

Andere Tonen #2

Stijn Frankfoorder and Eddie Stok - Are We Europe and AWE studio

Andere Tonen the podcast in which graphic designer Asja Keeman - together with guests - takes a closer look at the Dutch design climate. The aim is to reflect, learn and deepen the conversation about the position of designers and design agencies in society. In the second episode, Stijn Frankfoorder, Eddie Stok (Operations manager and Creative Director of Are We Europe and AWE studio) and Asja talk about under-reported journalism issues, setting up their own community and the accessibility of the design world for new makers.

AK: Today I'm speaking with his Stijn Frankfoorder and Eddie Stok of Are We Europe and AWE Studio, who have gathered a community of diverse visual brand creators around them to, as they put it themselves, make under-reported issues visible through collaboration between people of different generations and entities. They do this in the form of Are We Europe Magazine, multimedia stories and podcasts, among other things. Are We Europe was founded in 2017 by Kirill Hartog, Tisch Gijzel, Mick ter Reehorst and Marije Martens and has now grown into a media platform that brings borderless journalism to the world. For me, Stijn and Eddie are welcoming,

ES: thank you.

SF: thank you very much.

AK: nice of you to be. I just briefly introduced you guys, but I'm very curious how you would introduce yourselves. And how did you guys actually end up at Are We Europe? Shall we start with you Eddie?

ES: Yes, that's right. I'm Eddie Stok, I'm a creative director cq graphic designer at Are We Europe. I'm working in various positions at Are We Europe, both for the magazine itself and for our production studio. I once started at Are We Europe with a single illustration that one of the founders had committed to me. At that time I was not an illustrator or designer at all. And since then I've gradually become more and more involved with Are We Europe, until I'm now working full-time as creative director there.

AK: So it actually started from a very spontaneous collaboration.

ES: Yes, yes, yes, we were in the same undergraduate program. Totally unrelated to anything journalism or design related.

AK: Which one was this?

ES: We were all at Amsterdam University College on Liberal Arts and Sciences. I myself specialized in environment, sciences and computer science but I wanted something else. And when I wanted to say goodbye to science after that, I thought I would test the waters in illustration and design. And so that's how that grew.

AK: And you did a great job of that.

ES: Yes. I'm kind of glad that it's allowed me to make it this far.

AK: Yes exactly yes I understand. It's a very nice position, very nice position,

ES: With a lot of freedom.

AK: Exactly yes. And your other half is Stein

SF: On this stage, indeed yes.

AK: Yes.

SF: My name is Stijn Frankfoorder. I'm actually responsible for two things within Are We Europe and AWE Studio. Within Are We Europe, I'm actually responsible for operations. That means I deal with the day-to-day operations. So the way we work together, the way project are running, that's what I deal with. I'm less concerned with the editorial process or the design process. But I make sure that all the projects that we're doing, that they get done on time. Basically all the things in the background. I do that at Are We Europe and as AWE studio, which is actually a spin off of Are We Europe, but we'll probably talk about that later.

AK: Definitely.

SF: So I'm actually ultimately responsible and that's where I spend most of my time. So what I do there then is both bringing in new projects, but also supervising new projects and making sure actually that as an AWE studio is put on the map. That's the task that I've actually taken on mostly this year. How I got involved with Are We Europe, that's a bit like Eddie's story I would say. I had another company first and before that I worked with Are We Europe once. Then one time I went to the co-working spaces that we have in Brussels. And then I actually continued in a natural way. It was a great collaboration, they are very nice people. Smart people, who are good at challenging each other, so that was actually the reason for me to go in that direction as well. I actually joined then to say let's make this something more than a student job project(it really came out of the student days then) and let's make this a bigger company, make this a sustainable company. So that was the challenge we had there.

AK: Yeah, what can you talk a little bit more about that too? How did Are We Europe actually come about?

SF: Yeah sure, so. Are We Europe I think officially started 2017 and it was mainly looking at what the current journalism landscape within the European media looked like. And if you look at the European media it's very often about policy, it's about Brussels. And there was actually a bit of frustration there. There was really a gap actually there was something missing within that media landscape, namely something that goes a little bit further than just policy maker, or goes a little bit further than just the institutions like the commission, the parliament, you name it. And that is, in fact, the story of who are Europeans?

AK: Yes, exactly.

SF: And so that's also the question that has been asked many times from the beginning and very likely is never going to be answered. But it's the question of who and what does

it mean to be European? And that's a very difficult question. But actually with that thought, with that vision or with that question in mind, they actually started. And we are both, but everybody, within Are We Europe of the Erasmus generation. And so it went pretty naturally also that it was from a question that about four people asked people were invited: friends, other students that you meet abroad and other creators to actually ask that question together.

AK: Yes, exactly. That's also not a question with an answer that you work with.

SF: Yes yes, it can go a lot of ways.

AK: Yes and that's what I find so interesting about you guys. You then talk about a European issue, which of course is very big. And very complex where very many identities and cultures come together. But this is also how you partially work with the community that you have created around you. Where does the desire to work with so many different people come from?

ES: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think in the beginning it came mostly from an editorial point of view. In a traditional editorial, what's going to be in a publication is actually decided internally. A large editorial team with a very wide variety of people can cast quite a wide net. But we are a small team with a small core editorial staff. If the four of us were to decide what we think the important themes and important stories of Europe are. Then you only just scratch the surface and that's what we wanted to avoid. And that's why we leave a lot of the choices. Well not the choices, but yes, what kind of stories we tell. We leave that mostly to our community and the kind of stories that are picked from our network of writers and journalists. And with that, we try to cast as wide a net as possible for what it means to be European.

SF: Yes, yes and to add to that, I don't just think it's a desire. I think that literally without our community, the people around us, that we have no right to exist.

AK: Without them it can't be made.

SF: No, indeed without them it can't be made. What Eddie says of we often do determine a theme. We look at what's going on in society and then we can outline a certain framework within it. But of course what we can't do is what does it mean for you as a Spaniard? Or what does it mean to you as a Norwegian or an Icelander? Or or you name it? Or as a newcomer as well? What does a particular topic mean to you? We can never fill that in, so from that perspective. We can't do without them actually. So it's not only their desire, it's a pretty essential one!

AK: Yes exactly yes. Without you guys, the story can't be brought out. You literally give these people a voice, but also without their stories you can't tell anything either. So it's really a collaboration. Should this actually say?

SF: Yes definitely.

AK: And can you give an example of this? Because I see very nice magazines here.

ES: Yes, I do have that. And then I just have to see if I'm going to say it right now. So I'm going to get one in you right away.

AK: But you grab the Queer issue right away. The new newest issue or the one after newest issue.

ES: Well, this is it, the newest issue which is really next to the most recent one that came out, there's a new one coming out soon of course, but this is really the newest one. And before that, we published a couple of articles, also of stories within the team that we didn't know were in there. We then throw out the pitch call as we call it pretty broadly to make sure that as many stories as possible get in. Sometimes someone within the team surprises you with their own story. And it's such a strong story that it's almost impossible to publish. Then you have a bit of a conflict of interest: do you choose someone within the team over someone outside? And I realize now that I actually can't or can't have this story publicly. Because that person had actually requested that we not talk about his story in Debt.

SF: I have one example and you've actually been a part of it Asja and that is that sometimes we do a kind of Design sprint on site. And that means as much as we go on location to create a story. Often a multimedia story, but it can also take a different form, within a week's time. In advance, we collect local stories, storytellers from filmmakers to writers, journalist to audio experts. We do often give a certain theme. Or we do have an idea. Of course we do research in advance. But it is on location that the story is determined, and we - I'm just saying we as Are We Europe - mainly have a facilitating role in this. We ensure that it meets certain standards so that it fits within a certain framework. But the local storytellers and the local storytellers, they are ultimately the ones who are going to flesh it out. We've done this a number of times, including in Moldova. And yes, I, I know that produces some very unique stories. Something that we could never do from our office in Amsterdam or in our office in Brussels. That's just really impossible, so I think that's one for one of the many examples of how we're organized and that that can produce some pretty unique stories from time to time. Yes, and that includes the word under-reported so under-represented. As you said at.

AK: And that's also kind of nice. Because of course they are very spontaneous stories, because you don't think beforehand of: I'm going to see this person, because then I can pick up this story. Have you ever been disappointed by this? Have you ever been disappointed because we really wanted to do something about it, but it didn't work out because we couldn't find any people.

SF: Uhm, well, our network is big enough I think to always find a solution. But I think there are always natural moments where you think of well, maybe that should have been done a little better or that could have been done differently. I always say that we have a kind of two layers. On the one hand we try to answer the question of what does it mean to be European? But on the other hand we also want to give young and creative talent the chance to make a career in journalism or within the creative industry. And in that respect we often see ourselves as a springboard. That also gives us, not necessarily as a disadvantage, but as a kind of extra challenge, the fact that you have people of whom you sometimes doubt: is this good enough? Is this strong enough? Does it meet some of the criteria that we want to give it? Whether that ultimately meets it. And that's yes, that does present an additional challenge that Eddie has a little bit more content to deal with than I do personally. But we take that for granted if we know what we're doing it for. I think that's the best way to describe that, for myself at least.

AK: And does it also really come from the idea that Are We Europe also came from the idea that your student days or do you guys just really like to tie in with emerging creators: people who have just graduated, whose qualities you see that maybe someone else doesn't see yet.

ES: Yeah, that I think that's partly indeed both of us. Indeed, we once started with young emerging talent. Whether it's creative, illustrative, filmmakers, photographers writing talent because to give them a platform. Ultimately, that's also the goal of our foundation, the foundation that both the magazine and the studio fall under. That is the stimulation of emerging talent within journalism. And that's what we want to stick to. What that entails, of course, is a certain form of co-creation because you are always, as you just said, dependent on a question or story that someone else wants to tell. But also the story that you yourself want to tell. And when you're in it as equal interest parties, that creates a whole different kind of dynamic compared to someone we're working for as a contractor. Then you really have a client-studio relationship where one really has the upper hand when it comes to yes, this is what I think is important and that's what we're going to do. But when you step into the project as an equal, of course it has a very different balance. But that also brings a lot of beauty. If you're in a relationship of equals, people are more likely to suggest their ideas. Let their opinions be heard. And with that you can do beautiful, inspiring new things that you might not think of yourself and at the same time it is of course possible that a conflict arises because we do have to publish it under our name and it must therefore meet certain requirements.

AK: It has to be good enough.

ES: Yes, the quality requirements that we count on it. Those are pretty high for ourselves as well. And then at some point we do have to act very diplomatically to make sure that everybody stays satisfied,

AK: But it's nice that you give us this opportunity. I think it's also a very unique position that if you have just graduated you can immediately join such a platform as yours. I don't think many people are immediately aware of that. That as a beginning maker it's just very difficult to get started with a story or an image or a video at such a great organization.

SF: Yes, and of course that's also something that you hopefully know how to benefit from in the long run there. Not so much provide, in the sense of money but more of you build a certain relationship with someone, you give someone trust. I think it's, I can't speak for other media or other platforms of course, but I do know that we always have a close relationship, both with our creators and with our readers in it. And that people also just love to keep working for us. And we really enjoy building that community. That is really a very important aspect of our work to let it grow. Both in number, but also in quality. And we try to be active in that, so to speak.

AK: Yeah, nice, really the springboard and we've had the term underreported issues come up a couple of times. But could you maybe explain a little bit more? What does this include? Which issues are you really going to work with? And which ones are not included? Because this is obviously very different from a normal journalism platform.

SF: Think that under-reported that it doesn't only apply to themes, but for example also to countries or persons. It can be in a lot of different areas and we chose underreported or underreported to put that so prominently because we believe that like I am in the

beginning, there is something missing within the European media landscape. There is more than what is being told. There is more than Brussels, Paris, Düsseldorf and London so to speak. And I think, above all, that it is very important to show that. And whether it's about a story in Moldova about that being the fastest shrinking country, because just a lot of people are literally leaving the country. Or whether it's about the challenges that Spain has when it comes to climate change. In the south of Spain, where you might not hear anything about that either. I think that's just something very important in that. And what I think we always look for in that is that the challenges that we have across Europe. There's quite a bit of overlap in that between what we have here in the Netherlands and what others have. But at least that part. That's important to emphasize and to include. And I haven't even talked about the themes that are often underreported here, too, of course.

ES: Yes, although I have to say that some of the themes that we do are sometimes not underreported. We have the global themes that we cover in each journal. Those are pretty big themes with wide reaching issues that you then touch on. But what we also kind of take as an editorial line from under-reported is also the personal sting of all the stories. Of course if you only focus on the big stories, the big news, events that are happening across a continent. You can of course fill a magazine with that, but then you're only talking about what keeps everyone apart. And if you look at what is under-reported among the personal stories of people who are in the vicinity of these major European exciting events. Then you see that there is indeed that you can actually read an article and think of yes, I have quite a lot in common with someone in Georgia undergoing this problem, because I also recognize it from how I live here in Holland.

ES: So. It also actually brings people from different cultures different countries actually a little closer together. Just through these personal stories.

SF: [Yes, exactly. I think this was really one of the most pitched issues that we had though, so the sound did really come from the community. That it was time for an issue like this.

AK: Yes, exactly yes, very good.

ES: Now we've talked about colonialism and about Queer, but for example also topics like sports we've talked about and for us it's. Somewhere the challenge of looking for okay, what's an under-reported story there, but somewhere it's also for us still occasionally looking for what are the topics that fit us? And what are the topics that actually don't fit us?

AK: And what kind of criteria do you hang that on?

SF: Well, say listen well, anyway to your readers and stay in conversation with them. I think that's the most important one of all. It's also somewhere in all honesty a bit of the gut feeling that we have ourselves when we, both in advance, but also when we've finished a magazine. But that's like with a lot of things. It's continued balancing, all the time. I think we're getting a little better at it of differentiating, what does fit with what we want to tackle and with our own identity but it's still a challenge yes.

AK: And you guys already said you listen to the readers. But how do you guys do that?

ES: Well I should just say that we do listen to the readers. We ask those for their opinions. But we don't always listen to them. Because if we had listened to it, the Sports Issue would not have come out. Of course we have members and a collective group. And often yes sometimes we do poll what topics do you find interesting. And then we have a big list of yes sports, Queer issues, colonialism, disinformation and fake news et cetera. And well, by chance sports came at the bottom but we decided to make it anyway. I have to say I do think it's one of our more fun, lighter, more accessible magazines, so it's important that we did it. But. It is a challenge, you can't rely 100 percent on what someone else says you should do. In the end, you have to find the inspiration and make the decisions yourself.

AK: Yes, and how has the sports issue been received?

ES: I think pretty well.

SF: [00:21:16] We did think about it a lot. Not so much on okay, how are they received individually, but also when we look at a whole year actually of editorial output. Does it fit in there? Yes or no? So that was kind of the trade-off that we made ourselves in that.

AK: Yeah, so you guys also still have a lot of freedom about what kind of themes you actually wanted to address?

ES: Yes, yes definitely. Ultimately, there just has to be the support within the editorial team and within the team to start making these productions. Because of course you have quite a small team. And if there are a few people among them who don't really like it, then you know quickly enough that you're not in the right place with your theme. Yes, so we try to sound that out internally as well.

AK: Then I think we've pretty much covered everything for Are We Europe and I'm actually very curious about AWE Studio. Can you tell us a bit more about that? Because that's a very new initiative. It's just been launched. What are you going to do with AWE Studio?

SF: It's not a very new initiative. On the outside it is, but actually over the course of a year and a half we, quite naturally, sounded out the partners with whom we already worked for our magazine or were in contact with in some other way, to see how we could help them. And at a certain point they asked us what you were doing there, this design sprint, is very cool. Can you do that for us too? And that's a very natural question. Foundations asked us to do that, cultural institutions asked us to do that, and sometimes public bodies asked us to do that as well. And we actually decided this year to really make that our own entity. So what we do in that is we say okay, we use our, I always call it storytelling skills, that we have gained within Are We Europe. And that actually focuses on three areas: So developing concepts, production and then making sure that it actually knows how to reach the right audience. Those are kind of the three pillars. Through those three and that's actually the reason we set up AWE studio in it with the goal of, if we're asked so often. And those are often quite international organizations. The assignments are never limited to the Netherlands. That we also see this as a way to help our network get well-paid jobs. So now we are in Nice, for example, and a while ago in Berlin. We crisscross Europe pretty often like that. And yes, that also gives us the opportunity to fulfill those missions again. So that's how AWE studios came about this year.

AK: Yeah, and what kind of projects are you guys doing with AWE Studio? Can you name one as an example?

ES: Yes definitely. I think what sets us apart is that we come from journalism or at least from storytelling and that's a pretty essential element, actually in all the productions that we run there. So for example, we did a documentary series on thirteen different countries in the Balkan region and the surrounding region. For a German government agency that especially wanted to understand very much what does it mean now to live in than the Balkan countries? And there we actually developed such projects with thirteen different filmmakers, thirteen different journalists and finally one editor in Amsterdam, but that has really been a search for the right protagonist, the protagonist. It's making sure that you have right storylines and that you also have a good representation of the situation there. I think that's a good example of what we and what we did. But we also for example for a larger foundation did that. These are projects that are just very good and very close to us, the content of which we are very enthusiastic about. And where we can also ensure that our people can get to work. That we can also raise a bit of finance for Are We Europe Media, so that is actually a kind of the whole ecosystem in which we are operating.

AK: Yeah yeah, I hear a lot of different mediums, animation, video, journalism. Do you two have a favorite medium yourself that you really love to tell your stories with?

ES: Yeah, yeah, me. I really like ink on paper a lot.

AK: That's really oldschool

ES: Yes, that's really oldschool. But I like things that are flat and lie still and that you can turn a page. And so I'm really happy with the two of the magazines that are also here. Mayday Magazine. Also an AWE studio assignment. Together with Brussels cultural institutions Bozar. That was also a very natural cross-pollination, because we deploy what we do at Are We Europe Magazine, but with their themes, with the themes they want to address. We also use the same recipe. So a collective of writers for that, and also nice that we can give them a better paid assignment. Eventually printed though.

SF: I'm very much into print as well, but if I may give one other answer, it's the medium that we're practicing or performing in right now. And that is podcasting. I love the intimacy of podcasting. If someone has a wonderful voice and can take me all the way to a place or an environment or a situation, that makes me really genuinely, really happy. And preferably the narrative podcasts, so nothing the interview like we do now, but really a well told story and a podcast. So it doesn't matter where I'm walking. I just listen all day long. And that. Yeah, that's the way I enjoy it. Or at least the medium I enjoy.

AK: And have you guys ever had a chance to make your own podcast?

SF: Yeah sure, we make and produce for others and we also have our own podcast studio, so we definitely do that. We've recorded a number of series ourselves. We do recordings of all our stories anyway and we also do podcasts for others from time to time. It's not the thing we do on our own, but we do have it. We often get requests from from many different areas. And that's something we really enjoy doing as well. **AK:** Yeah sure.

AK: Yeah, is basically anything in a field that has to do with storytelling. That's where you can actually make your impact.

SF: Yeah definitely.

ES: And yeah, that dichotomy between on one side as AWE studio and the other side Are We Europe and we don't actually, I'm looking at Eddie right now, but we don't actually make any concessions about of okay, what's the most commercially interesting? And I think there's one more thing in there. And that's why I think Is We Europe as a media is just really interesting. If you end up having readers who appreciate what you have for clear choices and a clear mission and a clear vision. What you want to make something about and they're willing to pay for it, you don't have to make concessions. And I think that's where, not necessarily the only, but the solution lies. But I think that's a very important route that we're also pursuing. Yes, how? How would I describe it? Independence? By simply having a very solid and loyal base of readers and members who appreciate and respect what we do and also see the value in it.

AK: Yes, and who through membership then support you financially as well.

SF: Yes exactly yes,

AK: So that they can also read the best articles again and see the best stories.

SF: Ha ha, of course it also brings some challenges. We have, as we just discussed, a lot of different things that we do. And if you want to make it clear to your customers, potential customers, existing members. What are they paying for, what are they doing? What do we actually do? We did notice that that's really a challenge that we have to deal with on a weekly or monthly basis. How do you communicate clearly? When your product is so abstract and big. And that's something we definitely want to take a stab at in the future. To clarify that and throw ourselves even more into communicating our mission. What we've been fairly behind on so far is the communions, communicating the deliverables so to speak.

AK: Yes, I can also imagine that this might be difficult for the client as well, and for you as well, of course. Do you think that the client still has a piece of education here, like: this is what a graphic designer does, this is what a journalist does, this is what we as a team can do for you.

ES: One hundred percent. I think and that's definitely something we want to do more in our own communication is as a media communicate what our mission is and as a studio communicate what our added value is, of our service.

AK: Yes exactly.

ES: Because of course we are a bit abstract we have to make that a bit more concrete and say that, when you come to us, you don't just come for graphic design but you really get to deal with a total package, which you can purchase from us. And that's something you have to keep saying, you can't say it once and then just believe it and hope that the client understands. It really is something that must continue to emerge in every communication, and that is also the challenge that we now face with our communication teams. To make sure that our copies, visuals, all communication also on social media is clear what we deliver.

AK: And do you have any tips for people who are just starting out on how to handle this?

ES: I hope Stijn has the secret because I don't.

AK: Well Stijn?

SF: I think staying carefully engaged in conversation with others about the ideas you have and how you want to communicate them that to me is a lesson that will never really end. So it's not like use social media and everything will be fine, but try to stay in touch with those who you think are okay, I can spar with them, I can learn something from them and vice versa. That way you can really test whether what you want to create, produce or that is also something that other people see value in. That is what has been an important lesson for me. And sometimes still is. Then I catch myself saying that it's difficult to apply, that sometimes I'm a bit afraid, oh this is not good enough, or I want to think about this but every time I do dare to stick my neck out it always feels good afterwards. So that's what I would like to pass on.

AK: So self-reflection actually and don't be afraid to ask the opinion of others.

SF: Exactly. keep talking to others and listen carefully to what they say.

AK: Yes, beautiful. That's a very fine tip. Then I have another question for you both, and that is what is the future of AWE studio and Are We Europe?

SF: Yes, I have a dream for Are We Europe as media as well as AWE studio. To start with Are We Europe as media, that in 5 years we have a network but also hubs all over Europe. Maybe just starting in the under-reported countries but maybe in every country in Europe in a physical location where you can have the conversation about Europe and discuss it. And that it's a hub where makers sit and people think, a place where people can come together. I would love that.

AK: Well, I don't think that's a very fantasy rich dream.

SF: Oh no?

AK: No I can see you doing that too.

SF: I don't know how many countries there are in Europe now but there are a lot of them but we'll do our best.

AK: And you Eddie? Any dreams for Are We Europe or AWE studio?

ES: Yes, I dream very realistically.

SF: Surviving next year.

AK: Not unimportant either.

ES: Haha, yes not insignificant but no something bigger than that. No I hope that in a few years we can find a reader base all over Europe. And that we can just do our bit to make

the continent smaller. The continent is very big, Stijn already couldn't even enumerate how many countries are in Europe, so imagine if we could make the feeling of Europe a little smaller, a little more cozy, a little more personal then I would be very happy already.

AK: Yes, bringing people closer together. That ties in nicely with your mission.

SF: Definitely.

AK: Guys, thank you so much for stopping by. I found it a very inspiring conversation, very cool to talk to you behind the scenes about all the wonderful things you do, so, thank you.

ES: Thank you also Asja.

SF: Yes, thank you so much for having us.