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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**



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LIVENESS

ARCHIVES

EUROVISION

FANDOM

This Is Our Night: Eurovision Again and Liveness through Archives

Abby S. Waysdorf

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no Eurovision Song Contest for the first time in 65 years. For fans of the contest, this was distressing, at a time when life was distressing enough. Without the live event to watch and comment on, how could they participate in their fandom and connect with fellow fans? In this essay, I look at how the fan initiative Eurovision Again works to solve this problem by recreating the experience of live viewing through the use of archives. Throughout the lockdown, Eurovision Again has chosen a “classic” Eurovision Grand Final for a Saturday night viewing, complete with Twitter hashtag and voting. I argue that in combining the “shared social reality” of live viewing with the shared culture of archives, Eurovision Again serves to sustain and reinforce a “Eurofan” identity while providing a break from the anxiety of everyday pandemic life.

The 65th Eurovision Song Contest was to be held on May 16, 2020. As “Europe’s favorite television show,” the contest has been a fixture on screens across and outside of the continent for decades, with a set schedule of national finals and pre-contest events leading up to it. The Grand Final is met with an explosion of attention as the continent watches (and comments).

All of this was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe in March 2020. Within a short period, the pre-contest events were cancelled, the promotional tours stopped, and then, finally, the contest itself was called off. For the first time in 65 years, there would be no Eurovision.

Eurovision was not the only media event to be postponed. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the television schedule. Live events are an important structuring element of contemporary media life. What happens when they disappear?

For Eurovision fans, the answer was to recreate the experience with archives. Eurovision Again, developed by British journalist and Eurovision fan Rob Holley, selects a previous Grand Final for viewing at a set time on Saturday nights, followed along via a Twitter hashtag. (Post-lockdown, it has shifted from a weekly to a monthly event.) Originally set up as a fan initiative, Eurovision itself has become involved, hosting the livestream on its YouTube channel and using its archivists to put together full versions of shows that are not easily accessible. There may have not been a Eurovision 2020 to participate in, but for much of the lockdown, there has been a Eurovision—and one that is seen as by and for the fans, rather than the general audience that also watches the regular version.

In this essay, I will be exploring Eurovision Again. I argue here that in combining a form of “liveness” with archival material, it helps to sustain and enforce a “Eurofan” identity by both creating a specific public through the livestreams and encouraging increased engagement with (selected) Eurovision history. This serves as a way to “escape” from the pandemic, if just for a night, and keep the Eurofan identity alive in the absence of its structuring event.

The Live Event

The Eurovision Song Contest is just what it sounds like—a (televised) song competition, where every country in a loose definition of Europe can send a song and a performer. From its early versions as a short bit of light entertainment, participated in by a handful of western European countries, Eurovision has evolved into a week-long mega-event, broadcast across the continent and world. The Rotterdam edition would have hosted 41 performing countries and thousands of fans, coming not just to cheer on their own country, but to generally appreciate the contest and the fan community that has been built

up in recent years. It would have been broadcast to over 180 million people, mainly via the European public broadcasters that make up the sponsoring European Broadcasting Union, but also through official livestreams that bring the contest to a worldwide audience.

In its 65th year, Eurovision is a media institution—a quintessential “media event” as described by Dayan and Katz (1992). It is scheduled and anticipated, but outside of normal broadcasting—an interruption, made all the more special for how it disrupts the normal flow of media life. Dayan and Katz compare these events to holidays, in that they are disruptive, but pleasantly so. They promise a break from everyday life, a time for celebration, and particularly, a time for celebration with others. People gather together to watch media events, and in doing so, join spiritually with others who are doing the same thing. They disturb the normal atomization of media, in which every household is watching something different, and instead make people “aware of all the other homes in which the same thing is taking place at the same time” (Dayan and Katz 1992, 131). While “normal” media consumption is dispersed and atomized, media events bring people together to view the same thing at the same time.

This “at the same time” is the crucial point of a media event, and what makes it different from just a popular program. A media event is an event that is viewed “live” on television. The promise of live media, and especially live audiovisual media, is that we can experience important events as they happen, regardless of where we physically are, at the same time as others who also agree on its importance. It is this dual connection that Couldry stresses when talking about live transmission as a ritual category of media—it “guarantees a potential connection to our shared social realities as they are happening” (2003, 96–97). The connection is both to the event and to the broader society that makes the event meaningful and worth experiencing in the moment. As Couldry points out, “‘liveness’ naturalizes the idea that, through the media, we achieve a shared attention to the realities that matter to us as a society” (2003, 99). Without this connection to others, liveness as an idea is less valuable.

While Dayan and Katz saw the connection made between members of the public through televised events as imagined, as one could only react to the celebrants in your immediate vicinity, social media has made this explicit by showing how others are reacting and making it possible to respond directly to them. As van Es (2017) discusses, television increasingly “enhances” its liveness through the direct connections of social media. During a media event, the imagined other celebrants become very real. This is especially true for Twitter, which, even compared to other social media, emphasizes its up-to-date connectivity and facilitates it through a constantly refreshing feed and clickable hashtags that collect tweets about subjects in one place. Commenting on Twitter (and to some extent other social media) during a major media event

is therefore an important way of connecting to others. In a time when media consumption is even more atomized than when Dayan and Katz were writing due to on-demand media streaming, the rare moments of connectivity through a live event are even more valuable.

This idea of celebratory, connected liveness is at the heart of the Eurovision experience. Couldry's reading of Dayan and Katz's original concept emphasizes that media events are "times when large societies are 'together,' but when this togetherness is experienced as something *positive*" (2003, 62). Eurovision is quite explicit about this being a goal, stressing its ability to bring the disparate cultures of Europe together, at the same time, in common celebration. As a media event, it embraces festival and holiday qualities rather than sacredness and solemnity.

Dayan and Katz tend to emphasize the top-down nature of media events, stressing their connection to a society's elite center and celebrating its mainstream values, but with Eurovision, the situation is different. While conceived of as a classic contest between nations, fans of the contest have given it other meanings. Its fan culture is less concerned with the nationalistic clash as it is with the entertainment value of each entry and the joyous togetherness of the event itself.

It has also been widely adopted as a gay and queer event (Baker 2017; Halliwell 2018). Gathering for Eurovision, both online and offline, has taken on this identity. The ideal of Eurovision fandom is not that of opposing nations asserting their superiority, but of marginalized groups coming together to celebrate through music and spectacle. The connection is not with the center, but with other members of the outside. Its break from the everyday is a break from everyday oppression. However, this still happens within the framework of a major media event that "everyone" is watching. There are few other events that so entwine the mainstream and the marginalized.

It is this that was missed with the unprecedented cancellation of the contest. Silverstone (1994) and Coman (2008) stress the ontological security that comes with reoccurring media events, in knowing that this celebration will be repeated yearly. For Eurovision fans, this means connection with other marginalized people, both in-person and electronically, will be provided through the long-standing structure of the contest. The moments of reconnection were greatly anticipated. As one travelling Eurovision fan put it, "it's the one time of year we see our family from Europe and abroad." (Segalov 2020) The pandemic abruptly cancelled this just as it was beginning for the new year.

Alongside all the other COVID-19 interruptions, this caused considerable distress among fans. Eurovision was a constant, having endured longer than most of its fans were alive. Its late cancellation, coming after much of its

preliminaries had been completed and fans were eagerly anticipating the contest itself, was the confirmation that the pandemic was serious and worrying. At the same time, the cancellation removed one of the major support systems that fans had to turn to—the contest itself, and the coming-together that the contest provides, both through media and in person. When fans most needed the togetherness and ontological security of this media event, it was taken away.

Archives and Eurofandom

“Watch in sync. Tweet along. Vote for your hero, that’s what you must do.” This is how Eurovision Again explains itself. It goes like this: every Saturday at 7:45 PM BST a new “classic” Eurovision grand final is revealed as this week’s show. Fifteen minutes later, it begins. Viewers are encouraged to tweet along with the hashtag #EurovisionAgain, and to vote on a polling website once the songs have finished. It has clear appeal—the official Twitter account, begun in March 2020, now has over ten thousand followers, tweets using the hashtag (or related terms) are regularly in the tens of thousands, and Eurovision itself has begun to provide assistance, helping to source (and in some cases, put together) previous contests and airing the stream from its official YouTube account in order to better synchronize viewers.

Essentially, it reproduces the experience of watching Eurovision on television, complete with reactions from others and the ranking of favorites. In doing this, Eurovision Again aims to recreate the celebratory liveness of Eurovision, at a time when fans feel like they need it most. While the contest itself, and all its attendant celebrations, are cancelled, fans can still come together through social media and act as they would without the pandemic.

Indeed, escapism and positivity are the main tones of Eurovision Again. Those who participate do not want to be reminded that the contest was cancelled and that the world is experiencing a global pandemic. They want the disruption from the everyday that Eurovision has always represented. In watching Eurovision, again, the idea is that the joyous togetherness of the media event is also reexperienced, at a time when this is most needed. If the everyday is anxiety and fear, Eurovision provides a break.

However, there is one crucial difference. Rather than the eternal present of the main contest, Eurovision Again orients itself towards the past.

Media events have a complex relationship with the past. Dayan and Katz discuss how an event that finishes immediately loses some of its aura and meaning as it finishes and we must return to everyday life, the event “a record in the archives.” (1992, 106) At the same time, media events become “mnemonics for organizing personal and historical time.” (1992, 212) Media events

shape the way in which we remember our lives, defining both personal and collective memories of an era.

Both of these uses of the past are present in the liveness of Eurovision Again. The livestreams are given an introduction by historian Catherine Baker, who puts the contest about to be viewed in historical and cultural context. During the livestream, viewers not only react to what they're seeing, but what they remember about seeing it for the first time—how they felt as youth for older contests, memories of being there for newer ones. Photographs of trips to Lisbon or Copenhagen are shared, with recollections of what it was “really like” on the ground and how that compares to watching now. While it is, of course, possible to remember without the impetus of the livestream, watching it with others brings the connectivity of liveness to memory. Not only the contest, but the memory of the contest, is experienced with others. For those who don't have an existing memory of the contest being viewed, they can connect to the memories of others and gain a better understanding of Eurovision's past.

In this, Eurovision Again works to sustain and foster a distinct “Eurofan” identity, distinct from the general viewership of the main contest. A sense of shared history and heritage is an important part of any group identity. Having a shared sense of the past, and what this past means, is crucial in “securing a sense of togetherness and cultural solidarity” (McDowell 2008, 41). While this has largely been theorized in terms of national and ethnic identity, in the contemporary era, it is not only national and ethnic identities that matter. Many find equal value in popular-culture based identities—fandoms.

Here, too, a sense of history is important. De Kosnik argues that “archives provide this connection through giving members of a community a sense of shared culture” (2016, 124). Access to the shared past facilitates a shared identity, which, as De Kosnik argues, is especially critical for fandom as it is generally chosen, rather than “innate.” Establishing a shared culture through use of the past and access to historical records of an identity establishes it as legitimate.

For Eurovision fans, knowledge of history is also crucial in distinguishing “Eurofans” from general Eurovision viewers. While the general public watches Eurovision as it airs, Eurofans pride themselves on deeper engagement—knowing more about the artists and songs before the show and, increasingly, knowledge of past contests. Interest in Eurovision's past, as well as its present, is a key marker of being a Eurofan.

Eurovision Again is both created by and marketed to such fans. Even knowing about, much less participating in, Eurovision Again requires a certain amount of awareness of broader Eurofandom. This means that Eurovision is remembered in a particular way. Archives are structures of power (Schwartz and Cook, 2002), shaping memory in specific ways. In selecting and displaying

certain contests and not others, narratives about what Eurovisions were important to the Eurofan identity are created—these are the contests to remember and/or learn about. The casual queerness of Eurovision and Eurovision fandom are also reinforced, both by the organizers, who solicit donations for LGBT charities with each livestream, and by the audience, who make reference to their own and others' assumed queerness. Accepting this is part of Eurofandom. The kinds of songs and moments—campy, energetic, queer-friendly—that are celebrated by this audience become the way of remembering Eurovision. Eurovision Again did not create this way of reading and appreciating Eurovision, but it does enforce it through its selection of contests and voting process.

In this, it both complements and separates from the general remembering that is part of the Eurovision broadcast, which also seeks to use the power of memory and reminiscence in its stated goal of bringing Europe together. However, that the official Eurovision broadcast is institutional puts limits on it that a fan organization does not have. Eurovision's official response to the cancellation of the contest, the special Europe Shine A Light, needed to take a more solemn approach to Eurovision's history and the particular moment of the pandemic. It reflected on the cancellation as a trauma that needed addressing and used Eurovision's history to do so.

Eurovision Again has no such institutional demands. While increasingly embraced by Eurovision—a subject for another paper—it stands outside of its official commemorative culture. Rather, it is a way for Eurofans to experience the fun and connectivity of a Eurovision broadcast at a time when collective levity is hard to come by. Its point is to have fun and recall better times. Eurovision Again is not about mourning Eurovision, but celebrating it.

In this, the potential threat to the ontological security of Eurovision fandom—the cancellation of the media event that it is based around—is mitigated. Fans can recreate at least one of the experiences around Eurovision, while, at the same time, reinforcing their fandom through gaining (or remembering) knowledge about the fan object through the use of archives. At a time when non-mediated connectivity is disrupted, as well as anxiety-provoking, Eurovision Again provides at least a bit of connection to (accepting) others and happier times.

Conclusion

What happens when live events are cancelled or postponed by the COVID-19 crisis? For fans of the Eurovision Song Contest, the answer is a turn to archives. In reproducing the live viewing experience with archival footage, the promise of liveness—a shared social reality—is combined with a sense of shared history. This shared history helps to sustain and reinforce a “Eurofan”

identity at a time when fans were missing this connectivity most keenly. It must be noted that it was not the only initiative created for Eurofans to come together, as national fan clubs and broadcasters held “alternative” contests, Eurovision hosted “home concerts” with artists, and fans continued to communicate online with each other. However, the combination of liveness—of a large amount of fellow fans participating at the same time—and archives—of remembering the event in a specific way—is unique. Through it, the loss of the contest, while keenly felt, is mitigated. Watching Eurovision Again is not the same as watching a new Eurovision Song Contest, but it does remind fans of why they like Eurovision in the first place. It provides an escape from the anxieties of everyday pandemic life and ensures that Eurovision fandom, while disrupted, is not forgotten.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these “pandemic media” reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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