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# Media and the Cultural Legitimation of a Bestseller

A comparative study of *Millennium 4* in the Nordic press

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Division 2: Journalism

Panel session 3: Comparative Perspectives on Cultural Journalism  
in the Nordic Countries



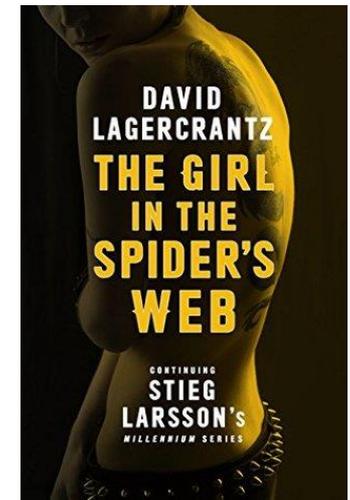
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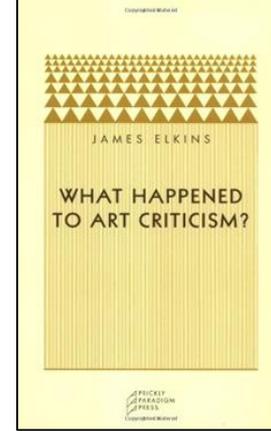
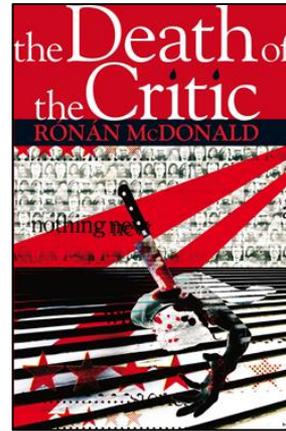
## A Question of Quality: Nordic cultural critique in the media and the negotiation of popular cultural

- «Perspectives on Aesthetic Quality in the Cultural Field»  
– a research programme funded by the Arts Council of Norway
- Researchers:
  - Associate professor Nete Nørgaard Kristensen, University of Copenhagen (PI)
  - Professor Kristina Riegert, Stockholm University
  - Associate professor Karl Atle Knapskog, University of Bergen
  - Senior research fellow Heikki Hellman, University of Tampere
- RQ: How are quality criteria discussed in Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish press when assessing popular culture
- Two cases:
  - TV series *Mad Men* (2007–2015)
  - **Sequel to the bestseller *Millennium* (2015)**





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## Relevance

- Humanistic critique and arts reviews are increasingly put under pressure
  - Commercial media logics and mediatization («newsification», professionalization of PR)
  - Participatory culture («everyone is a critic»)
- But: the news media (arts and cultural journalism in particular) still provide an important institutional setting for cultural critique and negotiation of artistic quality

## Approach

- Nordic comparison – similarities and differences in the light of the common Nordic media model and consolidating international bestseller culture
- Theoretical framework:
  - Journalists as cultural intermediaries / mediators (Bourdieu, Janssen & Verboord)
  - Production of symbolic value / (artistic) quality in literature (Bourdieu, DiMaggio, Janssen & Verboord)



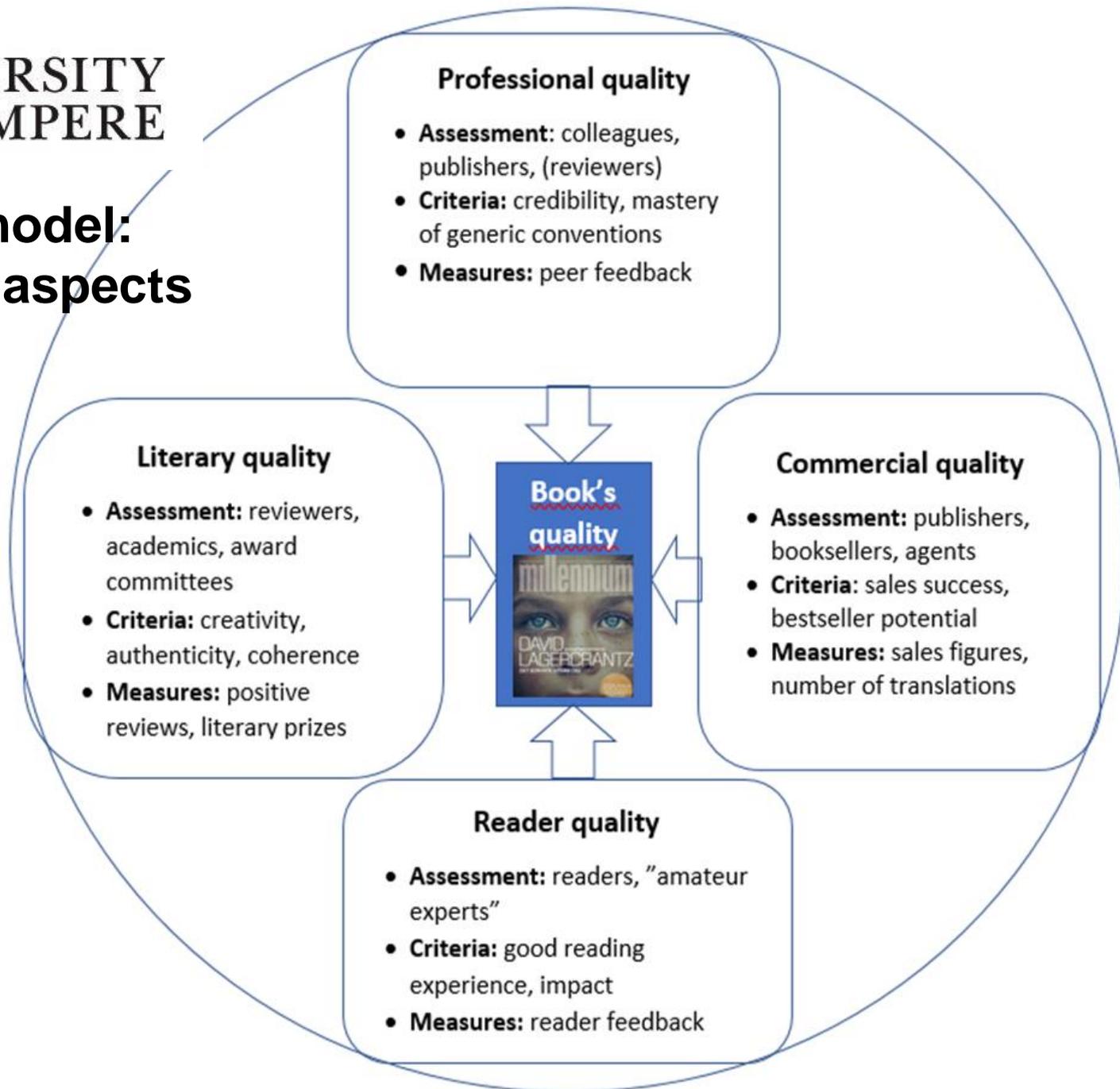
## The Millennium case

- RQ: How the leading newspapers in the Nordic countries addressed the symbolic value of the book, negotiated between the various aspects of its quality, and took part in constituting it as a potential bestseller
- Quality is not an inherent feature of the work but is defined institutionally within the literary field where its main players have the symbolic capital to assess the quality of literature
- (Cultural) journalists play a major role in the legitimization of literature, serving as cultural mediators who have a triple role of
  - 1) gatekeeping
  - 2) evaluating and
  - 3) promoting cultural products
- Data:
  - Sample: 36 national/regional newspapers, 2013–2015 (365 articles)
  - Interviews with publishers
- Quantitative and qualitative content analysis



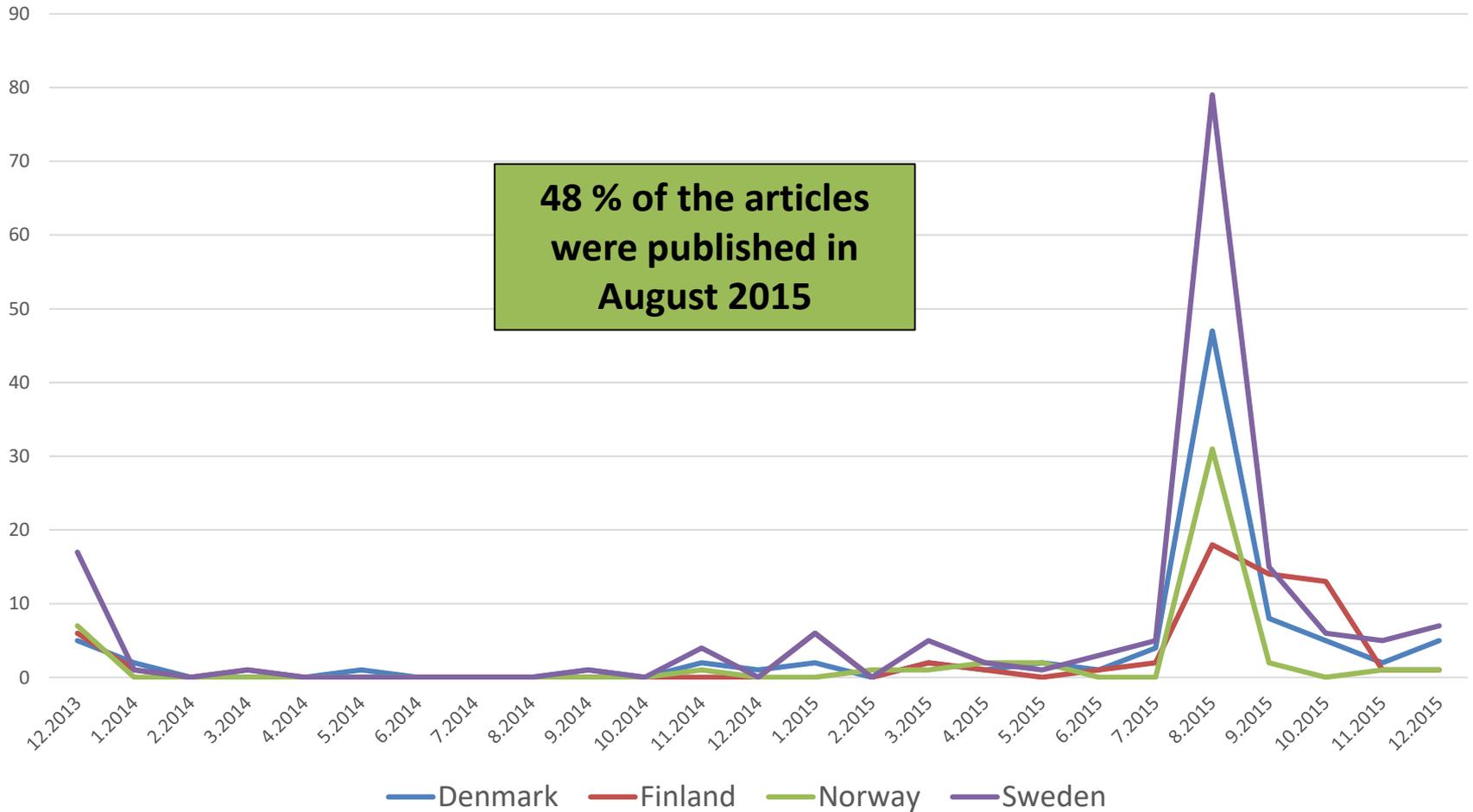
## Analytical model: four quality aspects

- Different players emphasise different criteria
- However, quality criteria cannot be monopolised – they are often shared by various players in the literary field



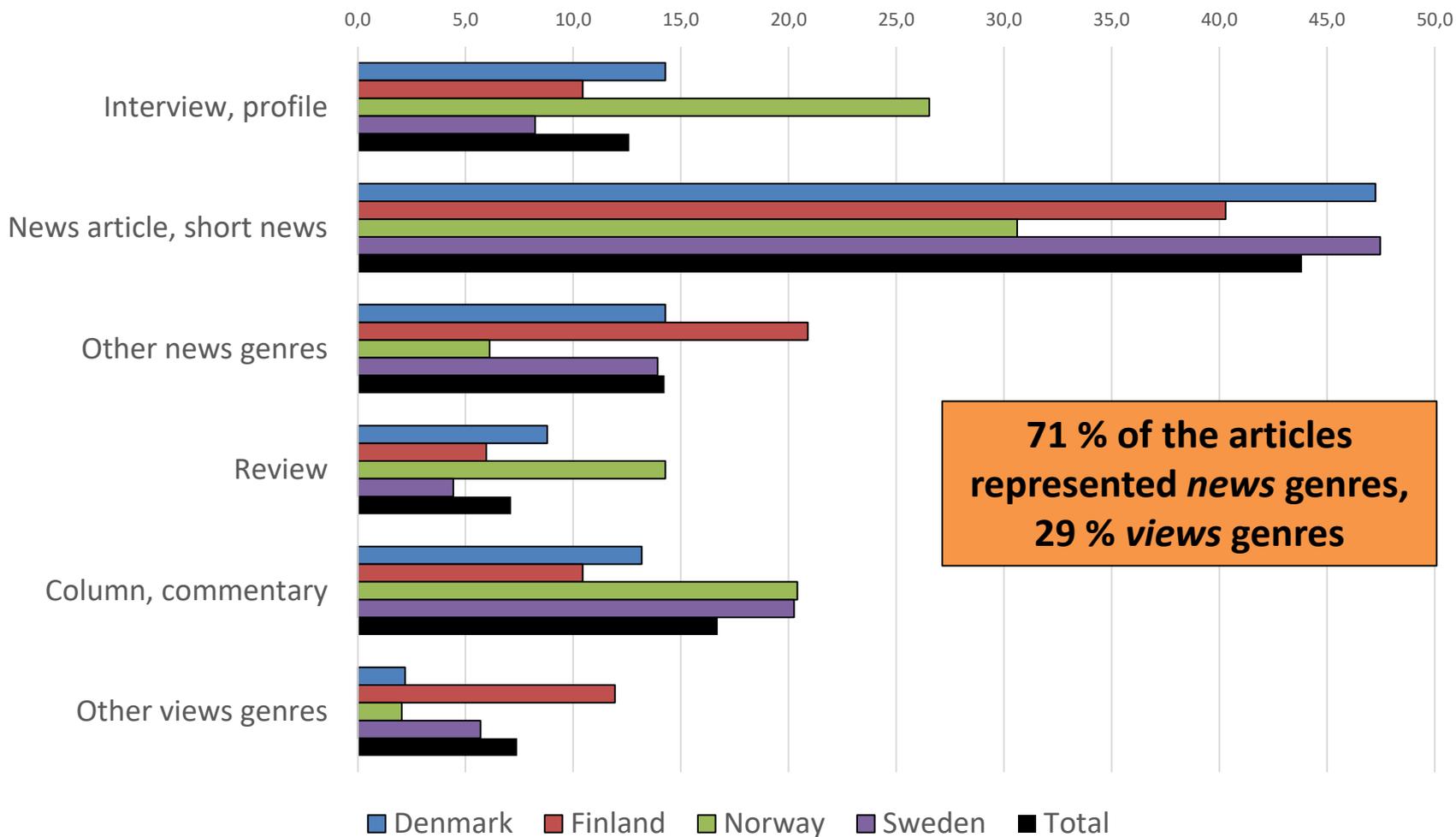


## Distribution of Millennium articles over time



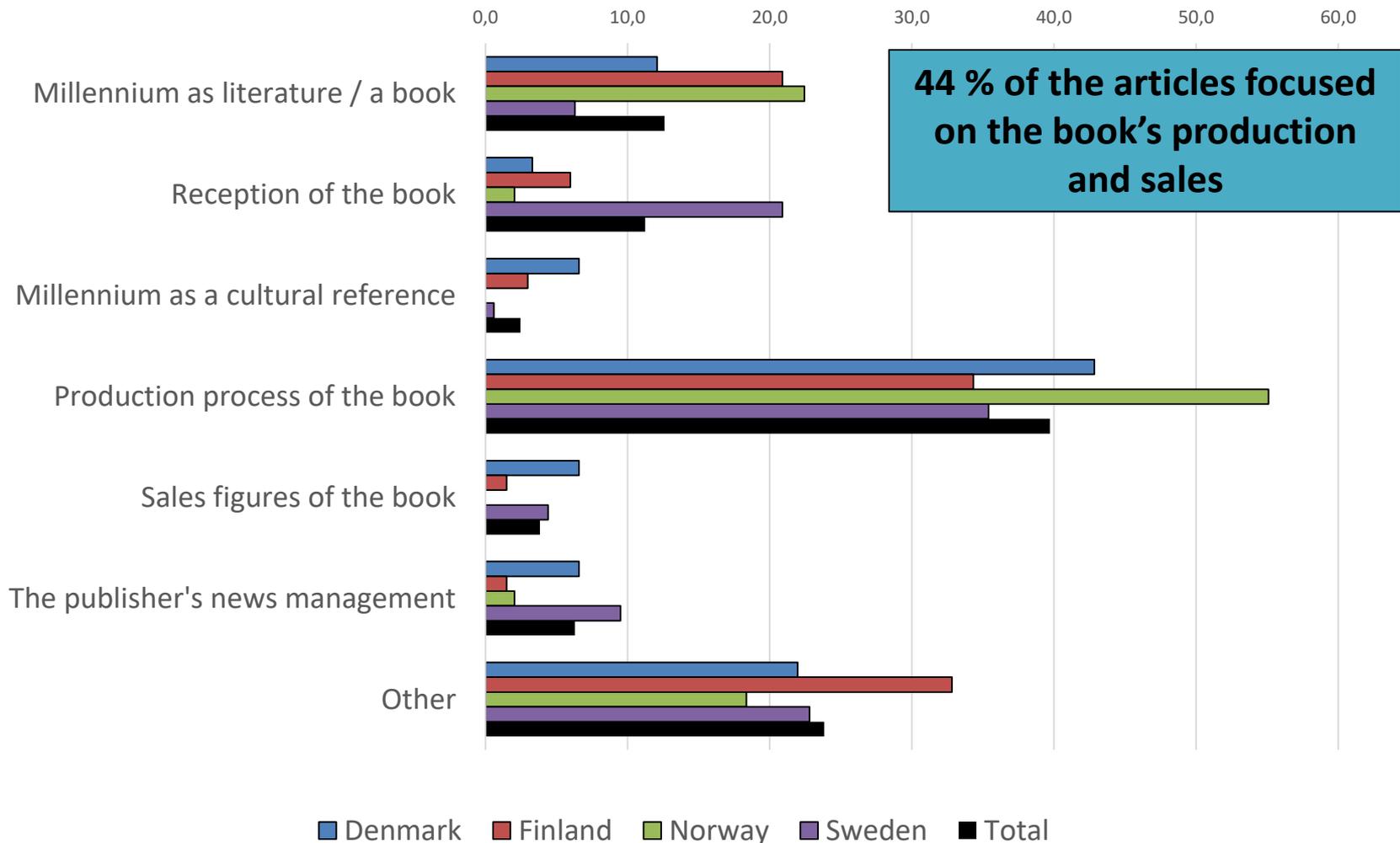


## Millennium articles by genre (% , N = 365)





# Focus of attention in articles on Millennium (%, N = 365)







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## Literary quality

- Internal vs. external parameters
  - Internal: expression – form – content → debate on the *authenticity* of the book
  - External: reviews, literary acknowledgements, reception
- Only 13 % of articles focused on the book's (internal) literary qualities, while 11 % focused on its reception
- 32 % of the articles referred to author's style (positively or negatively), while 11 % referred to Nordic noir
- Several cultural editors or leading critics wrote about the book – although often in order to comment on the commercial hype than due to its literary value
- “An A-list book”: 15 of the 26 reviews were published on the first day
- Book's authenticity was commented in almost all opinionated articles
- Critical reception divided – with 12 reviews being mostly positive and 14 mostly negative



”En blek kopia”  
Verdens Gang,  
28 August, 2015

DN Bok  
Nya Millennium är skicklig och  
respektfull  
PUBLICERAD 2015-08-28



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## Professional quality

- Several mystery/thriller authors were interviewed by the press – but most of them refrained from commenting on Lagercrantz’ professional skills as mystery writer
- However, reviews assessed broadly the author’s craftsmanship – representing divided views
- Lagercrantz’ high-intellectual background, celebrity status (in Sweden) and controversial record as a reporter and writer complicated the assessment
- The personal life and family history of the author became broadly exposed in 34 interviews, with other articles circulating and re-circulating the details – thus consolidating his celebrity status
- A Lagercrantz book: 29 % of quotes in articles were from the author
- «...a new kind of a celebrity writer: a literary actor mutated to a marketer, an entertainer and a brand» (Professor John Svedjedahl *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 August, 2015)

«Han kan skriva,  
men det merkes at  
han ikke er  
krimforfatter.»  
*Adresseavisen*,  
31 August, 2015





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**”Jag ser fram emot att  
läsa den.”**

*Upsala Nya Tidning,  
28 August 2015*

## Readers' quality

- Unfortunately, the press material included only incidentally made references to readers' expectations and experiences, thus not providing satisfactory basis for analysis
- In order to be able to analyse quality criteria the readers set to literary works, one should focus on reading habits and motifs and, for example, on amateur bloggers commenting





## Conclusions

- Quality assessment in the literary field not only consists of literary quality but also other quality aspects play an important role to the prestige of the book
- The various quality aspects presented and promoted by different actors in the literary field are interdependent and partly intertwined
- In quantitative terms, the debate about the commercial quality of the book overshadows the discussion about its literary quality
- The commercial significance of the book guided reviewers' reactions
- Journalists have the institutional forum and professional tools to bring forward various, even contradictory, quality aspects and promote them as legitimate
  - Different journalistic *genres* contribute to different aspects of quality
  - Different journalistic *roles* contribute to different aspects of quality
- Supporting earlier findings:
  - The monopoly of critics to assess and evaluate literature has ceased
  - Thrillers and generic literature are increasingly assessed and discussed seriously, suggesting a new «popular literary culture» (Collins)