

## Expert Judgment Versus Public Opinion – Evidence from the Eurovision Song Contest

MARCO A. HAAN, S. GERHARD DIJKSTRA and PETER T. DIJKSTRA

*Department of Economics, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 800, 9700 AV Groningen, The Netherlands*

*E-mail: m.a.haan@eco.rug.nl; sgdijkstra@gmx.net; ptdijkstra@gmx.net*

**Abstract.** For centuries, there have been discussions as to whether only experts can judge the quality of cultural output, or whether the taste of the public also has merit. This paper tries to answer that question empirically, using national finals of the Eurovision Song Contest. We show that experts are better judges of quality in the sense that the outcome of finals judged by experts is less sensitive to factors unrelated to quality than the outcome of finals judged by public opinion. Yet, experts are not perfect; their judgment does still depend on such factors. This is also the case in the European finals of the contest.

**Key words:** Eurovision Song Contest, expert judgment, public opinion

### 1. Introduction

Ancient wisdom has it that there is no arguing about tastes. Yet, for many centuries artists, critics, philosophers and economists, amongst others, have done exactly that. In particular, they have argued about whether only specialists can assess the quality of art, or whether the taste of the general public also has some merit.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion has important implications for the question as to whether there is a market failure in the provision of the arts, and whether government should intervene. If the general public is a bad judge of artistic quality, then market provision of the arts, which effectively boils down to judgment by the general public, would not be the ideal institution to foster and promote the quality of the arts. In that case, government would have a role in supporting artists who are judged by experts (but not by the public) as being worthwhile. This is the classic merit good argument, introduced by Musgrave (1959).

Indeed, there are those that argue that “producers of popular culture tend to aim their offerings at the lowest common denominator thereby degrading cultural products by catering to the relatively uncultivated tastes of ordinary consumers”<sup>2</sup> (see Holbrook, 1999 and the references therein). This concern dates back at least to Plato, who argued in *The Republic* that attempts to please the audience would decrease the quality of theatrical productions. Adherents of this view thus argue that judgments of the artistic merits of cultural production should be left to experts

who are familiar with the particular art form, and who can put the offerings into their proper perspective.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are those that argue that market competition “augments rather than undermines the quality and quantity of cultural creations”.<sup>3</sup> Economic incentives encourage artists to address the needs and interests of audiences. Economists and even critics and philosophers, the argument goes, cannot judge objectively the quality of art, just as a central planner will not be able to decide on the proper production and allocation of goods and services. Such jobs can only be done by the market, i.e., by the general public. One of the most outspoken proponents of this view is Tyler Cowen (1998) who argues that “aesthetic judgments that divide ‘high’ culture from ‘low’ culture fail to appreciate adequately the vitality of commercial culture and the efficacy of market forces in stimulating and sustaining creativity in all areas of artistic expression.” Cowen dismisses people having such judgments as cultural pessimists, who “wish to supercede the workings of the market with their own moral and aesthetic judgments.”

It seems impossible to judge which of these views is correct, and whether experts or the general public are best able to judge the quality of cultural output.<sup>4</sup> Any attempt to do so, it seems, inevitably implies the need for making judgments about quality to start with. Obviously, such an approach can never yield an objective evaluation of the judgment of quality. It seems that one cannot evaluate judgments of cultural merit without making such judgments oneself. Yet, in this paper, we do exactly that.

We show that the judgment of quality by a team of experts is inefficient in the sense that the random order of appearance of participants in a contest has a systematic effect on the final ranking of those participants, as decided by a jury of experts. Glejser and Heyndels (2001) argue that this is an inefficiency in the jury process. If jurors really evaluate contestants purely on their merit, then their order of appearance should have no influence on the final ranking.<sup>5</sup> When there is a correlation between order of appearance and final ranking, this then indicates that the jury is influenced by exogenous factors that should not influence their judgment.

Arguably, worse judges are more inefficient in this sense, as they are more strongly influenced by such exogenous factors. If judgments by the general public are more inefficient than judgments by a jury of experts, then we may argue that expert judgment is superior in the sense that it aggregates information in a way that is unambiguously better than that of the general public. In this paper, we show that, at least in the dataset we use, this is indeed the case. Thus, we are not, and never will be, able to judge whether the evaluation criteria that are used by the general public to judge cultural quality are “better” or “worse” than the criteria used by experts. But we are able to show that, however appropriate or inappropriate those evaluation criteria may be, experts at least do a better job than the general public in using them to evaluate the quality of cultural output.