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Studying “Openness” with “Closeness”

A videography of Prezi’s alternative entrepreneurship

How can we study a company’s call for “openness” and ambition to create an alternative form of entrepreneurship? This article introduces a videography of the Hungarian company Prezi, with a focus on their efforts to nurture an internal organisational culture defined by openness, as well as a desire to address the lack of corporate social engagement and openness in Hungarian society. We follow Prezi’s work with the Roma population to better understand how the company’s social value creation affects the employees, and to problematise how videography facilitates “closeness” and thereby the sharing of sensibility and co-experience of such an abstract ability as openness.

Openness within businesses has mainly been discussed in research on organisational culture,¹ especially in relation to how founders of companies influence communication in organisations.² In these studies, openness is conceived to be a normative means to reach better business results, which in turn has been criticised as leading to neo-normative control.³ That is, calls for openness may entice the employees to either feel more at home at work, or to be at work at home – mainly to increase production time and reduce leisure time.⁴

In less cynical terms, however, openness is a long-standing fundamental element in political theory, with openness to otherness assumed to be at the heart of the creation of social commonality.⁵ “The Open”, for Agam-

ben⁶ is, nevertheless, also where the demarcation between animal and human is negotiated in close proximity. Captivation and exposure operate as a contrast to possibilities for disconcealment of the concealed, where openness thrives on non-openness. There are, consequently, unsettling tensions present when organisations implement ideas about openness, merged with ambitions of social value creation, as in the case of the Hungarian company Prezi.

Prezi exemplifies the growing trend of “alternative entrepreneurship”; that is, disruptive initiatives that lead to new organisational forms based on efforts to accomplish other-than, or more-than, economic value creation. Alternative entrepreneurship is thus an umbrella concept for the recent interest in social entrepreneurship, ecopreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship and political entrepreneurship, to mention but a few.⁷ Importantly, the forms of alternative entrepreneurship spur new organisational forms that distinguish themselves from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is a managerial attempt to recover, rather than an entrepreneurial attempt to create.⁸

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Prezi’s alternative entrepreneurship permeated the core operations from the very beginning. In the late 20th century, one of the co-founders, now in the position of Principal Artist, Ádám Somlai-Fischer, used the Flash programming language to code his own presentation tool, which could zoom in and out on a canvas. This developed with the second co-founder and former chief technical officer, Péter Halácsy, into a digital zooming presentation tool, meant to facilitate free speech and the sharing of ideas worldwide. Facilitating communication and free speech was thus fundamental for the start-up of the company in 2009.⁹

In addition to Prezi’s grounding in political ideas of democracy and free speech, they have with the third co-founder and CEO, Péter Arvai, also engaged in openness to increase diversity thinking. Prezi has initiated WeAreOpen, a Non-Governmental-Organization (NGO) spin-off from Prezi in collaboration with Google and Espell.¹⁰ Prezi has thus encouraged both openness for alternative sexual identities, and openness for ethnic minorities, both strengthened by the daily work of WeAreOpen. Prezi was also one of the first companies to join the Pride parade protests in Budapest¹¹ in parallel with an increased engagement with the Roma population in the outskirts of Budapest. Prezi provides young Roma with mentorship to help them reach university studies, and provides hands-on help to renovate their homes. They have also given courses in computer programming and employed a Roma woman who now works in the so-called office lounge in Budapest.

Whilst it has been important for Prezi to make the engagement with the Roma long-term by spreading their efforts, we have in this particular study chosen to focus on their yearly two-day renovation initiative. Prezi employees from the US and Hungary visit a settlement located in the village of Bag, one hour from Budapest, to join the Roma in renovating their houses. Prezi’s aim is to expose existing prejudices and foster openness. The renovation has been planned for months in Prezi’s Budapest office, including coordination

with several actors, such as volunteer organizations, architects, charities, and local politicians. One NGO called Bagázs has here been of particular importance. The NGO has developed hand in hand with Prezi’s engagement in a specific Roma settlement in the village of Bag, and their collaboration has been cemented over several years. The renovation initiative has also been presented to all employees before and during their so-called “power week”, mainly to clarify the engagement in openness via the encounter with a discriminated-against minority. The two researchers participated in some of the planning events in the office, the power week presentation, and the renovation performed by around hundred people. This first pilot study has later been extended with several visits, shadowing, participant observations, interviews and additional filming of other events, such as the Pride parade.

Openness and videography

The abstract and fuzzy notion of ‘openness’ is perhaps exemplary to study with the help of video ethnographic methods. Motivated by the arts and humanities,¹² audio-visual ethnographies offer another sort of encounter with the research participants, and can, if successful, facilitate closeness.¹³ We thus brought a film camera so as to be able to situate ourselves, and a future audience, closer to Prezi’s nurturing of openness via engagement with the Roma. It is a closeness that builds on the same deliberative democratic agenda that is visible in other experimental participatory digital methods,¹⁴ but where the voicing of research participants not only provides a greater variety of perspectives, but also the sharing of sensibility, emotional expressions and co-experience of such an abstract ability as openness.

Filming can thus facilitate a situated immersion where closeness is embraced by zooming into the here and now, exposing affective responses to the situations that unfold. Closeness, it must be admitted, even demands or targets openness. In addition, closeness appeared, for participants, to facilitate sharing

of their feelings of what was going on, which informed us about how boundaries between “us” and “them” were drawn.¹⁵ In other words, audio-visual digital tools create what Karen Waltorp¹⁶ cautiously speaks about as a deepened “interface” – one that merges “lifeworlds, social fields, and moral and value systems”. Thus, fundamental in attaining closeness to study the experiences of others is the reciprocal openness on behalf of the ethnographer. Fieldwork with filming merges closeness and openness, exposes differences as you encounter them, and gives rise to unexpected shifts of roles and status, which “may lead to transformations of the self of the ethnographer”.¹⁷ This experimental approach makes it possible to respond in the moment, similar to theatrical improvisation,¹⁸ whereby the video ethnographer becomes a circumstantial activist¹⁹ who experiments collaboratively with others in the co-construction of ethnographic inquiry.²⁰ Hence, more anthropological uses of visual tools have turned away from realist notions of representation,²¹ towards approaches that emphasise subjectivity and reflexivity,²² including the construction of futures.²³ The long-standing and recently revived human obsession with observational facts and the desire to capture “reality”, which especially have haunted documentary filmmaking, has thus been substituted with an active intervention and processual re-construction of the world – the possibility to imagine it otherwise in order to transform it.²⁴

In practice, this video ethnographic approach is nevertheless full of obstacles, legal issues, and dilemmatic formal and informal ethics, which may stand in the way of experiencing openness closely together with the participants. We did for example face a situation where Prezi’s CEO was worried about the integrity of the Roma families. We were from various directions repeatedly warned about the prevalent difficulties for any outsiders to enter the enclosed Roma communities in Hungary. On site, together with our cameraman, translator and editor, Imre Széles, we did however find the videographic approach to be smoother than expected. The Prezi employees

had already been informed about the scope of the research and had agreed to participate. The Roma, on the other hand, had only been loosely informed via Prezi and an NGO on site, which is why we had to secure their oral consent to the research subject and how we would handle the data.²⁵ At this stage, we had to rely on our own reflexivity and field sensitivity, which is especially important when cameras are part of setting the empirical stage and later reconstruction.²⁶ Improvisation became crucial in the making of instantaneous decisions on what to film and what not to film. Sometimes, the cameraman also had to be enrolled in our decisions, reluctant as he was about filming the conditions under which some of the Roma lived. In addition, the Roma were often happy to be interviewed, but some politely refused to be filmed. The camera did however allow us to better follow the flow of activities, and interview Prezi employees, the Roma, volunteers and politicians who visited the site during their renovation work. Filming facilitated our own participation in the empowerment process, for example the painting of a container that would serve as an office for the NGO, and the moving of bricks from a truck. We were thus able to respond to the discontinuity of events in the moment, and focus on our own experience of the situation and openness activities, knowing that there would be a later stage of analysis, editing and montage of a certain narrative and sequence of events.²⁷ The closeness with which we approached the research would thus need to be refined at a later stage, at the same time as the closeness would inevitably become subject to layers of impressionistic construction and be buried under interpretation.²⁸

We watched the Hungarian film *Just the wind*, directed by Benedek Fliegauf to find inspiration before the analysis of our own material. The film is based on real events of oppression against the Roma, and succeeds in creating a penetrating atmosphere of discomfort by attending to the details of the actors and their thoughts. Similarly, we wished to re-create the atmosphere we experienced on site. Being less schooled in filmmaking, however,

we began to theoretically problematise Prezi’s work with openness and coded the transcripts of the audio files according to re-occurring themes. The first themes touched upon how openness was practically to come about via the renovation, how contrasts between the office and the village emerged, what the employees found troubling, including internal critique of the renovation, and lastly, broader political issues that affected the possibilities for openness. These themes all revolved around the unfolding of relations between the employees, the Roma and us, teasing out how various forms of openness or non-openness were manoeuvred during the renovation. After several public test screenings at conferences, in the classroom and at Prezi, leading to at least 20 iterations back and forth with our editor, the videography was publicly screened at Slottsbiografen in Uppsala under the title *Persuasion: Alternative Entrepreneurship Executed* (online version: <https://youtu.be/cX1QzYCcXdo>).

As you will be able to tell from viewing the videography, the ongoing linkage between openness and prejudices as well as closeness and differences, is highly ambiguous. The voicing of circumstances in the so-called

“settlement”, with general opinions about the Roma in Hungary, did seek to expose a sort of captivity of the Roma, but may be deceptive – leading to increased absorption and fewer possibilities for the uncovering of the ongoing disinhibition that the renovation project seeks.²⁹ Our closing in on experiences and feelings, as well as the general closeness created between various people at the site, may thus enclose “the other” in a more sophisticated subordination to the circulation of fear and despair.³⁰ And as we briefly mention in the end of the videography, meeting existing norms by empowering calls for voluntary participation and change via openness also exemplifies the attempt to govern through freedom.³¹ Our own claimed closeness may likewise be part of an overreliance on the knowing subject’s essential gaze and authentic thought. During screenings of early versions, we have in fact been confronted and criticised for deploying an ethnic gaze, and in the worst case, been accused of running the errands of business. Still, we argue that videography can accomplish the closeness that is needed to advance qualitative research methods that wish to follow how alternative forms of entrepreneurship unfold with efforts to nurture openness.

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Notes

1. Schein (2004).
2. Schein (1983).
3. Fleming (2009); Fleming & Sturdy (2009).
4. Fleming & Spicer (2004).
5. Tkacz (2014); von Beyme & Germino (1974).
6. Agamben (2004).
7. Peredo & McLean (2006); Schaltegger (2002).
8. Baron (2007).
9. Lázár (2016).
10. WAO (2017).
11. Prezi (2010).
12. Ahtila & Aarniosuo (2017).
13. Pink (2006); Pink (2012).
14. Juppi (2017).
15. Ahmed (2014).
16. Waltrip (2018, 117).
17. Waltrip (2018, 121).
18. Yanow (2009).
19. Marcus (1995).
20. Holmes & Marcus (2008).
21. Gupta & Ferguson (2001, 3).
22. Pink (2003).
23. Waltrip (2017).
24. Cowie (2011).
25. LeCompte & Schensul (2015).
26. Tanner & Roos (2017).
27. Knoblauch et al. (2015).
28. Kozinets & Belk (2006, 337).
29. Agamben (2004).
30. Ahmed (2014).
31. Rose (1999).

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