and funders in terms of which relevant actors to engage more closely and which to attend to at a distance. I examine whether they privileged bottom-up or top-down approaches to the citizens of the successor states, and which interlocutors were favored and disregarded throughout the process. I map proximity and distance among the project’s implementers and the variety of actors engaged by Videoletters, as well as between stated goals, proposed avenues and actual choices and achievements. Attention is given to how the project’s leaders described and performed their role (as filmmakers? as development practitioners? as representatives of their funders? as do-gooders?), and to the ensuing ethical considerations and professional standards that guided their actions, including the recruitment and management of local and foreign staff. The quality of communication across levels and stages is analyzed to establish whether all connections took place in the spirit of democratic dialogue embodied in the “video letters” correspondence on which the documentary TV series was based.

‘Being the messenger’, or dealing with a few citizens face to face

The production of the documentary television series was the stage of the project in which the filmmakers came closer to a number of the citizens that Videoletters claimed to serve, by seeking to relate to potential protagonists of the series beyond ethnocentric labels and civic status in order to reach mutual understanding (interview A). At this stage, the quality of the relationships they established mattered because the feasibility of the series depended on it, and the number of citizens they engaged was limited. While the criteria used by the filmmakers to choose whom to include and to leave out as protagonists of the series could not be established over the course of my research, data shows that at least some participants were their personal acquaintances or acquaintances of people in their networks, which would have facilitated initial contact, but this information is not enough to conclude that it was their strategy to approach people they were familiar with. The criteria they used to decide how many “videoletters”, – i.e., episodes of the series – to produce could not be established either. The related problems of the project’s scale and criteria for inclusion (and exclusion) come into view here. While
how to reach as many people as possible – i.e., the outreach scale – tends to be the primary concern among proponents of quantitative approaches to development communication, the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of citizens matter from a justice perspective.

The face-to-face mediation and recording of video-based correspondence could only reach a limited number of people, being as it was a step in the production of a documentary. Partly because of limited human and financial resources, but mainly because a series for television (particularly one that has not been commissioned, and must yet find a broadcaster and an audience) can only have so many episodes, the initial scale of the project was small by definition: only a few citizens could be included as protagonists. Alternative avenues for producing and circulating the project’s content would have allowed broader inclusion. To give an example: had an online archive of video-based correspondence been envisioned, more videoletters could have been shown, at the same time allowing the filmmakers’ extended engagement as postmen, interviewers and facilitators. Additional small crews of two (cameraman and interviewer) could have been trained to increase coverage while preserving the quality of the process of “being the messenger”.

If we accept that 16 episodes of Videoletters were produced based on published synopses (see Appendix 6), and given that at least some of those episodes included more than two protagonists, we can estimate that at most 80 citizens from various successor states to the former Yugoslavia were engaged in actual correspondence. The estimate is relevant in that it refers to one of the few aspects that can be quantified of a project that argued it would have a wide reach. But this number tells us nothing about the quality of the process. Importantly, this was a process that took time, since the filmmakers had to come and go, carrying the correspondence, and that took effort. The fact that each attempt at establishing correspondence had to progress at least up to a certain point before the filmmakers could decide if a “videoletter” episode would result from it is likely to have acted as an incentive for them to do their best to establish a rapport with people and promote reconnection. In order for correspondence to work, the filmmakers had to take care of the process. That is, the quality of communication between the filmmakers and correspondents in the act of “being the messengers” was crucial for the mechanism to work. Let us recall that in the case of those correspondents approached to take the initial step, the filmmakers were proposing engagement with as yet unresolved aspects of people’s histories, with an uncertain outcome and, when delivering a letter, they in turn arrived at people’s homes as strangers.

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220 For an example of a wide-reaching online archive of video interviews created in 1994, see: http://sfi.usc.edu/what_is_the_vha.
A matter of record, or the camera as interference

The six episodes of the series analyzed as part of this study suggest that the exchanges of video letters made correspondents happy, or at least brought about some reparation. Facilitating interpersonal correspondence for the purpose of recording it, however, breeds complications – and with complications come ethical challenges. According to the filmmakers, the process of recording a video letter for a lost friend or colleague promoted an experience of intimacy:221 “some of them first made a video letter, and then we did a very long interview, and they were still in this state of ‘I’m telling it to the other’.” (interview A) The intimacy of receiving a letter from an estranged friend or colleague, on the other hand, was immediately interfered with by the presence of the camera: “the easy part was to knock on the door and say ‘we have something for you, and we would like you to watch it’, and then of course these people had to realize that I wanted to film them while watching [...]” (interview A) The fact that personal matters were being recorded is likely to have become obvious to participants when, having received a letter, they might have needed/wanted some privacy in order to deal with their emotions. That the act of receiving a video letter had to be recorded reminds us of Winston’s observation that “concentrating on personalized social problems inevitably requires that some measure or other of private misery and distress be, if not exploited, then at least exposed” (2008: 54). This can be observed in the episode “Emil & Saša”, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Asked if there were any letters that they tried to deliver and couldn’t, the filmmakers said: “actually, no. People are so curious, we had one or two, but people are usually so curious to see, and [...] we didn’t say ‘we are bringing you a letter of this and that friend’, we said ‘we are bringing you a video letter and you should watch it’, and then they of course want to see it” (interview A). The filmmakers made it a point of acting as messengers in order to distance themselves from common perceptions of media workers in the region: “We didn't want to act as film people, because the media was – they got very suspicious, and with good reason, because [the media were] always their enemy in the communist time, and during war time. [They were] always the enemy” (interview A). Exemplifying an ethical concern raised by Winston (2008), they conceded that they occasionally resorted to retakes: “And then we would have a video letter which in almost all the cases was good enough in the first take. [...] and then after the first video letter was made sometimes we asked them ‘maybe it’s good that you mention’, ‘you didn’t mention that and that’, ‘ah, OK’, they would do it again. But in most cases it was OK just like that” (interview A). A tension between facilitating correspondence, i.e., the “video letters”, and producing “good” “videoletters”, i.e., moving episodes of the series, appears here.

221 Noted by Kolar-Panov (1997) for her case.
Notably, mediating seems to have been not simply about facilitating communication, but also about pushing for it: “We were very [forceful], [pushy], demanding postmen with a hidden agenda of course, because I thought it was good for the people” (interview A). Whether the agenda remained in fact hidden or was perceived by the series’ protagonists remains an unanswered question, and responding to it would require further interviews, but the filmmakers’ statement suggests that it may have somehow acted as a script, based on their conviction that they knew what people needed. Another reference to their push appears in the article by Aufderheide (2005: 15) about the project’s presentation at the IDFA: “The filmmakers found people who dared to re-open relationships that were broken bitterly, convinced them to record a comment that was not just sentiment but a question or a challenge […].”

The uses of documentary, or the shift from subject to object

Besides the ambivalences encountered while shooting, documentary-makers face additional complications – and ethical challenges – when it comes to communicating the ulterior uses of the material recorded to their subjects. In the case of Videoleters, what filmmakers told participants about the future uses of the “video letters” may have implied a certain degree of manipulation: they did not disclose that broadcasting region-wide was their ultimate goal, and played down the project’s ambition to achieve a high profile until the Sarajevo premiere, in contrast with the ambitious goals they communicated to an international audience at the IDFA in 2004: “We did not say ‘hey, we want to make a television series and to show it all around’, but we did say ‘we are filming this, and you can get […] we have money to pay [for] the meeting if you decide to meet’. Some people found it really interesting, because of course they wanted to go to Switzerland, while we wanted to film the Swiss in Mostar […] But we did have some money for that […] And we said ‘maybe one day there will be something out of this shown, but then we will let you know, and you will…’”

222 Mostar is a city in the Herzegovina region of BiH, belonging to the Federation.
a part of such a big project” (interview A). This quote shows that, while during production their subjects were at the center, by the time the Sarajevo premiere took place, they had become characters in a wider narrative that had the project itself at the center. A series participant remembered the occasion as a tightly scheduled event, in which the protagonists were constantly told what to do by the organizers: “It was all messed up, because it was all, ‘Now you do that, now you do this. OK, now you have one hour to go to Sarajevo to have kebabs’. That’s all” (interview N).

The Sarajevo premiere brought together a large group of Dutch attendants – “a full plane”, according to the filmmakers. British diplomats, international reporters and the series’ protagonists were also there. The filmmakers recall the moment when all of these people met: “then all the main characters came out, and they already met at the hotel, and then they saw that [there] were 80 of them or something, so they were looking like ‘wow, we are part of a big huge thing’, and then of course all these journalists were asking questions.” Strikingly, the protagonists had not been given a chance to watch the episodes in advance of the public event, despite the fact that the filmmakers had assured them that they would have the right to withdraw their participation at will if they did not like what they saw: “but I was so nervous because I knew that [the] next day was the D-day, because no one of them ever saw the episodes, and we had promised them if they [didn’t] like it then we [would] not show it or we [would] […] and it was all over the place that it [would] be on all the televisions in all the republics, and, you know, so I wasn’t sure about how […] these people [felt]” (interview A). The fact that the participants were only able to watch their episodes for the first time at an event covered by the international news media is extremely problematic. Despite the personal and sensitive (emotionally, if not politically) nature of the material, the protagonists were not granted the chance to view it in advance and in private, and therefore they were denied their rightful opportunity to withdraw before their involvement in the project went public in front of the press in attendance. This may have been a conscious strategy on the part of the filmmakers to minimize potential withdrawals. Highly questionable from an ethical perspective, it indicates that at this point the project’s end – to broadcast the series – was being prioritized over its means – the production of the series thanks to the personal involvement of its protagonists. From the perspective of the two ethics that, according to Winston (2008; see Chapter 2 for discussion), come into play in documentary filmmaking – one that governs the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject, and one that governs the relationship between filmmaker and audience – Videoletters clearly prioritized the audience over the subjects, and failed to fulfill their duty of care with them (Silverstone, 2007). At this point, the filmmakers had distanced themselves from those citizens that they
had carefully approached at the initial stage to the extent that they acted irresponsibly, evidencing a shift in the scale and purpose of mediation.

The filmmakers used their power over the series protagonists in three distinct ways: 1) they exerted editorial control over the production process by asking for retakes that in their view would improve the story; 2) they kept expectations in check by downplaying the exposure that they expected the series to have; and 3) as the project’s ambitions grew, they distantiated themselves from the protagonists to the point of interfering with their rights to see the material in advance of public screenings, and thus to change their minds (Aufderheide et al., 2009). While the first two are ethical contradictions not unique to the Videoletters project but rather typical of documentary-making (Winston, 2008; Aufderheide et al., 2009), the latter suggests that at its public relations peak – the Sarajevo premiere – the project’s stated good intentions had become a rhetorical device: while the narrative referred to doing good for the citizens of the successor states, actual choices implied that those particular citizens that had been approached closely and carefully at the stage of production were now being manipulated for the sake of making the project’s implementers and funders look good. Moreover, this can be observed when we consider that, in the eyes of the bilateral delegations and international press, the outstanding story on display was the fact that the series had been produced; no attention or voice was given to the protagonists and their viewpoints and experiences. The shift in the scale and purpose of mediation thus becomes clearer: in prioritizing the making of a documentary for social change as the story worth telling, the Videoletters project went from mediating between its European funders and the citizens of the successor states to mediating between those funders and their own national constituencies, and, by extension, “the West”.

What worked well
My strong critique of the filmmakers’ decision to postpone showing the episodes to their protagonists until it was too late, however, should not be read as an indication of overall malpractice. The analysis of available data suggests that their initial small-scale action to promote communication among distantiated parties via video letters worked well in at least three distinct ways. The “video letters” worked in the first place because of the filmmakers’ face-to-face mediation, i.e., the act of putting themselves in between the correspondents by carrying the video letters and encouraging viewing, reflection (in front of an interviewer and the camera), and response. In the process of facilitating correspondence, the filmmakers sought to challenge macro-perceptions of the “other” through the micro-experience of reestablishing interpersonal communication: “what we did was, if you bring back the face of the one Croat that you know, then maybe it will
disrupt your enemy thing about all the Croats” (interview A). This is likely to have worked well at least in some cases, based on episodes watched, even if at the risk of “subtracting the social” that Volcic and Andrejevic are weary of in their discussion of a Balkan reality show (2009: 21-23). But the production of the “video letters” also worked well inasmuch as it embodied the type of international development communication intervention that cares to come close to its subjects and take the time to listen to them (Quarry & Ramírez, 2009; Anderson et al., 2012). A third important and positive aspect of Videoletters’ initial action was the fact that, in the production of correspondence, while sociopolitical and geographical distance were bridged, time was not compressed – the process of circulating video letters back and forth required time, which enabled an in-between space for the idea of reconnection to become thinkable. In my analysis, the time allowed, combined with the possibility of actually seeing the corresponding party and the sense of social presence afforded by video (Lowenthal, 2009), played an important role in the reestablishment of communication that can be seen in the episodes available.

The production of the “video letters” was in a way a bottom-up process, in that the filmmakers were still operating independently, free from binding agreements with their funders. Moreover, perhaps because at that point they were largely dependent on their subjects for the project at large to succeed, there was a constructive aspect to their mediation. While the variety of ethical problems evidenced already at this stage, as discussed, merits attention, it is equally important to acknowledge that it was also at this stage that the filmmakers came closer to the citizens that the project claimed to serve: where the establishment of trust through sustained face-to-face encounters was a prerequisite for correspondence to happen.

Overall, the micro-level was actually what worked about the project from a justice perspective, i.e., the level at which (some) citizens were actually reached, and some thing was done with them that was useful for them as well, instead of useful for the project implementers and/or bilateral funders only. One of the filmmakers recalled this in a somehow romantic way: “In the beginning you feel that this is not gonna work, because they still hate each other. […]. But if you talk to people, one to one, on a micro-level, there was no exception that they all, that love is bigger than the rest. And that was a great discovery. And that makes me believe that this world, although I am sometimes very negative, it’s still possible to save it (smiles), if you bring it back to micro-level” (interview A). At the micro-level, the filmmakers were doing what they truly knew how to do, i.e., produce a human-interest documentary, and also interacting with people at a scale that they could manage sensibly. From this perspective, the idea to facilitate correspondence via video seems to have been a good idea, apparently welcomed by the protagonists of the episodes viewed for analysis, even if some of those protagonists did not want
their stories to be broadcast in the end, or allowed the broadcast but felt they had been somehow pushed to participate (interview I). Although the use of video letters in the region was far from new, the filmmakers’ take on it for the production of the series was appealing. More serious ethical problems would appear when the project’s ambitions grew and the filmmakers concerned themselves primarily with satisfying their funders and impressing the news media, counteracting the project’s initial positive aspects.

Negotiations with the broadcasters

The goal to broadcast the series via the successor states’ television stations implied adopting a complicated avenue toward reaching the citizens of those countries by way of a governance structure that had been initially ignored. Importantly, the broadcast was promised to the bilateral funders first, and then proposed to the state broadcasters in line with that promise. As expressed by the massive scale of international intervention aimed at democratizing the region’s media system (Rhodes, 2007), the funders considered the state broadcasters to be institutions in need of reform and, from that perspective, the idea of convincing them to jointly air content that proposed reconciliation across ethnocratic divides must have seemed reasonable. The former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force analyzed its pros and cons in this way: “There’s a good reason for that ambition to show it on the public broadcasters, and there’s a good reason not to even try. […] The public broadcasters, or state broadcasters really, had a huge role in igniting the fire in the war and were still to a very large extent controlled by [whoever] was in power at that moment. […] Political appointments, plus a strong heritage of their role in the preamble to the war, but also during the war, in basically contributing to the prejudices against, […] from Serbia’s side prejudice against its Croats, and vice versa. Those broadcasters had the hardest time to come to terms with their own past and the past of their country. So for them to show a television program that does exactly that, trying to come to terms with that past showing in a very personal, confronting way the consequences of war, how people were separated, innocent people, […] how Croats could love Serbs and how Serbs could be responsible, etc. That’s difficult. That was an uphill battle, [a] long shot, difficult one […] So that’s on the one hand a very good reason not to try that, on the other hand it was a very good reason to try it, because if anybody should show that program, it was those public broadcasters. […] RTS in Serbia or HRT in Croatia […] those stations are big bureaucracies with lots of people, […] not exactly risk-takers, not exactly television stations that would easily bend the rules, […] plus they [were] so difficult to convince. So it was a difficult one, but given the fact that it was exactly needed for them to show it, plus that they had the biggest reach, the biggest penetration in the country, large market share, plus also the political statement of them to do that all
together for once after the war, simultaneously [...] They decided, ‘OK, let’s try that’ (interview D).

While the stated goal of organizing a simultaneous broadcast was to promote the democratization of the media system by inviting the state television stations to collaborate in a region-wide project, the way in which Videoletters approached the stations was far from democratic. They were asked to broadcast programming that they had not commissioned, consulted on or involved in producing, and the filmmakers aimed to convince them first by showing them only a trailer and withholding information about the full extent of the series, and then by exerting diplomatic pressure.

The directors of the state television channels were approached for the first time in April 2004 at an official meeting to which the filmmakers got access via the Media Task Force to show a trailer and pitch the idea of the simultaneous broadcast. According to their account, those in attendance were moved by the content they viewed: “there was Slovenia wanting to come into the EU, and there was a meeting already from all the TV stations, [...] so we showed there, at the official meeting, a compilation, just a feel-good, it was a clip, it was nothing more, and the [interpreters] who were there [could no longer interpret] [...] anymore, because they were crying so much when they saw it, and everybody was crying” (interview A). A positive vote to the idea of a joint broadcast was obtained at the meeting based on the clip, -i.e., on a glimpse of the full series: “they had to say ‘we are going to do it yes or no’ [...] well, they gave their votes that they were all going to show it, but then we knew, because it was only a clip, that [...] so, how are we going to push it through their throats, and that was very difficult” (interview A). Although at the time of this meeting the project’s British funding, earmarked for organizing the broadcast, had been in place for months, the filmmakers lacked a strategy for that purpose. The pitch was followed by a second meeting convened for this purpose in Amsterdam: “Finally we invited them all, because somebody from the Soros Foundation, she was Serbian and she said ‘get them to Amsterdam, they will all come, they want to shop’, so we had a meeting here [...] and then we showed them some episodes, and then they kind of agreed” (interview A). Despite the organizational hypocrisy (Waisbord, 2008) built into the meeting, its apparent success led the filmmakers to believe that an agreement was in place: “Everybody said yes, and they had their joints, and they went to the prostitutes, [...] and we were all friends, and it was great. [...] And they went away, and we were so happy because they signed” (interview A). However, “yes” rapidly turned into “no” when the full series was delivered to each broadcaster, and the signatures on paper obtained in Amsterdam turned out to be of little value.

223 The large market share did not apply to BHT1 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had only started broadcasting a full schedule in 2004 and had a very low audience share (Hozic, 2008).
The Serbian and the Croatian broadcasters objected to airing certain episodes that, in their view, were contrary to national interests. In refusing to show those episodes, they were claiming their power to frame the official story in line with the position they had adopted during the conflict (Rolston, 2007). This was one of the ways in which, although the armed conflict had come to a halt, the war(s) continued under the appearance of peace (interview B). When Videoletters replied by putting pressure on them, the broadcasters stopped communicating. What had looked like a shared understanding while everybody was having a good time at the Amsterdam meeting appeared now as a disagreement. There was no correspondence between how the broadcasters behaved in private encounters – where, according to anecdotal evidence, they could share a common space and engage in conversation – and how they acted officially in the public realm. It appears as if the filmmakers learned only at the point of refusal something that was well known to analysts of the role of the mass media in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia at the time (Thompson, 1999; Kurspahic, 2003): “it was horrible because they started to ignore us, they didn't reply [to] e-mails, they didn't answer phone calls, they, they just […] the war veterans, they were very powerful in Croatia at that time, and they didn't allow actually people to talk to one another, they didn't want to let that happen, and then in Serbia kind of the same thing happened, but also out of fear” (interview A).

It is important to note that the filmmakers sent the episodes to each of the broadcasters from The Netherlands, remaining at a distance, instead of choosing alternative courses of action that might have been more democratic and more productive – if not to guarantee the synchronized broadcast, at least to better understand the obstacles. For example, they could have chosen to deliver the material in person, as they had done with the “video letters” correspondence at the point of production, inviting each decision-maker to watch the series with them, and thus being in a position to observe first-hand reactions and discuss and document what they found problematic about the material (or the synchronized broadcast). Alternatively, instead of delivering individually, they could have chosen to convene another meeting with the purpose of showing the full series to all broadcasters and facilitating a conversation about any objections and concerns they might have had. Such a meeting would have been in itself a concrete exercise in promoting the democratic dialogue and cooperation across national lines that the synchronized broadcast was supposed to exemplify. Instead, the filmmakers used the circulation of press coverage of the Amsterdam agreement as a strategy to try to exert pressure on the television stations: “we sent all the episodes, and then we got a letter from Croatia that they [were] not going to broadcast it. […] They said it’s all against Croats, and […] there was so much money now given for this project, and [it was] so important, […] and they couldn’t go back, because we were smart, we already had filmed, the Dutch
TV filmed the TV directors talking about the Videoletters and it was all over the media and with the website and it was out and it was difficult to go back, but anyway, the Croats still did, and then they said it’s all against Croatia” (interview A). But attempts to manipulate the broadcasters by threatening to expose them in the international media were to no avail, and high-level diplomatic pressure did not work either.

In the end, the Croatian and Serbian broadcasters both refused to air a number of the episodes, which they argued portrayed their respective countries in incorrect ways. In Serbia, B92 agreed to air the episodes discarded by the state broadcaster: “There is one very big independent TV in Belgrade, the B92, also sponsored by Press Now and the Dutch, and then of course I had to phone him, because if the public TV doesn’t want it, and he said ‘I want it all’, but then, that’s not what we wanted, we wanted it on public – on the wrong, on the bad guys’ TV, and then this guy said ok, we will do eight and not twelve, […] and […] the B92 guy said […] ‘my campaign is “watch episodes that neither Serbs nor Croats dare to show”’ […] So finally it was shown. Oh, my god, that was so difficult, with all these people” (interview A).

According to the Media Task Force’s former Executive Secretary, Videoletters was not the only bilateral project that failed to push the state broadcasters towards reform:224 “basically all the projects involved with state broadcasters failed though a lot of money was invested in it, trying to transform them from the outside in – it doesn’t work, they can only be transformed from the inside out” (interview D).

The actual broadcast

In Chapter 4, I presented the ratings for the broadcast of the series in Serbia and BiH. Low ratings in the case of the latter were only to be expected, since BHT1’s penetration was very low. The ratings for Serbia were standard for the slot in which the series was aired, according to a Nielsen analyst (interview R). How the episodes fit into the wider programming schedules of the respective broadcasters, i.e., which programs were aired right before and after, and how that might have impacted ratings, and whether the series was advertised by each channel in advance of airing, could not be established over the course of my research.

While there is no evidence whatsoever of viewers’ reactions in Serbia, there is some anecdotal evidence of reactions in BiH.225 According to an interviewee from the state channel, viewers wrote letters to the television station: “we have reference from our viewers, lot of letters, people, they’re watching this” (interview B). In some cases, viewers wanted to participate

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224 See Jakubowicz (2004) for a related analysis of the gap between ideas and realities regarding the introduction of public service broadcasting in post-communist countries.

225 Coming from interviewees other than the filmmakers.
in the project. Given the project’s organizational structure and strategy, however, the broadcaster could not assist people directly with their need or wish to establish video correspondence with distantiated others, and viewers were redirected to the Videoletters staff and website. In this sense, the broadcast of the series created not a window of opportunity to reconnect, but a double distance, i.e., an awareness of a need/wish that could not be addressed. According to the interviewee: “Some of the people, […] they [started] sending […] us letters, […] that they [wanted an opportunity] to find […] some relatives or some friends, how [could] they […] And […] we [were] trying to explain [to these] people […] how they [had] to do [this], that this [was] not our project. We [were] broadcasting this and supporting it, but they [had] to go to this website or send [a] letter directly to them, and they [would] try to decide” (interview B). That viewers thought that the broadcaster could help, since it had aired the series, was a reasonable assumption on their part. That they should instead address a foreign organization headquartered in Serbia through a website was reasonably difficult for BHT1 to explain. The situation is likely to have added to the generalized confusion among citizens regarding who was responsible for what in the intervention scenario noted by the International Commission for the Balkans (ICB, 2005).

The problem of scale discussed earlier comes back into view here in conjunction with the matter of distance. While the filmmakers imagined that watching the series would move citizens to take the initiative to reconnect with distantiated others using their own means, and argued that assistance for do-it-yourself reconciliation could be provided at a distance via a website, viewing instead led (at least some) people to want in, i.e., to hope for face-to-face facilitation of a mediated reencounter as seen on TV. This suggests that setting up a public desk and video booth at the broadcaster’s building for viewers to get personal assistance and record letters might have worked well to respond to impromptu requests. Such a strategy would have given the channel a degree of active participation in the series’ follow-up, and would have brought members of the audience and staff from the television station together, even if momentarily. Opportunities like this were missed partly because of the project’s lack of a pre-planning stage that might have helped the filmmakers anticipate different reactions and alternative response strategies, and partly because the filmmakers thought of the broadcasters only as channels for distribution and not as potential partners.

Broadcasting as an ineffective avenue for reaching citizens
In a climate of distrust toward governmental structures and their messengers, broadcasting the series via television channels that had done citizens a

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226 See Ramafoko et al. (2012) for a similar situation triggered by a reality show for social change in South Africa.
disservice by supporting ethnic confrontation may have confused audiences regarding the origin and the purposes of Videoletters. Based on the small-group interview discussed in Chapter 5, distrust for media messages seems to have run high among viewers. While the British and Dutch funders seemed to be quite taken with the symbolic meaning of a simultaneous broadcast, and the international media followed suit, the idea is likely to have meant nothing to most citizens across the region: either they remained unaware of the project or could not make sense of what the series was about in the absence of adequate framing (Schiller, 2008). The project’s insistence on broadcasting the series via the successor states’ television stations implied a distant avenue toward reaching the citizens that it intended to move.

Because the promise to broadcast was built into the project proposals submitted to the UK’s FCO and the Dutch MFA, \textit{not broadcasting was no longer an option} once funding was secured. In this sense, the project was caught in its own design. However, inasmuch as the project implementers had a) one full year to spend the Dutch funding since it was granted in November 2004, b) plenty of economic resources, c) a strong network of contacts in Belgrade that extended to other parts of the region, and d) a strategic knowledge of the language and the territory, they could have chosen to complement the broadcast through other forms of mediation. By systematically reaching out through cooperation with local groups or organizations engaged in peacebuilding and media reform efforts, they may have come closer to getting through to more of the citizens that the project was supposed to serve.

\textbf{Videoletters inside out: staffing and internal communication}

An analysis of the project’s recruitment strategies reveals contradictions between the project’s goals and internal management.\textsuperscript{227} Since the filmmakers did not own a production company or other organizational structure that could provide the basis for the project to operate, provisional structures were created ad hoc. To begin with, a temporary office was set up in Amsterdam, which was up and running by the announcement of the Dutch MFA’s support at the IDFA in November 2004 and closed in March 2005, one month before the Sarajevo launch. This office hosted a small crew of Dutch and former-Yugoslav employees.

An interviewee who was hired recalls meeting the filmmakers, reading the project description, and wondering how they would get it all done: “I read that, and I asked, ‘Where is the office with 20 people working on this?’ And

\textsuperscript{227} The filmmakers recruited staff for the project in three different ways: for production, for their Amsterdam office, and for the caravan crew. At least two editors, and most likely additional crew for shooting the “end scenes” and postproduction work (end credits and soundtrack) worked on production. Such a crew is typically hired for specific tasks and short periods, and paid based on professional experience according to standard rates. This form of recruitment is not especially relevant to my query and therefore not analyzed here in any detail.
they said, ‘Well, there’s no office.’ And I noticed that there was hardly anybody except for them. They […] hardly had an organization. […] So, that’s how I came into the project. They needed help. […] First of all, there was IDFA. […] There were some other people brought in also. […] And putting up an office, a small office. […] And then the larger organization. Other people had been coming in to take over the larger stuff that they wanted to do” (interview N).

The project’s temporary organizational structure was arranged in parallel with preparations for the Sarajevo premiere and the editing of episodes. A related team worked on developing content for the website, testing the software and trying to find users who would log in and create a profile. The project staff and the website team worked in different spaces in the same building, where Mediamatic was also based, and everybody would meet once a day for lunch to share aspects of ongoing work (interview G). An interviewee spoke of working long hours and in a rush to meet a deadline and of interns hired at cheap rates: “I remember sometimes staying there almost twenty hours. You know, you go from work, then you go to some opening or party228 […] Yeah, the whole day of being there basically. And the team was, I think it was, I cannot remember exactly, but our content part was 6-7 people or something, not more. [Author’s note: name redacted for the purposes of retaining anonymity] was working as an intern, so, also that was cheaper. For the website we had [a] couple of interns. […] We also had one guy who was [a] native English speaker and one guy who was [a] native in the three languages, or kind of, from a mixed marriage. And [the intern] was Croatian, so we had a combination. […] And we worked well, long hours, it was always, because there was a deadline to have the website produced, up and running, so it was kind of, long, undermanned. So it was work at least ten hours, for sure, every day” (interview E). One month before the project’s launch in Sarajevo, the Amsterdam office was closed and the operation was moved to Belgrade (interview G).

One former Yugoslav and a Dutch citizen originally hired in Amsterdam traveled to Belgrade as members of the caravan crew (interviews G and N). With the move, the contract for the website editor hired in Amsterdam was terminated in advance of the date originally agreed.229 According to an interviewee, a number of staff members from the former Yugoslavia recruited for the Amsterdam office were in a “gray zone” in terms of their residence and work permits, which made it difficult for them to negotiate adequate working conditions with the project. Another interviewee spoke of the same situation from a different angle, noting that the project enabled her to stay in Amsterdam at a time when s/he was about to leave:

228 The building where the office was located housed a number of arts and creative industries initiatives, as well as a nightclub, Club 11, on its top floor.

229 This appears to have been the only employee on the web team with a professional profile that responded to the specifications of the grant application submitted by the Videoletters project together with Mediamatic to the European Cultural Foundation.
“I was about to go back to Belgrade, because I got here in 2004, the first time for six months only for [a] work placement in [author's note: name of workplace redacted] and it was like almost going to hell and back to get all the work permits and all the red tape for [...] non-EU nationals [...] And when that project ended I was left with nothing to do, and I couldn’t get my work permit and the papers in order, and in this gap there [was] a lady that I met and she said, ‘Yeah, I know these people that are doing this Videoletters project, and you just speak the language, it might be interesting for you!’ And that’s how I got in touch with [the filmmakers]. Like completely out of the blue” (interview G). Another dimension of the relationship between the European bilateral funders and the citizens of the former Yugoslavia, such that development communication intervention assigned to third parties employs migrants for tasks that require local knowledge in a gray labor market, comes into view here (for a lucid literary rendition of the same problem in the specific case of migrant academics, see Ugresic, 2008).

Hiring a combination of “internationals” and former-Yugoslav exiles was one of the project’s explicit strategies according to documents released by the UK’s FCO: “While shooting Videoletters there were practical and emotional problems with local staff working across borders. The coordination of the main activities [would] have to be by internationals or ex-Yugoslavs living abroad, who [would] not be recognized by TV-staff or other partners as ‘enemies’” (FCO). This observation speaks of the difficulty of engaging “others” in collaboration across ethno-political divides at the initial stage of the project. The strategy proposed on paper to overcome the difficulty, however, was disregarded in practice, since several crew members for the caravan were hired in Belgrade. According to one interviewee, this staff was paid a local fee, while wages were higher for the crew members recruited in Amsterdam. The difference was discovered by chance during a discussion among a Serbian and a Dutch member of the crew, when the latter told the former that s/he should be embarrassed of her/his poor performance given the salaries they were being paid, and the Serb replied: “Do you know how much they pay me?” (interview T).

Candidates were sought by word of mouth, and recruitment was rushed: “Videoletters happened to me by accident. A friend of mine called me one day and said, ‘There is a project that I’m involved with. We leave like, in three days for a trip of two months around ex-Yugoslavia. And they are looking for somebody, they have two positions open.’ One of the positions was ‘trip coordinator’, and the other was somebody who would manage the website along the journey. So, I came, I said that I was interested and they gave me the telephone number of [one of the filmmakers]. I called, we had a really, like five minutes chat on the phone about it. I think they were

Notably, these “internationals” were in most cases Dutch nationals.
really lacking time to find people for these positions, and so I came for the interview [...] in the office. I didn't even meet both of them, I think. I met with just one [of the filmmakers] for a few moments, and then I actually went to speak with the IT guy, and he was testing me, you know, if I would understand the website, which was quite complicated, the background of the website. Horrible thing. But I learned it, I really got it very quickly. So he said, she can do it', and I got the job" (interview T).

The roll-out of the caravan implied for the filmmakers managing a large staff, which they had never done before as independents used to operating with minimal crews: “in our peak moment we had 80 people working for Videoletters” (interview A). They spoke of not being fully aware of the implications of the change of scale, from working solo to managing a group, and seemed to expect that the team would be capable of self-management: “I didn’t realize enough that we were going to manage a team, because we did it all by ourselves, and then I expected obviously [that] everybody [was doing] it for a cause, while we had people on the bus who just were there and hoped [...] that one of the musicians would fall in love with them and then take them to Holland, you know?” (interview A). The fact that members of the crew did not have a clue why they were there, however, can reasonably be attributed to the rushed, unprofessional recruitment strategies, and was seen by interviewees as a consequence of the lack of adequate management: “There was a serious lack of job description, for me. So, there were times that I felt, you know, like [I wasn’t] contributing, because what [was I doing there]” (interview T).

Data suggests that, as the caravan rolled, no one was truly in charge, i.e., capable of duly managing the group and communicating goals and responsibilities in a sensible and coherent manner. As a consequence of the lack of adequate leadership and poor staffing strategy, the caravan team malfunctioned, leading to a case of Babel within. The filmmakers spoke of a group that did not get along, and conceded that they were unable to mediate the internal differences: “A: you have a team, of more than 25 people, and we are idealists, so we invited x Croats, y Serbs, from every country to work together in the team, and [...] what happened was that the team of course didn’t know how to deal with each other, and they were kind of fighting each other, and it came to us, and then you find yourself in situations you don’t want to be in, because you are trying to spread the word, almost like a religion, and then you find that in this parallel process that it’s happening inside yourself, and you have to deal with all those problems” (interview A). This duality is important, in that it reveals the distance between what actually went on in the field and the story of success portrayed by the international media.

231 Another possible outcome of foreign intervention in the region: locals falling in love with foreigners, and having a reason – and a possibility – to leave.
Members of the caravan crew spoke of a roller-coaster ride, where the filmmakers would at times fight with each other or rant at staff (interviews G, Y, X). An interviewee noted: “the two of them, […] they’re not very easy to work with in the sense of people management, they’re quite bad” (interview N). This had been the case already in Amsterdam, according to another interviewee who saw a connection between the lack of organization, the poor management and the project’s overall lack of impact: “everyone was fed up with the whole Videoleters. And that’s also [why] I didn’t want to tour with them. […] Everyone was in a fight with everyone and I think if we could have succeeded to make a real organization, that would have had more impact” (interview L). Once the caravan ended its second tour toward the end of July 2005, most staff was dismissed (interview G).

Engaging with whom? Project priorities as from the Sarajevo launch

Data from several sources indicates that the Sarajevo launch was designed to have an impact on the project’s funders and the international media, and the responses of the UK’s FCO (FCO, 2013) and the BBC (Prodger, 2005) show that this goal was accomplished. After the event, and during the broadcast, the caravan gave the filmmakers one last opportunity to engage with citizens from the region face to face. Episodes from the series were shown in most of the locations visited, and follow-up discussions took place, thus making possible, on a small scale, the kind of conversations that the broadcast was expected to spark but most likely did not. However, the overall quality of the caravan’s engagement with citizens along the way is likely to have been affected by overlapping goals and complicated by the internal conflicts affecting the crew. At this point, the filmmakers’ concern with maximizing media impact, on the one hand, and with gathering information about the series’ reception to report back to the Dutch funder, on the other, seems to have prevailed over the task of acting as the mediators of reconnections among distanced parties at the locations visited by the caravan. As a consequence, not many “video letters” were taped and delivered during the tours.

As promised to the British funder (FCO, 2013), one of the stated purposes of the caravan was to enable the filmmakers to observe the reactions of audiences on the spot and report about them. The filmmakers put it this way: “We decided [to organize] this tour […] to find out, my basic feeling was ‘how do people watch it?’, because […] when you work for TV, you never know, who they are, what they think […] What we expected from it was for us, for ourselves to see what people thought about it, and to write a nice report about it, […] we did […] viewings on the square, on a big video screen, so we could actually literally see how people reacted on it”.

232 As regards the promise made to the FCO, if the filmmaker who spoke the region’s language(s) actually facilitated the post-screening discussions, this would have made it difficult to duly note down...
Moreover, the caravan’s tour served public relations purposes: “of course we did this PR tour as well, so in every city we [visited] when we were doing the tour, there was, [...] I don’t know how many journalists, and TV crews, and radio programs, and we had a PR manager who would say ‘you are going to that stage’, which was also good for us, because we wanted to promote the series. Who organized the PR? Was it one of the funders, or…? No, he was hired […] by us, he was part of the tour, because we realized that if you wanted some attention […], you have to do it” (interview A). Media attention, as we saw in the previous chapter, was nonetheless of poor quality in Serbia and BiH.

The caravan operated on its own. The filmmakers made no attempts to organize public screenings in collaboration with civil society groups or organizations working for reconciliation on the ground, or to engage them in the micro-distribution of copies of the series to their networks (Whiteman, 2004). There was no attempt either to organize screenings in collaboration with the media centers established across the region through international media support, or to provide them with copies of the series. As far as can be inferred from available data, everyday spaces usually visited by citizens, such as libraries or churches, were not engaged either. A number of schoolchildren in the locations visited were engaged in a journalistic/research exercise by which they were invited – and rapidly prepared – to interview their parents or other significant adults about their relationships before and after the conflict. But this activity was fleeting, and remained undocumented.

**Differential relationships**

Interviews evidenced a marked difference in how project staff and funders remembered their Videoletters experience and their relationship with the filmmakers. While the representatives of the Dutch MFA spoke fondly of them and highlighted their efforts and achievements, staff members recalled complicated circumstances and were critical of their lack of organization and professionalism, and the great deal of improvisation. According to several interviews, the filmmakers were charming with supporters and donors, but harsh with staff. Because they self-reported, it is possible, even likely, that the representatives of the Dutch MFA whom I interviewed may have been completely unaware of how things worked in the field. A great distance between the quality of how things were and how they were reported comes into view here, which can be attributed to the lack of provisions for systematic and impartial monitoring and evaluation in the funders’ stipulations.

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what was taking place in order to use it as input for an evaluation.
Recapping: Which forms of mediation took place among the core actors engaged in the Videoletters project?
The project started by approaching a small number of citizens from the successor states in person, to facilitate mediated interpersonal communication through the exchange of video-based correspondence. At this stage, citizens were the subject of Videoletters, and mediated intervention was slow and careful (even if a number of ethical issues typical of the making of documentaries arose). However, as the project grew in ambition and resources, the scale and purpose of mediation shifted, and the citizens that Videoletters was supposed to serve became a means to an end. On the one hand, the funders’ expectation of positive publicity was met by narrating a story of success that had the making of the documentary at the center. On the other hand, the series was used as a (pre)text to push the successor-state broadcasters toward endorsing a discourse of reconciliation.

Overall, the filmmakers referred to themselves as heroic independents, and to their bilateral funders as supporters, downplaying the fact that the intervention could not have existed as such without its adoption by the British and Dutch foreign ministries as an outsourced component of their agendas. While narratives fed to the press spoke of a democratizing effort aimed at reconciliation, the project’s engagement with the successor-state broadcasters, and its recruitment and management strategies, betrayed authoritarian and unjust traits. In the end, the citizens that the project had originally set out to serve became an abstraction. Rather than actively mediating opportunities for reconnection among citizens distanced by ethno-political divides, the project mediated the distant relationship between bilateral funders and the governance structures of the successor states, particularly their media systems on the one hand, and the relationship between the funders and their own constituencies at home on the other.

Ideas about communication

How do normative understandings of communication influence the embracement and rejection of specific mediated strategies as avenues for the promotion of social change? Here I am interested in identifying what the primary actors involved in the project made of communication and media in terms of their usefulness and power. I seek to understand in what ways the success of Videoletters as a media-driven intervention for social change was determined. I look into the ways in which filmmakers, donors, the news media and academics represented Videoletters’ merit and adequacy as an avenue to promote reconciliation (or to serve other purposes considered important). I map the embracement and the rejection of Videoletters among the primary agents engaged in the project, distinguishing between arguments for and against the intervention and exploring whether there were connections between embracement/rejection and international/national affiliation.
Why resort to (mediated) communication?

According to the filmmakers, the main point of producing the “video letters” was to facilitate an understanding of why interpersonal communication among two people or two families had come to a halt with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia: “actually every episode should give an answer to the question ‘why did you not phone your friend?’, or ‘why do you think your friend is not phoning you?’, that was the question” (interview A). Given the complexity of the sociopolitical situation, finding answers was not easy: “if I would ask you to make a video letter to somebody, you know, maybe some old friend, and you are very disappointed in this friendship, and you would find it very very difficult, so now we are talking about huge things […] like mistrust, and betrayal, and even death” (interview A). The filmmakers thought that the correspondence via video letters could prompt self-disclosure, leading participants to tell their stories of disconnection and explain how the conflict had affected them personally (compare with Rolston, 2007).

In turn, the point of broadcasting the series was to inspire reflexivity and to provoke public discussion, i.e., to seek to open communicative spaces (Christensen & Christensen, 2008, 2013; Christensen, 2013): “Another aspect is of course we wanted to make this videoletters series, an episode was not enough, a series which would run for a long time on TV, was to inspire people, other people, so the fact that these particular people would meet, of course it’s nice for us, […] but it was not the motive, the motive is to inspire. B: and to start talking about it.” (interview A) This statement suggests an understanding of storytelling as a process both individual and collective, in which broadcasting is clearly seen to play a role (Hackett & Rolston, 2009; Rolston, 2007).

Reflecting on the reasons why the project initially failed to raise funding but eventually succeeded, the filmmakers argued: “We did not get the money because it’s not only that it is so much written about the efforts of communication and development, but […] we could see that all these deeds with repairing roofs, the purpose of the money that went into Bosnia was not to build a house for a Muslim. The purpose was to put the Muslim back in the house where he lived. […] But, how are these people going to live then if they cannot communicate? If they’re still afraid? If they have all these stories?” (interview A). In line with the argument that peacebuilding is a prerequisite of development (Curtis, 2000), in their view, restoring communication among returnees and those who had stayed in place during the conflict was a necessity for reconstruction to work. However, there is a more likely reason why Videoleters actually ended up receiving substantial funding from the British and Dutch foreign ministries, well described by Rhodes (2007: 16): “The weight given to media assistance in the Balkans

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233 The filmmakers are acknowledging here that the production of the series was a means to an end. See Chapter 6.
ought to be seen in the context of a media boom in the West, when the ‘role of the media’ increasingly aroused the interest, not only of the media itself, but also of international actors: governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, and foundations.” On the one hand Videoletters gave funders an opportunity to look good by doing good. On the other, it spoke to the widespread, uncritical optimism that accompanied the fast rise of digital capitalism at the time by serving as a pilot experiment toward the introduction of public service broadcasting in the region and the deployment of the Internet as a driver of social re-engineering and development.

**The personal and the political**

When I interviewed them, the filmmakers tried to articulate how Videoletters sought to “re-personalize the social” and spoke of how difficult it was to reconcile people's generalized ideas about the “other” with their personal experiences of specific “others”. Hatred of stereotyped “others” in general seemed to coexist with loving feelings for specific “others”: “There are many essays or researches done on depersonification of the enemy and how it works. We have all described it, but no one describes how to get it back. And so, what we did, without doing it so rationally or reading the things – but we also read a lot of things – was, if you bring back the face of the one Croat that you know, then maybe it will disrupt your ‘enemy thing’ about all the Croats. So, then we ended up in situations that they hate all the Croats, ‘but not that one because that one is ours’. You know? When in our village, we like that Croat. But the others are horrible” (interview A). Their analysis resonates with the situation evidenced in the small-group interview, such that the personal micro- and political macro-dimensions of the sociopolitical conflict were at odds when it came to communicating with the “other”.

Subtracting the social from the political (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2009), which worked to a certain extent at the level of interpersonal correspondence, was not really possible when it came to the state broadcasters: “it became very political in the end, […] we of course didn’t want to let that happen, and we always said ‘Videoletters is not political’, but of course it is political, because how can you say it is not political. But because it was so honest, and because it was about micro-level, just two people, or families, then you can say it’s not political, but of course the TV directors realized it becomes political if our audience is in shock, because nobody knew what was going to happen if you showed it on TV” (interview A). The filmmakers sought to manage the problem by declaring that Videoletters was not political to the Bosnian press, contra an article published by the *International Herald Tribune* that stated: “What has given these individual experiences a broader political weight, however, is that a dozen of these videoletters are being broadcast this spring by television stations in each of the seven nations that were once united as Yugoslavia” (Riding, 2005).
This duality regarding the political nature of the project deserves attention. That the filmmakers and their bilateral funders saw a relationship between political governance and the region’s media institutions, and believed that the broadcast could have political effects, is evidenced in their push to convince the state television channels to air the series jointly. The diplomatic pressure exerted when the Serbian and Croatian broadcasters refused is further evidence of the project’s political nature. Interestingly, the Serbian and Croatian rejection of a number of episodes on the grounds that they were contrary to national interests suggests that bilateral funders and national state broadcasters shared a belief in the strong political effects of broadcasting and the potential of television programming to govern constituencies. Their dispute over which kind of content should fill the schedule suggests that both parties to the confrontation shared an understanding of the region’s audiences as readily susceptible to media messages (Grimson, 2011).

While the preferred storyline that the Videoletters project sought to get across focused on television’s capacity to build reconnections among ordinary people through the shared experience of viewing examples of restored bonds of recognition and conviviality, the diplomatic push for a joint broadcast spoke of mediated intervention clearly understood as “interference by a state in another’s affairs”. This duality, such that efforts to highlight the human-interest assistance dimensions were foregrounded while the foreign-policy intervention was kept out of sight, is in fact a crucial feature of the intervention.

Cause and effect
The filmmakers appeared undecided regarding the fact that the broadcast of the series would have a strong impact when I interviewed them. On the one hand, they expected a massive (chain) reaction: “we thought they [were] all going to watch it, and they [were] all going to phone” (interview A). In reality, however, they did not: “I knew for sure that there [was] no way, because we had so many people refuse to make a video letter, and it took us 8 years to make this, there was no way that millions of Serbs were all of a sudden going to say ‘hey, why did you kill my teacher’” (interview A). In any case, they still argued that there was a cause-and-effect relationship between the broadcast and the occurrence of positive social change: “you can say that because videoletters were shown, reconciliation on another level maybe went a little bit easier and quicker, because [simply] by showing them […] you already say it’s allowed to do this, people, and then they ‘oh, I have a friend like that’” (interview A).

There are two ideas worth unpacking here. First, their quote reveals the viewpoint that reconciliation should happen, and that it should happen

fast. Bracketing off the larger matter of whether the goal of reconciliation is at odds with struggles for justice, which cannot be adequately addressed here (see Hackett & Rolston, 2009 for a discussion), we are left with the proposition that showing people the appropriate content will lead them to do the right thing at a greater speed. In a remarkable moment of my interview with the representative of the Dutch MFA in charge of overseeing the project – one of the few during the exchange of questions and answers when s/he seemed to allow reflexivity instead of being on the defensive – s/he acknowledged that time is in fact essential to the process of coming to terms with the consequences of a war: “If you haven’t suffered from the war it’s quite simple to overcome the issues. If you have lost your father and mother, it’s a bit more difficult. So, it’s, I think, the same issue as in these countries here during 1945 and afterwards. So, sometimes we expect miracles in the Balkans, asking them to overcome their problems within five or ten years’ time, and we took at least 20 or 30 years to overcome the problems here in Europe after the Second World War” (interview O). This is an important admission, connected to remarks made by participants in the Belgrade small-group interview who viewed “Vlada and Ivica”, which brings into question the short duration – and presumed impact – of the Videoletters project.

The second idea contained in the filmmakers’ statement quoted above is that storytelling has a transformative potential for both particular individuals and society (as expressed by Hackett & Rolston, 2009). Valuable in principle, this idea was complicated in practice by the bilateral push to force the successor-state television stations to allow an official space for storytelling that they were not yet prepared to grant. Instead of working to further a process of opening up political space that required time through democratizing strategies, Videoletters sought to speed it up through forced media-driven intervention.

The power of television
The idea that television is powerful was shared by a number of my interviewees. A staff member of the Bosnian broadcaster argued: “TV is a very powerful [medium], you know. You can use [it] in a very different way” (interview B). The filmmakers agreed, but may have been thinking about their own experience: “TV is, you know, everybody becomes a hero if you are on it, so [...]” (interview A). That the broadcast would have a powerful impact was an idea expressed not only by the filmmakers, but also by the funders. A region-wide audience was expected to come together, almost as if the war(s) could be rendered into a fiction by broadcasting an invitation to reunite: “of course we had great ideals about that, because I hoped, and you too, that all former Yugoslavians [would] sit like that and watch [...]” (interview A).

235 Referring to Europe.
The representative of the UK’s FCO who attended the Sarajevo premiere and then reported to headquarters said: “It will be worth monitoring the impact of the program over the coming weeks in the different states of the former Yugoslavia and to see whether the program begins momentum for a greater process of reconciliation across these states than currently exists” (FCO).

The project proposal approved by the UK’s FCO in fact assured that wide-scale reconciliation would follow from the broadcast: “[Videoletters] will contribute to the process of coming to terms with the recent past and the process of reconciliation and provide a medium for viewers to overcome feelings from the war. The series will precipitate a discussion on war, nationality, responsibility, family and friendship. It will be used to provide an educational medium for schools and projects” (FCO). The idea that a public conversation about the consequences of the war could be precipitated once again shows a concern with speed. In particular, the simultaneousness of the broadcast was expected to make a difference: “Inter-ethnic discussion and exchange of feelings is more likely to happen with a simultaneous broadcast, hence the goal of the project will be reached sooner” (FCO). The actual grounds for this expectation, however, remain unclear, but a belief in the potential of television broadcasting as a strategy to manage a polity is obvious.

A direct relationship between the series and its presumed outcomes was established in the proposal: “The outcome is the reconnection of people who were friends but as a result of conflict became enemies. Such reconnection will strengthen the links in communities that were torn apart by conflict. The outcome will help prevent conflict in the future as misconceptions about the ‘enemy’ will be highlighted encouraging a greater understanding of the plight of people on all ‘sides’. The series will show how citizens in the FY236 have feelings in common and will reduce divisions in the community” (FCO). A single-minded audience, which would definitely react in a predictable way to the series’ content, was thus described. According to this formulation, encoding was decoding: “When broadcast, viewers will experience deep emotions by watching people from devastated countries rebuilding bridges towards those who used to be their ‘enemies’” (FCO). The idea that viewers would respond to the series in a specific way permeated the document: “Citizens will feel that they are being encouraged to become friends again when national TV stations broadcast Videoletters” (FCO). In the project proposal approved by the UK’s FCO, expectations about the strong power of broadcasting were taken for granted, and specific audience reactions were considered a given. The implicit assumption was that the citizens of the successor states could be governed by way of occupying a space in the broadcasters’ television schedules.

236 FY Stands for Former Yugoslavia.
Streaming reconciliation?
According to the filmmakers, “the heart of the project is the Videoletters episodes, and the blood streaming is the website, so that’s how we kind of approached it.” The website was envisioned as a tool that would make it possible to deal with a high level of response from viewers of the television series: “We thought they [were] all going to watch it, and they [were] all going to phone, and then we [needed] something, you know, so we were happy that XS4ALL was donating streaming, because they expected like thousands of videoletters” (interview A). But expectations about the potential take-up of the website proved to be highly unrealistic.

The website remained unknown to most people in the region, and the exchange of video letters through videoletters.net never materialized. Although the website was envisioned to include affordances later popularized by YouTube and Facebook, several conditions were not in place for the region’s citizens to be able to make use of them. In this sense, the chain reaction anticipated, by which the broadcast would lead to the website and the website would secure further reach, was a house of cards. Instead of being embraced by citizens eager to reconnect, the site was found and targeted by nationalists: “if there would have been talk shows, and a follow-up, and the place given, I think it would have worked, […] but actually nobody knew about the existence of the website, because it wasn’t even shown on TV,237 Serbs showed it, and Bosnians, but that was it, so. People found it, and then they started these discussions, about you don’t want to know, so actually […] I don’t know, it was useless” (interview A).

A tool for reconciliation?
According to the project proposal approved by the UK’s FCO, Videoletters would be “researched as a tool for conflict prevention in other countries.” The expectation was that “other post-war countries and/or countries with multi-ethnical conflicts [would] be able to use it as a reconciliation and conflict prevention tool” (FCO). However, whether the Videoletters project in fact performed the task of bringing about reconciliation remains unclear, and what about the project could be successfully replicated was never established. A pilot study undertaken in Kigali, Rwanda, in 2006 pointed to a number of important context-specific traits to be taken into account should the idea be adapted for implementation there (Twijnstra, 2007). Despite this evidence, and although Videoletters was never replicated in the long run, the filmmakers nonetheless still spoke of a tool of a universal character in 2012: “it’s so universal, and so […] archetypical […] because the Rwandans said ‘ah, that’s me, Emil and

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237 The filmmakers envisioned that it would be advertised every time an episode of the series was broadcast, but this barely happened in Serbia under the contested circumstances, and even if shown in Bosnia, this would have been of little use in any case given the low Internet penetration.
Sasha’, and [...] that was very nice for us to discover.” According to them, “Emil and Saša” was equally moving for Rwandan audiences: “we dubbed ‘Emil and Saša’ in the Kenya-Rwanda language [...] with actors, [...], and then we organized shows, [...] it was very powerful, because they were just giving us the same lines as they did in former Yugoslavia, and that’s when we found out that it doesn’t matter where you are, people, when you connect people in this concept, in this format, it’s very, it’s very intimate, and it’s very clever, actually, which we never realized from the beginning, but it’s like you connect somebody to an old friend, and the love overcomes. It’s still there. So, it was exactly the same” (interview A). The way they saw it, the same approach they used in the former Yugoslavia would have worked in Rwanda: “In Rwanda they stopped communicating because it’s unbearable to communicate. To live in a village with your [...] with the killer of your children. And what? What do you say? What do you ask? Where to start? How to? So, what’s fascinating if you show the videoletter they see other people doing it. What? So, you just can ask him? Are you still a nationalist? Are you still a voodoo diehard? You know? And, that’s, that’s powerful. That [...] provokes communicating because you see others doing it. You’re, you know? Normal people” (interview A). The claim of replicability, although unproven, gave the project an afterlife in academic writing, as we will see shortly.

The bilateral value of Videoleters

**UK FCO**

One reason why the UK’s FCO chose to support Videoleters was its potential as a public relations tool, as duly acknowledged in the project proposal: “There are good public diplomacy opportunities. Support from the UK government will be acknowledged at the end of each programme. [...] Televison stations outside the FY have taken an interest in Videoleter. Press releases will be sent to TV stations and newspapers outside the FY” (FCO, 2013). Notably, it was the project’s potential for public relations not only in the region of implementation but also outside – i.e., “at home” in the West – that interested the United Kingdom. For the FCO representative who attended the project’s premiere in Sarajevo, the event was valuable because it made the British government look good in the eyes of the city’s inhabitants: “There was a lot of positive coverage about the support of the British government throughout the weekend, acknowledged repeatedly by the two Dutch film directors who made the Videoleters documentary, and mentioned on all the literature handed out.” (e-mail by FCO post in FCO, 2013) Given the publicity, the event came across “as a clear success story for [the] GCPP, EAD staff responsible for projects and Belgrade Embassy Project Officers.” (e-mail by FCO post in FCO, 2013) This view was reinforced in the project’s evaluation, presumably completed by FCO staff based on
self-reporting by the filmmakers. According to that document, Videoletters was broadcast in all the countries of former Yugoslavia. The fact that eight television stations showed the series, “six of them in [...] prime time”, was an “output delivered”,238 which, in turn, led to the project’s first outcome: “Reconnection of people who were friends but as a result of conflict became enemies.” The second outcome highlighted in the evaluation was “the huge publicity in different media across the former Yugoslavia which reported about Videoletters in a very affirmative way and which undoubtedly contributed to the reconciliation efforts” (FCO post). As the reader will remember, this statement is not substantiated by the analysis of press coverage samples from Serbia and BiH discussed in Chapter 5.

While the evaluation form referred to this “huge publicity” in the region in general terms as a result of the broadcast and related promotional activities, it specified international coverage: “The publicity received for the project went beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia as the series got immense coverage in the international media – BBC, CNN, ABC, Canadian TV, New York Times, newspapers and magazines across Europe” (FCO post). The fact that the project’s coverage went beyond the region, changing direction and feeding back into the West, was seen as an important positive result regardless of the fact that it was not clearly connected to the FCO’s conflict-prevention strategy that Videoletters was supposed to fit. In the evaluation form, the series’ influence on the citizens of the successor states in terms of helping people “come to terms with the recent past and links divided communities, promotes the use of regional networks, and supports a responsible media” was summarily assessed with reference to ratings (FCO). Although the filmmakers’ lack of capacity to administer the project adequately was acknowledged, the project was nonetheless considered a positive experience: “We should make sure that the implementers have capacity to properly administer a project. We strongly recommend pursuing similar activities in the future” (FCO post). The fact that the international press reported on Videoletters as a success seems to have been what mattered the most to the UK funder in the end.

**Dutch MFA**

Asked to evaluate the project’s performance, one Dutch MFA representative mentioned the project’s potential to open up space for the public discussion of aspects of the conflict otherwise silenced (Hackett & Rolston, 2009): “At least they made it possible to put some sensitive issues on the public agenda.” Interestingly, he located this potential outside of the region of implementation,

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238 The evaluation mentioned two outputs envisaged but not delivered, i.e., the radio and television talk shows following the broadcast of each episode, indicating that, because these did not happen, “the impact of the programme was smaller than originally envisaged” (FCO post).
i.e., “at home”: “From the political point of view, they gained some attention through their festivals. So, they made it possible to discuss some issues which were rather sensitive in those areas at that particular time.” Disregarding the broadcasters’ resistance to air the full series and the diplomatic pressure that ensued, he added: “They were successful in making all those broadcasting [companies] cooperate. So, that means that the public broadcast companies of Serbia as well as the one of BiH cooperated quite well, which is a success. And the same goes for the companies from Croatia and the area in Croatia where Gotovina239 was most active. You know, the general.” Referring back to the smaller, initial scale of the project, he added: “All those video tapes, the ones on the documentaries as well as the private ones, I think they were quite successful. I don’t know how many there were, but […] The documentaries were quite successful, even the first one: although they didn’t want to cooperate, they240 accepted each other well” (interview O). For the other MFA representative interviewed, Videoletters was successful as a case of documentary filmmaking: “I think it was very successful in the, like you’ve mentioned, IDFA. I think it had a lot of awards in many different festivals [...] As a production in the documentary filmmakers’ circles it was very well received.” (interview M) Moreover, he argued that the broadcast was an audience success despite the lack of evidence to support the claim: “In the different countries of Yugoslavia, where it was [broadcast] nationally it was also well received. [...] And I’m sure that it brought together a lot of people. I can’t put a number, because it had never been researched” (interview M).

Asked if s/he thought that the project had provoked or facilitated change, the former Executive Secretary of the Media Task Force stated: “Yes, absolutely […] If only on a personal level of the people who participated in it. There’s a beautiful saying in […] [the] Jewish Talmud. It says, ‘If you manage to change one person, you’ve changed the world.’ And by all means, Videoletters changed the lives of certain people. Individually, for sure.” (interview D) But at the same, speaking of the project’s cost vis-à-vis its reach, he argued: “Does that immediately say that it’s therefore worthwhile that money was invested […] I think yes, in this case, absolutely. Because it was a fairly unique undertaking in a very difficult time and very difficult circumstances. Maybe the impact could have been higher if the series was broadcast more often, more frequently to more people etc., but there’s many programs made, including Dutch television, documentaries that cost just as much, and are viewed by far fewer people, and have no meaning for society whatsoever. So if you weigh it against that […] And for me this was the series that shed a

240 This is a reference to “Emil & Saša”.
completely new light on, in a moving way of what war does, and how things happened, and it directly [changed] the lives of the people who were involved by reconnecting them, and it may have opened the eyes of thousands of more people who have watched it. So, yes.” (interview D) A concern with justifying the funds disbursed towards the project vis-à-vis actual achievements appears here. Interestingly, it was only the officer who was not directly responsible for the allocation of funding who reflected about this matter.

Videoletters’ value according to the broadcasters in Serbia and BiH
As already discussed in Chapter 5, B92’s Chief Executive Officer was critical of Videoletters’ solo operation and lack of engagement with civil society in the region. The former director of BHT1, while appreciative and supportive of the project at the time when it took place, was very critical of international media-driven intervention in retrospect. His analysis is worth quoting at length. On the one hand, he noted that the retreat of the international community beginning in 2006, when the Media Task Force ceased operating, implied a backlash for the country’s state broadcasting system: “With the public service, I think the situation is worse. At that time we had support and we were under the umbrella of the international community. And it was much […] easier, we were protected from the internal political situation. […] But now the situation is […] They gave all influence to the local politicians. And if local politicians have influence on the media, that means the situation is worse.” (interview D)

On the other hand, he noted that Europe’s intervention was unsystematic, unprofessional, and in many ways merely an excuse to do business: “Europe is helping, but the question is what they did, what they helped with, after the war until now. I think all European projects helping media are unsuccessful. Including the public service. The help they gave didn’t work. […] The money they gave to the foreign companies to educate us, […] and we are just a way for somebody to get a big budget. And they are doing formally a job. The international community doesn’t have a system of how to help media. They’re not working seriously. You can’t say that the international community was successful after the war. The big result is they stopped the war, but everything else after the war didn’t work”. (interview D) In his view, Europe bears, and should take, responsibility for the fact that after 20 years of intervention BiH is not anywhere near being ready for accession to the European Union. From this perspective, the influence of international development communication intervention on the production of democratizing social change, including facilitation of the entry of the successor states to the European Union, was minimal if not counterproductive. There is obviously a stark contrast with the views expressed by European officers.
International PR: international media coverage, the project’s website and the embrace of academics

As discussed in the previous chapter, international media coverage was supportive of Videoletters to the point of exaggeration, focusing on the filmmakers as heroes of a quest and favoring a narrative of successful, helpful intervention that fed the evaluations of funders. The Videoletters website, used to gather media coverage and communicate the project’s achievements, added to the narrative of social usefulness and great impact. A number of academics, in turn, followed suit, evidencing a problematic dependence on interested narratives. Perhaps because these scholars were hunting for “good examples of what works”, facts were not checked, media statements were not compared with empirical data, and critical analysis was absent. Their references to the project are presented here in connection with Craig’s remark that communication is a practice that involves “not only engaging in certain activities but also thinking and talking about those activities in particular ways” (2006: 38-39). The point is to draw attention to the relationship between Videoletters as a specific case of the practice of international development communication intervention, and the academic discourses that arose in response to its public relations strategy, visibility and awards in documentary film festivals, and international media coverage. A process such that a well-publicized case of the practice reinforces academic discourses keen on justifying the value of the field of study, and these in turn strengthen the practice’s standing as a supposed ‘best practice’, comes into view here.

Daiute and Turniski (2005: 227) refer to Videoletters in connection with “video story-telling as a means of acknowledging and transforming history”, drawing on the project’s website as their source. Hochheimer (2007: 64) refers to it as an outstanding contemporary example of intimate political reporting in which dialogic media are “utilised in the active creation of reconciliation”, based on the press articles about the project published by the BBC and The New York Times in 2005. He reiterates his reference in a book chapter published more recently, drawing on the same sources (see Hoover & Emerich, 2011). London (2007: 261) refers to Videoletters as “one of the most affecting films relating to issues of war and forgiveness […] which creates lines of communication between former enemies in ethnic conflicts”. According to him, based on the project’s website, the project began in the Balkans and then spread to Rwanda and the Caucasus.241 Smyth, Etherton and Best (2010: 1060) refer to Videoletters as an example of traditional media projects aimed at promoting post-conflict reconciliation “which facilitated the exchange of video messages between people affected by the Balkan war and aired a compilation of the messages on national TV stations in

241 Although this was not the case according to my data.
the region.” Their source is the project’s website. Best, Long, Etherton and Smyth (2011: 234) in turn refer to Videoletters as a project that “facilitated video-mediated discussions between parties on each side of a conflict”, again drawing on the project’s website as accessed in August 2009.

References to Videoletters appear also in two gray-literature reports. In a publication released by the UN ICT Task Force (Stauffacher, Drake, Currion & Steinberge 2005), Videoletters is highlighted as an example of how to promote reconciliation through the mass media. According to the authors, whose source is the project’s website, the documentary series, shown by most public broadcasters in the region, “appears to have had an impact on public consciousness”. Moreover, “although it is difficult to measure the success of such initiatives, it has clearly been well-received, and is reflected in other locations, such as plans by North and South Korea to build a network linking the two countries so that families separated by war can be reunited via video” (ibid.: 49). In a roundtable report published by the US Center for Citizen Diplomacy (Nassar & Tatevossian, 2010: 15), Videoletters is highlighted as “an ambitious and innovative project” that attempted “to open channels of communication”. According to the report, “the project is currently on hiatus, and the website is no longer active. However, the idea behind the VideoLetters projects persists, and could potentially be emulated today in other regions and in a more deeply web or mobile enabled format.” No source for the information is quoted.

Recapping: How do normative understandings of communication influence the embracement and rejection of specific mediated strategies as avenues for the promotion of social change?

The project was premised on the idea that a documentary series produced and distributed in specific ways would attract an audience, and move it – emotionally and in terms of action – toward reconciliation. According to the idea, production should draw on “the human connection”, exemplifying the social through the individual (and minimizing the political), and distribution should be televised. While the filmmakers insisted on a cause-and-effect relationship between broadcasting and social change, at the same time they displayed a more nuanced understanding of the subtleties and complexities of documentary-making and viewing – both when interviewed and in the editing of the episode analyzed in Chapter 4. Bilateral funders, however, showed – as evidenced by interviews and project documents – a rather simplistic understanding of television and print media as powerful avenues for communicating with citizens, and of audiences as readily susceptible to mediated messages. This understanding applied to citizens in the successor states as regards the broadcast of the series, and to citizens “at home” in the case of international media coverage. The understanding of audiences as highly influenceable was presumably shared by the Serbian
state broadcaster, given its refusal to air selected episodes of the series deemed contrary to national interests.

The idea that large-scale reconciliation could be streamed and managed via a website proved ineffectual due to a combination of factors related to access and social take-up, and showed that implementers may envision and design technological accessories based on availability in their everyday contexts rather than in the contexts at issue. In the end, the project’s website worked only as a public relations tool. The characterization of Videoletters as “a tool of reconciliation” may have been only an exercise in development communication jargon. The tool remained untested with the exception of a pilot experience in Rwanda in 2006, and was never replicated in the long run.

The project’s ability to attract recognition in international documentary film festivals and news media was the final measure of success taken into account by bilateral funders. Although broadcasters in the region of implementation were critical of the project’s lack of engagement with civil society and overall ineffectiveness, Videoletters succeeded in telling the story of its own making to the Western media, as a heroic quest to promote communication under difficult conditions. A number of academic publications in turn uncritically echoed the story of accomplishment, which raises questions about the subjection of the field of study to calls for “examples of success”.

Chapter 7: Theoretical reappraisal and conclusions

Having addressed the study’s research questions by presenting and analyzing empirical data, I end this dissertation by taking two steps. First, I return to the proposed working theoretical framework in order to reconsider its links with the study’s empirical findings. Second, I raise a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the study, and highlight its contributions to a critical agenda for the study of international development communication intervention as a political form of mediation with multi-sited consequences.

Reflecting on the link between theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings

Development communication as a multi-scalar enterprise

Based on an analysis of its component elements, Videoletters proved to be a rich example of a project seeking to promote the three types of interaction that may coexist within a specific communication experience (Thompson, 1995, 2005; also see Jones & Holmes, 2011): *face-to-face interaction*, when the filmmaker who acted as the “on-camera” messenger and facilitator of video-based correspondence engaged in conversation with the documentary series’ protagonists (and also when s/he facilitated small-group discussions among citizens attending public screenings of episodes of the series during the caravan tour); *mediated interaction*, when correspondents communicated with each other through their “video letters” (and also when the filmmakers communicated with broadcasters of the successor states by delivering the full series for airing); and *mediated quasi-interaction*, when the series was broadcast on television. Thompson’s argument that the three types of interaction that he characterized are analytically distinguishable by their spatio-temporal potential (1995; also see Jones & Holmes, 2011) proved to be productive in order to render visible and unpack the variety of scales that this specific case of international development communication intervention intended to deal with.

Importantly, Thompson’s theoretical construct was useful despite – or because of – the fact that I disagree with it on two counts. On the one hand, my empirical data strongly suggests a correlation242 between *mediated distantiation* – i.e., the possibility to keep something at a distance enabled

242 The reader should note that correlation, i.e., “a mutual relationship or connection between two or more things”, does not imply a direct cause-effect relationship.
by mediated communication – and the production of *improper distance*. The correlation can be observed in the case of the bilateral funders, whose representatives made decisions at their national headquarters about how to reach the citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia (via television), and which message to convey to them (reconciliation). By charging the filmmakers with the responsibility to implement Videoletters, these officers – and thus the foreign ministries they represented – delegated responsibility for the quality of the intervention, and distanced themselves from the issues of ethics and accountability that arose from the practice. Moreover, through Videoletters the foreign ministries addressed the successor states’ broadcasters by proxy, using the documentary television series as a (pre)text for pushing for adoption of the European public broadcasting model. This alternative was preferred to engaging the state broadcasters as equal partners in a process of democratic dialogue and negotiation (Eriksson Baaz, 2005; IDEA, 2007). From this perspective, mediated distantiation is multivalent rather than positive (as argued by Thompson), in that it doesn’t necessarily lead to “space compression” and thus proximity. Instead, it enables approaches that either sustain a distance, as was the case with the citizens of Serbia and Bosnia, which remained a remote abstraction for bilateral funders, or aggravate a distance, as was the case with the successor-state broadcasters, which retreated and resisted under diplomatic pressure. This distinction is crucial if we are to decouple international development communication from technical understandings of mediated intervention as some thing with its own determining properties, and begin to consider the ways in which the practice and the project act as “agencies for quite other than their primary purposes”, as Raymond Williams would put it (ibid., 1983: 204).

My second disagreement with Thompson’s theorization has to do with “time compression”. Based on empirical data, I take issue with the great merit attributed to mediated communication’s presumed capacity to speed up processes of social change. As discussed in Chapter 4, my argument is that the slow motion of the video-based correspondence among distantediated parties – i.e., the fact that video-taped letters had to be physically transported from one location to another by the filmmakers/messengers, and unpacked, viewed, and talked about with a facilitator/interviewer by the recipients before responding – enabled a crucial in-between space to take shape, thus making it possible for correspondents to come to grips with the idea of being in contact again after the conflict before a reencounter could take place. In a different but related way, as was the case with “space compression”, the specifics of the Videoletters project draw attention to the fact that “time compression” does not necessarily have a positive value: certain communication processes require gradual action and the passing of time in order to make sense of them (and therefore instantaneity is not required).
Videoletters’ speedy implementation once bilateral funding determined the timeline shows that the duration of the intervention was tied not to the actual needs of citizens and the contextual conditions in the field, but to a) the annual budget cycles of ministries of foreign affairs, established by their national governments (Waisbord, 2008), and b) the shifting politics of foreign aid (Woods, 2005), according to which, by 2006, it was time for the international community to pack their bags and leave the Western Balkans. How the governance structure of international development cooperation operates under a time frame of its own, delinked from the duration of social-change processes in the locations it sets out to serve, comes into view here – in the specific case of Videoletters, sustained by an understanding of media-driven intervention as having the potential to facilitate control of the circumstances to be governed (Krippendorff, 1993; Beniger, 1986).

The analysis of Videoletters as a multi-scalar intervention demonstrates that what works about a communication experience will not necessarily carry over to wider scales, and that a carry-over cannot be guaranteed by offering access via forms of technological mediation that do away with the messenger. Whether the broadcast of the series did or did not enable a sense of co-presence,243 many-sided recognition among ethno-politically defined enemies, or the restoration of friendships or other forms of mutual trust broken during the conflict, remains an empirical question. But, on the basis of available data, it is highly unlikely that it may have had a socially significant influence in the attitudes and actions of citizens in Serbia and Bosnia – for various reasons discussed in previous chapters, and, importantly, because the influence of media content on audiences is never as straightforward or strong as proponents claim: to begin with, there is a difference between feeling moved and being moved to action.

The production of improper distance
As shown in Chapters 4 to 6, the implementation of the Videoletters project led to improper distance in a number of ways. Three of the various forms of distance identified merit reconsideration at this point, i.e., three ways in which the Videoletters project’s adoption of media technologies in order to put into effect the stated intentions to build peace and prevent conflict among the citizens of the region did not work as expected.

First, the study demonstrates that, once they started operating under the umbrella of bilateral intervention, the filmmakers distantiated themselves from the citizens of the former Yugoslavia that their project was supposed to serve. While in the project’s first stage they had approached some of those citizens personally and interacted with them carefully (at least to a certain extent),

243 Which is what I initially thought might have been the main purpose of proposing a simultaneous region-wide broadcast.
once bilateral funding kicked in, “citizens” became a generic abstraction. A concern with delivering on time and according to institutional expectations – i.e., a concern with staying close to the interests of the bilateral funders – prevailed over the responsibility for approaching citizens in pertinent ways. One of the reasons why the distance between the project’s implementers and its supposed beneficiaries grew wider once Videoletters became a bilateral intervention was that strategies and resources were redirected toward looking good in the eyes of the international media. As shown in Chapter 5, the representatives of bilateral funders were preoccupied with image, with so-called public diplomacy, and interested in Videoletters as an opportunity to make a good impression on Western citizens through press coverage. Their great concern with appearing successful in the eyes of their own constituencies speaks of a “society of the spectacle” in which ministries of foreign affairs are keen to promote their work in ways akin to those of business ventures. The extent to which international development communication interventions are in fact embraced by bilateral agencies as “politically correct” avenues to achieve publicity “at home” would merit further inquiry. The Videoletters case suggests a duality such that looking good takes the place of doing good and foreign affairs are attended to via development communication intervention because of their potential positive impact at home, in an example of a capability shifted toward an objective other than the original one. 

Second, the study demonstrates that the decision-makers within the bilaterals responsible for supporting the project at headquarters and their representatives in diplomatic posts tasked with “keeping an eye” on its performance on the ground remained at a distance from the everyday aspects of implementation and thus were largely unaware of the gap and contradictions between goals and achievements. Much diplomatic effort went into seeking to convince the managers of the successor-state television stations to agree to the simultaneous broadcast, but attention to citizens at large was left in the hands of the filmmakers. Representatives in diplomatic posts were called to visit the project at specific points in time, be it the Sarajevo premiere or smaller official events throughout the caravan tour, and thus given tailored opportunities to see the project at its best. This led to positive reports back to headquarters, which, in turn, appears to have kept decision-makers satisfied that things were going well. From this perspective, the project itself was a distant abstraction for the bilateral representatives overseeing it, with the exception of a number of official functions and the mediation of press clippings and television news coverage that reported a presumed success.

244 If there was communication between posts and headquarters about aspects of the project that did not work, such as the state broadcasters’ resistance to airing the series, or the outright rejection of the caravan in Makarska (Croatia), it has been kept out of view thanks to bureaucratic procedures.
Third, the fact that the documentary series was willingly broadcast by a Bosnian state television channel but Videoletters did not engage it to follow up on audience reactions meant that, when viewers approached BHT1 to request their assistance to reconnect with somebody, the broadcaster was unable to help. Because it was not involved in the project as an equal partner, but only used as a conduit, the one television channel in the region that embraced the project was rendered powerless in the eyes of the viewers that responded to the invitation to reconnect by seeking assistance. Among those viewers that the television channel redirected to the Videoletters website and most likely did not get the kind of help they were seeking, the broadcast created a double distance: it raised awareness of a need or wish, but did not provide the resources required to fulfill it. Even if those viewers never understood that the circumstances were the responsibility of the Videoletters project as a consequence of how the project was organized and deployed, which kept it at a distance, that is still the case.

Overall, the study of Videoletters suggests that the “mediated others” that were being “dealt with” by the project, to use Silverstone’s terms, were not handled with care. Although the representatives of the bilateral funders and the filmmakers themselves appear to have been following standard institutional procedures over the course of implementation, and therefore do not seem to have broken any formal rules, in a number of ways their handling of the project was irresponsible, i.e., a sense of responsibility for the citizens that the project was supposed to serve was lacking. Because the project was set up as an intervention outsourced by bilateral funders to a third party in the absence of adequate mechanisms for accountability, where the responsibility of funders ended and the responsibility of implementers began remained unclear.

Rights, capabilities and the obligation to serve the citizens
Thinking of the Videoletters project from the perspective of the citizens of the successor states and of the extent to which the intervention granted them representation, distribution and recognition, i.e., justice (Fraser, 2008), brings to the fore a number of limitations. The documentary series told a limited number of stories in the 12 episodes broadcast within the region. Who listened to those stories within the former Yugoslavia remains unclear: viewership was low, there is no reliable data about how viewers understood and reacted to the episodes they saw, and whether the series contributed to recognition among ethno-politically defined “others” remains an unanswerable empirical question. In Serbia, the state broadcaster exerted control over the permissible discourse, and thus the political space available for the discussion of differences at the official level remained unchanged (Hackett & Rolston, 2009). Since the state television station showed only those episodes deemed politically innocuous, and B92 could only air the
episodes that had been rejected, the series’ diversity of stories was rendered moot by the split circumstances of its broadcasting.

Who listened to the stories beyond the former Yugoslavia also remains unclear. The number of stories that the project told outside the successor states was even more limited, with at most six episodes circulated internationally in documentary film festivals and among journalists. The full series was never aired by a public broadcaster in Europe, the United States or elsewhere. Press coverage in the Western media gave recognition to the filmmakers and not to the series’ protagonists as citizens representative of their respective countries. It was the filmmakers’ voices that were prioritized by media coverage. In a communicative process that became increasingly reductive in terms of enabling the participation of the citizens of the successor states that Videoletters was supposed to serve, the filmmakers worked to guarantee a positive portrayal of the project they led, and the news media followed suit. Excluded as they were from public relations actions and the ensuing press coverage, the realities and concerns of the citizens represented in the documentary series, and their need to communicate across and beyond ethno-political divides, did not get any publicity in the international arena. Thus, these citizens lacked a political voice despite being the presumed subjects of the intervention. At the same time, the European funders and implementers of the project could talk about themselves and their “do-gooding” while remaining accountable to no one for the ways in which they appropriated opportunities to manage public opinion for their own benefit (Fraser, 2008: 76-99).

Beyond the broadcast, the project’s outreach was limited, beginning with the fact that only a small number of locations were briefly visited by the caravan.\footnote{The public screenings did gather small audiences, and the discussions facilitated after the screenings may have momentarily given citizens a voice, but there is no published record of these discussions. While they were filmed, the footage was never edited, and therefore their content never circulated within the region or elsewhere.} Clear and useful information about where Videoletters came from, what it stood for and why, and what it intended to do with/for the citizens of the successor countries, including contact and practical details about how to reach the project’s team in order to benefit from its resources and services, was not readily accessible to people in the region. Even if the insistence of implementers and funders on the project’s successful elements when interviewed for this study left little space for references to \textit{what did not happen}, one interviewee stressed the \textit{absence} of the many citizens in the region that the project did not reach, either because they did not learn about it, or because they chose to ignore it: “And that was, in fact, of course, a very important reaction of all the people who did not come to the screenings, but we did not get to see” (interview N). Overall, Videoletters distributed resources for citizens to reconnect with distantiated others in limited and unequal ways, and despite its claim that it would have a wide reach,
remained far from approaching “parity of participation” (Fraser, 2008). The possibility to reconnect via video letters with the direct assistance of the filmmakers was only offered to a few, following unclear criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The influence of the broadcast in terms of moving a large number of individual citizens to reconnect remained a chimera, and the idea that reconnection could be further facilitated in larger quantities and without face-to-face involvement through a website proved unrealistic.

Despite this gap between stated intentions and achieved outcomes, implementers and funders dodged responsibility for what did and did not happen. The filmmakers attributed a number of the project’s shortcomings to the conditions and “ways of doing things” imposed by the funders. The representative of the Dutch MFA in charge of overseeing Videoletters argued, in turn, that, once funding was granted to the filmmakers, they acted on their own responsibility. The framework of obligations binding both parties to the project was so vague that institutional and operational responsibility was diluted, to the point that in the end no party to the intervention was in fact accountable for failures or omissions. From this perspective, institutional arrangements – i.e., the particular bureaucratic ways in which a development communication intervention could be commissioned by bilateral funders from a third party – stood in the way of justice for the citizens of the successor states that Videoletters argued it would serve.

Moreover, the project did not help shift the capabilities of the region’s media system toward more democratic functioning. As noted by interviewees in Chapter 6, and in line with wider analyses of the impact of media support in the Balkans in the aftermath of the breakup (Rhodes, 2007; Kurspahic, 2003), Videoletters was one among other media-driven interventions that failed to facilitate a move from politically controlled state broadcasting to democratically managed public broadcasting.

**An intricate practice**

As Chapters 4 to 6 showed, the practice of international development communication exemplified by Videoletters was complex and, in many ways, self-defeating: unplanned, contradictory, undecidable (Craig, 2006). Despite its much promoted originality, in practice Videoletters followed a number of problematic patterns common to many other cases of international development intervention (Anderson et al., 2012; Waisbord, 2008):

- Although the project vocally sought to overcome ethno-political differences by promoting communication across divides, in practice it occasionally played into the hands of ethnic engineering by choosing which episodes to show and which to avoid at different stops of the caravan’s tour, by highlighting the inclusion of Bosnians in the project
for the Bosnian press, or by feeding press releases critical of Croatia’s resistance to the project to the Serbian and Bosnian news media.

- The successor-state television broadcasters were approached in a condescending and paternalistic way, as if the fact that they functioned in non-democratic ways warranted applying the same approach to them.
- Images of the series’ protagonists were widely circulated to the Western press as if they were objects rather than subjects, without giving voice to them.
- At all times, the filmmakers spoke for the citizens they were supposed to serve instead of treating them as rightful partners and ensuring that they could join the public conversation around the project as well.
- The project’s goals were decided without any kind of consultation or negotiation with the countries where implementation would take place.
- The broadcast was announced to the successor-state television stations as a fait accompli, and the broadcasters were expected to comply with providing preferential slots for airing the series, although they did not benefit from the bilateral funding allocated for such a purpose in any way.
- Project implementation beyond the broadcast was rolled out without consulting or partnering with any intermediate or civil society organizations at the local, national or regional level.
- Implementation was rushed and short-lived, and the quality of the overall intervention was poor.

Importantly, the project did not lack resources, which is often argued as a reason to justify poor implementation or lack of achievements in the practice of international development communication. The analysis suggests that the British and Dutch funding granted to the filmmakers was in excess of expenditures in implementation.\textsuperscript{246} Resources went largely to Dutch personnel and service providers, with smaller amounts spent in Serbia and insignificant amounts spent in BiH. Dutch staff members were paid higher fees than employees from the successor states, and former-Yugoslav migrants hired informally in Amsterdam were kept in check by the fact that their immigration paperwork was not duly in place. The distribution of resources was uneven, and likely to have benefitted those with the power to decide on expenditures the most. The project’s inconsiderate display of resources – both financial and technological – in the poor locations visited by the caravan was an indicator of injustice between foreigners and locals.

Videoletters was both autonomous, in that bilateral funders allowed the filmmakers to do as they pleased, as long as they delivered positive

\textsuperscript{246} My knowledge of how to budget for documentary film production, combined with direct experience of costs in Serbia and BiH and consultation with film and television producers in the region, allows me to hypothesize here.
press coverage, and instrumental, in that it was a means to achieving the bilaterals’ agendas (Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008). Given wide-reaching power to manage resources and decide on implementation as they saw fit, the filmmakers concentrated on controlling the project’s framing for the international media via public relations, taking center stage in the narrative and achieving international recognition in the process.

The fact that the practice was inconsistent with the project’s democratizing and dialogic aims was partly the consequence of the complete absence of checks and balances in the procedures for granting and disbursing funds among the bilateral funders. It followed from the loose agreements that seem to have ruled the relationship between funders and filmmakers that the latter were given free rein to operate. Power was further granted to them inasmuch as the Dutch MFA put its diplomatic resources in the region at their disposal. Under these circumstances, it is interesting that the filmmakers remained visibly concerned with meeting their funders’ expectations, thus playing by “the rules of the game” and directing their efforts toward delivering the good publicity envisaged. An interrelated field in which the institutional project and the practice of international development communication appear as interdependent comes into view here. The financial, operational and representational power bestowed on the filmmakers by its funders appears to have worked as a disciplining strategy, such that things were done as expected without supervision.

Scales of mediation

Videoletters’ attempt to manage space and time through the simultaneous broadcast of the series across the successor states to the former Yugoslavia and follow-up website was unsuccessful: the anticipated “coming together” “at once” of audiences beyond ethno-political divides and ensuing do-it-yourself online reconciliation were not realized. In this sense, the intervention failed to mediate the sociopolitical distances characteristic of the post-conflict scenario, and from this perspective we could easily reach the (simplistic) conclusion that “mediated reconciliation could not be scaled up”. Thus, the problem of how to achieve wide-reaching technical efficiency through development communication intervention remains unsolved, and the inquiry comes to an end.

However, and although this may seem paradoxical, large-scale mediation did work in other ways. As a specific case of the practice of international development communication, Videoletters constituted a temporary mode of relationship between the bilateral funders, the citizens of the countries that bilateral intervention claimed to help, and the governance structures of those countries (particularly their media systems). In this relationship, the citizens named as the beneficiaries of intervention were the “in between”, and the third-party implementers acted as mediators.
this perspective, the project itself was an instance of mediation between Europe and the former Yugoslavia, with problematic political and ethical implications. Politically, the project speaks of British and Dutch donors ready to display wide-ranging economic and diplomatic resources – as exemplified most visibly in the Videoletters Sarajevo premiere – to push the state television broadcasters to comply with its predetermined agenda. Ethically, the project shows that the concern and care for the citizens of the former Yugoslavia that it displayed at its best, during the production of the series, was short-lived, with the subjects of the documentary series becoming more of a means to an end as the scale of Videoletters grew in line with its adoption by bilateral funders.

Moreover, the project not only intermediated between the British and Dutch bilateral funders and the successor states as an element in Europe’s attempts to manage its (political) distance with the Western Balkans in the aftermath of the conflict. It also played a role in mediating the relationship between the bilateral funders and their own national constituencies, through the project’s news coverage in the Western press. This was another important way in which Videoletters worked as an element in the management of a distance. Granted, this was in one sense an imagined form of mediation, in that the British and Dutch foreign ministries charged the international press coverage with a relevance that goes way beyond the influence reasonably attributable to reading or watching the news, as plenty of audience research shows. However, inasmuch as the bilateral concern for achieving positive media coverage ‘at home’ played a role in the decisions to grant funding to the project, it is an imagined form of mediation with a very material weight.

Videoletters exerted “an intermediate, indirect agency between otherwise separated parties to a relationship” (Williams, 1983; Livingstone, 2009) in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, it was the “go-between” that linked the British and Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs with the successor state television broadcasters, and by extension with the national governments for which those broadcasters worked. This instance of mediation was, as we know, resisted by the Serbian and Croatian media outlets, in a power struggle for the differential capacity to mobilize meaning, which in fact ended up being a zero-sum game. On the other hand, Videoletters was the “go-between” that linked said ministries with the citizens of their respective countries, by working to generate positive coverage of the intervention through its public relations campaign and dealings with the media. The influence of this instance of mediation was presumed, but not investigated, and therefore it remains impossible to know whether the coverage of the project in the international news meant anything for the citizens of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or elsewhere in the West.

While these forms of mediation enacted through the Videoletters project do not appear to have facilitated democratizing social change, the
video-based correspondence facilitated as part of the production of the series did, even if on a very small scale, link the private and the public, and the micro and the macro. This was the only stage in the process in which certain distances, experienced individually but tightly connected to the sociopolitical circumstances, appear to have been bridged. For the rest, the project sustained previously existing distances, created new distances, or momentarily filled in spaces that were void of the democratic governance of both national and foreign actors with a flurry of rather inconsequential activity. The project’s initial premise – that dialogue among parties distanced for ethno-political reasons could be facilitated by strengthening the human connection – did not carry over into subsequent components: to a great extent, because the promotion of democratic dialogue was not a concern of the project throughout, and therefore did not translate into strategy. Although Videoleters’ initial intentions seemed good on paper, they came to be distorted not so much by the adoption of new technology (despite much promise, setting up a website did not make any difference) but rather by its dependence on the bilateral institutions that funded it and shaped it, and by “its own power to persuade and to claim attention and response” (Silverstone, 1999). From a political perspective, the project was in fact successfully scaled up, but for purposes other than civic reconciliation.

**Intervening through development communication**

The intervention started as a practice independent from the governance structure of international development cooperation, but actively sought bilateral funding in the presence of a post-conflict “marketplace of ideas” such that third parties pitched projects to ministries of foreign affairs, which chose what initiatives to adopt based on institutional agendas and priorities. Once bilateral funding was secured, Videoleters became subject to the rules of the game – and patterns of deployment – characteristic of the governance structure of international development cooperation. The enduring faith in the power of the mass media to effect (social) change at a fast pace regardless of contextual conditions, characteristic of much of the institutional project of international development communication as we know it, shaped the practice. But the study reveals that the practice was also shaped by a concern with “communicating development” as a positive enterprise. In turn, the way in which the practice was framed and circulated by way of press coverage in the West shaped most of the academic writing that came to refer to Videoleters, thus having a collateral influence on the field of study.

While on paper Videoleters looked like an initiative from European bilaterals to benefit the citizens of the particular subsection of Southeastern

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247 But also based on national affiliation. In the end, outstanding support and funding for the Videoleters Dutch-based filmmakers resulted from the choices made by Dutch officers.
Europe constituted by the successor states to the former Yugoslavia as part of the wider Western intervention in the region to democratize communication and media in so-called post-communist societies, this study demonstrates that, in practice, it focused largely on a) exerting political pressure on the region’s state television broadcasters, and b) making the intervention, and thus its bilateral funders, look good in the eyes of the West itself. The ministries of foreign affairs that chose to implement Videoletters were as concerned with making a good impression on their own constituencies as they were with pushing the region’s broadcasters to agree to a symbolic show of cooperation. This combination of aims makes the project both a political intervention and a marketing exercise. Therefore, attending to issues of ethics and accountability throughout the process is in order.

The fact that decision-makers in bilateral agencies think of communication in terms of public relations is not new, and has been voiced for years by a number of expert development communication practitioners. The former chief of the Communication for Development program of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Silvia Balit, put it clearly: “Like politicians and business people, decision makers in development institutions are keenly aware of the importance of information and communication activities, but primarily in connection with public relations or corporate communication. […] Governments, in turn, tend to be primarily interested in cutting edge technologies, and believe that adopting those technologies means that they are applying communication in development programs” (Balit, 2012: 106).

But the reasons for the conflation between development communication and public relations may not only be the consequence of the “confusion and lack of understanding” argued by Balit (ibid.). If development communication initiatives are considered likely to make for positive, “feel-good” press coverage, this may play a role in their selection for support. This study showed that, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, a peculiar marketplace was at work, in which a variety of third-party proponents pursued funders, which made choices to suit specific institutional needs. This marketplace operated in place of a professionally organized internal development communication structure within ministries of foreign affairs equipped to generate and implement – or at least to select and oversee – quality initiatives. The ephemeral and intangible structure of such an arrangement, where bilaterals act by proxy and implementers exist as such only temporarily, makes it difficult to assess responsibilities – and close to impossible to raise claims.

In this context, justice remains an outstanding issue. As it stands, Videoletters was deployed, terminated and filed away without the
requirement to produce reliable documentation reflecting how the citizens of the successor states targeted felt or thought about the intervention. What was their personal experience of Videoletters? Which aspects of the project did they find positive and useful – and which not? What did they think should have been done differently, to address the problem of reconciliation, and by whom? Although these citizens were defined by the Videoletters project as the “who” of the intervention, i.e., as its subject, it turned out the “what” of the intervention was not communicative justice. The problematic of framing, which Fraser intelligently illustrates by way of a map (ibid., 2008: 1-6), comes into view here. In the presence of two overlapping and competing frameworks, one that spoke of doing good in the Balkans and one that worked to look good in the West, and in the absence of legitimate mechanisms for the assessment of the relationship between the project’s backers and their targets, the affected citizens were ultimately excluded from consideration.

Conclusion
This study has focused on the practice and the project of international development communication. By way of a qualitative study, I have examined a situated process of intervention in its complexity, and analyzed how the specifics of mediation illuminate issues of proximity and distance in the relationship between bilateral funders, the citizens of the countries that their intervention claims to assist, and the governance structures of the countries intervened. While I have explored the practice from the perspective of how a specific intervention was initiated, implemented, circulated and evaluated, I also analyzed issues of ethics and accountability in relation to a framework of global justice. According to my findings, international development communication intervention may be embraced by bilateral funders for its potential to make them look good in the eyes of Western audiences beyond discourses that refer to its potential to do good for the citizens of troubled countries. To end, in what follows I briefly discuss other conclusions that can be drawn from the study, and highlight potential contributions toward a critical research agenda.

Communicating about results, or development communication as a tool for public diplomacy
One conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that there is an intricate overlap between what a report commissioned by the OECD DAC Development Co-operation Directorate & DevCom Network in 2009 (da Costa, 2009) sought to differentiate as “communication about results” (corporate communication) and communication for results (communication for development, understood as “a tool as well as a process for the effective

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249 Questions adapted from Anderson et al. (2012).
In contrast with the recommendations of the OECD report, the bilateral funders that supported Videoletters assigned priority to communicating positive results to the tax-paying constituencies of their own countries over serving the needs of the citizens of the successor states named as the project’s beneficiaries. In the process, they welcomed superficial media coverage of the project that insisted on its donor-driven effectiveness while leaving out the voice of the former Yugoslavs.

The overlap may prove hard to disentangle if development communication intervention presumed to do good is in fact perceived by funders as particularly suitable to make them look good in the eyes of their own constituencies. The enthusiastic press coverage achieved by Videoletters in the Western media moreover suggests that media outlets may share such a perception, which renders the overlap productive and therefore justifies it, and makes it attractive.

Whether this paradox – that interventions perceived as especially capable of doing good may be favored for deployment based on the understanding that their power to make funders look good could be stronger – is in fact an inclination or a tendency among funders would, of course, require further research. In the meantime, the finding for the case of Videoletters is especially relevant in that, by paying attention to the geopolitical totality in which international development communication intervention takes place, it evidences an interconnection between the localized practice in specific settings and its communicative reverberations on the international stage where projects are envisioned and decided upon.

The invisible citizens (and their nations)

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this investigation is that we cannot adequately study the presence or absence of justice in the implementation of an international development communication intervention vis-à-vis the citizens it was supposed to serve unless we bring those citizens into the field of visibility – even if the intervention tends to disregard them. One argument that I hope to have advanced throughout this study is that, if we are to think about issues in the practice and the project of international development in terms of the wider problem of justice under global conditions, we must bring citizenship into view, even if – or rather, particularly when – project designs and institutional priorities tend to do away with it.

Theoretical consideration of citizens not only brings into view communication as a right and a capability, but also the obligations that ensue. It also draws attention to the characteristics of national communicative spaces,

250 While conceding that, in practice, the former tended to get much more attention than the latter: by 2009, one-third of OECD countries integrated communication in development programs or projects, and only 10 percent of those had a formal communication strategy.
and requires that we consider their potential influence on the embracement or rejection of proposed discourses and strategies. In this way, attention to citizenship illuminates, moreover, the persistence of “the national” as a relevant framework for analyzing processes of mediated intervention that link parties across borders, thus clarifying the “who” of justice (Fraser, 2008), and makes it possible to begin to consider which mechanisms may enable citizens affected by inappropriate international development communication interventions to raise their claims.

The speed of intervention and the negation of politics
The short duration of Videoletters as a visible intervention – i.e., beginning with its public launch – speaks to the importance assigned to speed in international development cooperation. In accordance with such value, the project was not made to last until it responded to the need it was supposed to address. Instead, its public actions doubled as advertising spaces, turning the intervention into a medium for communicating its value and in the process distracting attention from its shortcomings. While the project’s implementers and funders insisted on denying the political nature of the intervention, politics was conducted through public relations and media coverage. The insistence on “appearing neutral” suggests an inability to discriminate between knowingly taking into account a political context and overtly politicizing an intervention. In a connected manner, the insistence on the fact that mediated intervention could and would speed up a region-wide process of reconciliation disregarded the well-known fact that it takes at least a generation for a nation to transition toward relatively stable governance conditions and to begin to address issues of truth and justice following sociopolitical conflict. In this sense, the project proposed that media technology could “mediate politics away” by accelerating the in-between time required for citizens to get a grip on their experiences of the conflict, and whether this was a reason why it appealed to funders would merit investigation.

In this sense, one contribution that I hope to have made with this dissertation is to draw attention to the intrinsically political nature of development communication intervention irrespective of neutral or technical discourses to the contrary.

Mediation: observable fact, or conceptual lens?
The reader should not expect an either/or answer to this question, which is intrinsic to the complexity of mediation, well analyzed by Raymond Williams (1983: 204-207). Instead, I raise it here to acknowledge the enduring relevance of the term for media and communication studies. Although I cannot claim to have successfully triangulated the three most common but conflicting uses of “mediation” elaborated by Williams (ibid.), I hope that this study
has contributed to exemplify, and therefore restate, the concept’s theoretical efficacy for the analysis of relationships in which forms of communication and media uses play a variety of crucial roles.

An open-ended approach to the question raised in this subsection in fact proved to be productive. While the reader may find that in certain cases I have referred to “acts of mediation” as observable facts, those are best thought of as “artifacts” derived from human agency. In other cases, I have abstracted “forms of mediation” from the analysis, more clearly resorting to mediation as a conceptual lens.

**Ethics for development communication?**

A question derived from this study is how to advance an ethics of communication in the field of study, the practice and the institutional project of international development communication. From a matter-of-fact perspective, the question is not difficult to answer, and a number of actions aimed at tackling shortcomings identified at the level of the institutional project or the practice could be enumerated. But any actions I could suggest presume an agreement among relevant stakeholders on the importance of an ethics of development communication, and would require the political will of bilateral agencies to engage. These preconditions may not necessarily be in place, and research aimed at identifying arguments against (and other obstacles to) the adoption of an agenda for development communication ethics among practitioners and funders may be necessary.

As regards the field of study, at least two problems would merit attention: the consequences of the push to “prove the value of development communication” on the quality of academic production, and an excess of proximity between the institutional and the academic projects that may stand in the way of independent research and the communication of critical findings. Importantly, from an academic standpoint we need to reflect on the ways in which we think and talk about the practice and the institutional project (Craig, 2006), so that due visibility is given to issues of justice.

**Where do we go from here?**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a body of research that, rather than shying away from the tradition of development communication studies, acknowledges it as an ambiguous legacy to be reappropriated and reinterpreted in light of the role of communication and media in present neoliberal conditions. My hope is that, through the situated study of a particular process of international development communication intervention from the ultimate perspective of global justice, I have advanced the understanding of the complexity at issue in projects of this type. As I have shown here, if we analyze processes of intervention in relation to the proximities and distances that come
into play through mediated action, attentive to the goals that bilateral funders may be seeking to achieve beyond explicit purposes, the wider implications of the practice and the project in terms of justice can be observed.

The idea of “development communication at home”, which I have sketched in this study, may be helpful in order to strengthen an analytical framework that can take into account the domestic/national and foreign/international scales as the combined (though competing) territories in which claims for justice are to be raised in a globalizing world. As I have demonstrated here, an international development communication intervention aimed “abroad”, to reach the citizens of “elsewhere”, is development communication “at home” inasmuch as it implies the engagement of national structures of governance in enabling or obstructing justice. The fact that the British and Dutch foreign ministries that funded Videoletters would go to so much trouble to publicize their doing good among their own constituencies, and to control the story told about the project, testifies to that.

For the specific case of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia that remain “losers in the accession game”, adopting the idea of “development communication at home” would draw attention the fact that communicative spaces are not constituted only by those citizens situated within their borders, but also by those beyond their borders, and therefore attention to issues of distance, proximity and justice are crucial. As the wave of civic protests that took place in Bosnia early in 2014 evidenced, the unresolved promise of accession to the European Union (closely linked to the democratic deficits of its media system, among another shortcomings considered an obstacle) has consequences in the present. In this context, the question is what kind of development communication intervention would make it possible not only for the citizens of the successor states to voice their claims, but also for Europe to listen.251

251 The question is borrowed from the analysis of the protest by scholar Igor Stiks, who asked: “As the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina engage in protests, is Europe listening?” See http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/17/bosnia-terrifying-picture-of-europe-future [accessed 28 February 2014].
References


Appendix 1: Interview guide for filmmakers

1. Could you describe (in as much detail as possible) the very beginning of the Videoletters project?
   (Had you used video letters before, or seen them used? For which purposes?)
   (Why did you choose the Balkans?)

2. Can you tell me about the process of gathering the letters?
   (How did you go about finding people who might want to record a letter and explaining your idea to them?) / (Were any of the letters you gathered left undelivered?) (Were any of the letters delivered left unanswered?) / (Can you describe the attitudes and feelings of the people participating in the letters that you included in the television series?)

3. You both shared the role of directing the documentary. Which other roles or tasks did you share during the process? Did one of you take responsibility for any roles or tasks more specifically?
   [If time is an issue, keep this one short].

4. In your experience, what was most difficult or complicated about the project, and what worked best?

5. Can you tell me about your everyday life in the Balkans while you were working on the project?
   (What do you remember most vividly?) / (How did the Balkans compare to other places in which you have lived/worked?)

6. (I understand that you have probably spoken about this before, but I would like to hear your current views first-hand.) How would you describe the differences between the project as originally intended and the role it ended up playing? [If they suggest there was a big change] What were the causes for such a change in your view?

7. Can you tell me about your relationship with the authorities in the region during the project?
   (How did you negotiate the permissions you needed, their involvement in supporting the project, etc.?)

8. At which point in the process was the website redeveloped to allow the taping of Videoletters?
   (How were the web-videoletters handled once people recorded them?)

9. How did you come to the decision to close the project’s website?
   (Is there an archive of the web-based Videoletters?) / (Have you considered the idea of re-launching the website as a site for remembering reconciliation?)

10. If I understand correctly, you started working on the project in 1999, and the series was broadcast in the Balkans in 2005. Can you tell me about your work
with the media organizations that broadcast the series?
(What were their attitudes, feelings and ideas?)

11. Can you tell me about the project after the broadcast in 2005?
12. How do you think the people who participated in the project remember it today?
13. Who do you think understood the project best among the journalists who
interviewed you, academic researchers who investigated it, or funders who
provided material support?
[scrap this question?]

14. Do you think communication and media have any power to make change
happen (for example, to get enemies to reconcile)? If so, what kind (and
degree) of change can we attribute to communication and the media?

15. In some ways, the possibilities provided by the Videoletters project seem
similar to those provided by YouTube or Facebook, which did not exist at the
time. What do you think about that?

16. Can you tell me about the Rwanda experience? (If I understood correctly,
between 2006 and 2008 you participated in the development of a pilot for
Videoletters Rwanda.)

17. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 2: General interview guide (common questions for
all interviewees)

1. Please describe in your own words what the Videoletters project was about, as
you remember it.
2. How did you come into contact with the Videoletters project? / What was your
role in the Videoletters project?
3. Did you receive or send a video letter yourself?
4. Did you watch any episodes of the Videoletters series when they were broadcast
on television? / What can you tell me about the episodes of the Videoletters
television series, as you remember them? / What do you think the series
meant for those people who saw it on television?
5. How do you think audiences in (Serbia/BiH) would react today if the
Videoletters documentary series were shown on television again?
6. Do you think that the Videoletters project facilitated or caused changes? If so,
which changes?
7. Do you think that certain types of communication and media have the
power to make change happen (for example, to get enemies to reconcile)? If
so, what kind (and degree) of change can we attribute to communication and
the media?
8. In some ways, the possibilities provided by the Videoletters website in 2005
seem similar to those provided today by YouTube or Facebook, which did not
exist at the time. What do you think about that?
9. What did your participation in the Videoletters television series mean for you, on a personal level?
10. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 3: List of interviews

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**Appendix 4: Consent form (English version)**

INFORMATION SHEET
Thank you for agreeing to take part in an interview for my research study. Please read this information carefully.

My name is Florencia Enghel. I am from Argentina, and a doctoral (Ph.D.) student in Media and Communication at Karlstad University, in Sweden. This interview is part of my research to obtain a Ph.D. degree. I am studying the forms of communication and media used by people to communicate with each other in the Western Balkans after the '90s wars, and the history of the Videoletters project. As part of my study, I am conducting a series of face-to-face interviews with different people in diverse locations across the Western Balkans.

My research is supervised by Professor Miyase Christensen, from the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University, in Sweden (e-mail: miyase.christensen@ims.su.se).

Your participation in my research study is voluntary. You may skip any questions that you don’t want to answer, and you may end the interview at any time. I will record, transcribe and save the interview in a secure way. In the future, I may use parts of this interview as part of my Ph.D. thesis and/or in other publications with educational purposes. If I do, your name will be kept anonymous. If I would like to cite parts of the interview in my future publications, I will do my best to contact you and ask you to verify your quotations.
Please keep this information sheet, of which I will ask you to sign a copy. You can find my contact information below. Thank you again for your collaboration and your time.

Florencia Enghel
Doctoral student, Media and Communication Studies, Karlstad University, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden.
Mobile: +4676-818-2082 – E-mail: Florencia.Enghel@kau.se
Skype: florenghel

CONSENT FORM
By signing below, I agree to participate in the interview, and for the resulting interview recording and transcript to be used according to the conditions described in the INFORMATION SHEET.

Name: 
Contact information (phone number and e-mail address):
Date: 
Place: 
Signature:

Appendix 5: Small-group interview questions for discussion
1. Does what we just saw relate in any way to your personal lives? (If yes, how. If not, why?)
2. Was there anything about what we just saw that you disliked? (If yes, why?)
3. What, if anything, did you like most about what we just saw?
4. Can you tell me about your everyday life in 2005 at the time when the Videoletters series was being broadcast on television?
5. Do you think that watching content like this may have caused changes in people?
6. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 6: Series and episode synopses
(Source: press kit from 2005 provided by press manager)

VIDEOLETTERS (20x25’)
A 16-part documentary series with reconciliation as the common theme is set in former Yugoslavia. After the war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and drove millions from hearths and homes, the country crumbled into five separate republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. The inhabitants hardly have any contacts beyond the borders. In each
episode, two people of different nationalities send each other a videoleter. Before the war they used to be friends, neighbors or colleagues. In intimate videoleters, they explain to each other how this could happen. They express their anger and sadness. They try to put rumors and false information behind them. They admit guilt. After exchanging the videoleters, they usually arrange a meeting, the first since the war erupted. This TV series was shot over the past five years, mostly in tough conditions. Not only was it hard for the people involved to start a conversation with the “other side” but often dangerous too. In this, the filmmakers act as initiators, mailmen and recorders.

1. Ivana & Senad
As the war starts, Bosnian children with polio who are being nursed in Belgrade don’t understand why their parents don’t come to the hospital anymore. They don’t comprehend the meaning of the word “war” and feel abandoned. So does Senad, a little boy from the surroundings of Konjic. He wants Ivana, who brings toys and food to the hospital, to become his “second” mom. When the war is over, Senad returns to Bosnia. Ivana receives a videoleter from Haifa, Senad’s “first” mum. “Your Senad and mine is gone. He works for the mafia, they make him beg,” she cries, “I wish he had stayed with you for ever.” Ivana sends videoleters to newspapers, radio and TV stations asking for help. She is convinced that Senad will tell her why he abandoned his two mothers. If only she could find him.

2. Emil & Saša
Emil and Saša are growing up in Pale, Bosnia & Hercegovina. During their childhood they are inseparable. If you look for Emil, you will also find Saša. If you call out for Saša, Emil will come along too. Later on, during school hours, in secret they drink coffee in Sarajevo, just like grown-ups do. They call themselves Yugoslavs. The war changes their world instantly. Saša has to join the army: his father is Serbian. Emil has to flee: his father is Muslim. Where Saša is, Emil cannot stay; where Emil goes, Saša is not welcome. They never speak to each other again. Ten years later, Emil explains in his videoleter to Saša why: “I never called you because you did something horrible during the war, so I heard.”

3. Lala & Mira
Lala lives in Serbia. Mira lives in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Every summer Lala comes to visit Mira. They swim in the river Neretva, flirt with the boys, and copy dresses from the latest magazines. Lala marries Nikola and moves to Switzerland. Mira marries Ibro and settles in Mostar. Then the war breaks out in Bosnia. Mira flees to Zagreb. Ibro cannot leave Mostar under siege. For months Mira doesn’t know if he is dead or alive. She does not call Lala since she thinks that the war in Bosnia doesn’t affect Lala, living safely abroad. Until she receives Lala’s videoleter…
4. **Snežana & Tonči**
Snežana was born on the cost of Croatia. She is Serbian but does not feel that way: “I belong to the sea; I knew Serbia only from TV.” Her best friend Tonči is Croatian, from Makarska. When the war breaks out, Snežana escapes to Serbia. She feels she has no choice: a bomb was thrown at her father’s supermarket, her house was set on fire, she was threatened. What she blames Tonči for is never having called her. Why? The only reason that she can think of is that Tonči became a nationalist; that he doesn’t call her because she is Serbian. Tonči is confused by the videoletter she receives from Snežana. If she only knew the real reason for his silence.

5. **Snežana & Zvezdana**
Once they stood next to each other in the classroom, hand in hand, taking the oath of pioneers in the schoolyard. Two eight-year-old best friends in Sarajevo: Snežana and Zvezdana. Then the war closes down the school. Zvjezdana moves to a basement in the center of the city. In the range of snipers, she must run to get bread every day. Meanwhile, Snežana had fled the city. Ten years later, Zvjezdana receives a videoletter from someone from her old school. She cannot imagine from whom. She recites all the names, except one, the name of her once best friend: Snežana. When she finally finds out who is sending the videoletter, she is not sure if she wants to watch it....

6. **Mujesira & Joviša**
Mujesira is a Muslim. She lives in a small village near Visegrad. As the war starts, she witnesses the killing of her husband by Serbs. His body is thrown into the river Drina. She manages to flee with her children and some other villagers into the mountains. But when soldiers ambush them, both her children die and Mujesira is forced to leave their bodies behind as she is taken to a camp. When she returns after the war, Mujesira cannot find the remains of her children so she can give them a proper burial. She has been searching for them ever since.

7. **Velimir & Koha**
Before the war Velimir was a director of a brick factory in Kosovo. The Albanian directors were all fired. But then the workers start getting unjustly accused of sabotage, Velimir openly asks his Albanian colleagues for forgiveness in the newspaper: “I feel ashamed for my politicians and their politics!” After the war, the roles change. There are no more Serbian directors in Kosovo, only Albanians. Velimir cannot visit the graves of his family in Kosovo. He can only visit their graves under the accompaniment of KFOR. From Skopje, Velimir sends videoletters to his former colleagues in Kosovo. However, they are scared to death to communicate with a Serbian openly. Will they put their fear behind them out of respect for what Velimir once did for them?
8. **Nenad & Rudjer**

Rudjer – a promising composer, blind from early age – has an artistic family. Before the war his father Miro Glavurić is a well-known painter and columnist, his sister Kristina studies at the Art Academy, his mother Rada is a French teacher. Just before the war starts Rada asks Nenad, one of her pupils, to look after Rudjer. They go on an excursion together, they talk about music and become friends. One day Rudjer and his family are suddenly gone. Nenad finds an unfamiliar name-plate at Rudjer’s door. Only later does he learn that Rudjer’s father had been receiving threatening phone calls daily and that Rudjer’s sister’s paintings had been ripped to pieces at the Art Academy. “I was young, I didn’t know the things I know now,” Nenad says in his videoletter to Rudjer. “But one thing I still don’t understand: why didn’t you tell me? You didn’t even say good-bye.”

9. **Edin & Tarzo**

Edin fights in the Bosnian army, Tarzo in the Serbian army. They are terrified of the idea of having to face each other, perhaps even shoot at each other. This is what they both think about whenever they are on guard duty. Tarzo gets severely injured and spends months in hospital; meanwhile his mother dies from a grenade explosion. “I was told you started hating Muslims,” says Edin in his videoletter. “My mother told me that you called the other day. Why? Do you miss me or do you want to threaten me? I really don’t know.” When Tarzo answers, Edin is struck dumb. Because Tarzo was told something as well.

10. **Irma & Djordje**

“Come back Johnny, we miss you so much,” says Irma in the videoletter that she is recording for her former neighbor Đorde. Irma is Croatian and Đorde is Serbian. Before the war they both called themselves Yugoslavians. They lived in Grbavica, a part of Sarajevo that becomes Serbian territory during the war. “They held the city under fire from our apartment buildings; the enemy was in our basement,” says Irma. “After the war you left us. We still don’t know why. Why did you leave, Johnny?” she asks. Đorde does not tell his new neighbors in Republika Srpska that he was once called Johnny; nor does he tell them why he doesn’t dare go back to Grbavica. But he does tell Irma, in his videoletter...

11. **Vera & Vlasta**

Vera was born in Kraljevo. After her studies, she receives a scholarship to specialize abroad as Serbia’s best young anesthesiologist. Vlasta receives the same scholarship, as Croatia’s best. That’s how forty years ago Vera and Vlasta became best friends in Denmark. When the war breaks out, Vlasta’s son, cameraman Gordan Lederer, is shot while filming for Croatian television. The images of his death are published all over the world. Vlasta declares in an interview: To me Serbians do not exist anymore. Vera sees these images on
Serbian television. She is devastated but she cannot reach Vlasta. “Why don’t you answer? Am I also ‘some Serbian’ to you too?” Vera asks in her videoletter.

12. Vlada & Ivica
Vlada lives in Belgrade, Ivica near Zagreb. Their fathers are colleagues, their mothers are friends. They all spend their summers together by the sea. When war breaks out in Croatia, Ivica’s mother calls Vlada’s mother in Belgrade: “Grenades are exploding, houses are burning, there is a Serbian sniper across the street.” Vlada’s mother cannot believe her ears. Later Vlada’s father writes to Ivica’s: “I am certain your wife was telling the truth. I am ashamed of what my people did to you.” But there is no reply. Maybe they have grown to hate Serbs, even us, thinks Vlada. Maybe they have never received the letter, comforts his grandmother. As long as you don’t call them, you don’t risk that they will hang up on you, says his sister. Then Vlada comes to a decision…

13. Beli & Dejan
They go to the same school in Belgrade. Beli does not even know that Dejan is Croatian. One day Dejan comes to say good-bye: “They put a grenade on our kitchen table. A knife to my throat! We are moving to Zadar.” Beli can hardly understand what he is being told, but Dejan’s father has already packed the truck, including the bees that make the best honey in Batajnica. Beli gives Dejan a tape with their favorite music as a souvenir. Beli changes from a teenager into a young man. During the NATO bombardments, he thinks about how his country has come to this. He gets involved in the resistance movement; he fights against the regime, against Miloševic.

14. Dragan & Safet [the synopsis included in the press kit repeats the text for the Beli & Dejan above]

15. Goran & Admir
Goran and Admir defend Sarajevo. Together, even though Admir is a Muslim and Goran a Serb. A Croatian friend fights with them too! In the trenches, they call themselves “unity and brotherhood” of the Bosnian army. When Admir has to go to an official army gathering, he finds that the trousers of his uniform are too short. He asks Goran if he can borrow his. Goran agrees, but when the moment comes to exchange uniforms, Goran has changed armies instead: he has fled to the “Serbian” side. “I thought: you were sick of war, that I could understand,” says Admir in his videoletter, “and there was food too on the other side? but that you forgot about my trousers, I cannot forgive you!”

16. Brana & Petar
Brana calls himself an extremist. He was a police officer before the war and then he became an officer in the Croatian army. “I wanted to go to war, to fight
for my country.” Brana now works on the island of Hvar. He misses his buddies from before the war, police officers just like him. They all left Croatia because they had a different nationality. Željko cries while watching Brana’s videoletter. He misses Hvar, Brana and the sea too. But he cannot go to visit. He is Serbian, born in Croatia, living in Bosnia. Which of these three countries should issue him a passport? In his videoletter Brana asks Željko to help him find Petar. Petar is half-Serbian, half-Macedonian. He lived in Croatia, but disappeared after the war. After a long search, Željko finally finds Petar. But he is not sure if he should tell Brana or not…

Appendix 7: Review form for press clippings
(adapted from Ryan, 1991)

Basic information about the press clipping
• Name of the file being analyzed (as provided):
• Name of the newspaper or magazine:
• City where the newspaper or magazine is headquartered (if possible to find out):
• Current website for the newspaper or magazine (if possible to find out):
• Date of publication of the press clipping:
• Page number (if visible in the file):
• Title of the piece:
• Subtitle:
• Reporter’s name:
• Is the reporter a man or a woman?:
• Contact information for the reporter (if available in the press clipping):

Content of the press clipping
What is the main message/information communicated in the press clipping? (Please summarize it in no more than five lines.)

How was the content communicated?
1. What is the main position stated in the piece? (For example, is the piece for or against the Videoletters project? Is it for or against reconciliation among former neighbors or co-workers opposed by the war? Etc.)
2. Are any metaphors used?
3. Are there any historical references?
4. Are any key phrases stressed and/or reiterated?
5. Is the reporter writing about a situation that he/she witnessed?
6. Are there any direct quotes from an interview? (if yes, to whom, and what do they say?)
7. Are there any photographs included in the piece? If yes, please copy the photo caption(s) below.
8. Is there anything else that stands out about the piece that you would like to note?

Summary
Did you find the coverage sympathetic, carefully neutral, negative, mixed, confusing, boring, exciting, misleading, or…?

Appendix 8: The Videoletters caravan

The caravan visited a total of thirteen locations, in two rounds. The first round lasted 14 days and covered six locations. The second round lasted 22 days and covered another six locations, additionally returning to Visegrad for a second time. Six cities were visited in BiH: Pale, Srebrenica, Visegrad (twice), Brcko, Zenika and Mostar. Visegrad is located in the Republika Srpska, Brcko is formally part of both the Federation and the Republika, and the other four cities are located in the Federation. In Serbia and Montenegro, the caravan visited four locations: Herceg Novi, Podgorica and Kostanica in Montenegro, and Novi Pazar in Serbia. In Croatia, it visited three locations: two in the Vukovar-Syrmia county – the city of Vinkovci and the village of Berak – and Makarska. The main focus was on Bosnia’s Federation entity, followed by Montenegro. What is Serbia today remained largely untouched, and that was also the case with Croatia. The detailed schedule for both tours, provided by another interviewee from a personal log, was the following:

Tour 1
30 May 30 – 1 June Pale
2-4 June Srebrenica
5 June Visegrad
6-8 June Herceg Novi
9 June Podgorica
10-12 June Novi Pazar

Tour 2
4-5 July Vinkovci, Berak
6-8 July Kostanica
9-11 July Brcko
12-14 July Zenica
15-19 July Makarska
20-22 July Mostar
23-25 July Visegrad
Video letters, mediation and (proper) distance

This study focuses on the institutional practice of international development communication. Through a qualitative study of the Videoletters project, it examines a situated process of intervention in its complexity and analyzes how the specifics of mediation illuminate issues of proximity and distance in the relationship between bilateral funders, the citizens of the countries that their intervention claims to assist, and the governance structures of the countries intervened. Videoletters was a media-driven intervention aimed at reconnecting ordinary people affected by ethno-political divisions across the former Yugoslavia between 2000 and 2005. Adopted by European bilateral funders for large-scale implementation, the project was categorized as a “tool for reconciliation”. The study explores how this specific intervention was initiated, implemented, circulated and evaluated in practice. Issues of ethics and accountability at stake in the process are analyzed in relation to a framework of global justice. Findings indicate that mediated communication intervention may be embraced by bilateral funders for its potential to make them look good in the eyes of Western audiences beyond discourses about its potential to do good for the citizens of troubled countries. By linking international development communication to a framework of justice, the study contributes to a critical agenda for theorization and research that takes accountability into consideration and puts citizens at the center.