

ONLINE PROPAGANDA: THE CASE OF THE “WOKE” EUROVISION SONG CONTEST

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Abstract: For the last few years, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) – the longest running international music competition, has been present in social media and online outlets as losing its focus on culture and becoming a tool for a left-wing, “woke” ideology. The 2024 edition was especially attacked after the first non-binary person had become the winner, fueling allegations the contest rewards artists based on their identity rather than talent.

Our analysis shows that such allegations have been inconsistent, vaguely defined, and context-aware, appearing to follow “culture war” topics, from LGBTQ+ rights to migrants or climate change. As most use of the “woke ESC” narrative comes from rightwing media and politicians, we content this narrative is part of a political propaganda effort, and functions to signify adherence to a political position, as well as to counter a perceived propagation of left-wing ideas.

Keywords: *propaganda; woke; Eurovision Song Contest;*

Introduction

The 2024 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has been won by Nemo, the first non-binary artist to win the competition. The news was followed by a wave of social media messages claiming they won *because* they are non-binary, and that Eurovision has a political agenda rather than a cultural one, with many using the label “woke”.

The current paper investigates what this label means, to what extent it is warranted and if the media representation of the ESC as “woke” can be considered propaganda. The Research Objectives and Questions are the following:

- RO: Determine if there is a discernible propaganda campaign claiming the Eurovision Song Contest is “woke”.
- RQ1: How “woke” have the Eurovision winners been, for the last 20 years?
- RQ2: How is the “woke Eurovision” narrative represented in media?

The fraught and fractured term “propaganda”

Peter Pomerantsev wrote that propaganda is “a term so fraught and fractured (...) that I avoid using it” (Pomerantsev, 2019). Indeed, “propaganda” is a widely used and contested term, having various definitions. Lasswell (1927) defined it as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols”. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis¹, (1939) defined it as “the expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends.” Some definitions don’t focus on some inherent negative aspects of propaganda, but instead view it as “a neutral term meaning mass persuasion” (Cull et al., 2017).

However, we can contend that the consensus today is that the term “connotes the selective use of information for political effect” (Jackson, 2018), or, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) “The systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a particular cause or point of view, often a political agenda.”

In the context of this paper, investigating if the narrative of the “woke ESC” is propaganda or not, we will work with the definitions that include the intent to “mislead” for a specific political agenda. Thus, we need to understand what media promote and contradict this narrative, if there is a political agenda driving those media, and to evaluate, if possible, to what extent Eurovision is actually “woke”.

Understanding “woke”

Romano (2020), traces the term back to the 1920s-1940s black communities in the US, where it conveyed “the notion that staying “woke” and alert to the deceptions of other people was a basic survival tactic”, with a strong racial justice component that particularly conveyed “Black Americans’ need to be aware of racially motivated threats.”

While the term got popular due to multiple cultural products, its use exploded after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, in 2014, cementing its meaning as a warning to “racially motivated police violence” (Nicholas, 2023). Nicholas also shows that the explosion in popularity extended its use to other groups, for other issues, “such as LGBTQA+ rights, class issues, and feminism”.

As the term grew and became a signifier of progressives fighting whatever they perceived as injustice, reactions were bound to arise. In 2017, Saturday Night Live made a parody on it (SNL, 2017), emphasizing the superficiality it had acquired, more aligned with virtue signaling than real activism. Sanders (2018) pleaded to retire the term, suggesting that it had run its course and had become too mainstream.

¹ The Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA): U.S. organization operating from 1937 to 1942, composed of social scientists, opinion leaders, historians, educators, and journalists.

Many scholars have criticized the term and the underlying phenomenon since, including McWhorter (2021), Fiocco (2022), and Žižek (2023). However, there are still defenders of “wokeness” as a “trait to be nurtured” or an “aspirational state” (Smith et al., 2023), a concept that promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion. (Zenn, 2023).

In the public sphere, “woke” doesn’t seem to have a definition that would completely differentiate it from other terms used in the so-called “culture wars”², such as “politically correct” or “social justice warrior”. In this context, conservatives have been caricaturing the word, “as a condemnation of people who use political correctness to excessive degrees or their own advantage” (Nicholas, 2023), and in some cases it is used purely as an insult.

Smith et al. (2023) claim that this lack of clarity “may be by design” insofar it allows critics to dismiss several topics at once and to create the illusion that there is somehow a significant threat to society from “the woke mob”.

Specifically, we can summarize the main perceived dangers as follows:

- censorship: cancel culture, silencing conservative voices, rewriting history to not offend some people, forcing cultural products to conform to leftist views on minorities, e.g. LGBTQ characters and non-white actors in movies; (Ramshankar, 2021; Gainor, 2024)
- imposing a false view on gender and sexuality: promoting LGBTQ as a lifestyle to children, promoting transgenderism and allowing children to transition; (Portella, 2023)
- undermining meritocracy: Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) practices are placing the wrong people in important jobs. (Hung, 2023)

The ESC and Politics

Operated by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the ESC is the longest-running international music competition on television and has constantly had a significant audience, with hundreds of millions of viewers every year.

The contest rules explicitly state it is a “non-political event”, that all participants have “to make sure that the ESC shall in no case be politicized and/or instrumentalized” (ESC, 2024) However, we may argue its creation was in fact a political act, as it came about in the process of creating the European Union, as a cultural element that aimed to balance an envisioned *European identity* with the diversity of national traditions.

As Baker (2019) put it, “Eurovision, with its rituals of competition between nations, exemplifies the paradox of ‘unity in diversity’ visions of Europe.” Wellings and Kalman (2019) argue that the ESC had developed as the spirit that animated the newly created body - the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), representing “a manifestation of postwar European identity”.

² Summarized as ‘a life and death struggle for conservatism faced with the Left’s attempts to “cancel” opposing voices’ (Cammaerts, 2022)

The *politics* question is made even more difficult when trying to differentiate between artistic and political gestures from artists and the public. In some cases the ESC rules led to action: Georgia had to withdraw in 2009 because their song was titled “We Don’t Wanna Put In”; Armenian TV was fined in 2016 because their artist brought an “Artsakh” flag on stage; Icelandic act Hatari have been fined in 2019 for showing a Palestinian flag; in 2017, the EBU banned portuguese artist Salvador Sobral from wearing a shirt with the message “S.O.S. Refugees”, though he argued it was a humanitarian message, not a political one.

More recently the EBU disqualified Russia in 2022 over its invasion of Ukraine yet calls for banning Israel in 2024 were rejected³, as EBU stated it is “in line with other international federations including sports bodies who are allowing Israel to participate in events”.

While further discussion on the politicization of the ESC is outside the scope of the current paper, we can acknowledge the fact that the contest is inextricably linked to politics because of the difficulties of delineating between “humanitarian” and political gestures and because both artists and the public (as seen in recent calls for boycott over Israel) are “zoon politikon”, unable to turn off their values and ideology.

How “woke” is the ESC? Methodological aspects

We can summarize the above theoretical discussion by highlighting several ideas:

- “Woke” is an unclear term, mostly used by conservatives either as an insult, or to dismiss, in bulk, any idea or action that goes against their ideology.
- These ideas usually revolve around racism and LGBTQ+ rights, though other topics are sometimes included, insofar as they are favored (or seem to be favored) by the left.
- The ESC, as the EU itself, openly states inclusion and diversity as core values.

To investigate if the ESC “has become” more “woke”, we considered the winning acts of the last 20 years and computed a “wokeness score” based on artists’ gender/sexual identity and its importance, and on artists using the stage to promote “woke” viewpoints such as promoting feminism or various “social justice issues”.

All the information for the criteria below has been extracted from publicly available data such as Wikipedia pages of artists, ESC winner’s conference, statements or interview, interviews with artists for any media outlet, and personal Instagram profile of the artist.

We should also note that we have conducted this analysis following the “*audiatur et altera pars*” principle, i.e. always considering what would critics of “wokeism” think.

³ This is by no means meant to suggest that the author considered the Russia and Israel situations to be the same, rather that many in the general public believe it is similar enough to warrant such a reaction.

Criteria 1a: gender / sexual identity of artists:

- **10 points** if winning artist is part of the LGBTQ+ community or has a non-traditional sexual identity. Since the main claim is that identity influences the jury's decision, we only awarded the points if the winning artist's identity was known *before* the competition.
- Some acts include bands with multiple individuals, we awarded only **5 points** if only some of the members have a known non-traditional gender or sexual identity.
- We awarded **0 points** for other situations.

Criteria 1b: importance of gender / sexual identity for artists

While identity is a main factor in assigning the “woke” label, embracing that identity can make an important difference.

- We awarded **10 points** if the sexual/gender identity is unequivocally relevant, i.e. the artist talks about their identity, the music is inspired from it, the artist becomes an LGBTQ+ icon etc.
- We awarded **5 points** if there is *some* inspiration, e.g., if lyrics are related to LGBTQ+ but there is not a very straight - forward, significant connection.
- We awarded **0 points** if the artist's sexual/gender identity has no significance for their act, or if they have a traditional sexual/gender identity.

The score for this category is the average of subcategories a and b.

Criteria 2: promoting “woke” themes

We included here any public discourse from the winning artists that would be considered “woke”:

- **2 points** for promoting measures against climate change, a new “culture wars” issue (Krugman, 2023).
- **2 points** for promoting feminism, the “me too” movement.
- **2 points** for promoting “cancel culture” or “censorship”, including criticizing public figures accused of bigotry etc.
- **2 points** for addressing racial injustice immigrants' rights.
- **2 points** for critiquing religious beliefs, as opposition to religion (usually Christianity) is also considered a “woke” characteristic (Chapman, 2023)

The score for this category is the sum of all the points from the above criteria.

Since we approached the analysis by giving leeway to the conservative viewpoint, we considered that artists can be considered “woke” even outside the ESC attention, yet this only partly reflects on the ESC itself. Therefore, we awarded only half the points if the artists referenced such topics outside the ESC context (eg. winner interviews), and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the points if the artists approached such topics outside the ESC but do it in a consistent way. This is the specific case of the 2013 winner, Emmelie de Forest, who has posted multiple *social justice* messages on her Instagram profile.

We have also not considered here activism that is not generally considered to be leftwing or “woke”, such as promoting the welfare of children (a topic very much embraced by conservatives as well).

The final “wokeness score” is calculated as average of criteria 1a and 1b scores, plus the criteria 2 score, having a range of 0 - 20.

ESC winners “woke” scores

Following the methodology described above, the computed scores for the ESC winners of the last 20 years are presented in Table 1:

Year	Winner	Final SCORE	Crit. 1a	Crit. 1b	Crit. 2
2024	Nemo (CH)	10	10	10	0
2023	Loreen (SE)	5	10	0	0
2022	Kalush Orchestra (UA)	0	0	0	0
2021	Måneskin (IT)	5	5	5	0
2019	Duncan Laurence (NL)	7.5	10	5	0
2018	Netta (IL)	6.5	5	0	4
2017	Salvador Sobral (PT)	2	0	0	2
2016	Jamala (UA)	0	0	0	0
2015	Måns Zelmerlöw (SE)	0	0	0	0
2014	Conchita Wurst (AT)	10	10	10	0
2013	Emmelie de Forest (DK)	3	0	0	3
2012	Loreen (SE)	0	0	0	0
2011	Ell/Nikki (AZ)	0	0	0	0
2010	Lena (DE)	0	0	0	0
2009	Alexander Rybak (NO)	0	0	0	0
2008	Dima Bilan (RU)	0	0	0	0
2007	Marija Šerifović (RS)	5	10	0	0
2006	Lordi (FI)	0	0	0	0
2005	Helena Paparizou (GR)	0	0	0	0
2004	Ruslana (UA)	2	0	0	2

Table 1: “Wokeness” scores of ESC winners, 2004-2024

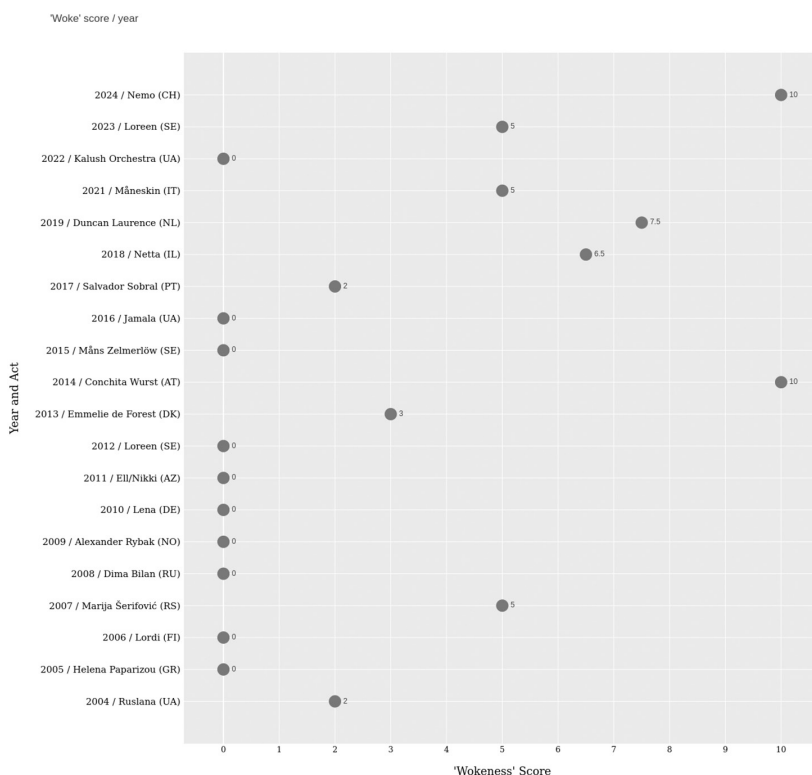
Explanations for scores:

- Nemo: openly non-binary artist; their winning song - *The Code* is connected to their identity (Santos, 2024) and their win has inspired political discussion in Switzerland over recognition for a “third gender” (Swissinfo, 2024). No data suggests Nemo promoted other social issues.
- Loreen: came out as bisexual in 2017 but never focused on her sexual identity: “people know about that is because a newspaper asked me a question, and I answered, ‘Love is where you find it.’” (Williams, 2023). Since she only came out in 2017, she was awarded 0 points for her 2012 win, and 10 points for her 2023 win.

- Kalush Orchestra: members identify as heterosexual; their song was written to honour one of the band members' mother. (Eurovision, 2022)
- Måneskin: two of the four band members identify as queer (5 points for crit. 1a). The band doesn't focus on gender/sexual identities and have rejected claims that they are "exploiting their sex appeal" or "queerbaiting". However, they do sometimes show their support to the LGBTQ+ community during their concerts (5 points for crit. 1b). (Portal Maneskin, 2023; Bosso, 2022).
- Duncan Lawrence: came out as bisexual in 2016, which he addressed publicly in 2018. He married J. Garfield in 2023. He is not significantly focused on his identity but did state in "I am more than just an artist, I am a person, I am a living being, I'm bisexual, I'm a musician, I stand for things." (Moore, 2019)
- Netta: heterosexual woman, strong ally of the LGBTQ+ community: "It's absurd that gays here don't have the same rights as I do." (Stroude, 2019). Her song, *Toy*, was inspired by the #metoo movement, and she promoted racial and cultural equality as well (Heller, 2019).
- Salvador Sobral: revealed he was intersex in 2023 (after his win, so he was not awarded any points). He attended a press conference wearing an "S.O.S. Refugees" shirt that was considered a political gesture and may be considered "woke" by critics of the concept.
- Jamala: heterosexual woman, married to a man; no information she promotes any social justice topics.
- Måns Zelmerlöv: heterosexual, married with children, no information he promotes any "woke" topics. He was even criticized for stating that he considered "gay sex was not as <<natural>> as that between a man and a woman" but later apologised and claimed a misunderstanding. (Walker, 2015).
- Conchita Wurst: gay man (T. Neuwirth) that has built a stage persona as a "bearded lady". Conchita created significant controversies at the time, with a Russian petition asserting the ESC became "a hotbed of sodomy, at the initiation of European liberals". (Denham, 2014). At the same time, Conchita was praised by fans, journalists, and even western politicians; the Austrian president stated Conchita's victory was "not just a victory for Austria, but above all for diversity and tolerance in Europe" (Davies, 2014).
- Emmelie de Forest: heterosexual; has several Instagram posts on various social issues.
- Ell/Nikki: Eldar Qasimov and Nigar Camal, traditional gender/sexual identity, no data on promoting any social issues.
- Lena: heterosexual woman, married, with children. No information on promoting any social issues.
- Alexander Rybak: no proof of him having a non-traditional gender/sexual identity; the winning song was about song was about a high school sweetheart Ingrid, who married someone else. (Amara, 2015)
- Dima Bilan: heterosexual, sometimes criticized for being a playboy.

- Marija Šerifović: there is some confusion, as Greer (2007) constantly referred to her as a lesbian, while Wikipedia claims she “has not openly declared as a lesbian” but admitted it in 2014. She never focused on her identity, so she was awarded 5 total points per our methodology.
- Lordi: no data of any of the band members having a non-traditional identity. The band was attacked for being Satanists because of the monster-like outfits they wear when performing. However, they are Christians, and their on-stage personas are only entertainment “like horror movies”. (Blabbermouth, 2006).
- Helena Paparizou: heterosexual, no information she is involved in any social activism.
- Ruslana: heterosexual. She is very involved in various causes such as fighting human trafficking and she contributed to the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine. According to our methodology, we only awarded her 2 points, for her interest in fighting climate change: “she wants to get people thinking about the environmental cost of fossil fuels, and the dangers of global climate change”. (Charles, 2008).

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the “wokeness” score over time:



The interesting area of the chart is between 2014 and 2024, marked by the two artists that drew the most discussion pro- and against the LGBTQ+ community, where we do see a rise in the scores, compared to the previous ten years.

We should note that, with a few exceptions, artists got points for having a non-traditional sexual identity and focusing on it, rather than promoting other issues, such as racial injustice or climate change. In this sense, if the narrative would change from “ESC is woke” to “ESC is LGBTQ+”, there will be little change of the current analysis.

To put this into context, we have to recognize the difficulties for the LGBTQ+ community to get civil rights. In some countries, homosexuality was a criminal offence not very long ago - Armenia before 2003, Azerbaijan before 2000, Georgia before 2000, Romania before 2001. While some countries allow same-sex marriage or civil partnership, others forbid both or have even enshrined this ban in their Constitutions.

The association between Europe and LGBTQ+ activism is well documented and has grown *with* the increasing shift of the European Union from an economic project to a political project that includes values such as tolerance and diversity. More specifically, “LGBT movements have a long history of referring to a vision of Europe, and an understanding of Europe that contains a human rights mandate inclusive of LGBT people is increasingly common in contemporary discourses.” (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014).

Thus, we contend that the explanation for the “wokeness” score increase is not driven by ESC rewarding “virtue signaling” or “social justice warriors” but by a normalization of non-traditional gender/sexual identities that is reflective of Europe at large.

Media representation of “woke ESC”: Methodological aspects

- To answer RQ2, about media representations of the “woke Eurovision” narrative, we gathered 50 online articles and 164 Facebook posts to analyze.
- The online articles were selected from a Google Search, using the following process:
- We have used an “incognito” browser session, and a random VPN connection, to minimize contagion with regular internet usage.
- Google search was used, with search *Eurovision and woke* (without quotes) and setting the timeframe to each year from 2019 to 2024.
- We saved the link to the first 10 articles from each year, in order of finding them but excluding social media links, articles behind a paywall, and articles posted by sites connected to the ESC.
- Articles in other languages than English were translated to English using the Chrome built-in Translator.
- Facebook data was acquired from CrowdTangle (2024); all data was acquired at the same time, before the tool was suspended. The process:

- We searched using the available search tool using the phrase *Eurovision AND woke* (without quotes), one for each year 2015 - 2024. No other criteria or filters were used.
- Results were exported to .csv files containing the contents of the posts and all CrowdTangle metadata such as page name, total interactions, post URL etc. After reviewing the files, we removed entries that had zero interactions.
- Posts in other languages than English were translated using the built-in Facebook translator. Where posts consisted in links to online articles, we only considered the post text and the excerpt displayed by Facebook, since these are visible for anyone seeing the post. The articles being linked to were not considered, since they are external to Facebook, and we risk overlapping with online articles.
- Analysis on the content of both media articles and Facebook posts has been performed using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Regarding political bias of media outlets and Facebook pages, we have used a five-point scale (left = -2, center-left = -1, neutral = 0, center-right = +1, right = +2) and considered the following:
- Self-descriptions: online platforms stating in their description they are conservative, liberal etc.
- Specialized media analysis platforms: Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart, All-sides (Harvard Library, n.d.).
- For Facebook posts, we only considered pages that represent media outlets (where we applied the same process as above), or pages belonging to political figures (where we considered the party affiliation, e.g. AfD is right wing). The rest were marked “unclear” and discarded from the bias analysis.

Media representation of “woke ESC”: results

Multiple posts or articles that contain the terms “woke” and “Eurovision” meant a literal sense of “waking up”, e.g. “I woke up in a world today where(...)”.

In some cases, the content was unclear, e.g. a post with the content “Broke: Eurovision. Woke: Proto Indo-Eurovision”, which is unclear if it is an irony at ESC or at ESC critics, or perhaps a reference that only makes sense to the followers of the account.

Finally, there have been cases deemed “unrelated”. Some articles did not even include the word “woke” in the text, but contained links to other articles that had “woke” in their title. For others, the references to “woke” and ESC were completely disconnected.

To get some insights into the evolution of “woke ESC” in media, we first counted how many posts/articles were using this phrase (Figure 2 – Facebook, Figure 3 - online articles).

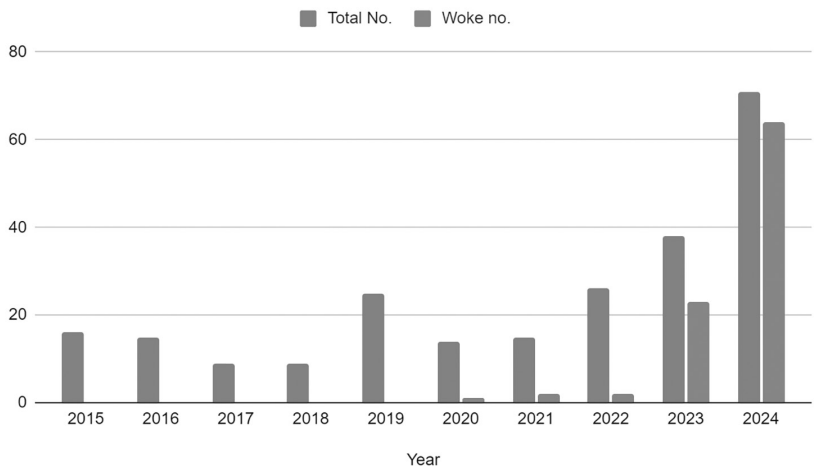


Figure 2: Total number of Facebook posts for years 2015-2024, containing both terms “Eurovision” and “woke” vs the number of posts using “woke” in the figurative sense.

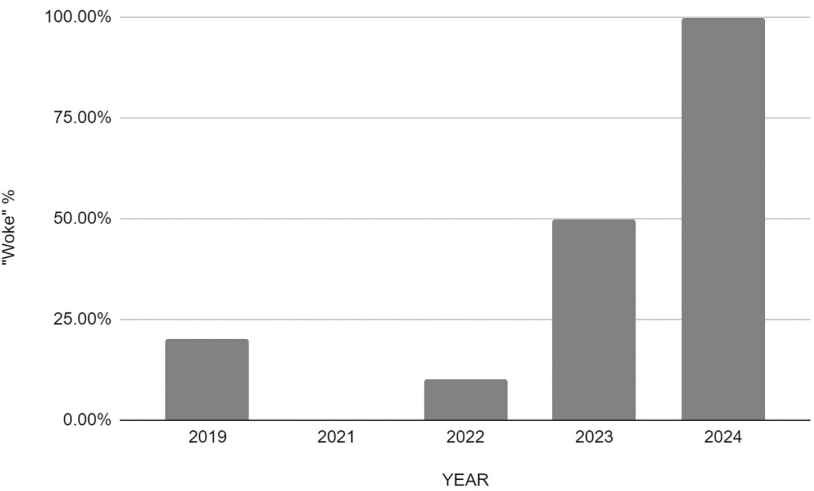


Figure 3: Percent of article posts for years 2019, 2021-2024, containing references to “woke Eurovision”.

On Facebook, references to “woke ESC” was inexistent before 2020, picked up steam in 2023 (60% figurative), and exploded in 2024 (90% figurative). The trend is similar for online articles, though there were two online articles (out of ten) in 2019 referencing “woke” in connection to ESC.

- Considering these findings, thematic analysis focused on 2023 and 2024 and provided several insights.

- Only a few posts presented themes having a neutral or positive sentiment, most contents promoted negative sentiments.
- Most common “defense” was to point out “woke” is a term used by people to express their disagreement with certain political ideas. Another positive theme was in support of diversity (presented as good).
- Most common negative theme is associating “woke” to other concepts or events that can be further criticized. These have been considered together, as texts did not elaborate. Most associations have been with antisemitism (sometimes conflated with an anti-Israel or a pro-Palestine position), “gender ideology”, moral decay, left-wing politics, and satanism. Contents from 2024 were focused on claiming “woke” ESC fans were antisemitic for protesting Israel.
- Negative themes also claimed, “the ESC is no longer what it used to be”, no longer about music or bringing people together, but about promoting the ideology of a radical minority.
- Specific themes claimed the “woke ESC” fuels euroscepticism, some artist won (or lost!) because of “woke”, or that people didn’t vote for “woke acts”, only jurors did.
- From the theme maps (fig. 4, 5, and 6), we can see that negative themes are more repetitive, i.e. there is more content repeating the same themes.
- These findings support the idea that “woke” is a catch-all term sometimes used contradictory, a way to show affinity for political positions, and that it is context-sensitive, it changes to support whatever narrative is most interesting at any given moment (as we see with the focus of Israel in 2024).

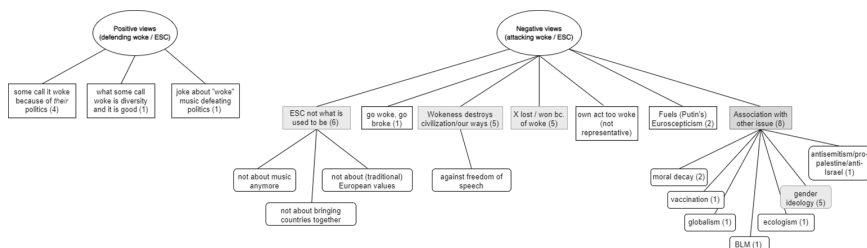


Figure4: Theme map, Facebook data 2023.

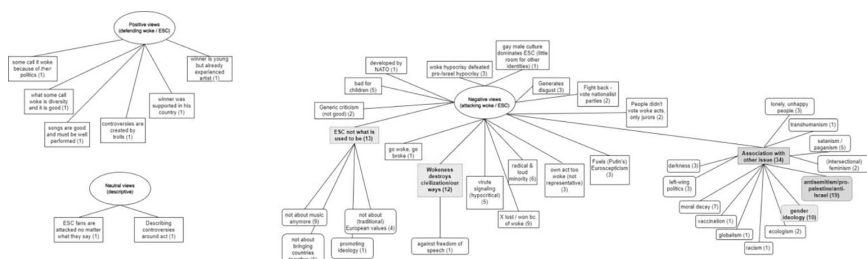


Figure 5: Theme map, Facebook data, 2024.

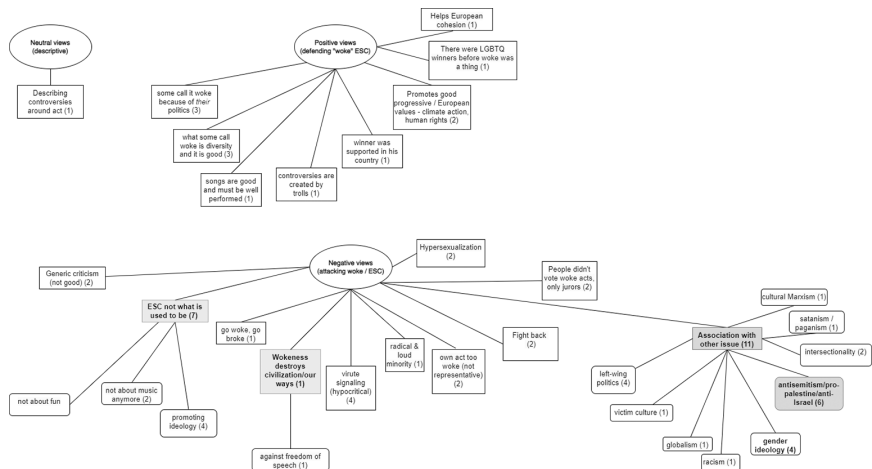


Figure 6: Theme map, online articles, all data.

To analyze the relationship between political bias and sentiment on, we content deemed “unclear”, “unrelated” or “literal”, as well as posts for which the author’s political position could not be established. 61 pieces of content remained - 6 from left leaning sources, 7 from center-left sources, 6 from neutral sources, 19 from center-right sources, and 23 from right leaning sources. (We should note that 3 of the 6 left leaning sources are the same Facebook post that we allowed because it was shared on different accounts / occasions and thus contributed to the visibility of the narratives).

Center-right and right sources had only negative sentiment themes. From the neutral sources, one article was neutral, 3 were positive, and 2 were negative. Center-left sources were mostly positive (5 pieces of content), and 2 were negative. Interestingly, all 6 pieces from left leaning sources were negative, claiming ESC is dominated by “gay male culture”, or that the 2024 ESC pitted “woke virtue signaling” against “zionist virtue signaling”.

This confirms that “woke” is used as a political propaganda term. We can also state that rightwing media and politicians are much more likely to use it (42 pieces of content compared to 13 on left and center-left), and that some center - left sources are defending “woke” ESC, while the radical left is likely to be against it.

Conclusions

ESC is “woke” only in the sense that it promotes diversity, tolerance, and inclusion, as Europe itself promotes these values. Artists are opening up about their identity and values but there is no proof they win *because* of that.

The narrative grew mostly after 2023, but is still vague, contradictory, and context-aware, pushed mainly by right and center-right media, while center-left media is rather positive. Left wing media is less interested in the topic, but mostly negative, though for other reasons than those on the right – who care only about the culture wars.

Outrage grows when the winner puts their identity or values in focus - nobody attacked Netta for being feminist and pro LGBTQ nor Loreen, but Conchita Wurst and Nemo started a real storm (though the term “woke” wasn’t popular in 2014).

Political parties (AfD, Reform UK) are visible in the collected data, attacking the ESC as woke; AfD even had a concerted action, with several political figures and party pages posting the same message, in line with their discourse.

The “woke ESC” narrative can therefore be summarized as exaggerated and incoherent, amplified mostly by right-wing media and politicians, especially visible when winners promote a nontraditional identity (Nemo, Conchita Wurst) or when it can be used to rally around a political position (in the case of defending Israel). Per our definitions, this is called propaganda.

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