

## Media events and cosmopolitan fandom

"Playful nationalism' in the Eurovision Song Contest

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**Title: Media events and cosmopolitan fandom: 'Playful nationalism' in the Eurovision Song**

**Contest**

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**Abstract**

Academic literature on media events is increasingly concerned with their global dimensions and the applicability of Dayan and Katz's (1992) theoretical concept in a post-national context. This paper contributes to this debate by exploring the Eurovision Song Contest as a global media event. In particular, we employ a perspective from 'inside the media event', drawing upon empirical material collected during the 2014 Eurovision final in Copenhagen and focusing on the experiences of fans attending the contest. We argue that the ESC as a media event is experienced by its fans as a cosmopolitan space, open and diverse, whereas national belonging is expressed in a playful way tied to the overall visual aesthetics of the contest. However, the bounded and narrow character of participation render this cosmopolitan space rather limited.

**Keywords:** media events, Eurovision Song Contest, fandom, cosmopolitanism, nationalism

**Introduction**

Recent work on media events has gradually moved from the context of the nation to question the applicability of Dayan and Katz's (1992) theoretical concept at a global level. In their initial

conceptualisation, Dayan and Katz (1992) highlighted the social cohesive role of media events as affirming a common set of social values, an argument often questioned due to its assumption of societies as inherently stable and uniform (Couldry, 2003). As contemporary social life becomes increasingly complex through the global flows of people, ideas and products and media content attracts but also targets global audiences, it has become imperative to study the implication of events designed for and broadcast to an international audience. In this global context, the cohesive role of media events has been further questioned both because of the variability of media events type content and the ways they are mediated in different national contexts (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 5).

In this paper we aim at contributing to this discussion through an empirical investigation of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). Currently counting about forty participant countries, including Australia<sup>i</sup>, and reaching an audience of about 180 million around the world, Eurovision is a major global media event. Loved and ridiculed to an equal degree, the ESC has preoccupied social scientists from a number of fields, and has been the topic of studies of nationalism, globalisation and fandom. Although the active members of the EBU, the organising body, are not geographically confined to the European continent and in principle the competition bears no relation to the European Union, Eurovision has been approached as a cultural arena where the politics of Europe are expressed and as a constitutive process for the construction of the idea of a united Europe. Its nature as an international cultural competition, as well as the acknowledgement of its global reach and popularity, open up questions about the event as a space of international cultural exchange and its role in the formation of global cultural tastes and ideas.

We approach the Eurovision Song Contest as a global media event, questioning its integrative potential at a post-national level. Moving beyond other accounts of the contest, which explore it in relation to its organization (Bolin, 2006) or its television audiences (Georgiou, 2008), the current paper is based on fieldwork conducted 'inside the media event' during the 59th Eurovision Song Contest, organised in Copenhagen in May 2014. Drawing upon interviews with Eurovision fans attending the finals, as well as participant observation in the event itself, the paper argues that the competition as a global media event opens up a space of cosmopolitan engagement for its fans. Nationalism, as expressed inside the media event, is of a playful nature, performed through flag waving and dress up, but not in competition to the other participant nations. At the same time, this playful nationalism is a constituent of the cosmopolitan space that is the Eurovision Song Contest at the site of organisation and live attendance. This space, centred on sexual and fan identities, is expressed in terms of cultural openness but is not itself neutral of hierarchies and stratification. These two concepts, of playful nationalism and cosmopolitan fandom, will be the focus of the paper, after a first brief look of the relevant literature, and an illustration of our research method. Our aim in this paper is, therefore, twofold: in empirical terms, we explore the integrative potential of global media events; in analytical terms, we provide a perspective from 'inside the media event', focusing on those fans who attend it.

### **The ESC as a media event**

Dayan and Katz included the ESC in their initial conceptualization of media events, namely the television genre of the broadcast of ceremonial events (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 136), which interrupt the routines of daily media flow and attract large numbers of audiences brought together by the simultaneous viewing activity. These events, in this first definition of the concept, are preplanned and organised outside the media by public or other bodies, are presented

with reverence and celebrate societal unity and values. Media events become moments of 'mechanical solidarity' based on the fact that 'all those within reach of a television set are simultaneously and equally exposed, and they share the knowledge that everybody else is too' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 196–197). The potential of media events to disrupt daily media routines and bring large (often global) audiences together has been central in later developments of the concept, which expanded its definition to include disaster marathons (Katz and Liebes, 2007), global disasters (Kyriakidou, 2008) and popular events (Hepp, 2004).

The possible integrative role of the ESC at the European level has also influenced early studies of the contest. As an international, and more recently global, televised event, Eurovision has been promoted, since its early days, as playing a key role in the construction of a European public space through the sharing and exchange of popular culture, an enterprise of 'the engineers of the European soul' (Bourdon, 2007). Central to this idea is the assumption that audiences around Europe are being brought together into a European public through the simultaneous viewing activity of the competition. As a television genre, the ESC adheres to the criteria of the 'contest' script of Dayan and Katz's (1992) model - the other two being conquests and coronations -, namely a cyclical media event taking place under specific rules in an arena and presented to a judging audience, marked by the question of 'who will win?'. The shared experience of the ESC among European audiences, habitual in its annual cycle, can gradually contribute to the addition of a European layer to the identities of Europeans (Gripsrud, 2007: 479). At the same time, as a media event, the ESC is seen as highlighting central social values or aspects of collective memory, in this case the ideal of a European cooperation (Feddersen and Lyttle, 2003).

Among the number of criticisms the concept of media events has received (see for example, Cottle, 2006; Couldry, 2003; Scannell, 1995), the idea of it as celebratory and symbolic of social unity has generated the most vigorous debate. Dayan and Katz's (1992) initial account of media events seems to assume a straightforward relationship between media coverage and audience endorsement, obscuring the ideological construction of social order as well as significant diversities in what they assume to be a rather unified public, ignoring questions of class, ethnicity, religion or gender. These diversities become even more accentuated when the concept of the media event is applied beyond nationally-bound broadcasts, to events televised for an international and global audience (Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz, 2010). Global media events are nationalised in their broadcast and mediated differently in different areas of the world (Hepp and Couldry, 2010). In this context, instead of forming the basis for a global 'we', global media events 'open the space for the construction and reconstruction of many different constructions of a common "we", and of many varied national, ethnic, religious, sub-cultural and other voicings of that "we"' (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 12), depending on how the event is appropriated locally.

Similarly, the effectiveness of the ESC in fostering European identity among the participant countries and their people has been challenged. For Bourdon, the idea that European unity can be promoted top-down through media events reflects outdated assumptions both of nationalism and the media, and a doomed attempt to repeat the process of nationalisation of the masses of the 19th century in Europe (Bourdon, 2007: 274). Instead of forming the basis for a common European cultural space, the ESC is instead expressive of an aspiration to be part of the 'West', illustrated by the relevant popularity of the contest in the countries of the periphery (Bourdon, 2007: 265). Bolin (2010) has argued that attitudes towards Eurovision have evolved in a way that ultimately divides Europe between the ironic Western viewers and the sincere and strategic

attitudes of Eastern European countries. In this context, the nation-state is reaffirmed as a basis for cultural identity, whereas Europeanness is being contested (Bolin, 2010: 131). Štětka (2009) has further demonstrated how the failure of a country to be symbolically confirmed as belonging to the European cultural space through a successful ESC participation might lead to a rejection of the media event of the Eurovision both by the national media and its audiences.

### **ESC and national belonging**

Such critiques of the ESC as a media event reinforcing a European identity have emphasised the role played by national identity in the contest. Bolin theorises the ESC as representative of the politics of the nation, something that, he argues, has become even more prominent with the inclusion of Eastern and Central European countries in the competition during the early 2000s (Bolin, 2006). The contest has been approached by many of the participant countries as an opportunity to showcase part of their cultural production, in an attempt to nation branding (Jordan, 2014), especially in the case of the organising nation - along with the prestige associated with being able to organise an event of such scale (Bolin, 2006). The emphasis on local distinctiveness in the process of nation branding by the marginalised countries of Eastern Europe, however, essentialises national folklore and exoticises non-Western cultures and therefore constitutes, according to Baker (2008), an illustration of already existing structural inequalities and symbolic hierarchies within Europe.

Furthermore, nationalist ideologies come to play during the televised event itself. Commentators of the national broadcasters tend to function as national anchorage for the televised text, by expressing unquestioned support for the national entry (Ericson, 2002 in Bolin, 2006). The way audiences engage with and respond to the competition is also often expressive of national and

cultural stereotypes (Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns, 2013). Georgiou, who conducted research with Eurovision fans in Britain both through online forums and focus groups, found that audience discussions seemed to reproduce an understanding of a hierarchical Europe, where Western cultures and interests are perceived as superior to those of the rest of European countries (Georgiou, 2008: 144), although this seemed not to be the case for Eurovision enthusiasts.

It is such nationalist identifications that form the basis of what has been described as the 'bloc division' of the Eurovision (Pajala, 2013). United through common history, political interests or cultural and linguistic proximities (Yair, 1995) these blocs of countries also loosely reflect the politics of Europe and political and cultural allegiances. Research has demonstrated that the way votes are cast among participant nations reveals clear coalitions and cliques. In specific, Yair (1995) found three such coalitions, namely the Western, the Mediterranean and the Northern, whereas Gatherer also identified the 'Viking Empire', the 'Warsaw Pact' and the 'Balkan bloc' (Gatherer, 2006). Such findings have pointed out the prominence of nationalist sentiments of proximity and difference in the voting process and have defied the nature of the festival as a space of openness and fairness. Far from forming the arena of a united Europe, the ESC seems to be a space for the dramatisation and symbolic articulation of existing political and national tensions (Kellner, 2003).

### **Global perspectives from 'inside the media event'**

The above arguments are based on empirical studies that explore the contest as a media event focusing either on the practices of the organisers or the consumption of the event by national audiences. What we aim at doing here is offering a novel perspective from 'inside the media event' in order to understand how those inside the event, in this case the ESC fans, engage with



it. Dayan and Katz briefly addressed live attendance as the 'in-person audience', which they described as 'actors in the event', who nevertheless 'get only the most fragmentary glimpse of what there is to see, compared with the orchestrated ensemble of events seen by the television viewer' (Dayan and Katz, 1992, pp. 75–76). However, live audiences are a significant part of the performance that is the media event, their visual and aural importance demonstrated continuously by camera shots (Rowe, 2000: 16). Recent studies have also highlighted the contribution of different stakeholders and social actors in media events and the need to study them in their diversity in order to gain insights into the complex nature of the genre (authors, xxx; Hepp and Krotz, 2008; McCurdy, 2008; Rowe, 2000). We understand fans here as important stakeholders in the ESC.

Studies of Eurovision fandom have mostly focused on television audiences of the media event highlighting the affective bond of these audiences with the ESC due to its traditional presence in family life (Sandvoss, 2008; Zaroulia, 2013) or the different ways audiences discuss the contest, mostly along national lines (Georgiou, 2008). Another significant strand of such studies has highlighted the queer character of ESC fandom. Despite the fact that the contest is not inherently queer - on the contrary, it has been traditionally packaged as family entertainment -, it has been significant in providing its gay fans a sense of community and identity, which 'goes beyond territorial constraints and national borders' (Lemish, 2007: 128). Queer engagement with the contest allows for a disruption and critique of the socially normative (Singleton, Fricker and Moreo, 2007) and an 'escape from masculine rites that disinterest and threaten gay men' (Clum, 1999: 6). The role of fan practices in constructing a sense of community among fans has been illustrated by a number of studies exploring fandom, increasingly and through the help of new technologies at the global level (Baym, 2000; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, 2007). What we

focus on here is the global dimension of ESC fandom, which, we argue, is illustrative of a space of cosmopolitan engagement with cultural others (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002) opened up by the contest.

Our understanding of cosmopolitanism here draws upon sociological approaches to the concept, taking as a starting point Hannerz's definition of cosmopolitanism as 'an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other', as well as the 'intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (Hannerz, 1990: 239). A number of empirical studies have grounded this 'orientation' in diverse socio-cultural practices, such as everyday consumption (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007), living in international cities (Müller, 2011), or engaging with the suffering of distant others (Kyriakidou, 2009). These studies have illustrated cosmopolitanism as 'a set of practices and dispositions, grounded in social structures, and observable in commonplace folk settings and practices' (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007: 734). Cosmopolitanism thus conceived is not an ideal type but 'a negotiated frame of reference for dealing with cultural difference' (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007: 745). It is, therefore, a perspective articulated in relation to specific needs and contexts, rather than an inherent property of individuals, groups or situations (Skey, 2013: 235). The ESC as a media event, we will illustrate below, opens up a space where fans engage with and reflect upon cultural difference, and enjoy meeting with people from around the world.

National belonging is not dismissed or surpassed in this context. National and cosmopolitan frames co-exist and can be articulated alternatively, in what Beck has described as the 'both/and' principle of the cosmopolitan experience, whereby seemingly incompatible frames of reference overlap (Beck, 2006: 57). ESC fans, as we will illustrate below, did use a number of national markers such as flags and folk costumes. They also acknowledged the significance of national

politics at the level of the organisation of the media event, especially in relation to voting. They did, however, articulate national ideas in a way that we call 'playful nationalism'. With that we wish to describe the expression of national identifications in a non-antagonistic way but as part of the visual aesthetics and carnivalesque element of the media event. Commonsense markers of identity such as flags were often challenged, when fans were asked to reflect on their preferred entry or their experience of the event. Distancing themselves from their national entry or carrying additional symbols of another participating country, and identifying above all with the global community of the ESC, fans would play around with different frames of identification, acknowledging national belonging but not using it as marker of distinction and exclusion.

### **The research project**

The discussion that follows draws upon research conducted over the week of the 2014 ESC, which took place in Copenhagen between the 6th and 10th of May. It is worth noting here that the televised media event of the ESC final is the culmination of a week of Eurovision-related events and festivities at the site of the organisation. These include the semi-finals and dress rehearsals, as well as events organised by or for the fans visiting the city from around the world. The organising city transforms itself for the duration of Eurovision week in order to accommodate and entertain the visiting fans, as well as, to a lesser extent, the local population. One of Copenhagen's central square was named the 'Eurovision Village', and was adorned with a stage for small performances by the ESC participants and other artists, a karaoke machine, and food stands throughout the week. Not far from the square was the Eurovision Café, where fans could spend their days eating, drinking, and meeting each other, as well as watching broadcasts of the performances, if they had not secured tickets. The formal performances took place on one of the city's small islands, the 'Eurovision Island'. These included two semi-finals, two dress

rehearsals, and two finals (one for the jury, and one for the television broadcast). In other words, the media event of the ESC is a spatially and temporally expanded operation at the site of its organisation.

It is by moving within these sites that we conducted the research on which this paper is based. In particular, we conducted participant observation in different sites within the city of Copenhagen during Eurovision week, and we attended all semi-finals, rehearsals and finals. We talked to more than 80 fans both in individual or, most often, group interviews. These people were in their vast majority visiting Copenhagen to attend the event, and came from a wide range of countries, such as Sweden, Ireland, Greece, Australia and USA. Our questions focused on their interest in the event, patterns of attendance, opinions on the different entries, and social media use during the competition. What follows draws upon these discussions, as well as our field notes and observations from attending the performances and walking around the city. Our focus is on the ways Eurovision fans experience the contest as a global media event.

### **Waving the flag: playful nationalism in the ESC**

Symbols of the nation were visually prominent all over Copenhagen during Eurovision week. Flags of the participating countries were decorating and sold in different locations throughout the city. The display of national identity seemed to be an integral part of fan participation in the festivities of the ESC. This display, however, was expressed and performed in a rather ironic way, in what we call here 'playful nationalism'. Central to this idea of nationalism was the use of national symbols and displaying of one's national background as a way of communicating with other fans and participating in the international event rather than a more exclusive expression of nationalism and belonging.

In this context, it was common to see fans walking around the city dressed up in national costumes, carrying national symbols, face-painted with the colours of or covered with their national flags. At the surface, Eurovision did not look very different from any other international competition such as sports events. Fans would often make this comparison but were also eager to differentiate the 'testosterone-filled aggression' (English fan, aged 30-40) of sporting events from the inclusive and welcoming character of Eurovision. Contrary to other international competitions, symbols of the nation were not used to denote an exclusive in-group relation and neither could they be used to predict national identity. Fans with different national attires would often mix in diverse groups. At the same time, fans would also often carry flags of the country of their favourite performance. When we asked three Danish men about their carrying Swedish flags, while strolling around the Eurovision Village, they found it self-evident that they should do so, as they 'loved' the Swedish song, and joked about their lack of patriotic sentiment. British and German fans were strolling with the Greek flag on their backs the day of the first semi-final. The night of the final was also characteristic of this non-nationalist flag waving, as a lot of the fans would carry more than one flag to show support to their favourite song(s) as well as their national entry, often also including the rainbow flag of the LGBT movement. Flag-waving was, therefore, part of the implicit grammar of the visual aesthetics and the spectacle of the media event (Schrag, 2009: 1089) rather than a marker of nationalist distinction. As one fan put it:

The thing is I like all kind of world events. So I'll be watching the World Cup, I'll be watching the Commonwealth Games, I like the Olympics. So you know, anything where there's flags and countries together, I like. (Irish man, aged 40-50)

This was also reflected in the fans' favourite performances in the competition. There were two patterns of song preferences among the participants in our interviews. Some of them, when asked

about their favourite song, would list two, the one representing their home country, and another favourite from the rest of the participating countries. This did not necessarily mean that their national song was their favourite but some of the fans talked about patriotic pride in winning the contest. A couple of British fans claimed that despite their preference for the Swedish entry, they would prefer the UK to win:

Yes, although I wouldn't say that it is my favorite song. [...]you all got a national identity in that and of course we support our, we feel proud about our country. But if you just put all that aside and take them out then Sweden for me would be [the one]...(British man, aged 20-30)

For the majority of fans, however, their favourite song had little to do with the nation it represented. Most of them chose their favourite(s) predominantly on the basis of the 'performance' or the 'catchy tune' and what they saw as a 'good Eurovision song'. Although they acknowledged the politics of voting and the role of geographical proximity, this was discussed as something that did not concern them and at times irritated them. These discussions illustrated the existence of two levels of Eurovision fandom: the audience that watches the contest at home, and tends to vote in line with cultural and political affiliations (Gatherer, 2006; Yair, 1995), on one hand; and the Eurovision enthusiasts that participate in the media event and are mostly interested in the songs and performances, on the other hand (authors, xxxx). In fact, most of the participants in our interviews were not voting themselves. 'Being there' and 'cheering' were described as the role of the fan in the media event, whereas voting was something better left to the 'televoters and other people' (British men, aged 30-40).

Another illustration of playful nationalism was the way fans reacted to political issues emerging during the contest. The 2014 ESC final took place only a couple of months after the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea by Russia. The political tension between the two countries was played out by the mainstream media in the build-up to the final (Jensen, 2014; Sherwin, 2014). In the performance arena this tension was first reflected in the booing of the Russian entry, the 17 year-old Tolmachevy sisters, in the first semi-final. Similar booing was also heard before the same performance during the final, as well as when the Russian presenter read out the country's votes.

Such an expression of dissent seems to confirm a conceptualisation of Eurovision as a space for the dramatisation of existing political and national tensions (Kellner, 2003). However, when talking to the fans outside the arena, they were quick to condemn such expressions as a kind of politics that does not belong to the Eurovision. Characterisations such as 'disgusting', 'disrespectful', 'terrifying' and 'unacceptable' were used by our participants to describe the booing of the Russian performance, as '[this] is Eurovision, it's not about politics!' (Swedish man, aged 20-30). Such an approach to the ESC was also promoted, albeit seemingly unsuccessfully, by the presenters of the ESC final, who introduced the Russian act to the fans by reminding them that 'this is a night to celebrate music! Please, forget about politics and give it up for the two beautiful girls!'.

Only one of our interviewees was proud to admit that he was among the ones booing against Russia. Having travelled to Copenhagen from the US, where he was born and raised by Ukrainian parents, he only became interested in the Eurovision after Ruslana's win for Ukraine in 2004. For him, political identification with the nation seemed to be significant for his identity as a second-generation Ukrainian diaspora.

For most of the fans, however, national politics did not really belong in the contest. As an Israeli fan put it:

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 [i.e. Israel] get, I think sometimes we get the worst [place in the competition] because of the politics, and not because of our song. It saddens me because it's not the artists' fault, it's not the fans' fault. We don't represent our leaders or our political actions. We're just people who like music. We try to sing for that. (Israeli woman, aged 30-40)

What these diverse responses show is a multi-layered engagement with the nation and its politics, which goes beyond the assumptions of a direct relationship between a media event and audience engagement, as well as a challenge to the framing of the contest as underlined by national politics found in the majority of the relevant literature. ESC fans move among different frames of identification and play around with national symbols with apparent easiness, enjoying what Favell has described as '*denationalised* freedom' from what might seem as fixed identities (Favell, 2009: 9; emphasis in the original).

### ***'Music and harmony': the ESC as a cosmopolitan space***

Expressions of playful nationalism, as described above, are illustrative of what we want to describe here as the 'cosmopolitan space' of the ESC. The idea of the coming together of people from different countries and cultures to experience the event, as an example of 'openness' towards cultural difference (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002), was highlighted virtually in all discussions with fans. One of our interviewees, an English teacher, described this as



[...] the breaking of boundaries also. It is on a global level now. You see the interest from Australia, China. Every year I'm so astounded how many more countries want to have a license to be broadcasting the ESC even though they don't have direct obligation to be voting but it is just, kind of like I say, this demolition of boundaries and bringing music and harmony. It sounds so cliché and cheesy... (English man, aged 30-40)

This abstract idea of openness and the 'demolition of boundaries' was illustrated in practice by the formation of friendships and connections with people from other countries. The social space constructed for the purposes of the contest, beyond that of the main arena, such as the Eurovision Café and the Euro Club, where fans would party after the night's performances, was the platform for the formation of such connections. A lot of the regular attendees of the contest that we talked to mentioned that they had made friends with people they met in previous contests and meeting them every year for the event was part of the joy of attending the competition. Some of the groups we interviewed consisted of fans that had become friends in previous contests and kept in touch for years, meeting annually at the ESC. The potential of meeting people and forming such transnational friendships was an idea prominent in fans' accounts of their Eurovision experience. In the following extract, one interviewee, a 28-year-old carpenter from Germany, describes what he likes most about the ESC:

Max: Just being together. Just all those countries, all your friends in the whole of Europe and outside of Europe, so it is just friendship. That is the most important thing here.

Interviewer: More than the music even?

Max: Together with the music because the music unites us, because without Eurovision I wouldn't know all these people, so those two things are the most important. Music and friendship. (German man, aged 20-30)

Cosmopolitan openness in these accounts takes a very specific meaning, associated with the development of personal relations, but also tied to the very specific fandom experience of ESC. An Israeli participant described this as the bubble of the Eurovision:

But the thing is, it's a bubble. [...] When Eurovision is taking over a city, it's a bubble. [...] It depends on which year, but on average 15 000 - 20 000 people are coming each end every year. For those of us. Only two weeks. So it's the biggest party of the year, people come from all over the world. [...] It's multicultural. It's big. It's colourful. And I mean, — who would resist a two week party? (Israeli woman, aged 30-40)

The cosmopolitan 'bubble' of the ESC, as described here, seems to be tied to two main elements, namely fan practices predominantly during but not limited to the media event of the ESC, and sexual politics, which, to a great extent, formed the basis for its definition of openness. At the same time, however, this type of cosmopolitanism seems to be enabled by and reproducing specific class structures.

For our research participants, the basis of identification with national and cultural others was their common status as Eurovision fans. This shared interest and taste formed the common ground for transnational social relations. The importance of this identification was accentuated by the fact that for most of them their love for Eurovision was not something shared widely with friends, families and acquaintances at their local contexts. The ESC, therefore, constitutes a space for the expression of fan identities otherwise marginalised.

It is worth noting, however, that for the fans the life-span of the media event of the ESC goes far beyond the competition's final as broadcast on television or even the days of the Eurovision week. Most of our research participants are members of their national OGAE (Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision), which is the official fan club of the contest. They attend events organised locally, read and write blogs and share information with other fans through social networking sites. Some of them also described how the Eurovision season for them starts in January, the moment the different countries start the local competitions for the choice of their representative:

Melody<sup>ii</sup> is always a big part of our Eurovision calendar of the year [... ]And that was like streaming, we could watch the Swedish competition. It was 6 weeks in total? Six weeks, yeah. Yeah, so every Saturday night we can watch it for a few hours... and follow it through. (Irish man, aged 30-40)

As such, the communicative space opened up by Eurovision is not ephemeral (Christensen and Christensen, 2008) but for fans the event spans virtually for the whole year.

It is the days of the final of the ESC that fan engagement, transnational in its orientation, is expressed more vividly. By performing their fandom at the organising city and the site of the media event, through the use of multiple flags, their dressing up and singing to the songs, as well as their forming relations with others, Eurovision fans embody a type of cosmopolitan cultural capital centred around popular culture (Prieur and Savage, 2013). Their comfort of navigating between and within different cultural formations, contexts and spaces (Hannerz, 1996: 103) is anchored to the contest.

The second element underlining the particularity of the ESC as a cosmopolitan space was that of its sexual politics. The association of Eurovision with queer culture and LGBT politics has long been highlighted (Lemish, 2007). When most international competitions and media events seem to celebrate heteronormativity as a social norm, the ESC has often been described as 'The Gay World Cup' or the 'Gay Olympics' (Baker, 2016)<sup>iii</sup>. As one of our participants put it, in an effort to explain the reason Eurovision is so popular among gay people:

I think the reality is that people like music, people like competitions, and most straight people have the World Cup and things like that. (British man, aged 20-30)

Indeed, most of the participants in our research identified as gay men and all made references to the camp nature of the competition and its sexual politics. The concepts of openness and acceptance of diversity were often mentioned alongside LGBT politics. For that reason, a lot of the fans we talked to before the final acknowledged that the Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst, who ended up winning the contest, would be a good winner, even though her song was not favoured by most. They did find, however, that the message she gave through her presence was in accordance with the spirit of the competition<sup>iv</sup>.

Openness towards sexual diversity was again discussed in transnational terms, as the ESC was described as a space embracing gay people from around the world, who wish to celebrate camp and queer culture. This issue is discussed in the quote below, by one of our participants who manages a popular Eurovision blog:

There's an interesting kind of sexual issue [...]. There are certain people who come from countries where they can't be themselves. They can't be gay. So they arrive in Eurovision, surrounded by openly gay people and they can finally be themselves in the two weeks

during the year – and it becomes a bit, you know, sexual hot house. (British man, aged 20-30)

Such cosmopolitan openness, however, as discussed here constructs the media event as detached from the social experience of fans' everyday lives. The ESC functions as a two-week 'bubble' that allows fans to express their identities and celebrate diversity but does not really challenge mainstream sexual politics beyond the competition. The example of countries that have hosted the competition, while holding a very poor record when it comes to the rights of LGBT groups, such as Russia in 2009, is a testimony to this limited power of Eurovision to challenge the mainstream.

At the same time, the marketing of the ESC as a gay cosmopolitan spectacle by the organisers of the contest has been met with criticism. Catherine Baker argues that such forms of institutionalisation of queer cultural expressions risk turning these expressions into a celebration of how tolerant 'we' are as nation, while more radical views within the LGBTQ community and its relationship to the state remain marginalised (Baker, 2016). The queer character of the event was highlighted by the organisers in Copenhagen, both through frequent jokes by the presenters in the finals and semi-finals, and the offer by the city to gay tourists and fans to get married there during the days leading to the final (Reuters, 2014)<sup>v</sup>. Such branding techniques, however, were hardly accompanied by a vocal critique of human rights violations of LGBT people in many of the participating countries.

Furthermore, the expenses involved in the travel, accommodation and tickets for attending the final and its surrounding events highlight the rather exclusive and specific nature of the cosmopolitanism attached to the ESC. A lot of our participants that were regularly attending the

contest were men in their 30s and white-collar jobs, who saw the Eurovision final as an opportunity for holidays and travelling. Others said it was hard for them to attend every contest due to the costs involved, and had to save money for it. Fandom thus becomes a commodified experience, expressive of an elite kind of cosmopolitanism, more associated with the 'class consciousness of frequent flyers', as described by Calhoun (2003).

## **Conclusion**

Discussing with Eurovision fans attending the ESC final and the accompanying events has given us an insight into the different levels of engagement the ESC allows for as a media event. We have argued that for its fans the competition functions as a space for cosmopolitan engagement with cultural otherness, a space based on fandom and sexual identities. In this context, national identification acquires a playful character, expressed and performed mostly for the purpose of celebrating diversity. At the same time, however, this cultural cosmopolitanism is experienced within the space constructed by the media event and fan practices, detached from the broader social and political context within which the contest takes place or the fans live. The costs required for participating in the experience further highlight the exclusivity and very specific nature of this cosmopolitanism.

These findings contribute to contemporary debates on the global application of media events. We have illustrated how such events can open up a space of global connections among fans. In the case of the ESC these connections move beyond ideas of European-ness or national politics, that have predominated the relevant literature. Fans approach the contest as a global event rather than in terms of European or national politics. In analytical terms, these findings add a further layer to the study of the media events. While most of the literature has focused on the construction and

broadcast of a media event by its producers or its consumption by television audiences, we wish to argue here for the need to pay more focused attention on the experience of the fans attending the event. As the relevant research is increasingly preoccupied with the significance and implications of global media events, highlighting the complexity of such an endeavor and calling for further empirical investigations (Couldry et al., 2010; Fox and Mitu, 2016), it is important to move beyond established analytical foci and inside the media event to explore the levels of engagement experienced within the site of its production. Fandom, as we have identified here with regard to the ESC, creates a space of cosmopolitan engagement both with the event itself and fans from around the world, who share common experiences on the basis of the annual cycle of the competition. This relationship between an international media event and its fans can further develop our understanding of the place of media events in contemporary societies.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Australia participated in the competition for the first time in 2015, in what was thought of as a 'one-off' event but seems to have been extended indefinitely .

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<sup>ii</sup> The participant here refers to Melodifestivalen, which is the national competition organised by the Swedish broadcaster in order to determine the country's representative for the ESC.

<sup>iii</sup> This idea was also echoed by Dafna Lemish's interviewees, who claimed that Eurovision 'is to gay men what sport events are to heterosexual men' (Lemish, 2007: 125).

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, in her acceptance speech, Conchita made references to the sexual politics of the ESC, describing her victory as a sign of respect and tolerance of the European community. "This night is dedicated to everyone who believes in a future of peace and freedom", she said. "You know who you are. We are unity. And we are unstoppable (BBC News, 2014).

<sup>v</sup> It is worth noting here that the organisers' invitation was to all couples, gay and straight, despite the different emphasis of the media (Eurovision.tv, 2014). Only around 40% of the couples that got married were gay.