COMMENTARY

'All Kinds of Everything'? Queer Visibility in Online and Offline Eurovision Fandom

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The annual televisual spectacle, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is an international media event that is a nexus around which questions surrounding identity surface. This paper focuses specifically on the contest's active promotion of queer visibility, that intersects through national stage performances and its international fan base. It untangles the relationship between the contest and its problematic construction as a 'gay event' and how fans are increasingly using social media platforms to legitimise their fan and queer identities. Mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter are an important site where issues surrounding queer visibility may be expressed and constructed. These ESC fan practices are contextualised in relation to literature surrounding male same-sex hook-up apps which can inform our ideas surrounding queer code/space. It also suggests that fans self-regulate who or how they 'come out' as ESC fans which establishes an ESC closet because the ESC is prone to stigmatisation in some national contexts.

Introduction

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has been used as a platform for celebrating the diverse cultures and languages that exist around Europe (Sieg, 2012; Skey, et al., 2016); a diversity which can also be seen in the ESC's international fan base. The contest has also frequently become a platform of queer visibility, actively encouraging the promotion of non-heterosexuality as normative on an international scale (Bohlman, 2007; Mitrovic, 2009; Vänskä, 2007). Thus, the contest is highly popular amongst LGBT individuals and groups, but it is not explicitly a 'gay event'. This paper argues that ESC fandom is a nexus through which issues surrounding queer visibility are expressed and constructed. This occurs within national stage performances and the contest's production, but also within its international fandom. This paper also explores the way in which the ESC is kept alive through digital and social media platforms and how these technical mediators are used by fans to access ESC-related information and to forge like-minded transnational networks. This allows the contest to further promote inclusivity since it becomes accessible beyond the television screen and does not necessarily need to be attended in person. The ESC also intersects with wider issues surrounding how we express and situate our fan identities and sexualities within the landscape of the digital realm. It further problematises

the messy relationships between sexuality constructed diversely as gay, queer and/or camp. This paper begins by exploring queer visibility in relation to European stage performances, particularly in relation to representations in post-socialist and post-soviet countries. Such nations attempt to secure European integration by appropriating liberal Western European attitudes on the path to a progressive LGBT politics. Arguing that the contest embraces technology, social media practices thus create an access point in to ESC fandom, allowing daily fan exchanges of information that intersect with expressions of sexuality. Lastly, the queering of sexuality is explored more specifically in relation to hook-up and mainstream social media smartphone applications and how this research can inform analyses of the ESC, particularly in relation to queer code/space, before drawing conclusions and providing methodological recommendations for analysing digital ESC, and other, fan spaces.

Eurovision as a 'gay event'?

The relationship between the ESC and wider gay culture has become increasingly prominent and more visible within the last 20 years. The contest celebrates campness and queerness on an international scale and has also seen these appropriated by various actors who watch the contest's cultural and national performances (Singleton, et al., 2007). The decoding of ESC narratives as camp is situated within wider debates surrounding the contest as not 'serious' and its use of wind machines and excess use of glitter, sequins and audacious costumes. Thus, the festival converts the 'serious into the frivolous' (Sontag, [1966], 2018: 2) and challenges heteronormative assumptions of gender and sexuality. The wining of the contest by Israeli transsexual *Dana International* in 1998 was considered a defining moment in the ESC's 'coming out'; the singer went on to become an icon who after this success represented LGBT identity struggles internationally (Lemish, 2007). More recently, the winner of the 2014 contest Conchita Wurst, commonly referred to as the 'Lady with the beard', became an LGBT icon, symbolic of a progressive Europe tolerance, respect and equal rights. Wurst has also spoken about these issues internationally at EU-organised summits, furthering the reach of the ESC community (Fricker, 2015). National performances at the ESC have also manipulated gendered, sexual and ethnic stereotypes in articulating visions of European nationhood. These stage performances attempt to reconfigure relationships with shared soviet pasts, such as in Russia (Johnson, 2014) and in the Ukraine through drag act Verka Seduchka (Miazhevich, 2012). Seduchka's effervescent performance of the song 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai' was an attempt to distance Ukraine from Soviet Russian political ties (the words Lasha Tumbai were interpreted as 'Russia Goodbye') and towards (Western) European integration. These performances are portrayed as 'camp' by the media and the ESC fan base because they are staged in an overly exaggerated, theatrical and audacious way. The winner of the 2007 contest Marija Serifovic was perceived as 'butch-femme' and self-identified as lesbian and Roma producing a soulful performance that attempted to 'integrate' Serbia culturally-politically into the European project and the EU (Bohlman, 2007; Mitrovic, 2009; Vänskä, 2007). The contest powerfully gives voice and representation to individuals of different socio-cultural backgrounds, particularly those who identify as LGBT, on an international platform. The ESC champions gender and sexuality diversity which demonstrates a desire to be seen as European, which evokes feelings of 'Europeanness' (Binnie and Klesse, 2011; Sieg, 2013). The contest nevertheless involves itself with these political acts, as it is a way of targeting millions of viewers internationally to positively promote social and cultural differences and diversity.

It could be said too that the contest constructs an imaginative geopolitical logic and rhetoric that progressive LGBT politics is linked to within occidental constructions and representations of European modernity (Binnie and Klesse, 2011). Ukraine embraced westernised values of Europeanness in 2017 by promoting the city of Kyiv (Kiev) as a gay-friendly city

during its hosting of the ESC, painting the Russian-Ukrainian 'People's Friendship Arch' in the rainbow colours of the LGBT Pride flag (Prentice, 2017). In contrast Russia has received much international attention because of its active promotion of anti-LGBT legislature, isolating itself further from the West (Stella, 2013). This is a position further reinforced by wider media discourses, which have positioned Russia as *other* to the West (Baker, 2016). Conversely, scholars such as Cassiday (2014) have argued that Russian ESC performances can be read in a gay or bi-curious way and with a camp sensibility to generate votes from the European continent. Cassiday explains how Russia's 2008 winner Dima Bilan resorted to unbuttoning his shirt during his performance, revealing his well-defined torso, further garnering Western support. Challenges towards heteronormativity are also present during the ESC itself, particularly where gay men access exclusive backstage areas while working for international fan community outlets, such as fan websites. These spaces provide them with a high level of subcultural capital and conversations with ESC artists are queered as they centre on male same-sex desire (Motschenbacher, 2013). These examples demonstrate different fan spaces where sexuality and fan identity are made in/visible.

There has been a tendency for nations to target the gay demographic, demonstrating the ways in which the ESC has become a nexus around which issues of gay and queer sexuality are heightened, earning it a reputation amongst mainstream media outlets as 'Gay Christmas' (Rehberg, 2007: 60). This festive spirit has been attributed to its wider fan communities, particularly in countries such as Germany and the UK (Geoghegan, 2016) where the contest is often presented trivial and its popularity debated. In the UK, this was exemplified by long-time commentator Terry Wogan with his acerbic and dry wit, positioning the UK as 'other' to its European counterparts (Fricker, 2013). This marginalisation of the contest in the national consciousness also informs the popularity and celebration of the event amongst LGBT individuals. 'Coming out' as an ESC fan is also contextualised in relation to the conditioning of the 'closet', a socio-cultural construct that permeates gay life as a consequence of dominant heteronormativity (Fricker, Moreo and Singleton, 2007; Seidman, 2002). It remains stigmatised to 'come out' as a ESC fan because of the 'questioned' popularity of the event in societies such as the UK. This results in the construction of the ESC closet as fans (both gay and non-gay) self-regulate who they come out to, both in terms of physical and digital everyday life. Social media often provides opportunities for fans to escape the ESC closet and network with others but this can also be problematic given everyday uses of social media that intersect with fan activity.

Eurovision and technology

The ESC offers opportunities to understand how technology informs the convergence of media (Jenkins, 2014), such as music (Anderson, et al., 2005; Wood, et al., 2007) and television (Highfield, 2017) and how these socio-cultural contexts shape imaginations of place and space. Smartphone technologies problematize and blur the boundaries between the online/offline dichotomy and reconfigures socio-spatial relationships as they can bring users closer together (Ash, et al., 2016). This digital social media sphere is used to facilitate engagement on topics from the banal to the political and encourages social movements, such as ESC fandom. Individuals document their lives and experiences on social media to share with wider online audiences (Highfield, 2016). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, operate as technical mediators and help to maintain proximate social connections. Social media becomes engaged – spatially and transient in nature as it is –operating as an '… *ongoing* mutual constitution of the "human" and the "technical"' (Kinsley, 2014: 378, emphasis in original). It is these practices that encourage the quotidian engagement of ESC fandom and provide escapism from routinized daily life. Social media sites are not identical and can be used to articulate different aspects of our identities. ESC fan activity

intersects with other socio-cultural categorisations of identity and is necessarily relationally constructed, further problematizing the ways in which identity is subjectively performed and made performative, within multiple social media networks (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959), disrupting offline ontological security. Social media provides a certain level of anonymity, particularly where ESC fans network with others and can reaffirm the social conditioning of the ESC closet (Seidman, 2002). Fandom is regulated within different social media contexts and in this way intersects with wider expressions of sexuality allowing fans to discuss their struggles in asserting and expressing their gay/queer identity within a 'private' sphere. This can differ between social media platforms; Facebook software encourages establishments of ESC fan groups that are only accessible by, or through gatekeepers, and ESC fan identity can be maintained within a bounded area. Whereas Twitter encourages individuals to play with their names and Twitter handles, providing more anonymity and a broader audience reach to connect with other ESC fans. Fan identity and sexuality may act as relational characteristics of identity that are constructed and negotiated as in/visible between different public spaces, both on social media and offline. Twitter is a popular social media platform to engage with the ESC. It has been used to identify the most popular points during the show where Twitter users interact with the contest through hashtags (such as #eurovision), within a national context, such as Australia (Highfield, et al., 2013). This paper hence argues that the ESC is not a once a year event; social media makes it possible for fans to interact on a quotidian basis and also to engage with like-minded fans, both year-round and during the ESC shows themselves.

Eurovision and queering sexuality

The ESC provides new levels of queer visibility and has embraced celebrating diversity and individuals who challenge gender and sexuality normativity (Bohlman, 2007). Where stage performances are an obvious site for making these socio-cultural identities increasingly visible, the situation is more complex in digital environments and within ESC fandom. There are questions of ephemerality that influence sexuality visibility and its rigidity within cyberspace. As van Doorn (2011: 542) argues, gender and sexual identities are partly virtual phenomena 'that have to be repeatedly actualized in order to assume their material shape in both physical and digital environments.' This is not always the case; digital technology provides new levels of queer visibility and sexual orientation that is not necessarily directly mapped offline (Hawkins and Watson, 2017). It can reaffirm and reconfigure the social conditioning of the closet and can provide spaces of liberation for closeted individuals (Brown, Maycock and Burns, 2005). Social media applications can influence sexual in/visibility as different social media applications and their usage can negotiate or complicate the public/private binary. Within sexuality and digital geographies, there has been extensive work that has examined the production of '*cyberqueer spaces*' (Wakeford, 1997) through smartphone applications such as Grindr. This app is a technical mediator designed for men who want to have sex with men that has made same-sex encounters and erotic chat more immediate and accessible (Cockayne, et al., 2017; Tziallas, 2015). Grindr has been likened as a 'gay bar in my pocket' according to Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott (2015: 1126), which was used in a 'straight bar' by one interview participant to hook-up with another gay man. These socio-cultural transformations of how individuals engage with the erotic also reconfigure where they take place. The boundaries of gay space vary in their permeability and can be temporarily conditioned. Using Grindr on smartphone apps operates similarly since viewing its 'grid' in seeking a potential partner in a public space can be considered a shameful act (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). The ESC follows a similar discourse because of its struggle in 'fitting in' with wider popular culture, being as it is, highly critiqued, particularly within UK public consciousness. This, can operate as camouflage for engaging with wider gay and

queer culture in public space that is not solely focused on sex practices (Brown, 2006). Many subsidiary events of the ESC take place inside inner city gay clubs, such as the prestigious Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) in London, home to 'Eurofest' and cabaret venues such as Café de Paris for the 'London Eurovision Party' (Geoghegan, 2016). Where Grindr is focused on facilitating hook-ups for sex and erotic chat amongst men, the ESC is more engaged with the socio-cultural construction of gay and queer sexuality that can get beyond thinking about sexual orientation as simply about sex. The contest is not directly labelled as a 'gay event' but engaging with ESC music inside venues such as the RVT can be a more accessible way into gay culture. The ESC can reconfigure ideas surrounding sexuality and queerness, especially as it is not demarcated by socio-cultural identification categories and can be constructed as ambivalent. This propensity permeates digital ESC fan spaces, which can contribute to wider understandings of queer code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017). Social media, such as Twitter permits the construction of ESC networks that are queered through identity expression using multiple textual, audible and visual forms. This leads to questions concerning how more mainstream social media sites can be ascribed ambivalent characteristics of identity, and how they might provide multiple outlets for the performance of sexuality.

Where do we go now?

The ESC raises many important issues surrounding the construction of identity, particularly, with regard to expressions of sexuality both digitally through its fandom, and offline through stage performances, attendance at the contest itself and at ESC-related events. ESC-related events are frequently confined to gay clubs, which reaffirm the contest as a 'gay event'. But, because the contest provides a sense of gender and sexuality ambiguity that is not labelled by socio-cultural identity categories, it can be more accessible for LGBT ESC fans, both in and out of the 'closet'. This is often the case with social media platforms, such as Grindr, which is designed for men who seek sex with men but can attract men from different sexual orientations. Sexuality is reconfigured within social media platforms and demonstrates the instability of self-presentation between online and offline manifestations (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017). ESC fandom operates as a nexus where different sexual orientations converge and network with others based on their like-minded interest of the ESC (Kozinets, 2015). Social media empowers users to negotiate their ESC fandom between different social media sites and regulate, or even 'closet' their fandom as in/visible for different reasons, such as the relationship of the contest with gay culture or the negative perceptions of the contest within mainstream media. There are even questions to be asked of non-gay men's consumption and interaction within ESC fandom. This offers scope to explore constructions of camp (both in the ESC and its fandom) by queer and non-queer fans in gay-friendly cultures. Non-gay men are often perceived as a minority within ESC fandom and have received little academic attention in sexuality geographies. This opens up further research opportunities, by helping us understand alternative understandings of queering code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017), in particular regarding how heterosexuality and bisexuality can be queered through interacting with the ESC and its fandom.

Note

[1] LGBT is used as an encapsulating term within this paper that refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. It denotes individuals who are not heterosexual.

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Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information
Jamie Halliwell is a PhD candidate at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. His thesis explores the construction of identity within Eurovision Song Contest fandom in online and offline fan spaces. More specifically, he is interested in how sexuality identity permeates through fan identity and how these are negotiated between different social media platforms and corporeal spaces. He is also the Website Officer for the Social and Cultural Geography research group of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

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