

**Accepted version for**

*Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication (second edition)*

pp. 156-165.

Eds. Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys

New York, NY: Peter Lang

2017

**Social TV and depictions of community on social media:  
Instagram and Eurovision fandom**

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**Abstract**

Social media have become intertwined in audiences' television viewing, in how viewers experience texts and how broadcasters encourage and attract audiences with varying levels of interactivity and participation through 'social television'. Popular social media like Twitter are well established for engaging with broadcasts through practices like live-tweeting, but this is not the only platform used or encouraged for this context. This chapter examines how audiences engage with both broadcast and context on Instagram, focusing on the specific case of the Australian experience of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. Visual social media demonstrate and disclose practices around television engagement, audiencing, and fandom which are not necessarily visible on Twitter, and which highlight different ideas of the 'social' for both social media and social TV.

**Keywords:** Instagram, social media, fandom, Eurovision, television, audiences

## Introduction

Notions linking community and television on the internet have often focused on audiences and fans, dynamics which have taken various forms as online platforms and technologies have developed (see Jenkins, 2006; Booth, 2010). Communities of interest emerged around particular texts or figures, whether focused on a single unofficial fan site, discussion boards and forums, or distributed across multiple sites linked as part of a designated community such as a web ring. Engagement with television (and other popular media) content was also encouraged through shared practices, bringing together creativity, humor, and critique. Fan fiction and fan art, for instance, have allowed audience members to provide their own interpretations (and desires) of themes and characters, the presentation of which may range from hand-drawn art to erotic fiction to animated GIFs and mash-ups, among others (see Booth, 2015). Cultures of audiencing online are also seen in the popularity and longevity of recap sites (Andrejevic, 2008), of live blogging, of engaging with content in a critically humorous way such as through snark (Haig, 2014). As online platforms have become increasingly popular means for watching this content, further practices have been encouraged: practices like binge-watching might not have started online, but have become popularized through the accessibility and shared experiences of watching television content on-demand through Netflix, Hulu, and others (see Jenner, 2015; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015) – and by engaging with this by sharing opinions and content, and connecting with others, on social media.

Social media platforms encourage different – both new and old – realizations of fan practices, communities, and engagement with television and other popular culture. Twitter, for example, is well-established in both practice and in research as a space for commenting on live television, breaking news, and major events, and Moe *et al.* (2015) argue that Twitter is also “television’s favorite [platform] in terms of social media engagement” (104). However, Twitter is not the sole platform used for this purpose, nor is it used in isolation: broadcasters may encourage viewers to comment on their television shows using show- or channel-specific apps, or by engaging across a multitude of popular social media, including Facebook and Instagram, which each offer their own particular affordances and cultures.

This chapter explores how Instagram is used as part of ‘social TV’, where social media and television are intertwined, both in how viewers experience texts and how broadcasters encourage and attract audiences with varying levels of interactivity and participation (see van Es, 2016; Hutchinson, 2015; Bredl *et al.*, 2013). I examine how audiences engage with both broadcast and context through visual social media, focusing on the specific case of the Australian experience of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. Building upon previous research conducted into Australian Twitter engagement with Eurovision (see Highfield *et al.*, 2013), I outline commonalities and differences in how these different platforms are used to demonstrate participation and engagement with a common text, and with the cultures and tropes of this text. In doing so, I argue that visual social media demonstrate and disclose practices around television engagement, audiencing, and fandom which are not necessarily visible on Twitter, and which highlight different ideas of the ‘social’ for both social media and social TV.

### **Social television**

The connections between social tv and social media center on the audience as active contributors, participating in the consumption of a broadcast through social media, broadcaster websites, and specific apps. Van Es (2016) describes social tv as “the latest articulation of television’s promise of interactivity: viewers are led to expect that they will be an integral, active part of the live television experience through real-time interactions facilitated by social media” (110). Social media activity need not be directed by broadcasters, of course: audiences might create their own hashtags and communities without needing to be prompted by in-show messages or official channels. The presence of actors, writers, and directors on social media also encourages further interaction, especially if they actively use their accounts to promote and engage with their own shows during broadcasts.

A key outcome of social media’s adoption as a means of engaging with television has been the renewed importance to the live broadcast, privileging the first-run to avoid spoilers and to connect with a widely-distributed audience in a shared experience (see Sørensen, 2015; van Es, 2016; Deller, 2011). Event television in particular is ideal for this: major media events, whether sports, political debates and elections, reality television finales, awards shows, and talent contests, and one-off

broadcasts may attract large audiences and encourage ongoing social media coverage. For fans, though, all relevant programming might count as event television – fans of serialized shows like *Scandal* (Everett, 2015) or *Downton Abbey* (Ji & Rayney, 2015), for instance, may engage with social television for each episode.

Social and digital media offer numerous ways of engaging with television, including as second screens where viewers engage with additional devices (whether computers, tablets, or smartphones) while watching broadcasts. For instance, Twitter's use within a second screen (Giglietto & Selva, 2014) includes acting as a backchannel for commenting while watching programs (Harrington 2013) – which can be used to critique and mock shows and broadcasters (such as NBC's coverage of the 2012 summer Olympic Games – O'Hallarn & Shapiro, 2014). Broadcasters have taken advantage of the active but captive audience on social media by promoting their own official hashtags for individual shows. These range from encouraging user comments which might be shown on-screen, develop storylines (Hutchinson, 2015), or inform panel discussions (Given & Radywyl, 2013; Pond, 2016), to simply providing a central marker for viewers to share their comments. The social media and television context encourages participatory audience behaviors, including role-playing and fan fiction, and highlighting and playing with the conventions and tropes of coverage (Highfield, 2013). Discussions around reality television, meanwhile, mix live commentary with promoting or denigrating individual contestants. This cumulative social media activity can be used to measure audience engagement, from quantifying hype and buzz to evaluating sentiment and themes (Sauter & Bruns, 2014).

Audience participation, fan comments and interactions, and shared social experiences around television are also encouraged on other platforms, such as Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram, through official channels and informal, user-created spaces. While broadcasters have attempted to launch show-specific apps and their own channel discussions, these have not always been widely-adopted and their success has depended on the type of shows featured: event television may invite the use of additional apps and communication more than serialized dramatic content (see Lee & Andrejevic, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Broadcasters may aggregate content from multiple platforms, making use of a common hashtag to denote relevant

comments and present them within a central social feed. This allows users and broadcasters alike to engage with the different types of content popular on individual platforms: short, pithy remarks on Twitter, photos and other visual content on Instagram, and various mixes of these media on these platforms and others, such as Facebook. Here, these platforms are complementary, offering their own strengths and affordances for users within the context of a particular event.

Instagram, as with other social media, also features its own particular vernaculars, practices, and cultures (see Abidin, 2014; Gibbs *et al.*, 2015; Marwick, 2015). Instagram offers users a social means to share photographs, allowing followers to comment on and like content, and also provides artistic filters that users can run on their photos before uploading them. It is also intertwined with other elements of visual digital culture (see Highfield & Leaver, 2016), such as selfies - photographic self-portraits, of both individuals and groups (see the selfie research curated by Senft and Baym, 2015). These are connected to a wider photographic cultural history, highly interlinked with how we experience and record events and people: Susan Sontag's view that "what photography supplies is not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present" (2005, p. 130), remains relevant to our social and digital media contexts, where the present is instantly archived and publicly shared. Instagram content extends beyond photographs, too, to also feature short (15-second) videos, memes, and screenshots of conversations and interactions, including visual forms that are not necessarily native to Instagram but which have been adopted by its users.

Visual social media content connects with social tv in different ways. While platforms like Tumblr encourage engagement with texts and with fandom through visual forms like GIFs, screencaps, fan art, and fiction (see Booth, 2015), these are practices taking place after the fact and with perhaps more lasting effect than the in-the-moment responses of live tweets, for instance. Instagram, though, is predicated on sharing content instantaneously, with a culture privileging posting media as they are captured (or explicitly stating when this is not the case). This offers particular interest for this chapter in examining how audiences use this platform for engaging with television content, especially as a point of comparison with established 'live' text-centric platforms like Twitter.

## **The Eurovision context**

The social media coverage of popular culture is in part shaped by fandom and popular perceptions of texts and events, and by a wider historical and cultural context of engaging with this content. Different texts attract different types of response, encouraged by their producers and actors as well as by fans and anti-fans (see Gray, 2003; Harman & Jones, 2013). This means that there are some elements of the social media activity around an individual text that may be more particular to it than for social television more broadly.

The Eurovision Song Contest features its own distinct blend of cultural, social, political, and musical contexts that set it apart from many other broadcasts. Eurovision is an annual music contest, first held in 1956, where European countries compete by sending a contestant and original song to represent them, with the winner selected by popular vote from the participating nations. However, Eurovision as a cultural phenomenon is not simply a music contest.

Eurovision occupies a particular place in European and national psyches, although perceptions range from a prestigious competition to an irrelevance and embarrassment. While some countries see Eurovision as a cultural institution firmly placing them within Europe, in the United Kingdom, for instance, a popular view positions the contest as kitschy, to be mocked and enjoyed ironically. The prominence of this interpretation was helped by its endorsement by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s commentator, the late Terry Wogan, who up to his retirement in 2008 would make deadpan responses to the spectacle, providing 'a witty and sometimes acerbic account' of Eurovision (Coleman, 2008, 133). The Wogan approach can also be seen as a precursor to popular trends on social media, especially Twitter, in commenting on Eurovision, where the audience at large can also share their scathing and droll remarks (Highfield et al., 2013).

For many viewers across Europe and beyond, Eurovision is cult viewing, whether because of the kitsch spectacle, critical or anti-fandom, or genuine, unironic enjoyment. Eurovision has also been adopted by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community (LGBTQ) (Lemish, 2004; Singleton *et al.*, 2007),

and the promotion and acceptance of different, unique, and weird acts has fostered an at times inclusive view of the contest. In 1998, Dana International, a transsexual entrant representing Israel, won the contest, while considerable buzz ahead of the 2014 contest focused on Austria's entrant, Conchita Wurst, as a drag persona. Of course, Eurovision commentary (by commentators and by viewers) might also be sarcastic, racist, homophobic, or misogynistic (see Miazhevich, 2015); Eurovision fandom and spectatorship takes many forms (Georgiou, 2008), which coalesce in centralized spaces such as social media. These different groups are well-versed in the tropes and stereotypes of Eurovision: from voting patterns (where blocs of neighboring countries vote for each other regardless of the perceived quality of songs) to on-stage props such as wind machines and pyrotechnics, there are expected elements to every Eurovision, which are then remarked upon on social media when they occur. Indeed, the 2014 contest took the awareness of this engaged audience (and the contemporary social media context) further by making its tagline '#joinus'.

Such patterns are also visible among Australian viewers of Eurovision. Until invited in 2015 for the contest's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Australia had never participated in Eurovision, yet there is a dedicated Australian audience for the contest. The multicultural public service broadcaster Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has shown Eurovision in Australia for nearly thirty years, with its production expanding in recent years to using its own commentators and providing extensive online material. Audience participation in the broadcast is encouraged: since countries cannot vote in the actual contest unless competing, SBS ran its own vote online where viewers can pick the 'Australian winner'. SBS also actively promotes viewer commentary on social media, using its specific hashtag #sbseurovision (as opposed to the more generic #eurovision or #esc) to solicit posts from the audience on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and which might appear on-screen.

Prior to 2015, SBS showed Eurovision on delay, reflecting the effect of 'the tyranny of digital distance' (Leaver, 2008). Television shows broadcast in the US or the UK might not appear on Australian television until months later, and Australians often move to less-legal sources for accessing television shows either live or immediately after their broadcast overseas. The 2014 Eurovision broadcast in Australia reflects

elements of both digital distance and broadcasters adapting to their audience's practices. The contest is broadcast in Australia on delay, in primetime: this means that the risk of spoilers and not being part of the same experience as European fans is still apparent. For the final, though, the Australian broadcast started within 12 hours of the contest finishing in Europe, the earliest primetime slot available. Without live broadcasts, the next-day primetime event is SBS's way of replicating the European experience of Eurovision; most notably, SBS still presents the show 'as live', not revealing the winners beforehand. Although the different time zones in Australia mean that viewers in the west of the country will see the broadcast on additional delay, risking spoilers in the #sbseurovision discussions (since the broadcasts overlap), the majority of the Australian Eurovision audience see the east coast, 'as live', broadcast.

SBS recognizes its audience's active engagement with Eurovision. Rather than being passive, Australian viewers are invested in Eurovision, whether celebrating their own European heritage, pan-European interests, or other cultural and social enjoyment of the contest. Viewers hold their own themed parties with friends and contribute commentary on social media during the broadcast. While the result will not change – and Australia (prior to 2015) would not win anyway – Eurovision viewing is still something enjoyed socially and actively. SBS encourages this fandom, offering different ways for Australians to interact and engage with the broadcast, through its website and social media. Furthermore, SBS acknowledges that many Eurovision fans try to avoid knowing the result before watching the delayed broadcast, even though other Australian broadcasters and online sources will reveal the winner. SBS's house rules then try to maintain the sanctity of this experience:

Don't spoil the fun for others by revealing who the winner is, who got the lowest score, who had a wardrobe malfunction, or any other contest-related happenings before they happen (on SBS TV). (SBS, 2014)

The integration of social media into the SBS broadcast makes use of the various affordances of multiple platforms; the support for hashtags on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram means that finding and aggregating topical content can follow similar processes. Even if different users are active on different platforms, using the



#sbseurovision hashtag on any of them provides a centralized hook for the broadcaster and for users following the hashtag (for publicly-accessible content, at least), and some of this content may be featured in the broadcast itself.

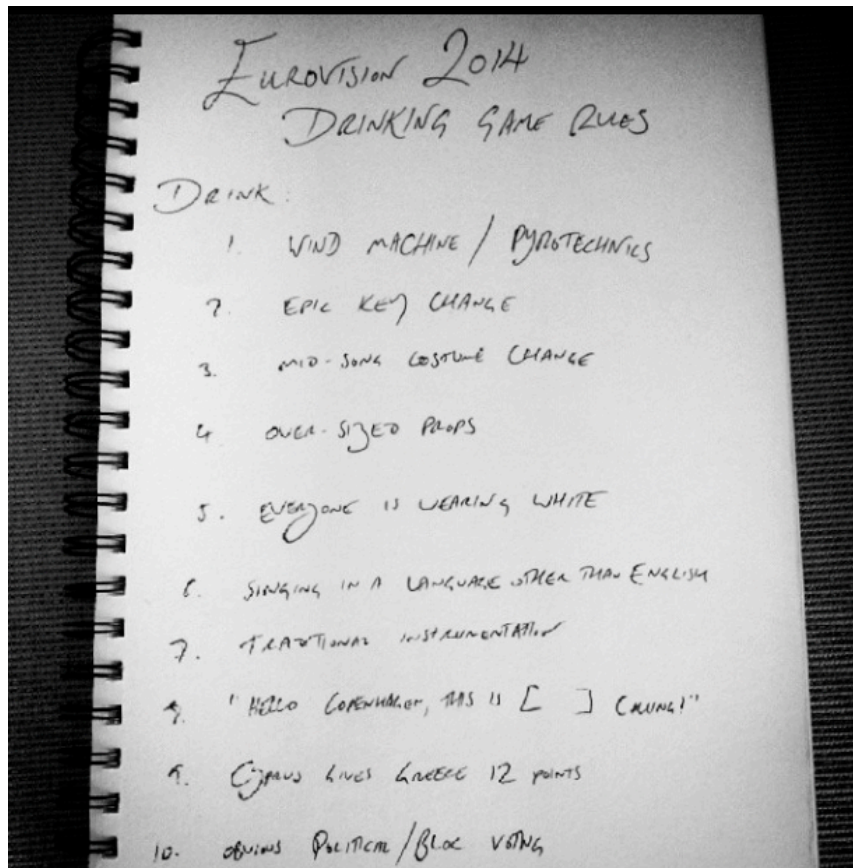
The following discussion is based on analyzing 1846 media objects (1807 images and 39 videos) posted publicly to Instagram with the #sbseurovision hashtag in the caption between 8 and 12 May 2014 (inclusive). This period is focused on the local Australian broadcasts of the Eurovision semi-finals and final (on 9, 10, and 11 May respectively) rather than their actual dates (6, 8, and 10 May). The relevant images and video were located by querying the Instagram API for the #sbseurovision hashtag throughout this period (see Highfield & Leaver, 2015). The following discussion uses this analysis to examine how Instagram users engage with broadcasts and present their social television experiences through visual media, including the genres and forms of content, and how this may differ from other social media practices.

### **#sbseurovision: Social television and Instagram**

Posting to Instagram while watching Eurovision can reflect the instantaneity of social media and mobile apps, engaging with the broadcast as it happens. However, for the #sbseurovision coverage, this type of engagement is not extensive: for most contributing users, this only happens once or twice, peaking during the broadcast of the final as the focal point of the event. Of the 1205 Instagram users who posted the 1846 objects studied, 884 users posted only one image or video tagged with #sbseurovision. A further 181 users posted two items, 71 three, 36 four, and 33 users each published five or more items, with the most by an individual user being 15 tagged items over the five days. These patterns suggest that user engagement with the broadcast on Instagram is generally not an ongoing concern; a single image or video is sufficient for most users, with just over 26% of the total users represented here posting more than once using the hashtag. Unlike Twitter, where repeated posting in response to unfolding onscreen events is the norm, the user activity patterns here would suggest different approaches to broadcast engagement through visual social media.

This is reflected too in the actual content of the images and videos posted to Instagram: common framings included selfies (both individual and with multiple people) and point-of-view (POV) shots, which showed the user's view of the screen on which they were watching Eurovision. 520 selfies featured in the dataset, of which two-thirds featured two or more people, and minor but recurring framings included 32 'pelfies' (selfies with pets) and 12 mirror selfies. Meanwhile, 186 images were POV shots, which could also feature any food, drink, and pets found in-between the viewer and the screen. These popular forms of presentation highlight both the viewing experience, explicitly situating the user around the broadcast, and the social side of watching with others (as well as sharing this on social media). These far outnumbered non-photographic/video content in the dataset, suggesting that for engaging with and documenting live broadcasts, and their surrounding social events, what will be shared primarily is user-taken media (both by itself and in combination with other content).

The importance of the social to the Eurovision experience more broadly is underlined in the Instagram content: it is not just that viewers are sharing their images and comments on social media, but that they are also doing so while watching Eurovision with other people. Nearly half of the media featured more than one person, while depictions of parties and social events were also apparent in images of themed food and drinks, Eurovision costumes (featured in 25% of the dataset), banners and flags around lounge rooms, and various forms of home voting, bingo cards, and drinking game rules for playing along with the broadcast (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Example of Eurovision drinking game rules posted to Instagram, recreated by the author**

The special event nature of Eurovision in Australia is clear here. Watching the broadcast is not necessarily a casual activity like watching a more regular, ongoing show (although it should be noted that serialized shows can have their own event-like viewing cultures – the wine and popcorn accompaniment for *Scandal*, for instance). For Australian Eurovision viewers, the broadcast is an impetus to dress up, to have friends over, and to embrace the myriad tropes and nationalities of Eurovision. This includes explicitly engaging with the broadcast and contest, as well as with the localized social experience. From showing the screen featuring the broadcast (in 27% of media) to voting on favorite performances or playing along with drinking games, these images directly link the media to the broadcast. The diversity of approaches depicted here demonstrates how the #sbseurovision content encompass a range of subjects that reflect not just the viewing of Eurovision, but the social and cultural experiences and representations of the contest.

Although #sbseurovision is ostensibly a broadcaster-specific hashtag, it is not a moderated space and can be used by any social media user. Tagging an image or a

tweet with #sbseurovision does not mean that there has to be direct engagement with the broadcast itself: arguably, #sbseurovision is a de facto hashtag for Australians discussing Eurovision in general, whether on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, because it is a comparatively spoiler-free space. Posting to - and following - #eurovision or #esc would mean that Australian viewers could unwittingly see the result before the SBS broadcast. #sbseurovision, by contrast, pretends that the results have not happened - a social media discussion on delay and in a bubble - and by extension becomes a safe space for Australian users to post their Eurovision content without being sullied by spoilers. The audience and broadcasters alike are aware of the impact of digital distance, and in the absence of live broadcasts of Eurovision this self-organized space is a means to maintain anticipation and excitement until the broadcast. The incentive of having tweets, Facebook posts, or Instagram images appearing on the broadcast (and the chance of an extended audience for witty remarks and interesting content) may also be a factor in the use of the SBS-promoted hashtag, even when not posting specifically about the broadcast; of the media showing screens, a small number were explicitly of social media content shared during the broadcast, including previous images or tweets posted by the user.

Rather than being a broadcast-only space, #sbseurovision on Instagram encompasses the contest and the experience of Eurovision as social event, whether through the preparation of party food decorated for Eurovision, such as cupcakes iced with competing nations' flags, creating drinking game rules, putting up balloons and streamers, or dressing up in costumes. These practices demonstrate a further side to social TV which is not always apparent on other social media - and indeed highlights that 'social TV' is not a social media-only phenomenon, but bridges distributed discussions on social media with viewers around Australia and interactions with people with whom individuals are physically watching the broadcast. The Instagram activity depicts the social fandom inherent in the Eurovision experience and an affirmation of friendships, family, and interpersonal connections; because of the special event nature of Eurovision, though, it remains to be seen if these patterns are replicated for other show-related activity on Instagram.

As with any social media activity, including live-tweeting television viewing (d'Heer & Verdegem, 2014), there is a performance aspect to the Instagram #sbseurovision posts. Vittadini and Pasquali (2013) stress the need for examining performance and the construction of sociality and self through social media (162-163), and this is a crucial consideration for studies of visual media and the self-representations included therein. Sharing a photo of Eurovision parties, the preparation of food, drinks, and costumes, and the fun being had is not just documenting a social experience; it may also be presenting a particularly carefully constructed representation for audiences both known (a user's Instagram followers) and unknown (the wider SBS audience). However, the intentions behind Instagram content are not immediately apparent from the images and videos alone, and may be many and various.

The Instagram content offers a different response to Eurovision than Twitter coverage. The tones of comments through content on Instagram and Twitter differ. While many tweets are genuinely enthusiastic about Eurovision, the short length of tweets and ongoing contributions also encourages pithy and witty one-liners that might both attract further attention and appear on-screen. Instagram users also employ humor and familiarity, such as engaging with Eurovision tropes, yet snark and irony are less prominent in the images and videos. This may be due to limitations of conveying such views within photographs, and not using Instagram for live coverage of the show in the same way as Twitter. Instagram users do infrequently use other visual media to establish comedy and mockery, including screenshots, memes, and image macros, which may make humor more obvious and accessible.

Posting to Instagram about watching television is more about setting the context for the social experience taking place - documenting that this is what a user is doing, whether by themselves or as part of a group - than repeatedly engaging with the broadcast. What this initial analysis has also found is that there are common approaches for Instagram users to engage with broadcasts. These include popular framings of images documenting the television watching experience, and such practices record users' everyday experiences, establishing their viewing of particular programs, without going into detail about the actual content of the broadcast.

Whereas Twitter activity promotes live-tweeting and humor, Instagram activity demonstrates fun and enjoyment in different ways.<sup>1</sup> Rather than repeatedly commenting on the broadcast, Instagram users generally post one or two images which set up the context and environment for their experience of the broadcast: this includes establishing the viewing as a special event, with food, drinks, costumes, decorations, and other people. For the SBS Eurovision broadcast, the Instagram activity is less concerned with just the events on screen, but rather depicts the wider Eurovision experience.

## **Conclusion**

As an exploratory analysis of Instagram activity around the Australian broadcast of the Eurovision Song Contest, the specific context of this study puts obvious limits on generalization of findings, particularly in the absence of further work comparing audiences' visual participation, framing, and engagement with television-watching. However, the practices outlined here, and especially the identification of common approaches to presenting these experiences on Instagram, suggest starting points for follow-up research. This initial analysis has focused just on the image and video content of Instagram posts tagged with #sbseurovision; comments and likes have not been included, although information for both is returned through the Instagram API. The focus on the #sbseurovision hashtag further limits the study: there is no requirement for users to include hashtags in their posts, and the intentions behind use and non-use may differ for individual users.

This study has focused solely on material contributed by Instagram users to #sbseurovision; while these are members of the audience, they are not necessarily representative of the entire audience for Eurovision in Australia, nor of social media or Instagram-specific users. As Baym (2013) notes, knowing *which* audience we are studying, and what this means for findings and generalizations, is critical for research in this field. This is especially crucial when considering the visibility of social media content. While the data studied here are public images and videos, tools for aggregating and following topical content on Instagram are currently less common

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<sup>1</sup> It may indeed be that users employ both platforms: an individual might watch all three broadcasts and tweet along throughout each of them, but only post more visual content to Instagram during the final (and this may also be cross-posted to Twitter and Facebook).

than for Twitter, meaning that user engagement with tweets during broadcast may be more extensive than Instagram posts.

This chapter has provided a preliminary outline of how Instagram users employ this platform to engage with television broadcasts through primarily visual means. Australian Instagram users' #sbseurovision contributions highlight the overlap between social media, broadcasting, participatory and active audiences, and fandom. Unlike Twitter, where repeated, often-humorous commentary to events on-screen is the norm, Instagram content is less tied to the broadcast itself, and instead connects users to the wider context of the program and the social experience of television watching. Photos and videos establish the setting for a user's viewing, including where they are watching, who they are with, and what they are eating and drinking, whether mundane or special events. The documentation of these different social experiences makes use of the broadcaster-specific hashtag, without necessarily commenting on the show itself: #sbseurovision is also a space for Australians to overcome digital distance and share their Eurovision-related content without having the result spoiled. As long-standing cult viewing in Australia (and elsewhere), Eurovision already has established communities and practices of fandom and engagement; social media afford additional ways of playing with these practices, extending old forms, creating new ones, and bridging the multiple dimensions of 'social' within social media and social television.

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