Podcast production as creative practice

The case of GEEL: a nonfictional associative journey

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Introduction

Usually when we are confronted with a creative product, object or event, all of the different choices that were made during the process are invisible. What we are left with, is the final product of all of the moments where the creator stood on a crossroad deciding in which direction, he was going to continue his journey. But what if this journey, together with all of the choices, were integrated in final product. What if the audience is invited 'to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world, rather than behind it to an originating intention of which it is the final product' (Ingold, 2010, p. 97).

One of the media where there is a more regular and obvious unveiling of the production and story-making process is podcasting, which is especially evident in nonfictional storytelling (Dann & Spinelli, 2019). The audience gets insight in the process involved with the production of such podcasts at the same time that they are listening to the final product. As if I would leave my personal notes in this article so you could get a sense of my writing process. Dann & Spinelli describe podcasting as a *creative* medium that has its own unique ways of *production, listening* and *engagement*. By analysing one specific case study, the podcast *GEEL2*, I will try to make an argument for how this particular way of nonfictional storytelling combined with in-depth investigative reporting, creates an environment where creativity is stimulated. If creativity is something that can be stimulated, implies that it has meaning, can be interpreted and thus is in need of a clear definition. However, this is not that straight forward. I'm going to discuss the standard definition (Garrett & Runco, 2012) and why some of its criteria are problematic according to Nick Wilson and Lee Martin (2017). Finally, I will discuss the concepts of improvisational and product creativity (Sawyer K. R., 2000) and how this relates to a strategy proposed by Tim Ingold to *read creativity forwards*. In his article *The Textility of Making* he argues that in 'an

2 Geel is the Dutch word for yellow

ongoing generative movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic' (2010, p. 91) creativity is to be found.

Before going into the case study, I will discuss some of the specific qualities and affordances of the medium. Dann & Spinelli (2019) offer a clear list of features and concepts that distinguish podcasting from other media, from which we will discuss three in relation to the production process. I was able to have two interesting conversations with Michiel van de Weerthof, the man behind *GEEL,* which I will incorporate in the analyses. In the conclusion I will return to my argument that the production of nonfictional investigative podcasting, with *GEEL* used as exemplar, is a creative practice.

What do we find if we find creativity?

It is important that we try to establish what exactly we are reading, when we say 'to read creativity forward'. According to Garrett Jeager and Mark Runco (2012), who studied how creativity was defined through history and eventually came up with a 'standard definition', the definition of creativity is twofold and requires both *originality* and *effectiveness* because 'original things must be effective to be creative' (p. 92). This definition excludes a lot of potential creative objects and events in advance. This is not completely strange considering that it was originally proposed as a temporary way of dealing with the problem of correctly delineating creativity. Nevertheless, these two criteria have become an invaluable means through which creativity research is conducted (Martin & Wilson, 2017).

Lee Martin and Nick Wilson recognize that this definition is problematic and discuss issues within three concepts of the standard definition: 'the nature of *novelty*; the role of *effectiveness*, whether defined through adaptivity or *values*; and where *recognition* is necessary to the existence of creativity' (p. 417) [emphasis added]. Concerning the concept of novelty (originality), according to Martin and Wilson, we are still not able to pin-point the

origins of creative novelty. This indicates an issue because if we do not know at all why novelty is possible, we are working with an insufficient definition because a definition that does not comments on its origin, is philosophically speaking incomplete (Martin & Wilson, 2017). Added to that, there is also a need to understand how creative novelty is different from other types of novelty, because not everything novel is creative. The current solution as mentioned before is that creative novelty distinguishes itself by being effective, adaptive or *valuable*. But how do we decide that something possesses these characteristics? When we agree that it does not poses one of the three requirements, does that indicate that something is not creative? The standard definition does not mention whether someone can know if a new product is creative outside its recognition 'it lacks criteria to differentiate a creative product, person, or process from an uncreative one, outside of the capabilities of the researcher, or the prevailing cultural conditions' (Martin & Wilson, 2017, p. 418).

Returning to the problem of value and recognition, we could ask our self that If objects or events are not recognized as valuable, are they not creative? Alison Hills and Alexander Bird examined this in *Creativity Without Value* (2018). They reject value in their definition but retain *originality* (novelty) and add three related conditions: *fertility*, *imagination* and *motivation* (Hills & Bird, 2018). One of their arguments against the condition that creativity has to be valuable is that 'we can *recognize* an object as being the product of creativity independently of identifying the value in that object' (2018, p. 96)[emphasis added]. They argue that it is not necessary to evaluate the objects produced in order to assess the creativity involved in their production. This is something we can recognize in the way ideas are carried out, they can be in a banal or maybe a creative way and end up with the same kind of object. So, these authors mention something that the standard definition did not: an object or event can be the product of creativity without being recognized as being valuable. Considering my focus on the creative practice within the

production process, this argument is very helpful. When you, for example, have to search for the material for a podcast you will probably follow some leads that you will eventually discard during the editing process 'individuals who are creative often produce many ideas, of varying quality. Their creative dispositions sometimes lead them to devise objects that are valuable, at other times objects that are worthless' (Hills & Bird, 2018, p. 101). But this does not mean that in the act of searching for these materials, you were not creative and that these 'worthless' objects are not the outcome of a creative process. Personally, I would not even use the word worthless in this regard because, and this is also something that Hills & Bird argue themselves 'in the arts, creative ideas may fail to have value by the standard of a relevant or intended kind' (p. 99). The final product may be 'worthless' but the preceding process can house all these different *what ifs* that expose creative practices.

At is point the distinction that Keith Sawyer makes between *product creativity* and *improvisational creativity* is worth mentioning since both can be argued for in nonfictional investigative podcasting[3]. Product creativity generally involves a long period of creative work leading up to the creative product. In contrast, in improvisational creativity, the process is the product (Sawyer K. R., 2000). Now it gets interesting, because in our case the seemingly improvisational creativity is eventually being presented as the creative product, although clearly polished. Sawyer argues that with product creativity 'the artist has to interact with physical materials and has many opportunities to revise the work, even to discard it entirely upon completion' (2000, p. 158). Sawyer states that a theory of product creativity would have to build onto the theory of improvisation if we want 'to explore if, and how this edit and revise process changes the nature of the work, the experience' (2000, p. 158). If we

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[3] Further investigation on improvisational creativity in relation to podcasting is not within the scope of this essay but can be studied in future research.

thus want to study a creative process presented as creative product, we have to focus on improvisation and this is where the idea of *reading creativity forwards* comes in.

Tim Ingold (2010) argues that the creativity of a work is to be found when we read creativity *forwards* 'this entails a focus not on abduction but on *improvisation*' (Ingold, The Textility of Making, 2010, p. 97). When we improvise 'we follow the ways of the world, rather than to recover a chain of connections, from an end-point to a starting-point, on a route already travelled' (2010, p. 97). He wants to reverse a tendency to read creativity *backwards* 'starting from an outcome in the form of a novel object and tracing it, through a sequence of antecedent conditions, to an unprecedented idea in the mind of an agent' (2010, p. 97). This strategy calls for an attention to the process in relation to the ongoing life of its creator and not as a separate path. This is also something that we recognize in some nonfictional podcasts, where the hosts and producers also sometimes talk about their personal lives[4]. Ingold mentions that 'the role of the artist—as that of any skilled practitioner—is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being' (2010, p. 97). Following Ingold, we could say that in this forward movement, it is important that we not only trace the process behind the work but to study how to work is still coming into being. Creativity is emergent in ongoing social action, but at the same time also marked and framed 'these reflexive dimensions, can be integral to performances that bring their own processes of production into focus (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 20). Although not exactly a performance, the category of podcasts that we are researching does foreground their own processes of production. It is at these moments, that creativity is emerging.

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[4] A nice example is VINK (2019) where at the beginning of the episodes the producers and creator talk for example about how they spend their weekends before they go into analyzing different podcasts

Producing podcasts

Even though we used the term podcasting several times already and probably is a familiar

term, a definition can provide a steadier framework. Acorrding to Bonini 'a podcast is a

technology used to distribute, receive and listen, on-demand, to sound content produced by

traditional editors such as radio, publishing houses, journalists and educational institutions as

well as content created by independent radio producers, artists and radio amateurs' (Bonini,

2015, p. 21). Podcasts are considered converged[5] media that bring together audio, web-based

infrastructure and portable media devices together. Although the term podcast was originally

coined for the first time fifteen years ago (Bonini, 2015), the 'Golden Age' of podcasting

(Berry, 2016) began in late 2014 when Apple included a built-in podcasting app on every

iPhone (Dann & Spinelli, 2019) and when online audio editing programs, like Audacity,

became free to use which enabled users 'to produce high-quality radio journalism without

expensive editing booths and elaborate studio facilities' (Dowling, 2019, p. 120).

Podcasting studies are often closely connected to studies of radio (Heise, 2014)

(Berry, 2016) which is, considering its format, not completely arbitrary. Nevertheless, Dann

and Spinelli state that the distinctiveness of podcasting production 'has opened the door to

creative practices (and dilemmas) not found on radio' (2019, p. 10) and that the way that

engagement is stimulated, urges the need for a distinct discourse or vocabulary for studying

podcast. They propose eleven major features and concepts that define the medium (Dann &

Spinelli, 2019) from which the following three are discussed in relation to the production of

GEEL and how it allows space for creativity; 'podcasts can be produced and distributed

without the approval of a commissioning editor, program controller, or gatekeeper', 'there is

no fixed or definitive text of a podcast episode or instalment' and 'podcasts do not have the

timing and scheduling constraints of broadcast media' (2019, p. 8). After I introduced and

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[5] Convergence defined as the flow of content across multiple media platforms (Jenkins, 2006)

justified the case study, I will discuss the aforementioned concepts in relation to *GEEL* and how the production of such a podcast generates space for creativity.

GEEL, a podcast about the colour yellow

GEEL is a podcast about the colour yellow, or at least that is what the creator Michiel van de Weerthof states at the beginning of each episode. But as each episode progresses, we realise that yellow is indeed the overarching theme of the podcast but that the episodes itself examines a whole range of other topics. From researching how yellow sounds by talking to synesthetes to discussing what kind of yellow is the yellow that is used in the vests of the yellow vest's movement6. Spoiler alert: it's actually classified as green. It can be defined as nonfiction literary story telling combined with in-depth investigative reporting, according to Michiel, every story is already there, his foundation is reality. Michiel began his quest for the essence of yellow around two years ago when he had to face the aftermath of some events which had a huge impact on his personal life7. Since he deliberately chose not to share the backstory behind *GEEL* in the podcast itself, I will also leave it out but it is worth mentioning that these events did fuel the intrinsic motivation to create the podcast.

As for many of my peers, listening to podcasts is part of my everyday life and this undoubtedly affected the analyses. I tried to write in a way that is conscious of my subjective involvement in this particular medium. One of the reasons I chose *GEEL* as my case study, is a personal one since I am fascinated by what non-fiction auditory storytelling has to offer in an age where we are hooked onto our screens. While I was listening to the podcast, I became curious about the creative process behind it. This probably partly have to do with the fact I

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6 The yellow vests movement (Mouvement des gilets jaunes) is a populist, revolutionary, political movement for economic justice that began in France in October 2018 and spread rather quickly to other countries (e.g. The Netherlands)

7 If you do want to hear the story behind *GEEL*, you can listen to the interview that he gave in *Lijn14* (listed in the reference list)

have a background in creating myself. Michiel describes this as that as makers we always sit in the passenger seat. Secondly, *GEEL* is, if we look at the Netherlands, a good (and rare) example of a podcast that has 'an emphasis on richly textured narrative featuring self-reflexive gestures that expose audiences to the journalistic process of production' (Dowling, 2019, p. 119). Both Dann & Spinelli and Dowling studied the production process of American podcasts like *Radiolab*, *Serial* and *Reply All* which are all nonfictional investigative podcasts were the creative process is foregrounded in the final product. These podcasts share similarities with *GEEL*, except for the fact that they have large production teams with big budgets and *GEEL* is created independently and with no budget at all[8].

        When listening to *GEEL*, you become also part of the production process because Michiel discloses the choices that he had to make and the setbacks that he had to face. A good example of this is in episode 10 where he is trying to find out what the story is behind a certain street name but is not able to find an answer and discusses with someone over the phone if he should just abandon the search and continue with something else. This makes it particular interesting when we are *reading creativity forward* because even if we are not able to have personal conversations with the creators of a podcast, you are still invited to have a glimpse at the production process. These moments, where the production process is foregrounded, are the moments were creativity allegedly becomes apparent. Dann & Spinelli use *Radiolab* as an example where the episodes frequently remind us that 'shit seldom comes in a story shape' and that there are plenty of cues where the audience is reminded that they are listening to a process of story making (Dann & Spinelli, 2019). In large part, this is done to develop a sense of trust with the audience. The investigation into the subject and production process is intertwined within the final product. So, the search for the material and

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[8] Where the first episodes were released independently, as the series progressed Michiel applied for a small contribution from the municipality of Den Bosch https://www.denbosch.nl/nl/actueel/geel

the leads that are followed are not always instantly discarded but also shared with the audience. Here we recognize creativity in the act of searching for the materials. Although some of the materials eventually will be discarded in the final product, they are the outcome of a creative process. Which I also mentioned before when discussing the definition of creativity as proposed by Hills & Bird (2018).

Space for creativity

Let us return to the three concepts that define the medium of podcasting in relation to its production and how these allow space for creativity. First, because podcasts can be produced and distributed without going through the traditional gatekeeping channels (Sawyer & Markman, 2014), the creators are most of the time working with a lot of freedom. This is especially evident with *GEEL* because it is produced independently and in Michiel his spare time, where he describes his work as 'applied art where I am my own client' (van de Weerthof, 2019). Michiel gets no funding for this project and considering the time and budget, he tells me that he does indeed sets time constraints for himself so that he avoids ending up spending all of his time on something that does not (yet) provide his income. But in the moments that he did reserve time in his schedule to work on *GEEL*, there is no one who is telling him what to do, except for himself. He explained that he did not picture an audience which allowed him to make what he wanted and surprisingly enough did reach a wide audience.

This brings us to the second feature, a podcast does not have a fixed text, mistakes can be corrected, sound can de added and the content can be infinitely be re-arranged (Dann & Spinelli, 2019). Michiel explains that he does have some rules for himself in the way that of course, it has to relate in some way to the colour yellow and that he does have a concept for each episode. For example, when the yellow vests movement became a thing, he decided

for himself that somehow, he had to deal with that topic. When I asked him about his creative process, he told me that in a way it always begins with a form of doing, for example recording and collecting material that could potentially be of interest. Then he screens the material, searches for connections and with this refined information returns to recording new material. This process of collecting, screening, going back out again to find more material continues until he feels like he has enough. At this point the, what he calls, fermentation process begins where he spends hours on end searching the right pieces of the puzzle and putting them in place. It is in this moment of editing where he can be creative in finding the perfect jingle or combining the most interesting sentences with each other. This process, although way more invisible, is an important part of the creative practice in podcast production.

Finally, broadcast media have timing and scheduling constraints where podcasts can be as long as they need to be, and released whenever is desired (Dann & Spinelli, 2019). Dowling argues that 'unlike terrestrial radio, podcasts are free of time limits restricting the size of the cast of interviewees, characters that often explicate concepts and reinforce thematic purpose' (Dowling, 2019, p. 129) He continues that this freedom can allow for a greater range of diverse perspective and balance in the narrative. Because Michiel is not restricted considering the duration time and upload deadline, there are now ten episodes spanning one and a half year where the duration of the episodes varies between 1:52 and the 29:05 minutes.

Conclusion

With *GEEL* as an exemplar I hope that I was able to show that the production of nonfictional investigative podcasting, is a highly creative practice. After establishing that ideas and practices can be creative without being recognized as being valuable, according to Hills &

Bird (2018)we saw that when improvisational and product creativity become intertwined, reading creativity forward is a useful strategy. Dann & Spinelli (2019) provided a clear frame which was efficient when analysing how the specific affordances of podcasting production allow space for creativity. Within this frame we analysed what effect the freedom stimulated by not having to deal with gate-keepers, having a text that is highly malleable and the absence of time constraints had on the creative practice.

I think it is now safe to say that the aforementioned affordances have a positive impact on the creative practices within podcast production and this is something that we, or at least I, are able to pick-up while listening. Compared to reading a factual text about how it was decided what kind of yellow we should use for safety vest, a podcast where this information is combined with interviews with people actually wearing these vests and commenting on how it mismatches their outfits, is at least for me way more entertaining. For future research I suggest that it could be relevant to have more interviews with a broader range of podcast producers, since the existing literature is mainly focussed on American and highly successful examples. Even though Michiel is not going to like that I'm going to say this but *GEEL* exists between autonomous art and investigative podcasting and this is a rare field where there is still a lot to still discover within academic and artistic research.

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