

Understanding the Donor-Driven Practice of Development
Communication: From Media Engagement
to a Politics of Mediation

Florencia Enghel

Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract:

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), not enough attention is given to the ways in which mediation is socially produced and becomes politically effective. Although rarely taken into account as an analytical variable in studies of international development communication, mediation is implicit in donor-driven practice. In the act of framing a problem and favouring a solution, and of communicating about a problem and solution in particular ways, donors seek to mediate their complex relationships with recipient countries and with citizens at both ends of the donor-recipient equation. But which forms of media engagement do they propose to these ends? How is mediated communication aimed at *doing good* for the citizens of recipient countries? How is it used to communicate *do-gooding* to the citizens of donor countries? Which media technologies are foregrounded and which media-driven practices are favoured to promote one and the other? Which perceptions of media engagement influence donors’ strategic choices, and how are citizens understood in those choices? Based on a qualitative study of a large-scale mediated communication intervention mandated by the British Foreign Commonwealth Office and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote reconciliation and democratize media systems in the successor states to the former Yugoslavia in 2005 (Enghel, 2014), this paper examines forms of media engagement at work in donor-driven international development communication and considers their uses as components of a politics of mediation.

Keywords: Donor-Recipient Equation; International Development Communication; Media Engagement; Netherlands; Politics of Mediation; United Kingdom; Video Letters; Western Balkans

Résumé:

Il est paradoxal des études communicationnelles et médiatiques de largement considérer que les médias sont des institutions clés dans le “project of time, space and life management” (Silverstone, 2005), sans toutefois porter assez d’attention à la manière dont la médiation est produite socialement et devient politiquement efficace. Bien que rarement pris en compte comme une variable d’analyse dans les études de la communication du développement international, la médiation est implicite dans la pratique par les donateurs. En voulant encadrer un problème tout en favorisant une solution, ainsi qu’en communiquant sur le problème et sa solution de façon particulière, les donateurs cherchent à arbitrer leurs relations complexes entre les pays bénéficiaires et avec les citoyens aux deux extrémités de l’équation donneur-receveur. Mais quelles formes d’engagement médiatique proposent-ils afin d’arriver à ces fins? Comment est médiée la communication visant à faire le bien pour les citoyens des pays bénéficiaires? Comment est-ce utilisé pour communiquer le bien fait aux citoyens des pays donateurs? Quels technologies médiatiques sont mises de l’avant et qui, alimentée par les pratiques axées sur les médias, sont privilégiés pour promouvoir l’un et l’autre? Quelles perceptions de l’engagement des médias influence les donateurs, les choix stratégiques, et comment les citoyens sont compris dans leurs choix? Basé sur une étude qualitative d’une intervention de communication médiatisée à grande échelle mandaté par le Foreign Commonwealth Office britannique et le ministère néerlandais des Affaires étrangères pour promouvoir la réconciliation et de démocratiser les systèmes de médias dans les États successeurs de l’ex-Yougoslavie en 2005 (Enghel, 2014), cet article examine les formes d’engagement des médiatiques à l’œuvre dans la communication internationale pour le développement par les donateurs et considère leur utilisation comme composants d’une politique de médiation.

Mots-clés: Balkans occidentaux; Communication pour le développement international; Engagement des médias; Équation donateur-bénéficiaire; Lettres vidéo; Pays-Bas; Politique de médiation; Royaume-Uni

Donor-Driven Intervention in the Former Yugoslavia after the Breakup

After its founder Josip Broz (also known as “Tito”) died in 1980, the breakup of Yugoslavia spanned 20 years. According to its last constitution from 1974, Yugoslavia was a Socialist Federal Republic made of six republics, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, and two provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, and each Yugoslav republic had its own nationality. Following Tito’s death, increasing tensions between the republics led to political and economic decay, and by late 1989 Yugoslavia had ceased to exist for all practical purposes: legislative, economic, and cultural. While Slovenia managed to achieve independence in 1992 following a short armed conflict with the army led by Slobodan Milosevic (who had assumed de facto control of Serbia in 1987) and an agreement brokered by the European Commission, tensions between Croatia and Serbia escalated. The Serb-Croat battle for Bosnian territory broke out in March 1992, and the siege of Sarajevo begun in April. Violence ensued, including the massacre of Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serb troops in Srebrenica in BiH in July 1995; the attack by the Croatian Army of the Serb Krajina in Croatia in August; and NATO’s bombardment of Bosnian Serb positions between late August and September. The conflict officially ended in December 1995 with the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement, brokered by the international community (e.g., Hupchick & Cox, 2001; Kurspahic, 2003; Ramet, 2005).

Donor-driven mediated communication intervention in the region began at that point, and went on to coexist with military intervention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations, and reconstruction programs for the next ten years, achieving a central role in the constellation (Irion & Jusic, 2014). Various factors combined to foreground the strong influence assigned to the media by the international community during that period (Silverstone, 2007). First, intervention coincided with “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” (Rhodes, 2007: 16). Second, the awareness of the ways in which the nationalistic governments of the successor states had used the regional media to disseminate war propaganda and foster conflict led to efforts to counteract the narrative through the same means (e.g., Haselock, 2010; Kurspahic, 2003). And third, donors themselves resorted to the international media as an avenue for demonstrating the effectiveness of their do-gooding in the region (Seaton, 1999).¹

Despite the massive scale of assistance delivered by the international community since 1995, hostilities between the successor states to the former Yugoslavia did not end with Dayton’s signature. By April 2005, ten years after the peace agreement had put a formal end to armed conflict in BiH and five years after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime, the socio-political situation in the region remained unstable. Violence had erupted in Kosovo in March 2004, and doubts about the future persisted among ordinary citizens, compounded by a paucity of opportunities to communicate freely and peacefully across the divides derived from ethnic engineering (Enghel, 2014).

It was in this context that the Videoleters Project was deployed and came to be known in Western circles as a successful initiative. Purportedly aimed at reconnecting ordinary people affected by ethno-political divisions across the former Yugoslavia, and referred to as a “tool for reconciliation”, its large-scale implementation was funded by European bilateral donors.

This paper begins by outlining the methodological rationale, introducing the case studied and defining donor-driven mediated communication intervention. Next, Videoleters is analyzed

from a multiperspectival approach: its premises and assumptions regarding media effects, its media-driven strategic components, and its choice and uses of media technologies. Based on the analysis, I then discuss the project's ambiguous outcomes across levels of intervention, conceptualizing them within the framework of a donor-driven politics of mediation and suggesting avenues for future research and theorization.

The arguments raised in this paper are distilled from Enghel's (2014) study titled *Video letters, mediation and (proper) distance: A qualitative study of international development communication in practice*. The purpose of the study was to document and scrutinize the Videoleters project in order to unpack the contextual and institutional factors that impacted on its trajectory, and map the forms of mediation that came into play in its deployment. Videoleters was selected as a case of international development communication both rare and representative (e.g., Enghel, 2014; Yin, 2009). The choice was made from an instrumental perspective: the purpose was not to evaluate the project per se, but to understand it in its complexity as a situated example of the practice and the project of international development communication (e.g., Creswell 2013; Enghel, 2014; 2015; Yin 2009). The approach was qualitative. The case study, dating from 2000-2005, was investigated in retrospect via a) 25 semi-structured interviews to a variety of case participants and b) the collection of documents as sources of evidence (including audiovisual material, press clippings, Internet archives, institutional records, and project participants' logs). The use of multiple sources of evidence allowed for data triangulation. Multi-sited fieldwork took place in Belgrade (Serbia), Sarajevo (BiH), and Amsterdam and The Hague (The Netherlands) between April 2012 and January 2014, and additional queries were made in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Rwanda via e-mail and Internet telephony. A detailed account of the study's research design and a discussion of issues of validity, reliability, generalizability and quality can be found in Enghel (2014).²

The Case Study in a Nutshell

Videoleters was a donor-driven intervention purportedly aimed at facilitating, rendering public, and mobilizing processes of reconnection among estranged citizens across the Western Balkans through the strategic use of mediated communication. The project, which premiered in Sarajevo, (the capital of BiH) on April 2, 2005, had started in 2000 as the independent initiative of two documentary filmmakers based in the Netherlands. It was premised on a seemingly simple idea: the filmmakers would travel across the former Yugoslavia seeking people who during the conflict had lost contact with a dear someone—friend, relative, neighbour, or colleague—and longed to reconnect, but had not dared attempting. They would then act as messengers, promoting correspondence and bringing video letters back and forth in order to mediate emotionally charged, difficult conversations. Each case of correspondence would in turn become an episode of a documentary series (e.g., Enghel, 2005; Korver, 2005, April 14; Videoleters Project, n.d.).

In 2004, three episodes of the series were screened as work-in-progress at the prestigious International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) held in the Netherlands, and was received as “remarkable work” (Aufderheide, 2005). By then, Videoleters had grabbed the attention of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which funded plans for its large-scale roll-out, adding to earlier financial support from the United Kingdom's Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) aimed at coordinating a synchronized broadcast of the series by all the state TV stations across the Western Balkans (e.g., Enghel, 2014; FCO, 2013). With the British and Dutch

involvement, the project changed from a small-scale independent endeavour to a large-scale strategic intervention, deployed in a way characteristic of the donor-driven practice of development communication within wider international agendas and priorities (Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012). At the Sarajevo premiere, the filmmakers announced that the 12-episodes documentary TV series was scheduled to be screened across the region, and that a dedicated interactive website would facilitate “do-it-yourself” Internet-based correspondence among audiences. In parallel with the broadcast, a caravan would tour selected cities in the region in order to call attention to the project in schools and public squares (Videoletters Project, n.d.).

Regarded by the Media Task Force of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe³ as a case representative of “high quality television production”, and considered of utmost importance given the reach of television in the region (MTF, 2004), Videoletters went on to attract international attention as an example of how mediated communication intervention can be used to “do good” in recipient countries. It was covered as a success story by the international news media (e.g., Prodger, 2005, April 5; Riding, 2005, June 9), recognized in two top level international documentary film festivals as an outstanding documentary for social change (e.g., HRW, 2005; IDFA, 2004), and described in academic literature as a “best practice” (e.g., Best et al., 2011; Daiute & Turniski, 2005; Hochheimer, 2007; London, 2007). It was also pilot-tested for replication in Rwanda between 2006 and 2008 (Twijnstra, 2007).

While based on this brief history the reader may get the impression that the project was neatly planned and successfully implemented, the post facto qualitative examination of its trajectory offered multidimensional insight into the intervention’s complexity and democratic deficits. Based on the larger study from which this paper is distilled, I argue that understanding this complexity requires a conceptual framework that considers mediated communication intervention not as a tool that can be neutrally applied (and replicated) to achieve pre-established results, but as an institutionally driven, contextually situated practice that implies instances of mediation among the parties involved, with potentially ambiguous outcomes. In this framework, identifying the forms of media engagement⁴ put forward by donors serves as a first step towards analyzing the politics of mediation that underpins intervention (Enghel, 2014).

Defining Mediated Communication Intervention

The question of how to investigate and theorize strategic mediated communication interventions aimed at doing good is central to development communication, generally understood as a subfield of communication and media studies linked to a varying extent to international development studies (Wilkins, 2008). Because development communication studies are mired in an excess of normative definitions and siloed categorizations, seeking to assign Videoletters to a particular category drawn from the existing literature could make for a whole paper. Such an exercise, however, would be of a descriptive nature and lack explanatory power. Starting from the argument that the excess of normativity and categorization tends to complicate dialogue between scholars and decision-makers in donor agencies⁵, the Videoletters project is simply characterized in this paper as a hybrid mediated communication intervention that combined elements of the practice of communication for development, documentary for social change, media assistance, and public diplomacy (e.g., Enghel, 2014; González Cahuapé-Casaux & Kalatil, 2015). Categorization is not an outstanding concern here for the reason that, as Durham Peters has noted, “[f]orms alone of communication matter less than what is done with them” (2006: 124). Instead, the point is to understand how Videoletters played out as a case of an

institutionally driven practice that remains under-researched (Waisbord, 2008), and to highlight issues that the case raises for future research and theorization.

The analysis that I propose shifts away from a toolkit approach to intervention and considers the project's consequences beyond its explicit purposes and obvious location, focusing on the types of media engagement that it put forward across scales of sociality and of governance from a critical perspective that pays attention to the increasingly central role of media-driven practices in the governance of global affairs (e.g., Chakravartty, 2009; Enghel, 2015; Fraser, 2008; Mosco, 2009; Postill, 2010). In this framework, donor-driven mediated communication intervention is understood to imply a double purpose—to “do good” abroad and to “look good” at home—and conceptualized as an expression of *a politics of mediation* at work at the interface between international development and foreign policy, with consequences for citizens' right to communication at both ends of the donor-recipient equation (Enghel, 2014). Citizens' right to communication is understood as embedded in an obligation-based perspective that pays attention to the responsibilities of donors (e.g., Anderson, Brown & Jean, 2012; O'Neill, 2009; Silverstone, 2007), thus providing a lens into the implications of their favouring certain forms of media engagement over others in terms of democratizing accomplishments and democratic deficits, and to the politico-institutional reasons why they may favour specific uses in the first place.

Videoleters is contextualized as a case of the donor-driven practice of mediated communication intervention in the wider context of international peacebuilding operations. Said operations, which combine elements of foreign policy and development, are one of the significant scenarios in which donor-driven intervention is deployed today (Zelizer & Oliphant, 2013). As we will see, while the project's known purpose was to provide a stimulus for region-wide peaceful communication by mediating it across scales of sociality, starting from the interpersonal and escalating towards the collective, the intervention also had other uses. On the one hand, donors sought to manage their relationship with the successor states by deploying the documentary series as a means to democratize the state TV broadcasters. On the other hand, they sought to relate to their own citizens, and by extension to the international community, by communicating a do-gooding presence in the Western Balkans via Videoleters' coverage in Western news media.

Unpacking Videoleters

Differences and Links between Video Letters and Videoleters

The Videoleters project started with the facilitation of interpersonal “video letters”. This was the initial form of media engagement proposed. A “video letter” was a videotaped message from one person living somewhere in the successor states to someone that she or he used to coexist with until the region's conflictual breakup distanced them. Each taped “video letter” was delivered personally by the filmmakers, who travelled across the region by car and filmed various processes of re-establishing correspondence. Based on the facilitation of several exchanges of “video letters” among different people, the “videoleters” were then created—that is, a number of episodes of a documentary series for television were made. In each episode, the story of two persons or families re-engaging in correspondence was told, proposing an interrelated but distinct form of media engagement to audiences.

Differentiating “video letters” from “videoleters” is useful in order to begin to decouple the media technologies engaged by the project from assumptions about the effects that such technologies would trigger and about the scales of governance at which they operated (e.g., Enghel, 2014; Jones & Holmes, 2011). If we focused on the media technology in use, we would understand “video letters” and “videoleters” simply as varieties of video-based communication for establishing social relationships (Molyneaux, O’Donnell & Milliken, 2011). The idea of correspondence is focused on instead—understood as “a noun of action or process” (Williams, 1983)—in order to identify differences in the forms of media engagement proposed by the Videoleters project across scales of implementation and spheres of influence⁶. Or in other words, a focus on the process—correspondence—rather than the technology—video—enables a better understanding of *what was done* with mediated communication in various ways: it calls attention to the establishment of communication via video as a way of mediating a relationship between distantiated parties; it highlights the tensions that might arise when correspondence that is privately addressed becomes publicly accessible (Durham Peters, 2006); and it reminds us of the fact that in communication “there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding” (Hall, 1980: 135). That is, that the responses desired will not necessarily result from proposed forms of communication. If we apply these ideas not only to the “video letters” but also to the “videoleters” and to the Videoleters project itself, the different scales of implementation and spheres of influence of the intervention can be discerned.

The Project’s Premises

Videoleters operated on the basis of explicit and implicit premises. While the explicit premises were stated in the project’s website and publicized by the filmmakers in press interviews, the implicit ones were kept out of sight and only became visible over the course of research⁷. The first explicit premise was that there was an actual need among ordinary citizens of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia to reconnect with dear but distantiated others across ethno-political divides, and that facilitating video-based correspondence would be an effective way of addressing that need (e.g., Enghel, 2014; Videoleters Project, n.d.). The second one was that watching examples of such correspondence on TV would move audiences across the region not only emotionally, but also to act, inspiring them to seek to re-establish communication with distantiated others in line with the documentary series’ proposition (e.g., Aufderheide, 2005; Enghel, 2014). Following from the idea that audiences could be moved to seek to reconnect with estranged others, the third premise was that, once this need became evident to them, TV viewers could be directed towards an interactive website and prompted to adopt a standard “do-it-yourself” procedure. The exemplary effect expected from the series would be first multiplied through the TV broadcast and then orderly channelled through the Internet. The overall idea was typical of donor-driven mediated communication intervention in the context of international development: that the solution prescribed—in this case, reconciliation—could be scaled up, and managed across social scales by way of a combination of media-driven strategies (e.g., FCO, 2013; MTF, 2004; Videoleters Project, n.d.).

In parallel, the project’s implicit premises had goals more typical of foreign affairs and public diplomacy. The first one was that the region’s state TV broadcasters could be democratized by populating their schedules with reconciliation-prone content produced externally⁸ (Enghel, 2014). The second one was that, given the moving nature of the series’ content, Videoleters would provide a compelling narrative for communicating the donors’ do-

gooding to Western citizens (FCO, 2013). While focusing on the project exclusively as a “tool for reconciliation” would have kept these premises out of sight, widening the analytical lens brought them into view (Enghel, 2014).

The Project’s Strategic Components

The premises described above formed the basis for a strategic mediated communication intervention organized around explicit and implicit components. While the four explicit components were aimed at *doing good* through more or less dialogic forms of media engagement, the goal of the implicit component was instead to *communicate do-gooding*. The *first* and central component was the making of the documentary TV series by way of the facilitation and recording of interpersonal video correspondence among individuals or families. Managed in the small-scale characteristic of much independent documentary production, this component was of central importance: the intervention as a whole was premised on what could/should be done with, and as from, the series (Enghel, 2014). The *second* component was the series’ broadcast through the national TV stations of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia. Nested in this component was donors’ intention to persuade the state broadcasters to air the series simultaneously as a way of symbolizing that they could work in sync and share a unified message. Broadcasters were first lured into showing the series, and when that failed, they were pushed through diplomatic backchannels (Ibid).

The *third* component was the design, launch, and facilitation of an interactive website, supposedly aimed at facilitating “do it yourself” reconciliation via Internet. The site, videoletters.net, was published in English and in “Dobardanski”, a tongue invented by mixing elements from the language(s) spoken in the successor states in an attempt to counteract divisive connotations.⁹ The *fourth* component was a caravan tour of selected cities and towns across the region in order to screen episodes of the series in public spaces and facilitate their discussion (Enghel, 2014). The *fifth* component, which was implicit and transversal, was aimed at communicating do-gooding to the citizens of donor countries back at home.

While the first component was developed at a slow pace in parallel with the search for donors’ support over a period of approximately three years, components two, three, and four were deployed at great speed—and with varying outcomes—between November 2004 and July 2005 (Enghel, 2014). During that period, the fifth, transversal component was actively implemented: a public relations campaign aimed at attracting favourable media coverage not only in the successor states, but primarily in the donors’ countries and among their Western allies, sought to package the project in ways that would appeal to the press (Ibid).

The Project’s Media Technologies of Choice and their Uses

Three media technologies were adopted to implement the project’s explicit components. Videoletters worked with video, television, and the Internet based on the presumption that each technology would lead to a specific form of media engagement and trigger particular effects among the citizens of the successor states (Enghel, 2014). *Video* was used to implement the first component by promoting interpersonal correspondence. The intention was to do good by directly mediating processes of reconnection between distantiated others. This worked well when the ordinary citizens to whom reconnection was proposed had not been directly involved in violence, but not in those cases when one of the correspondents had been, for example, recruited in the

armed forces (Ibid). The reach of this initial component was small, since the filmmakers could only act as door-to-door postmen in a limited number of cases, but also because only a limited amount of cases was in fact needed in order to produce the series' episodes. But the use of video for promoting interpersonal reconnections through video-correspondence was at the same time a step towards producing the documentary series (intended for related but distinct purposes), and therefore a means to an end. With the making of the series the filmmakers generated a commodity—a set of moving content—that would prove useful to communicate do-gooding at home in donor countries, although in the end it failed to scale up reconciliation in the region (Ibid).

Television was used as a means to a publicly voiced end—to show and therefore to promote reconciliation—and to not-talked about ends: to change the state broadcasters' discourses about, and attitudes towards, the conflict on the one hand; and to publicize donors' do-gooding in the West on the other. The reach presumed for the publicly voiced end was that of a media event: donors believed the filmmakers' proposition that it would be possible to make the whole region watch the series at once by organizing a simultaneous broadcast (Engel, 2014). Each station would show the episodes on the same day and at the same hour, and the magnitude of the event would trigger a wide process of reconnection among audiences. However, the attempt to use the series as a pretext to prompt the state broadcasters to do the right thing by jointly airing pro-reconciliation content failed, and despite efforts to push them through diplomatic channels, the media event did not happen: the series was only aired reluctantly—at odd hours, without publicity—and scantily seen (Ibid). Oblivious to this failure on the ground, the international news media nonetheless covered the project as a heroic quest to promote communication under difficult conditions, featuring it in the BBC, ABC News, and CNN (e.g., ABC News, 2005, July 11; CNN International, 2005, November 28; Prodger, 2005, April 5).

The *Internet* was supposedly intended to facilitate interpersonal reconnection at a wide scale. The idea was that a specially designed website would enable individual citizens across the successor states to do good for themselves (i.e., engage in do-it-yourself reconciliation). The expectation was that the website would enable full coverage of the need of individual citizens to reconnect: given the provision of the (by then new) technology, do-it-yourself reconciliation would replace the filmmakers' initial face-to-face facilitation as seen in the documentary series and expand its reach (Engel, 2014). But the Internet was in fact the least useful and least used media technology put forward by Videoleters in terms of serving the region's citizens, for various reasons. To begin with, the site was designed and tested in the Netherlands and introduced to the Western Balkans as a ready-made solution that turned out not to be suited to the region's infrastructure, where connectivity and access were scant (Ibid). Moreover, because the launch of the website preceded the rise of social media, the affordances and social uses of the Internet that the reader is likely to take for granted today were not in place at the time (Ibid). Anonymity and hate speech in the context of listservs were the rule (e.g., Ibid; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2009), and the idea that the medium could be used to connect with distant others was not commonsensical, but strange. Because of the social control linked to the ethnically engineered divisions that followed from the Yugoslavian breakup (Shaw & Stiks, 2013), the public visibility implied in using the project's website to reach out was perceived as risky exposure. In the end, rather than facilitate do-it-yourself reconciliation, videoleters.net functioned primarily as a dissemination platform for communicating the do-gooding of donors back at home in the West, as evidenced in the scholarly publications that highlighted Videoleters as an example of how mediated communication works to do good using the website

as their only source of information (e.g., Best et al., 2011; Daiute & Turniski, 2005; London, 2007).

Revisiting the Premises: The Need to Reconnect and its Possible Avenues

Videoletters' fundamental premise was that, given the need to reconnect with dear but distanced others across the ethno-political divides experienced by the citizens of the former Yugoslavia, facilitating video-based correspondence would be an effective way of addressing it. Following from this premise, the project's proponents anticipated a linear progression of its imagined media effects: the broadcast of the TV documentary series would exemplify and inspire reconciliation among audiences, who would be prompted to engage in do-it-yourself reconnection via an interactive website, in a smooth and swift process. However, viewers of the series felt otherwise (Enghel, 2014). Fearing that if they used a public website they might face negative reactions, they asked for an opportunity to reconnect with dear ones offline, in private, with the facilitation of a mediator that would bring video letters back and forth as seen on TV. But this kind of assistance, requested by citizens who approached the state broadcaster in BiH following the screening of the series, was not on offer (Ibid). As a consequence, instead of creating a window of possibility for people to reconnect, the broadcast generated an awareness of a need that could not be fulfilled by counting on the project's assistance.

Revisiting the Components: Nested Intentions and Unexpected Reactions

Videoletters claimed to have brought about the first joint transmission of a program by all of the region's state TV stations since the Yugoslavian breakup, in what was described to the international press as a demonstration of governmental collaboration and the media's will to reconcile (Riding, 2005, June 9). However, research showed that when they were approached with the complete series, which was presented to them as a *fait accompli*, the Croatian and Serbian broadcasters refused to show specific episodes on the grounds that they were contrary to national interests. Donors then exerted diplomatic pressure for the media event that they had anticipated to take place despite resistance, but this did not solve the problem (Enghel, 2014). While the project's preferred storyline for public relations purposes focused on television's capacity to foster reconnections among ordinary citizens based on the shared experience of viewing moving content, the diplomatic push for a joint broadcast that took place behind the scenes speaks of mediated communication intervention as "interference by a state in another's affairs" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). This duality, such that efforts to highlight the human interest dimensions of the project were foregrounded while the foreign policy intervention was kept out of sight, turned out to be a crucial feature of what I have termed Videoletters' ambivalent politics of mediation.

Revisiting the Uses of Media Technologies: Looking Good by Appearing to Do Good

While Videoletters insisted on its aim to serve the citizens of the successor states by facilitating a specific media-driven path towards the reestablishment of peaceful relationships, in the end, rather than working as a "tool for reconciliation" in the former Yugoslavia, it operated symbolically as a signifier of the donors' do-gooding in their own countries. The project's uses of media technologies were characterized by a duplicity. In retrospect, Videoletters main concern

was to look good in the eyes of the tax-paying constituencies of donor countries, and more generally of audiences in the West, based on the argument that it was “doing” much needed “good” in the successor states, although the project’s performance on the ground ended up being far from substantiating those claims (e.g., Enghel, 2014; FCO, 2013). In theory, video, TV, and the Internet were adopted in order to do good, but in practice they served primarily to communicate do-gooding.

Linking Donors, Recipients, and Citizens on Both Ends of the Equation Through the Lens of Mediation

Whereas the concept of mediation has often been understood to imply that media-driven intervention can and will give rise to positive outcomes (e.g., Ginsburg, 1991; Hutchby, 2001; Samarajiva & Shields, 1997; Silverstone, 2007), the study of Videoleters shows that the consequences of intervention are in fact ambivalent. The interposing of media as a means for connecting distant parties to a relationship may simultaneously lead to dialogue, the absence of dialogue, the pretence of dialogue, and/or conflict at a variety of scales. This distinction is crucial if we are to decouple international development communication from technical understandings of mediated intervention as something with its own determining properties, and consider the ways in which specific projects, with their strategic approaches to media engagement, may act as “agencies for quite other than their primary purposes” (Williams, 1983: 204).

Redefining donor-driven development communication as a type of mediated intervention in the governance of global affairs particularly concerned with the goals of doing good and looking good brings into view the concrete ways in which a given project may be programmatically aimed at beneficiaries in a recipient country but practically geared towards addressing publics from donor countries. It then becomes possible to analyze doing good and looking good as expressions of *a politics of mediation* at work in international development, and consider the consequences of said politics for citizens’ right to communication at both ends of the donor-recipient equation (Enghel, 2014).

Conclusion: Towards Conceptualizing Donor-driven Mediated Communication as an Expression of a Politics of Mediation

Videoleters’ attempt to facilitate region-wide reconnections among ordinary citizens across the successor states to the former Yugoslavia through a documentary series and a do-it-yourself interactive website was unsuccessful, and in this sense the intervention failed to mediate the sociopolitical distances characteristic of the post-conflict scenario (for reasons partly of its own making). But concluding from this case study that mediation cannot be scaled up would be missing the point. In fact, mediation did work in other ways.

Videoleters constituted a temporary mode of relationship between the donors that mandated the intervention, the citizens of the countries that the project claimed to help, and the governance structures of those countries. In this relationship, the citizens named as the project’s beneficiaries were the “in between”, and the project itself was an instance of mediation between the British and Dutch governments and the successor states to the former Yugoslavia in the wider context of Europe’s attempts to manage its relationship with the Western Balkans after the conflict. But Videoleters also played a role in mediating the relationship between donors and

their own national constituencies, through the project's news coverage in the Western press and its reverberations.

These two distinct ways of exerting "an intermediate, (indirect) agency between otherwise separated parties to a relationship" (Williams, 1983: 204) were related. On the one hand, Videoleters was the "go-between" that linked the British and Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs with the successor state TV broadcasters, and by extension with the national governments to which those broadcasters were answerable. This instance of mediation was resisted by the Serbian and Croatian media outlets in a power struggle for the differential capacity to mobilize meaning that ended up becoming a zero-sum game. On the other hand, Videoleters was the "go-between" that linked donors with their citizens, 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 by donors but not investigated, and therefore it remains impossible to know whether the project's news coverage meant anything for the citizens of the UK, the Netherlands, or elsewhere in the West. However, inasmuch as donors' concern with achieving positive media coverage at home played a role in their decisions to fund the project, it was a form of mediation with a very material weight. And inasmuch as donors evaluated that the allocation had paid off because of Videoleters' success as a news story, it was a form of mediation that raises questions regarding the political and ethical dimensions of intervention. While for the most part the forms of media engagement mobilized by the project did not facilitate democratizing social change on location, Videoleters was in fact successfully scaled up, even if for purposes other than civic reconciliation.

Videoleters' mediation of the relationship between donors and their citizens, and the problematic overlap between doing good and communicating do-gooding that characterized the intervention, became visible thanks to an analytical shift from media effects to mediation. In this shift, the notion of media engagement was useful in order to grasp forms of mediation beyond those typically attended to in studies of the practice of development communication. Unpacking the Videoleters project showed that beliefs and discourses about the media's power to exert a positive influence on troubled polities coexist with the empirical fact that mediation has ambiguous outcomes at different levels, and served to demonstrate the complexity of contextually situated processes of mediated communication intervention.

Future research is needed in order to establish the extent to which mediated communication initiatives aimed at doing good abroad may be perceived by donors as particularly suitable to make them look good in the eyes of their own constituencies, and to understand the tensions and risks derived from the overlap in those cases where attention to looking good prevails over doing good. Additional studies of specific cases, designed to enable comparison, would contribute to the theorization of the politics of mediation derived from donors' hybrid uses of mediated communication intervention to manage their agendas on two fronts: abroad, and at home.

Notes

- 1 That “media” is a catchall term encompassing a variety of different understandings and therefore requiring specification becomes apparent when we consider these factors (e.g., Robertson, 2015; Silverstone, 1999).
- 2 For a detailed list of the interviews referred to in the remainder of this paper, see Enghel (2014, p. 260-261).
- 3 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, bringing together more than 40 donor countries in order to strengthen efforts towards stability.
- 4 Media engagement refers here to the various ways in which citizens of donor and recipient countries encounter and experience mediated communication in the context of donor-driven intervention.
- 5 For varying definitions see, for example, Manyozo (2012), McAnany (2012), Lennie and Tacchi (2013), and Scott (2014). See Berger (2010), Wilkins (2009) and Enghel (e.g., 2014; 2015) for debates regarding their appropriateness.
- 6 While facilitating “video letters” was a process that the filmmakers could sustain on their own, producing the “videoleters” required donor support. However, in entering the project, donors did not merely support it: through their allocation and reporting procedures, and their agendas and priorities, they imposed certain “rules of the game” and expectations that would clearly influence its deployment.
- 7 As shown in Enghel (2014), this was not the product of a fully deliberate strategy, but rather the result of a combination of institutional and political factors.
- 8 The filmmakers wrongly assumed that if they offered the series as free-of-cost programming to the stations, which were strapped for cash and thus struggling to fill their schedules, it would simply be accepted. But proposing a solution to the stations’ economic constraints did not mediate away the broadcasters’ political standpoint.
- 9 During the war(s), language was used by political leaders as a divisive tool (Hammel, 2000).

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About the Author

Florencia Enghel, from Argentina, is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Stockholm University's Department of Media Studies in Sweden. Her new research project, "Doing good and looking good: The EU's strategic uses of mediated communication in the promotion of development abroad and at home", is a component of the Department's Leading Research Environment *Global Media Studies and the Politics of Mediated Communication*. She obtained her Ph.D. in Media and Communication Studies from Karlstad University in 2014 with the study "Video letters, mediation and (proper) distance", which won the 2015 Doctoral Dissertation Award from the Swedish Association for Media and Communication Research.

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