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Telling stories of war through the screen. Participatory video approaches and practice for peace in conflict-affected contexts

Kurzfassung: Literatur über Kommunikation für Entwicklung und Konflikttransformation miteinander verbindend, bietet der vorliegende Aufsatz eine theoretische Erläuterung der Wirkung von partizipatorischen Videos als Instrument zur Überwindung von Feindseligkeit zwischen Gruppen und zur Heilung und Wiederherstellung von Gemeinschaften, die Verluste und Leid infolge von Bürgerkriegen und zwi-schengesellschaftlicher Gewalt erlitten haben. Ergänzt wird dies durch eine Reihe von praktischen Erfahrungen aus Projekten, die auf der Graswurzelebene implementiert wurden.

Diese Art von Szenario, die oft als fehlender Dialog zwischen Gruppen charakterisiert wird, wird als fruchtbarer Boden für den Einsatz von community media begriffen, die Menschen die Mittel der Selbstdarstellung zur Hand geben. Da sie Kommunikationskanäle schaffen, die benötigt werden, um Interventionen zur Heilung der Gemeinschaft zu entwickeln, können Videoproduktionen, die mittels partizipatorischer Methoden gestaltet werden, ein wirksames Mittel für den Umgang mit der Feindseligkeit und Trauer darstellen, die nach einem Bürgerkrieg fortbestehen.

Abstract: By bringing together literatures of Communication for Development and Conflict Transformation, this paper provides a theoretical illustration of the impact of participatory video as a tool for overcoming hostility among groups, as well as for healing and re-connecting communities that have endured loss and suffering as a consequence of civil war and inter-communal violence. This is accompanied by a number of practical experiences of projects implemented by organizations on the ground.

This type of scenario, often characterized by a lack of dialogue among groups, has been recognized to be fertile ground for the setting up of community media, where people are given the means for self-expression. In particular, video productions created through participatory methodology can be effective tools for dealing with the hostility and grief that linger after a civil war, as they provide those channels of communication that are needed for effective development interventions aimed at community healing.

1. Introduction

A reality characterized by lack of dialogue among groups can be regarded as fertile ground for the setting up of community media, where people are given the means for self-expression and for identifying problems and solutions through debate (Gamucio-Dragon, 2001). In particular, video productions created through a participatory methodology can be effective tools for dealing with hostility and grief that linger after a civil war, as they provide those channels of communication that are needed for effective development interventions aimed at community healing.

This article begins with a review of the major theories that have given shape to the present field of Communication for Development, with particular emphasis on the Communication for Social Change approach. This will open the path to a discussion of the concepts and theories linked to participatory video production in developing contexts, with a presentation of the views of its major authors. The theoretical framework established thus far will be then analyzed in the light of the literature on war trauma, conflict transformation and reconciliation. This will clarify subsequent claims on the crucial role that participatory video productions can play in communities in the aftermath of conflict.

A brief review of projects that have used participatory video in post-conflict interventions has been compiled for the final section of this article. The projects differ in their approach to video and in the degree of participation that beneficiaries have in the activities. Whilst the discussion presented here does not engage in an empirical assessment of each one of them, their shared goal of opening up a dialogue between groups for the achievement of peace is clarified through the nexus that the theoretical framework of this paper has with their practice.

By linking communication for development theory with notions of conflict transformation, this paper attempts to contribute toward filling the gap created by a lack of consistent documentation and analysis of such projects from an academic perspective. It also opens the path to further research on the impact that video has in reconnecting groups affected by violence.

2. Origins and progress of development communication

According to the definition developed by the 1996 United Nations General Assembly, the aim of Communication for Development is "to support two-way communication systems that enable dialogue and that allow communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the decisions that relate to their development"¹.

1. UN General Assembly Resolution 51/172, December 1996.

The path to such designation has been marked by a number of different practices and theoretical perspectives that have followed an evolution over the past few decades, forming alongside the various approaches to development theory.

The 1970s saw the introduction of the *Diffusion of Innovation* model put forward by Rogers (1962), which draws from mass communication theory and is linked to the Modernisation paradigm that characterized those years. This was followed by a planned use of mass media like radio and television to promote positive behavior change - especially on health related issues – in which communication began to be used as a tool for development education with a wider scope. This practice has given birth to a discipline known by many as 'edutainment', for its particular feature of educating an audience while entertaining. An extensive body of literature has come to characterize the field of edutainment, particularly through the work of authors such as Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers (1999), who have reflected upon and identified the strengths of using media to provide people with models with which they can identify themselves.

Another important move in the growth of the discipline of communication for development has been the acknowledgement of the flaws of theories of Dependency and Modernization and the shift towards a People-centered Development approach from the 1980s.

Huesca (2003) explains how, until then, development interventions had focused on the individual and had failed to take into account the social, political and economic context. Similarly accompanied by a lack of structural analysis, the role of communication in development had been simply considered as a process of persuasion aimed at the adoption of new behaviors or technologies by communities in developing areas of the world (ibid). Today, however, scholars have begun to recognize the limitations of unidirectional approaches based on knowledge transfer, and the attention has shifted towards ways that give voice to those at the grassroots and delink them from the slant that had seen them as passive recipients of information (Ramirez 1998).

Thus, a new perspective that looks at the notion of a participatory form of communication has begun to gain ground through the consolidation of the idea, among development planners, that establishment of a dialogue with projects' beneficiaries is needed in order to conceive, carry out and evaluate activities effectively. At the same time, practitioners have recognized that the only way for beneficiaries to take ownership of the projects is by having a say in the decisions that are being made (Gamucio-Dragon, 2001). As Gamucio-Dragon and Rodriguez (2006) clarify, people and communities are at the center of development and participatory communication allows their local knowledge and perspectives to come to the surface and thus influence the development process.

3. Communication for social change

The different perspectives discussed above on the application of participatory methodologies in communication for development have led to the rise of a new field that aims to take further the earlier behavior change approaches that targeted primarily the individual. The field goes under the name of Communication for Social Change (CFSC) and can be defined as "a process of public and private dialogue through which people themselves define who they are, what they need and how to get what they need in order to improve their own lives. It utilizes dialogue that leads to collective problem identification, decision-making and community-based implementation of solutions to development issues" (Byrne et al. 2005, 1).

This area is being researched and analyzed by a number of scholars and practitioners, particularly through the establishment of the *CFSC Consortium*. In one of the key publications released by the group, Figueroa et al. (2002) explain the importance of dialogue as a process in which each party tries to understand not only what others believe, but also their own beliefs. This represents a form of collective action, where both sides undergo the experience of shaping and re-shaping their convictions. The authors point out how this very process can be regarded as particularly complex when the parties involved have a long history of conflict.

With the rise of this new view of communication, accompanied by the establishment of the CFSC School, more indigenous forms of communication gained attention, and are considered as valid tools for stimulating dialogue and critical awareness. They include instruments such as music, theatre, dance, and also video and radio, which offer a channel to give voice to marginalized groups (Waters, 2000).

In particular, Norrish (1998) points out how the revolution in technology that has taken place over the past two decades has brought about a more accessible use of both video and audio instruments, which are available in smaller and less expensive formats. The simultaneous shift that has occurred in the role of the media in communication for development has thus been towards a new view of the media as channels of participation for rural and urban communities in decision-making processes (ibid).

From these new approaches, development communication projects implemented at a practical level have shown how, by reversing the traditional audience-producer dichotomy in media practice, people can look at their lives and that of those

around them from another perspective and regain control of their situation. This can have great potential when applied to contexts of communities who have experienced mass violence, as the conflicts that have overstayed war can be transformed in the light of a new agenda that includes reconciliation.

The following sections intend to show the link between participation in video production and the potential to create connections among former enemies by sharing stories and experiences of war.

4. Participatory video

Rodriguez (1994), one of the more prominent scholars who have studied the use of video with disadvantaged groups, defines a participatory video (PV) production "one in which a communicator and a community engage in video production. That is, the whole process of producing a video message (planning, script writing, shooting, viewing, editing, and showing) is shared by both, the 'communication expert' and the community" (150).

While this tool has also been analyzed in literatures such as those of anthropology (Pink 2007; Zoettl 2012, 2013) and geography (Kindon 2003, Richardson-Ngwenya 2012), the discussion presented here focuses mainly on the communication process that arises from its use.

White and Patel (1994) place emphasis on one of the main characteristics of PV productions, which is their adoption of a horizontal rather than vertical use of video. This type of activity can initiate an exchange of communication at the individual level, and also from group to group and village to village. The messages created by way of the video camera can be taken from one place to another and be shared directly with the people.

Another important aspect lies in the fact that most rural people are highly unlikely to see themselves on a screen throughout their lifetime. Video, however, can make this experience possible. This powerful event can influence a person's perspective to the extent of encouraging them to begin to reconsider and adjust their frame of reference in accordance with the environment they live in (ibid).

Through her work on the use of PV in violent contexts, Wheeler (2011) highlights how participatory video is a process that involves the creation of knowledge from those who participate. The message that has to be conveyed, therefore, is not pre-established, but it arises from the process that brings about its articulation: "participatory video can facilitate continually expanding boundaries of knowledge, from the self to the group to the community, to beyond; between different perspectives expressed, reconciled or shed through the process" (53).

Under a cultural anthropological lens, Ginsburg (1991) recognizes how indigenous media can become instruments for the reproduction and transformation of cultural identity, particularly among those groups who have been affected by political, economic or geographical disruption. Thanks to their ability to go beyond boundaries of time, space and language, the media can rebuild social ruptures and help to redefine identities by reconnecting past and present.

At the same time, Bery (2003) recognizes the importance of the roles of both the producers and the viewers. The author highlights how participatory video is effective also at engaging its audience in the process. While the producer gains power by being in charge, identifying issues and shaping the story, the viewer is able to internalize the content, reformulate concepts and challenge stereotypes.

Again, Bery (2003) emphasizes how the videos produced through the PV activity become instruments for sharing experiences, and how viewers can reflect upon others' stories and apply them as new frames of reference to look at their own realities. The viewing experience gives members of the audience the opportunity to examine their situation and that of their community, and to consider ways to take charge of their lives. In addition, "video can be used in iterative cycles of shooting and screening to tell stories and create dialogue that unfold over time in response to the changes that occur" (113).

5. In the aftermath of civil war

Societies emerging from conflict acknowledge the fact that despite the war having come to an end, the path to peace – particularly towards sustainable peace – is still a long one: factors such as extreme poverty, ongoing ethnic, political or religious fighting, armed violence, as well as the absence of a stable government and basic infrastructure, are all potential causes for a fallback into war (Anderlini & El-Bushra 2004).

Even though the institutional conflict has come to an end, issues linked to power, interest and identity between the warring parties have not disappeared. In reality, civil violence is still present at the lower levels of society and continues to be an instrument of revenge in certain areas, where hostility strongly emerges between communities. External assistance that is offered should focus on the creation of tools which allow for non-violent resolution of the outstanding disputes. In addition

to working on the structural causes of conflict, development programs must therefore be built on the objectives of renewing social relations, fostering dialogue and building confidence (Fisher 2004).

One of the most serious legacies of a civil conflict is the trauma experienced by individuals and communities. Fisher (2004) stresses how, in this context, the psychosocial dimension gains particular relevance, involving, especially, interventions that aim at overcoming trauma and achieving reconciliation at both the individual and inter-group level, while simultaneously working on identity issues. Moreover, both parties should be enabled to gain an understanding into the other's standpoint and believe that the creation of a productive dialogue is possible (Ross 2000).

Yet, while the process of individual healing from trauma deals primarily with the needs and interests of individuals and how they relate to their community, it is difficult to identify a specific practice that traumatized groups should undertake in order to heal themselves. This is due to the fact that people react to a traumatic experience in different ways in accordance with the culture they live in (Brendel, 2006). As Krippner and McIntyre (2003) emphasize, the kinds of challenges faced in treating large civilian populations affected by psychological war trauma are often unique and cannot always be found in therapeutic literature or conventional clinical practice. In some cases, effective tools for collective healing may include sharing stories, ventilating feelings and using arts to represent violent experiences. In other scenarios, it may be useful to engage the community of victims and that of perpetrators in a dialogue, in which they both have an opportunity to confront one another by sharing stories, expressing feelings, apologising and forgiving.

Miall (2004) defines *conflict transformation* as "a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourse and the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violence. This suggests a wide-ranging approach emphasising support for groups within the society in conflict rather than for the mediation of outsiders, for a long-term process of peace-building" (4).

This approach is largely advocated by Lederach through his work *Preparing for Peace: conflict transformation across cultures* (1999). In earlier writing (1997), the author also explains how the aim of reconciliation is to offer an opportunity to the opposing sides to meet together at various levels, make sense of their past and reflect on an interdependent future.

Shapiro (2006) emphasizes that one of the levels of analysis that need to be targeted in conflict interventions for social change is that of *changing relationships*. According to the author, change at this level occurs when interventions are designed to create a collaborative and meaningful interaction between members of the (formerly) warring parties, which results in the improvement of inter-group relations. Shapiro (2006) states that "the processes of learning about the 'out-group', changing behaviors toward out-group members, developing cross-group friendships and, at times, ... establishing a new, common in-group identity facilitate inter-group cooperation" (6).

This shows, once again, how crucial are communication interventions that are aimed at re-establishing dialogue and sharing experiences among groups.

6. Video stories for peace

As previously discussed, conflicts are increasingly been fought among a large number of different groups and factions. As a result, media projects aiming at peace need to be designed with the intent of reaching all sides of the populations involved. Hieber (2001) recognizes ways in which the media can play an important role in addressing tensions that outlast the end of fighting. In particular, media projects intending to be sustainable should consider the divisions within a society, and plan how to overcome the particular divergences that have caused the conflict.

In a statement released by UNESCO on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2009, the agency declares that: "The media have a demonstrated ability in fostering mutual understanding by communicating across divides, thus bringing competing narratives together into a shared story" (1).

This further validates the idea that media productions created through a participatory methodology can be effective tools for dealing with the hostility and grief inherited in post-conflict settings, as they can be employed as avenues to share stories and the experiences of loss and violence with opposing sides, and serve as tools for intervention aimed at community healing.

Rodriguez (2000), again, is one of the few scholars to have offered an illustration of the benefits that participatory media can provide in post-conflict settings. Her ideas are discussed below:

- Participatory media are regarded as *alternative sources of information* to the mainstream news system, and can help communities understand their social reality
- They can also be seen as *seekers of peace initiatives*, since they offer great opportunity to provide peace initiatives, conflict resolution and reconciliation through dialogue at the heart of civil society

- They are identifiable as *architects of peace genres*, as they can distance themselves from the traditional focus that ordinary media hold on conflicts and opposition - which are considered newsworthy subjects and more attractive to audiences - and work on different narratives that address peace
- As *catalysts of forgiveness*, participatory media offer a space for the humanization of and the dialogue between survivors and victimizers. This allows the development of a new perspective on the events that have occurred and encourages forgiveness.
- Finally, they can be *sites to reclaim the experience of violence*. While the trauma caused by war tends to drive the survivor towards silence and isolation, participatory media can help translate the experience of violence into human language.

In addition to Rodriguez, another author who has made a connection to the healing effect of communication for development in post-conflict situations is Harris (2010). Her analysis of an ethnographic case study of a participatory video workshop with rural women in post-conflict Fiji highlights the need for participatory practices in conjunction with community-based reconciliation efforts to encourage dialogue between alienated groups. Through an exploration of the idea of participatory media as a dialogic tool, the author shows how this methodology can help bring to light the connections rather than the disconnections between people.

Harris (2010) tells how, through a recodification of traditional customs and social networks, community productions open a space for new interactions, reviving relationships that had withered. This occurs both within and among communities. At the same time, referring again to post-conflict contexts, the author highlights how 'the process [...] of content development become[s] a dynamic site for community building and reconciliation' (162-163). Here, reconciliation is not enforced from the top down, but is rather initiated by the social cohesion that is created through the production of local content (ibid).

This can be linked to some of the concepts presented by Senehi (2002) in her work on storytelling as a peace process. The author emphasizes the importance, in the context of long-lasting inter-communal conflicts, of developing a shared narrative that strengthens the sense of common identity. This is also needed in the face of silence and lack of awareness that surround some of the issues related to the conflict; establishing a community-based knowledge can help restore a sense of power to address problems that were left unresolved.

Bery (2003) suggests that "active storytelling through video helps the producer and the viewer to look within themselves, sometimes for the first time" (116). When dealing with intense social trauma, storytelling has demonstrated that it has an important effect on the lives of individuals. Survivors' recounting of their traumatic events will ultimately reopen those channels of thoughts, feelings and communication that the trauma had shut down. Having the opportunity to tell one's story of trauma to someone who is willing to listen can be extremely beneficial and allows the retelling of deeply personal stories that previously had been repressed (Chaitin 2004).

From an oral history perspective, Field (2006) points out how disseminating stories through multimedia productions can enable marginalized people to make connections with others who share the same types of memories. This is particularly relevant in the case of trauma survivors, who often isolate themselves in the belief that they are the only individuals experiencing that situation. The author explains how this process is important "to identify the social interconnectedness of past experiences and current memories" (40).

Within this context, Bery's (2003) considerations on the PV process again gain particular relevance: "Participatory video ... blends the freshness of oral tradition to elicit new thoughts from the viewers through playback discussions. In this participatory video context, both the producer and audience are powerful actors since the producer gains the power to tell a story and the viewer internalizes the stories during playback sessions and gains the power to take control over and change their lives and structures of the society in which they live" (113).

Also Goodsmith and Acosta (2011) highlight how videos produced by the community can help individuals and groups break through isolation. By watching their stories through the screen, people realize that they are not the only ones who have experienced certain events. In a post-conflict scenario, video can also be incredibly useful to remind people of the horrors they have inflicted on each other, and to develop the will to forgive (Visser 1998). Finally, these productions can offer positive models of change that present alternative suggestions to violence (Goodsmith & Acosta 2011).

7. Experiences from the field

There are a number of experiences from the field that are related to the use of video in post-conflict settings. These are mainly activities implemented by non-governmental or other charitable organizations. While they carry an analogous purpose, methods may vary slightly, depending on the way each project is planned; methods differ particularly in the way the use of cameras is introduced to participants, and in the degree of definition of the roles that each individual has within the video-making process. Another difference may lie in the use that is made of the final video product, which relates directly

to the decision-making power beneficiaries have in the activity. These distinctions depend on the degree of participation that has been built into each project.

An example of a project where video was used for these purposes was in South Africa in the early 1990s. Although the country had not undergone civil war, policies of separatism, discrimination and ethnic rivalry had put several areas under the strain of internal conflict and violence. In Thokoza township outside Johannesburg, more than 2000 people were reported dead as a result of the pre-election strife between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party. After the election, tension between the two groups increased and threatened to break out again. The *Simunye Video Dialogue Project* was set up to bring political adversaries together through the use of video cameras. The main participants who made this process possible were the two former rival commanders, Thabo Kwaza of the ANC and Wiseman Ndebele of Inkatha.

Visser (1998), who facilitated the activities, describes the project as follows:

Thabo and Wiseman were handed video cameras to facilitate dialogue between 'their sides' and between themselves. Initially given digital hand-held cameras and training in video-making and conflict handling, Thabo and Wiseman began to shoot scenes, conduct interviews and record stories of suffering and hopes for the future as seen by the people from 'their side'. They used the intimacy of their access to go as deeply as they dared, identifying key issues for the community. To do this successfully, they had to listen to their own inner voices, their own emotions, fears and hesitations. Essentially they engaged in a journey of personal dialogue while recording the dialogue of their comrades.

Successively, Thabo and Wiseman entered the layer of joint dialogue, by showing their work to each other and starting the process of visual sharing and creating a joint film. In fact, the very soul of each side had to be shared with the former enemy. What was separate had to become one, in a small but symbolic process for the community.

The third sphere of dialogue occurred when a section of the community, including former commanders, members of the defense structures, local politicians, representatives from women's and youth's structures, as well as church and business leaders, gathered in a public setting to watch the completed film. The video – which was emotional and spoke to people's fear, anger, shame and sadness – was screened in a facilitated session where people engaged each other, 'dialoguing' with those with whom they otherwise would not talk.¹

A more recent experience from the African context is the work that the non-governmental organization (NGO) FilmAid implemented in Kenya in Dadaab refugee camp between 2011 and 2012. Situated in the north-eastern part of the country, next to the border with Somalia, Dadaab is home to approximately half a million refugees. People from different cultures, ethnic groups and nationalities, arriving from war torn areas, have to learn how to live together in peace.

Through their *Community-based Participatory Video Program*, the beneficiaries' largest contribution was the development of all the video-based materials. Advisory Committees consisting of women and youth representatives, religious leaders and others, were constituted to inform the messaging structure, script development, production and post-production. Forum group discussions were also held to contextualize the issues and test scripts for significance and accuracy, among other things. Advisory Committees also included relevant stakeholders with expertise on the thematic area of the films (i.e. agencies operating in the camp) to ensure that accuracy of information was delivered at all times².

Topics addressed in these videos included, among others, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In particular, the videos appeared to have an impact on:

- Enabling people from different cultures to do business together or employ people from other communities;
- Enhancing the concept of harmonious living, which involves talking and understanding each other's cultural differences instead of attacking one another;
- Promoting dialogue between people in dispute through community leaders as the right channel to resolving conflict (FilmAid 2012).

A program that takes on a more conventional filmmaking approach is *Peace It Together*, which addresses the long-lasting conflict between Israel and Palestine. As highlighted in the presentation of their activities, their work revolves around three processes:

1. Dialogue: learning about and listening to each other
2. Filmmaking: engaging in the creative process
3. Sustaining the impact: sharing the films and encouraging others to build peace

With a focus on young people, the activities involved offer the opportunity to establish a dialogue between the two sides, which collaborate in the creation of short films that are used as peacebuilding tools. In order to produce films together, filmmakers must engage in a discussion on contentious topics and, as a result, adjust some of their own ideas and expect-

1. This text has been reproduced and slightly adapted from Visser's 2008 article.

2. Personal correspondence with Mordecai Odera, Programme Quality Officer, FilmAid Kenya, 13/02/2013.

tations; this is an essential process for reconciliation and peace. Through the filmmaking activities, the youth socialize, negotiate and discover each other¹.

A similar example took place in Azerbaijan, in an attempt to create an understanding between Armenians and Azeris. Connections between the two groups were lost in the 1994 conflict and new generations were raised with no contact or knowledge of one another. The project *Dialogue Through Film*, implemented by the NGO Internews, trained participants – young people from both sides – in filmmaking and in some of the key notions of peacebuilding. Ideas would be shaped into films and first cuts would be made, thanks to the assistance of a professional director. Participants would then meet to watch and critique them together, and to agree on final edits. The resulting films were shown in a series of screenings in Armenia, and each function was accompanied by a facilitated dialogue session for the audience (Conciliation Resources 2012).

Although this article does not engage in an empirical assessment of the impact that these projects have had, their design demonstrates the relevance that these activities have in contexts of peacebuilding. The field experiences presented here are particularly helpful in revealing how practice has evolved to inform theory. For this reason, a more consistent and rigorous analysis of how participants respond to the use of video to portray personal stories of violence and suffering, and the effects these productions have on their audience, is what directions for future research should include in order to highlight and incorporate new developments in this field. The varying degrees of participation that the different approaches to videos carry – as exemplified in the experiences discussed above – is another factor that requires further examination. This is useful in order to establish the type of involvement participants should have in these productions, on the basis of the cultural and political context in which these projects are taking place.

8. Conclusions

This paper shows how local involvement in video productions for storytelling in the aftermath of violence can lead to the opening of spaces for dialogue and reconciliation within and among communities.

The evolution of literature on communication for development demonstrates how the shift in development practice has been accompanied by new approaches to the use of the media, particularly with the introduction of the Communication for Social Change model. A new participatory methodology has arisen, which sees community members no longer as passive audiences but as primary makers of their own media content.

When these activities take place where hostility reigns, video can be a powerful tool for sharing stories for conflict transformation and the restoration of social fabric that conflict has destroyed. Grief, isolation and victimhood are all elements that video stories can address and the wider community can benefit through public screenings.

The cross-disciplinary discussion built over different literatures ranging from development to peace and conflict studies has shed light on the links and the effects that new applications of participatory media and communication planning can have in post-conflict environments. This highlights the potential of development communication in targeting violence and trauma; at the same time, it extends the scope for empirical research on the application of participatory video design in peacebuilding interventions.

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1. This information was found on <http://peaceittogether.com/>

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