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Citation for final published version:

Skey, Michael, Kyriakidou, Maria ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4053-5961>, McCurdy, Patrick and Uldam, Julie 2016. Staging and engaging with media events: A study of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. *International Journal of Communication* 10 , pp. 3381-3399. file

Publishers page: <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5114/1...>  
<<http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5114/1716>>

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## **Staging and Engaging With Media Events: A Study of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest**

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Recent work on media events has questioned their integrative function, arguing that they operate as sites of symbolic struggle between different interest groups. However, relatively few studies have examined the experiences of those who design, organize, and attend such events. This article addresses this lacuna with reference to the biggest nonsporting live TV event in the world, the Eurovision Song Contest. Drawing on data from the 2014 competition in Copenhagen, Denmark, it examines the varying levels of commitment to the event among organizers, fans, broadcasters, and journalists and, in particular, notes how this shaped responses to a controversial incident involving the Russian entry. While those with an ongoing interest, including organizers and fans, tended to emphasize personal narratives and individual freedom of expression, mainstream media and audiences adopted a far more cynical standpoint, privileging geopolitical issues to make the event seem more relevant and compelling.

*Keywords: media events, Eurovision Song Contest, fans, audiences*

The literature on media events has grown dramatically in the past few years as scholars have sought to theorize the shows, incidents, and issues that, for short periods, attract widespread public attention across a range of media platforms and in various locales.

The concept, developed and popularized by Dayan and Katz (1994, originally referred to *live* events that *interrupt* daily routines and schedules, are *preplanned* and *organized outside the media* by

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Date submitted: 2015-11-25

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large public or other bodies, involve *ceremonial* elements that are presented with *reverence*, and *electrify very large*. Crucially, these broadcasts were seen to “integrate societies and evoke a renewal of loyalty to the society and its legitimate authority” (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 9).

Recent studies (Couldry, Hepp, & Krotz, 2010) have called into question this assumed integrative function by making two key points. First, viewing societies as discrete entities tied together by shared norms and values overlooks the significant cleavages (ethnicity, class, religion, gender) that undermine even the most settled social groups. It also fails to account for the growing complexity of contemporary social life perhaps best represented by global flows of people, products, and ideas (Hepp & Couldry, 2010).

Second is the vexed question of how we understand media power. A view of media events as “shared experiences uniting viewers with one another and with their societies” (Dayan & Katz, 1994, p. 13) underplays the extent to which audiences and alternative media can ignore and challenge dominant readings of such events. Such criticisms are becoming even more salient in an era of digital technologies that blur the boundaries between producers and audiences, enable a range of competing narratives around particular events, and contribute to the complexity of local, national, and regional media landscapes.

### **Beyond Representations**

It has been argued that media events should instead be conceptualized as sites of symbolic struggle and that research should foreground “the variety of interest groups . . . related to the[ir] performance” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, pp. 10–12). While such an approach is now broadly accepted in the literature, it is worth noting that the majority of empirical work has focused on the (mediated) performance of particular individuals or groups (e.g., Heller, 2007) or how a particular event has been covered in the media (e.g., Štětka, 2009). In other words, relatively few analyses from *inside the media event* have explored how those who design, organize, and attend such events engage with and make sense of them. It is this lacuna that this article wishes to address. To do this, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), the largest nonsporting live TV event in the world, is used as a case study, and the article discusses data collected at the 2014 competition held in Copenhagen, Denmark. This includes participant observation and interviews in and around the main arena during the week of the contest as well as postevent interviews with organizers, broadcasters, journalists, and fans.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first examines the fairly narrow range of studies that have moved beyond representations to examine the staging and performance of media events as well as insights from fan studies, where there has also been some interest in theorizing different people’s varying commitments to particular texts, products, or events. The second part provides a brief overview of the literature on the ESC, which has often emphasized (geo)political issues or identity politics. After a note on method, the final part draws on empirical data to analyze one of the key issues that developed during the week of the fieldwork—the controversial reception of the Russian entry and subsequent responses to this. This incident is used to highlight one of the key arguments: that different groups will not only hope to

achieve particular objectives in relation to any media event but that varying levels of commitment to it will shape the manner in which the event is engaged with and responded to.

### **Staging Media Events**

Studies of how media events are designed and organized have tended to focus on major international sporting occasions such as the Olympics (Frawley & Adair, 2013; Hiller, 2013) and football World Cup (Eisenhauer, 2013). These studies have addressed a range of issues—governance, transport and logistics, security, broadcasting rights, marketing, legacy, and environmental impact—that are largely beyond the scope of this article. However, two broad themes are worth picking up on, both of which point to the competing aims and activities of different interest groups, organizers, hosts, sponsors, and attendees. The first concerns tensions over the management of space (both physical and virtual); the second explores the meaningfulness of the event. In the first instance, the complex range of technologies used to manage access to particular locales has been primarily discussed in relation to security and surveillance (Bennett & Haggerty, 2014; Fussey, Coaffee, Armstrong, & Hobbs, 2011) as well as brand and image protection (Eisenhauer, 2013).

A good example of this comes from a study of World Catholic Youth Day by Hepp and Kronert (2010). They note how the careful management of “sacred” spaces is tied to the overall presentation of the event. In the latter case, the “host broadcaster WDR together with its print media partner the *Bild-Zeitung* have an outstanding but predefined role” (p. 272) defined in advance by event organizers who set camera positions, provide accreditation and monitor journalistic activities. As ever, however, it is difficult to manage every aspect of an event, and so particular places become the focus for uncontrolled activities (by participants) and alternative narratives of the event, which often emphasize “jolly celebrations and condom use” (p. 272).

Such transgressive behavior cautions us against seeing such events as totalizing and instead points to the varying aims and motivations of different interest groups. This is an argument that has been eloquently made by John McAloon in his ongoing analyses of the Olympics. Skeptical of the Debordian thesis of the spectacle, McAloon (1984) has instead conducted detailed ethnographic research to show how the demands of organizers and sponsors for “big shows, simplified and consistent messages, and a passive audience content to be wowed” (p. 31) are often in tension with the efforts of local volunteers, who generally emphasize the value of civic engagement at the expense of commercial imperatives, and spectators, who are just as likely to articulate cynicism or boredom as wonder!

Indeed, this final argument points to not only the multitude of ways in which participants can respond to an event but the varying commitments they may have to it. Volunteers who have dedicated time and effort to an event’s production will obviously be invested in it in very different ways from those whose engagements are more fleeting. Likewise, those who engage through media will have a vastly different experience from those who are present, as Lang and Lang’s (1953) seminal study of the McArthur Day parade revealed. Yet this idea has been relatively undertheorized in the media events literature. Indeed, we suggest that it is studies of fandom, primarily in relation to sport, that may offer the

most useful insights when addressing the multiple ways in which groups position themselves in relation to a media event.

### ***Commitment Versus Detachment***

For instance, Sandvoss (2002) builds on the Langs' work in his discussion of the experience of live and mediated fandom. Although he mainly focuses on ideas around authenticity and hyper/reality (Sandvoss, 2003, pp. 143–145), his data also point to a notable difference between the narratives of comfort and consistency of those who watch on television and those that emphasize the sense of belonging and commitment that comes from "being there" in person. Richard Giulianotti (2002) has offered a related argument in his typology of football fans, which is largely based on "the individual's investment in a specific club" and "the different degrees to which the club is central to the individual's project of self-formation" (p. 31). In this way, those who watch a club regularly are contrasted both with those whose long-standing affiliation is developed and maintained through media and consumption practices and a far greater number—labeled as flâneurs—who "adopt a detached relationship to football clubs" (p. 39). These ideas of detachment and commitment have been explored in relation to another form of fandom by Jonathan Gray (2003) in his provocative analysis of anti-fans. Gray points to the importance of attending to those whose engagements with a particular television show range from disinterest to highly critical and rightly suggests that such oppositional "readings" are key in contributing to wider cultural debates. This is also an argument that applies to the Eurovision Song Contest, where many viewers tend to adopt a detached, ironic posture when discussing why they watch the show (Georgiou, 2008; McCulloch, 2012). This is in addition to countless critics who deride the ESC as vacuous and/or morally debased yet are often key in raising its profile.

The broader point that needs to be made, here, however, is that these approaches point to not only the varying commitment that particular individuals or groups have to, in this case, a media event but how that sense of commitment/detachment is tied to "projects of self-formation" and informed by media practices. Moreover, we should be aware that such arguments apply not just to anti/fans but those who produce and participate in such events, whether as organizers, hosts, journalists, or performers.

Therefore, foregrounding the investment that different groups have made in a particular media event, whether as a one-off or over longer periods of time, may help us to move beyond simply noting them as sites of symbolic struggle and more effectively theorize their significance. The next section briefly outlines how the Eurovision Song Contest has been studied in previous research before describing how the data were collected and analyzed.

### **Studying the ESC—From Geopolitics to Identity Politics**

The Eurovision Song Contest is the most popular international music event in the world, attracting annual audiences of more than 150 million. Each year, member states of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) are asked submit an original pop song to be sung by a nominated performer. The winner is the entry that receives the most votes from the public and expert juries across all the competing countries.

The voting system has been the subject of a great deal of controversy with accusations that some members continue to vote “politically” in order to meet obligations to cultural and/or political allies (Blangiardo & Baio, 2014). Studies of voting patterns at the ESC have largely confirmed this view, noting the importance of “cultural and geographical similarities as well as migrations of people” in shaping outcomes (Blangiardo & Baio, 2014, p. 2312). In the past, it was Western, Northern, and Mediterranean blocs (Yair, 1995) that were seen to matter, but the expansion of the competition has focused attention on new entrants from the former Yugoslav and Soviet republics (Gatherer, 2007; Spierdijk & Vellekoop, 2009).

This eastern expansion of the competition has also led to a growing interest in the role of the ESC in allowing these “new” nations to announce themselves on the European stage (Jordan, 2014) and/or perform “Europeanness” (Akin, 2013, p. 2317). Beyond the display of technical capabilities (Bolin, 2006), ideas around what it means to be European have increasingly focused on attitudes toward “diversity” and, in the case of the ESC, sexual minorities (Mizielinska & Kulpa, 2011). To this end, a range of studies have noted the ways in which more peripheral countries—including Russia (Heller, 2007), Israel (Lemish, 2004, Serbia (Mitrović, 2010), and Turkey (Akin, 2013)—have responded to the competition’s “camp aesthetic” and “social and cultural significance for queer individuals and communities” (Heller, 2007, p. 203) as well as the wider controversies these responses have generated (Jones & Subotic, 2011).

These tensions over the organization and meaning of the ESC are at the heart of this article, but rather than focusing on textual analyses, we offer a complementary perspective from “inside the media event.” We adopt this approach to understand not only how different interest groups—organizers, broadcasters, journalists, fans—engage with the event but the ways in which these varying engagements shape their understanding of it.

### **Method**

The main part of the project involved fieldwork in Copenhagen during the week leading up to the final of the contest on May 6, 2014, and included attendance at all the preliminary events as well as the final itself, observing the activities of participants inside the media event and conducting short interviews with fans in the arena and journalists in the press center. Visits were also made to the main fan sites in Copenhagen, and longer single and group interviews with fans, volunteers, and support staff were undertaken. Subsequently, interviews were also carried out with journalists who attended the event and with two of the key organizers from the Danish broadcaster. In total, more than 80 people were interviewed. In terms of the interview schedules, we started by asking fans about their interest in the competition, previous visits, their most/least favorite events, and so on. We then moved on to more specific questions about their uses of media and their opinions on key issues relating to the 2014 competition, including the controversy over the Russian entry and the rise to prominence of the Austrian entrant (and subsequent winner), Conchita Wurst. Journalists were asked about their experience of, and attitudes toward, the ESC, how they planned to cover the 2014 events, the main issues for their organization, and changing media practices. The interviews with the organizers addressed the challenges they faced in working with different interest groups (the EBU, other broadcasters, government

organizations) and their main achievements, which mainly revolved around their use of social media to engage participants.

Although we spoke to a useful number of people with an interest in the competition, we cannot, of course, claim that the views we discuss are representative of any group. However, in talking to a fairly broad range of fans (in terms of gender, age, nationality, sexuality), we did hear the same views and arguments being expressed consistently and, therefore, can reasonably argue that in some instances theoretical saturation was reached. In terms of data analysis, the fan interviews were initially coded, using NVivo, according to a number of preidentified themes (attendance, media practices, identity performance, activities, preferences). These open codes helped to identify broader patterns and, in particular, consistencies across the data. For instance, most fans we spoke to were unhappy about the booing of the Russian entry, and these passages were analyzed in greater detail using the tenets of membership categorization analysis to understand how respondents defined both the situation and their own sense of identity in relation to it (Stokoe, 2012).

#### **“This Year There Was a Big Interest in the Political Aspect”**

Given the amount of material collected, the number of people interviewed, and the range of features observed, for the purposes of this article, the focus is on an issue that became one of the key talking points of the 2014 ESC: how the Russian entry was anticipated, responded to, and evaluated. In particular, we examine three notable fault lines—organizers and mainstream media, organizers and hosts, and fans attending the event and media audiences—because they seem to capture the extent to which the meaning(fulness) of the event is tied to both levels of commitment to it and “projects of self-formation.”

The contest in Copenhagen was held against a wider backdrop of economic turmoil, with some countries citing rising costs as a reason for not participating. However, one of the key stories that had dominated news schedules in the run-up to the event was the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. In 2013, Russia annexed the region of Crimea after the violent overthrow of the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian leader Viktor Yanashenko. This move generated huge controversy, culminating in the imposition of sanctions by many Western (European) states and leading to further fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in other parts of eastern Ukraine.

Therefore, the fact that Russia and Ukraine were drawn in the same semifinal at the 2014 contest offered one useful way of framing the contest for many media outlets. As a BBC journalist who covered the event argued, this was a useful way of drawing attention to the competition and relating it to wider public debates:

BBC journalist: Well, I think this year there was a big interest in the political aspect . . . and the whole Russia, Ukraine thing, the fact that they were both in the same semifinal. There was a lot of interest . . . not just from the website but from all of BBC News for all of the editors of the news programs. That was something, that was an element that they could all get their teeth into . . . rather than EV [Eurovision] is just going on. So there was a lot of interest in that.

Interviewer: So the Russia, Ukraine . . . was that something you were expecting before, or did that develop as a result of what happened on the night?

BBC journalist: It was something that we were kind of anticipating in, in terms of everybody had said they're in the same . . . quite a few people had pointed out they were in the same semifinal on Tuesday night . . . it was kind of like . . . is one of them going to get through and not the other one, or what's going to happen basically. It was kind of anticipated that something might happen, it was one of those things that we were watching . . .

Interviewer: Right, OK.

BBC journalist: . . . but we didn't know what the actual outcome would be.

Similar views were expressed in the press center at the main ESC venue. While some of the journalists we spoke to had been coming to the event for many years and had come to enjoy the occasion, many others were simply parachuted in for a few days and generally saw it as either a lighthearted distraction or a slog. These individuals had little or no commitment to the event and were required to generate stories about a competition involving few recognizable stars and varying musical quality. In these cases, it is perhaps not surprising that they looked to frame the event in relation to wider (geo)political issues.

This emphasis was also reflected in wider press coverage of the 2014 contest. A simple content analysis of the UK and French press, using Nexis, during the month of May 2014 showed that Russia and Ukraine generated more mentions than all other "foreign" countries, except the winner (Austria) and host country (Denmark).

However, this framing of the competition represents a major challenge for the organizers, who continually emphasize the apolitical nature of the ESC. To this end, the rules of the competition specifically state that:

No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the Eurovision Song Contest. . . . No messages promoting any organisation, institution, political cause or other, company, brand, products or services shall be allowed in the Shows and within any official Eurovision Song Contest premises (i.e. at the venue, the Eurovision village, the Press Centre, etc.). A breach of this rule may result in disqualification.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, these are not idle threats. Georgia's 2009 entry, a thinly disguised attack on the Russian leader Vladimir Putin, was banned from the competition. Likewise, Turkey was suspended for two years when the state broadcaster refused to transmit coverage of the Greek entry in 1976 (Akin, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eurovision.tv/page/about/rules>



The applications of these draconian rules and regulations show that the contest is a means to a very different end for those who organize it over the longer term. Indeed, the EBU primarily uses the contest to highlight its role as “a world-renowned benchmark of media industry knowledge and expertise, particularly in broadcast technology and innovation” (European Broadcasting Union, 2013, p. ii) and, more broadly, “to defend the interests of public service media” (European Broadcasting Union, 2013, p. ii).

These examples demonstrate not only the competing aims that organizers and mainstream media often have in relation to a specific media event but how such struggles over its organization and meaning are closely tied to the different ways in which they engage, and identify, with it. Just as mainstream journalists often crave controversy as a means of selling the show to skeptical colleagues and media audiences before moving on to the next issue, so the EBU looks to manage such issues to both secure the long-term viability of the show and demonstrate its own continued standing within a rapidly changing social and media environment.

The next section explores the impact of these varying levels of commitment to the ESC by focusing on another key fault line—the ways in which organizers and hosts sometimes come into conflict over how the event is designed, managed, and promoted.

#### **“Expect a Mixed Response to This Song. Number 15, Russia”**

As a long-term custodian of the ESC, the EBU is “directly responsible for overseeing and guiding all aspects of the finances, organization, creative planning and execution” (European Broadcasting Union, 2015, p. 10). Each year it works closely with the member who won the previous year’s competition to identify a suitable venue, market the event, design a program, and ensure that the broadcast and other facilities are in order. As we noted before, the ESC is an opportunity for the host country to promote its technical capabilities (Bolin, 2006) alongside other cultural and social amenities (Jordan, 2014). However, while both groups will strive to produce a spectacular and successful show, their priorities are not always aligned—notably when it comes to defining the budget of the show and how that budget is spent. According to a senior executive from the Danish public-service broadcaster:

It is their [the EBU’s] job to make sure that the long-term vision for the show is sustained. . . . And each broadcaster has an incentive to try and make this year the best and wildest one yet. . . . And they sit there and say yes, sure, but next year it will take place somewhere different and they will also want to do something crazy. . . . So some kind of continuity has to be kept and they are in charge of that on a daily basis. (personal interview, March 27, 2016)

Here again we see how a longer-term commitment to the contest results in a somewhat different set of objectives from those whose involvement is far more fleeting. Hosts of the ESC will quite obviously have an overriding interest in ensuring that “their” event is regarded as a success, but they will care much less about subsequent iterations (Akin, 2013). Conversely, organizers need to allow for variations each year while maintaining the overall integrity of the brand and format. For instance, we were told that the EBU has consistently refused to allow hosts to bring in global superstars, such as Justin Bieber, to bolster

the profile of a given contest, because it poses a threat to the distinctiveness of the ESC. This idea of continuity and image management has also been discussed by Simone Eisenhauer (2013) in her recent study of the football World Cup. She noted that FIFA (international soccer's governing body) exerted considerable power as the event owner, with its principal responsibility seeming to be to the World Cup brand and the major sponsors of the event rather than the hosts or fans.

Similarly, such tensions can be seen in relation to how the Eurovision event is managed as well as in the design phase. For instance, at the 2014 competition, one of the main issues that emerged was the fact that a clearly audible group of fans in the arena booed the Russian entry, 17-year-old twins, the Tolmachevy Sisters. This was a largely unprecedented response to a performance at an ESC and, not surprisingly, caused a major problem for the organizers and hosts, who had differing views on how to respond to it.

### **“What We Stand For and What the EBU Stands For Is the Happy Message”**

For those on the ground, the initial response seemed quite low-key, being incorporated into the set of instructions that the crowd was given before each show, concerning, for instance, when to wave their flags, which songs to turn on their mobile phone lights to, and so on. At first, these were coded in general terms—for instance, “Let’s make some noise for all the songs, all the countries, this is EV, this is love” and “Make very good positive vibes for all the countries.” However, later in the night of the finals, the instructions became more specific: “People, Eurovision crowd, I need your positive vibe now, make a big round of applause for Russia” and “This is a night to celebrate music, please forget about politics, let’s have some fun, Russia.”

As two representatives from the Danish broadcaster subsequently confirmed, these utterances were designed to focus on the personal (the two young girls and the music competition) over the political.

Producer 1: They did it in several ways, for instance by saying that what we have here are two sweet girls, so let us consider them as the people that they are instead of thinking of them being representatives of Putin. And in that way encouraged to . . .

Producer 2: But we didn’t say . . . the crowd manager, he didn’t say, you are not allowed to boo. He said, hey, it is fair play and shouldn’t we give everybody a fair chance? That is what we attempted. We attempted to be the happy message.

Unfortunately, for the organizers this “happy message” did not make much difference with not only the performance in the final but the awarding of points to Russia generating further dissent. This meant that the organizers resorted to their control over the broadcast technology to try to manage the impact of these activities.

As our respondents discussed in a section that is worth quoting at length, this attempt generated noticeable conflict between the Danish hosts and the EBU as well as demonstrated the relations of power that operate between organizers and other participants.

Producer 1: We had an intense discussion because it is possible to control it somewhat, we were able to turn the volume of the audience up or down. . . . That means manipulation with reality, or should we let reality appear as it is. And then a heavy pressure came from EBU because they are of the opinion that Eurovision Song Contest has to be 100% apolitical. So they wanted us to first of all get all the flags and banners out of there, and we said that there is no way that we are going to do that. That isn't going to happen. And here we reached the top level of management.

Producer 2: The rainbow banner.

Producer 1: We cannot take the rainbow banner away from people, because that is a kind of freedom of expression.

Producer 2: In many countries the rainbow banner represents something that has to do with activism and politics, while it in other countries—Denmark, for instance—is a symbol of freedom. And we don't want to take part in censoring a symbol of freedom . . .

Producer 1: We simply cannot do that. Our opinion is that if you are homosexual in this country, then that is what you are and that has nothing to do with politics. So we won't be doing that. We cannot take banners away. And then they asked if we could lower the volume level. And here we caved a bit on the live show itself and turned it down a bit. Turned the volume down a bit. But it demanded—in reality it was mostly about trying to balance the competition in such a way that the Russian girls received neither sympathy or hatred, so really it was about trying to level the playing field. So we tried to do that—it was a huge dilemma.

There is much that could be said about this exchange, but for the purposes of this article, we focus on how the different priorities of the organizer and host shaped their responses to this incident. In the initial negotiations over the rainbow banner, the concerns of the EBU to ensure an apolitical contest were trumped by the hosts' unwillingness to censor fans "in this country." One can imagine the sort of furor the banning of the rainbow banner would have caused around the world and how it would have impacted on perceptions of Denmark as a bastion of tolerance and liberal values—an idea that was promoted quite aggressively in the promotional literature around the event. Such a move is likely to have done little for the EBU's image as well, but it is generally the host country that suffers most when there is an issue with the management or organization of the ESC.

The turning down of the volume is still seen to be problematic because it needs to be justified as both a conditional response to the demands of the organizers (notice the repetition of "down a bit") and as an act of decency (to "level the playing field") rather than censorship. However, it does not have the potential to threaten the standing of the host broadcaster, city, or country in the same way that the banning of the rainbow banner might have done. Here, the objectives of the organizer and the host coalesce around the desire to present a compelling, yet carefully managed, spectacle that will, as far as possible, not generate repercussions for subsequent hosts or performers.

In the final section of this article, we switch our focus slightly to examine one final perspective that again touches on issues around the meaningfulness of a media event. Before examining in some depth the views of fans who traveled to Copenhagen, we will briefly note how media audiences across Europe voted in 2014. Without any in-depth audience research, which was beyond the scope of this project, we cannot say why they voted the way they did. However, by looking at the overall televoting results, we can begin to look at broader patterns in the ways that audiences in different countries responded to particular artists and observe whether there are any noticeable discrepancies between different countries or regions across Europe.

### **“And the Winner Is . . .”**

Table 1 shows how fans and juries in three Western and three Eastern European countries voted for the Russian and Austrian entries in the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. If the boeing of the Russian entrant was one of the major stories of the 2014 ESC, then the other was the eventual winner, the Austrian representative Conchita Wurst. Wurst, “a woman with a beard,” is the creation of Tom Neuwirth and, according to the artist, was designed to challenge the prejudice and discrimination he had faced throughout his life. Although Conchita was the subject of criticism from some commentators and politicians, the response to her performance at the ESC was overwhelmingly positive, and she won by a landslide. The Russian entry came in seventh, with strong support from a number of its near neighbors (and Greece).

**Table 1. Public Televotes and Jury Votes in Eight Countries for the Russian and Austrian Entries in the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest.**

Country	Russian entry		Austrian entry	
	Televote	Jury vote	Televote	Jury vote
Armenia	1	6	2	24
Azerbaijan	2	1	3	24
Belarus	1	1	4	23
Sweden	16	16	1	1
Norway	19	24	2	4
Netherlands	15	14	1	1
Russia			3	11
Austria	18	15		

*Note.* 1 = first place; 24 = last place. From <http://www.eurovision.tv/page/results?event=1893&voter=>

There are three noticeable features about the votes shown in Table 1. First is the extent to which viewers who took part in the televote from all over Europe responded positively to Conchita Wurst’s performance. While this offers a partial challenge to some of the claims that have been made about the difference in attitudes toward sexual minorities in Eastern and Western Europe, it seems likely that those watching the event and participating in the vote would have more liberal attitudes (and would not necessarily be a representative sample of the population). What is also striking about the Austrian vote is

the extent to which the jury vote stands at odds to the televote in East European countries. Given the reported criticism of Wurst in many of these countries from official government sources, this discrepancy is perhaps not surprising, but it again shows the ways in which particular performers are evaluated by different constituencies. Finally, we can see a marked difference between support for the Russian entry among Russia's near neighbors and the most liberal of Western European states. One could argue, of course, that these are largely the result of cultural preferences, but given the nature of the Russian song (a Western-style ballad, sung in English), it seems likely that wider political issues impacted on the voting.

As noted earlier, examining voting patterns has been a fairly standard approach to theorizing the ESC on the basis of cultural/national/regional affiliations and preferences. Perhaps the other point to make here is that most people watching on TV are unlikely to have more than a passing interest in the ESC, and they engage with it for a short period of time and through the lens of mainstream media, which tends to focus on political issues. Given these data, it is fascinating to see how these results contrast with how fans at the event discussed the proceedings and, in particular, the treatment of the Russian entry.

### **"We're Just People Who Like Music"**

Although the booing of the Tolmachevy Sisters was clearly audible at particular moments inside the arena, it was not always easy to identify who was responsible. Partly this was because of the size of the arena and partly because much of the booing came from near the front, where people were standing packed together and, hence, largely inaccessible. Beyond these groups around the stage and the green room (a carefully managed area in the center of the arena where artists sit after their performance), the majority of those who attend remain seated and relatively inactive, beyond cheering their favorite song. We managed to conduct a few brief interviews with people who were booing, though, not surprisingly, they were brief encounters and not easy to conduct.

Those we managed to get a response from indicated they were booing to protest the Russian government's treatment of LGBT people<sup>2</sup> rather than the crisis in Ukraine, though this was a far from representative sample. Having said that, the organizers we spoke to noted that the booing was also accompanied by a concerted display of the rainbow flag (a marker of gay pride) and suggested that these activities "didn't happen spontaneously . . . [but] had been planned." This again indicates that it was LGBT, rather than geopolitical, issues that were being highlighted by a core group of fans.

Outside the arena, those we interviewed in the fan cafes and other public settings expressed a surprising degree of antipathy toward the booing, with many drawing a distinction between Russian politics (which they were critical of) and the individual performers, the Tolmachevy Sisters. Their views also point to the ways in which the meaningfulness of the event is directly tied to the extent to which different groups invest in it, notably as a project of self-formation.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2013, the Russian government passed a law banning the promotion of alternative sexual lifestyles. The harassment of LGBT organizations and activists has also increased.

The vast majority of the people we spoke to criticized the barracking of the Russian entry, with the following examples being fairly typical:

1. Interviewer: What did you think about the booing?

Tim: That was terrible.

Jeff: Not good.

Ben: It's rude.

Tim: It's not good for the artist because they're not involved.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Tim: They're not involved, they're just singing a song, it's not for them to be booed (Irish and Australian fans, ages 20–30)

2. Interviewer: What did you think of the booing?

Anna: I think it's the gay thing I suppose, and the Ukraine thing. And you know, the war with Ukraine. So yeah, I think it's disrespectful because the singer—it's not their fault. It's not their fault if there is a political thing happening. I hate also when we get, I think sometimes we get the worst because of the politics, and not because of our song. It saddens me because it's not the artist's fault, it's not the fan's fault. We don't represent our leaders or our political actions. We're just people who like music. (Israeli fan, age 30–40)

3. Interviewer: Seriously, what did you think about the booing?

Robert: I'm glad they didn't do it in the—during the performance . . . because they are young ladies. And—and you know, they—it wasn't their fault. They were asked to do their job, and they did it to the best of their ability. (Irish fan, age 40–50)

4. Interviewer: Right. And so, it's [Bob writes a regular piece about the competition for a national newspaper] mainly about, about personality as opposed to say the political angle?

Bob: I didn't want to get involved in the, in the serious politics of it—because I don't really think that's what Eurovision is about. There is an element of that. . . . But I wouldn't want to do that, because that's not something I feel comfortable writing about. In the semifinal, the Russian girls got booed at the end, simply for qualifying, which I thought was outrageous. I mean, 17-year-old girls who, you know, probably want to talk

about fashion and Justin Bieber and all that kind of stuff. And they're getting booed for simply being Russian. . . . I just think it's really uncalled for. And I didn't cover any of that. (Scottish fan, age 50–60)

5. Interviewer: Did you hear when people were booing the Russians?

Max: Yeah.

Interviewer: What do you think?

Max: I can almost tell why, because of all the problems going on between Russia and Ukraine but also for the gay rights in Russia. They are against it. So, I think this is still a friendly competition, so, politics matter, but not in here. It is just a country with their song. Those two girls, they can't help it that their president is a jackass to say it, but, yeah. It is not nice. (German fan, age 30–40)

6. Maria: Yeah. You meet in a friendly space. And we just are sympathetic to one another. That's also why I also—I don't—I didn't appreciate the first semifinals this year that the Russian act got booed.

Interviewer: Oh, OK.

Maria: So, I mean . . . of course I'm not in love with Russia, or Russian politics but we shouldn't do that.

Paul: I don't think that has anything to do with Eurovision, I don't think that's a problem of Ukraine and Russia, I think that's more about Russia and Putin and the Ukrainian leaders, not about us here who come to see the final, both entrants were known before Russia started their war, it's not about that.

Maria: But I understand your question—I think it's really different if you love it, then you have a totally different point of view on Eurovision. It's—and you can never share the same view as someone from outside. (German and Belgian fans, ages 30–40)

Several points are worth making in relation to these extracts. First, those who attend the ESC on a regular basis see it as a "friendly space" where people from different backgrounds can come together and enjoy themselves. In other words, the week of the competition is a "liminal" period (Turner, 1995) during which many of the constraints and challenges of everyday life no longer apply. This would include time away from work and other regular commitments but, perhaps more importantly, access to social settings that support and encourage a diverse range of social and sexual practices. This is particularly important for members of the LGBT community, who make up a sizable number of those attending, given the stigmatization they continue to face in mainstream society. Time and again we were told about the liberating feeling that people experienced at the ESC and the sense of community that developed as, in the words of Maria, "we just are sympathetic to one another."

These factors may partly explain why so many of the fans we spoke to criticized the booing of the Russian act. First, they saw it as threatening the liminal space of the contest by bringing “politics . . . in here.” As members of a minority group that has to struggle with the politics of identity/sexuality on a regular basis, the ESC not only offers LGBT fans a place of physical comfort and security, it is also a period when such issues can be set aside and life simply enjoyed in the presence of like-minded souls. It’s worth noting that both Bob and Paul use almost identical language—“It’s not what Eurovision is about” and “I don’t think that has anything to do with Eurovision”—when critiquing the infiltration of “serious politics” into the 2014 event. Maria draws a distinction between those who really “love Eurovision” and those who witness the event “from outside.” For those inside the media event—notably fans and supporters who engage with it on a regular basis—the contest is about building and nurturing personal relationships in a safe and fun environment. For them, overtly political debates take away from this atmosphere and have the potential to drive a wedge between supporters. Alternatively, for more casual observers, such controversies ensure that the ESC remains a compelling spectacle.

There is also something to be said here about the meaningfulness of the musical content of the contest. Fans of the show whom we both spoke to and overheard as we moved through the city constantly debated their favorite songs and proudly expressed their in-depth knowledge of previous competitions and performers. For them, the music is a key element, and their ability to become experts in their field has been dramatically assisted by the growth of global digital media platforms, such as YouTube, as well as dedicated Internet radio and TV stations, generally run by fans. For many dedicated fans who attend the event and are immersed in the culture of the ESC, the performers are clearly identifiable figures with their own tastes and preferences. For the casual observer who watches the final and may read the odd newspaper report in the run-up to it, individual performers will generally be unfamiliar and primarily identified by their country. Just as importantly, they will also be framed through the lens of mainstream media, which—as we have seen—often emphasizes the political over the personal.

As a result, the dedicated fans are better able (and willing) to distinguish between individual performers and view them as more than representatives of a country or regime. As two of our respondents argued, “they are just singing a song” and doing their “job . . . to the best of their ability.” In a similar vein, Anna expresses her frustration that as an Israeli she is judged by the activities of her government (“we get . . . the worst because of the politics . . . we don’t represent our leaders”) rather than as an individual fan of the event (“we’re just people who like music”). In these instances, we can again see how a commitment to a particular media event is tied to a very specific “project of self-formation” that is defined by liberal values and tolerance of (sexual) differences. This is nurtured over time through both attending the event on a regular basis and various media practices throughout the year that are designed to build a sense of community with other like-minded fans.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on both media events and the Eurovision Song Contest has grown quite dramatically in recent years, with scholars moving beyond functionalist approaches to focus on relations of power and the struggles to articulate, and resist, particular narratives. In the case of the ESC, research



has often emphasized the significance of identity politics—whether tied to gender, sexuality, nationality, or Europe—mainly using textual analysis.

This article provides an alternative perspective by connecting insights from fan studies, which have emphasized the varying ways that different groups engage with a particular text, issue, or object of affection, with data collected from inside the media event. In doing so, it introduces a key temporal dimension into the analysis by foregrounding the commitment that different groups—organizers, broadcasters, fans, and media audiences—have to the event *over time* and the ways in which this shapes their response to key issues and performers.

Interestingly, those with a longer-term interest in Eurovision, whether as organizers or followers, view it (or at least portray it) as a liminal space defined by tolerance, friendship, and personal narratives of exploration. For these groups, the ESC is a major investment (of time, expertise, money) and often becomes bound up with the individual's wider sense of identity and community. In the latter case, this is cultivated outside the event itself, often through the use of various media platforms as well as sporadic face-to-face meetings. This is in contrast to major media broadcasters and audiences whose interest is generally captured for a short period of time and only then by the larger-scale political dramas that are often used to frame and evaluate performers and the countries they represent.

A similar distinction can be seen in the ways such groups engage with the content of the show. The music featured in the ESC is largely derided by mainstream commentators and audiences as vapid. Alternatively, while long-term followers may not define performers or their songs as high art, their knowledge and enthusiasm are impressive. This, in turn, enables them to see individual performers in a very different light from the majority who watch the show in passing.

At the 2014 event, these tensions could also be seen in responses to the unprecedented barracking of the Russian entrant. On the one hand, it posed a significant challenge to those who wish to portray the event as nonpolitical or enjoy it as a liminal space. On the other hand, these carefully targeted attacks (supported through the use of social media) generated publicity for the event and made it, once again, the most watched international musical competition in the world.

Therefore, in trying to make sense of the place of media events in an increasingly complex media and social environment, it is imperative that we move beyond simply noting that they are sites of symbolic struggle to explore two key issues. First, the extent to which different groups commit to, and invest in, such events over time, whether materially, physically, and/or emotionally, and what they hope to achieve from these ongoing engagements. Second, how these varying commitments shape their own understandings of, and responses to, both the event itself as well as particular incidents that may occur. In terms of the ESC, three major fault lines were identified—between organizers and mainstream media, hosts and organizers, and fans attending the event and media audiences—and future work might investigate their relevance in other times and settings.

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