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Cultural Mediators Seduced by Mad Men:

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Abstract

Based on theories about the role of cultural mediators in cultural production and using the TV series *Mad Men* as a case, this article investigates how cultural journalists in the Nordic countries have contributed to legitimizing “quality TV series” as a worthy field of aesthetic consumption. Key analytical points are: 1) cultural journalists legitimize *Mad Men*’s quality by addressing aspects *internal* (aesthetic markers) and aspects *external* (culture industry markers) to the series, as well as the series’ broader social and historical anchoring; 2) Nordic cultural journalists position themselves positively towards the TV series based on their professional expertise *and* their personal taste preferences and predilections; 3) these legitimation processes take place across journalistic genres, pointing to the importance not only of TV criticism, epitomized by the review, but of cultural journalism more broadly in constructing affirmative attitudes towards popular culture phenomena such as TV series.

Introduction

This article analyses how mainstream media’s cultural journalists and critics in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden covered, critiqued and legitimized, not only the internationally recognized TV series *Mad Men* (2007–2015), but by extension the notion of “quality TV series” during the 2000s. Even if “quality TV” is considered a genre designation indicating specific narrative structures and style universes in recent TV fiction, rather than a specific quality evaluation, we argue that the cultural

journalists' mainly positive discourses contribute to positioning *Mad Men* as "good quality" in a crowded field of cultural consumption.

The cultural journalistic perspective is significant since the news media, and the press in particular, constitute an important institutional framework for cultural legitimation processes and critical work, with reasonably well-defined norms and practices for the assessment of cultural quality.¹ These norms and practices increasingly also apply to television journalism and criticism (Bielby, Moloney and Ngo 2005, 9; Rixon 2017). The review is naturally a central example of this, since it is through this genre the cultural journalists contribute to highlighting the qualities of the works reviewed (e.g. Shrum 1996). However, as this article will show, also other genres are important to the journalists' construction of *Mad Men*'s qualities. Cultural journalists are often assigned great significance to the circulation of cultural products – as *gatekeepers*, *marketers* and *legitimizers* (Janssen and Verboord 2015). For these reasons, the article combines a cultural journalism and cultural sociological perspective, inspired by recent theoretical developments of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *cultural intermediaries*, underlining the role of cultural journalists as *mediators* in cultural circulation processes. These processes have of course dramatically changed with the global media landscape, which puts pressure on traditional ideas of cultural quality, and challenges the authority of the journalist as a cultural mediator (Kristensen and From 2015; McDonald 2007). Finally, the article considers research into "quality TV", television criticism and the social construction of cultural quality to demonstrate how Nordic journalists approach a global, American product at a time when television production and distribution are changing dramatically.

The study is based on a quantitative analysis of *how much* and *how* the Nordic press covered and debated the qualities of *Mad Men* in the course of the TV series' first run (over nine years). This quantitative outline is combined with qualitative examples from the sample to highlight the types of arguments deployed. The study thus deals with the cultural journalistic discourses *about* the TV series as a cultural product and can be seen as a response to Rixon's (2012, 393-394) call for more research into TV journalism and criticism.

The analysis shows how a broad range of journalists discuss qualities *internal* to the series, or aesthetic aspects referring to its expression, form and content, and aspects *external* to the series in terms of culture industrial quality markers. It also shows that this heterogeneous group of journalists not only performs as *arbiters of taste* based on professional expertise, but is also motivated by their personal taste preferences and predilection for the TV series' characters and narrative. This may explain both the considerable extent of the coverage, and the Nordic journalists' quite homogenous and mainly positive pitching of the series as an expression of quality. This combination of the professional and the personal is a central characteristic of contemporary cultural mediators, perhaps in particular within TV journalism and criticism (Rixon 2011, 177-180). The cultural journalists' quality appraisals not only affect cultural products' legitimacy and market value, but also cement the cultural journalists' *own* status and authority as taste-based agenda setters in the culture industrial cycle (Janssen and Verboord 2015; Maguire and Matthews 2012).

Cultural journalists as cultural mediators

In the 1960s, Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of *cultural intermediaries* with reference to "institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu 1984, 359). Many definitions have been offered since then, also in Bourdieu's own sporadic writings on the concept. However, cultural journalists and critics were from the outset mentioned among the many professional fields that were becoming increasingly professionalized in their links between cultural production and consumption. Though the cultural intermediary concept is elusive and highly contested (Hesmondhalgh 2006), it is still used to designate journalists more broadly (Matthews 2014) and cultural journalists in particular (Kristensen and From 2015; Jaakkola 2015). In this article, however, we apply a related and more general concept, *cultural mediators*, since it has been successfully applied in empirical research on cultural journalism (e.g. Shrum 1996) and since its dimensions have been systematically outlined recently (Janssen and Verboord 2015).

Cultural journalists can be seen as cultural mediators of quality who are, first and foremost, *gatekeepers* in relation to the media agenda and the cultural public sphere, since they draw attention to certain cultural products – and not to others (Janssen and Verboord 2015). Just by making this selection, they ascribe value and emphasize quality. Studies have shown that mainstream media predominantly choose to review cultural products that reviewers rate positively and which match the brand and audience segment of the media organization in question (Rixon 2012, 2017; Verboord 2014). Cultural journalists hereby also perform a *marketing role*, as news stories and reviews serve as PR for the (positively) reviewed works, even though this is not necessarily their primary purpose. In this way, cultural journalists also *classify* works and ascribe meaning to them. Janssen and Verboord (2015, 444) write that cultural journalists and reviewers contribute to explaining culture products' quality through their texts, which often draw on academic criteria. Hereby they also contribute to the more general appreciation of works in the cultural field. During the last decades, research has shown how media discourses on quality have contributed to the legitimation of popular cultural products such as films, popular music and television (Baumann 2001; Newman and Levine 2012; Rixon 2011; Schmutz et al. 2010).

One can naturally question the actual significance of the established media's quality discussions concerning culture, since the last 20 years have challenged this institutionalized framework. While cultural journalism's "aesthetic paradigm" used to prioritize academic specialization as the basis for evaluation of quality, the media increasingly favor generalist journalists with a broad expertise in the cultural field (Hellman and Jaakkola 2012). The current media logic also contributes to (further) blurring of the boundaries between the professional and the personal, and between the objective and the subjective in cultural journalistic quality appraisals. This is because the digital media landscape has enabled new players to express opinions on art and culture in the cultural public domain to a far greater extent than has previously been the case (McDonald 2007). TV and TV series, in particular, are a field which draws great interest from ordinary culture users (Rixon 2017; Teurlings 2017). These changes can be seen as a challenge for mainstream cultural journalism as a cultural-

critical institution, but they also cement the institution's significance to the current quality discussions. Even though TV (series) criticism is less institutionalized and viewed as a less "serious" field (Lotz 2008) than, e.g., literary and theatre criticism, it applies many of the same criteria and still represents an established voice, which can reach broader audiences and thus extend beyond the social media's fragmented sub-publics and layman discussions (Kristensen and From 2015; Rixon 2017). Furthermore, cultural legitimation processes play out not only in the designated review genre, but across the many analytical, commentary and essay-like genres, not to mention interviews and other features characteristic of cultural journalism (Kristensen and Riegert 2017). Articulating their views in the media on a daily basis, cultural journalists still play a central role in the cultural cycle, since they both direct cultural attention by preannouncing and informing about cultural products *as well as* describing, analyzing, assessing and (pre-)judging cultural products. Their journalistic work has market value not only for the cultural industrial cycle (in the form of both news media and TV producers), but also constitutes a cultural public service and legitimizes cultural quality. The question is naturally *how* this is done. One way, according to Janssen and Verboord (2015, 443), is to draw on institutionalized and contextualizing quality indicators such as the cultural producers' or artists' reputation; other news media's debate on and criticism of the work; genre classifications and conventions; and journalistic background or insider knowledge. The aim is to reduce uncertainty about which works deserve attention, and how this attention must be addressed. In turn, these strategies also contribute to cementing cultural journalists' own authority as *connoisseurs* of culture, and legitimate appraisers of the quality of the works.

"Quality TV" as a genre and the social construction of quality

The TV series *Mad Men* is usually mentioned in connection with what has been called a "Golden Age of Television" (Martin 2013; Newman and Levine 2012). The notion of a golden age is, according to Damico and Quay (2016), linked to fundamental changes in the television industry over a

period of time, where a number of television programs and channels exhibit similar increases in hitherto unseen artistic quality elements. Such a period commenced in the late 1990s, when HBO began to produce TV series such as *Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008), and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005). Their critical success coincided with changing distribution patterns, such as DVD sales and Video-on-Demand services, “making possible contemplative modes of viewing and fanatical attention to detail that contribute to the growing belief that television series are worthy of aesthetic appreciation” (Anderson 2009, 28). Recent research often links “binge-watching” to fan-like or focused viewing, since it is well-suited to TV series with complex narrative structures and controversial themes, i.e., important characteristics of “quality TV series” in the Golden Age (Mikos 2016).

Other characteristics of quality TV (Thompson 1996) include the combination of established genres to create new or hybrid ones; their creation by recognized professionals from the film industry with author-based and auteur-driven manuscripts (Anderson 2009, 36); intertextual references to highbrow and popular culture; the fact that these series often win awards and institutionalized critical acclaim; and their main audience being affluent, well-educated urban dwellers which is a commercially attractive segment (to which cultural journalists typically also belong) (Mittel 2015). “Quality TV” has thus become a marker of “middlebrow culture”, which seldom attracts broader viewer groups (Lauridsen 2016, 92–94; Anderson 2008). This has, at any rate, been the case in an American context, where the discussion of “quality TV” has focused especially on the HBO or Showtime cable networks.

“Quality TV” has thus become a broad genre designation, rather than just a concept referring to an aesthetic quality appraisal of a specific TV series. Since more and more TV series are marketed as “quality TV”, it is now more common to think in terms of “good” or “bad” quality TV series (Lauridsen 2016). It is in this latter context that the legitimation by Nordic cultural journalists of the specific “quality TV series” – *Mad Men* – is significant, not least because of the long public service tradition of producing and importing “quality drama” in the Nordic region. The increasing number of “quality TV series” has meant that, especially since the early 2000s, cultural journalists have had many opportunities to debate the genre, not least because the series often have a long lifetime, across

many years. For the same reason, successful series are often discussed by cultural journalists, critics as well as by other types of reporters. Series can thus serve as cultural reference points for their time, while the consumer and culture industry will often seek to capitalize on their universes and dissemination. In this way, TV series such as *Mad Men* represent both an aesthetic expression with a broader cultural significance, and a commodity with considerable market value.

This article thus relies on an *institutional-contextual* understanding of the notion of quality, seeing quality as socially constructed in the interaction between various players – in this case TV producers, media scholars, cultural journalists, TV critics and TV viewers etc. There are competing, even opposite, understandings of what constitutes cultural quality in a broader sense, with critics emphasizing different parameters than industry representatives or the public. Here we refrain from a more general discussion of “quality” and focus solely on showing how cultural journalists and critics are involved in the construction of “quality TV” as a genre, as well as in the definition of “good” “quality TV series”, such as *Mad Men*.

The Nordic context and the case study design

The Nordic region provides an intriguing context when studying how cultural journalists contribute to constructing and mediating positive discourses about a global, American TV product such as *Mad Men*. Firstly, even though the Nordic market, which is anchored in the public service ethos, traditionally focused on domestically produced drama, British and American TV series have achieved an increasingly larger share of the market’s offering, especially after the introduction of commercial television at the end of the 1980s (Syvertsen *et al.* 2014). Since 2010, companies such as HBO and Netflix have established Nordic offices, as the Nordic countries are often considered as one regional market, due to cultural similarities, high broadband penetration and a high standard of living. This has allowed for easier archive viewing of series such as *Mad Men* in recent years, compared to when it was introduced to Nordic audiences in the late 2000s. Secondly, the Nordic media welfare model (*ibid.*) has secured a special place for cultural journalism with newspapers playing a key role in the history and

development of the beat where they have been agenda-setting in the cultural public sphere (Kristensen and Riegert 2017).

Where much of the existing research on cultural mediators considers *players*, e.g. via observation studies or interviews, this study focuses on the *texts* produced by cultural journalists. The study combines a quantitative content analysis of the media coverage of *Mad Men* across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden over time with qualitative examples of cultural journalists' discourses about the series. The analysis covers the period from 1 January 2007 to 1 January 2016, i.e. from the start of the series in the USA up until after the showing of the last season in the Nordic countries. We sampled the data via online providers of digital access to most nationwide printed and online newspapers – Infomedia in Denmark, and Retriever in Sweden and Norway. As no similar archives were available in Finland, the individual media's electronic archives were used. As far as possible, each country used identical search words and involved the nine to ten largest (measured by number of readers) newspapers, which represented different, but comparable, newspaper types: tabloid, nationwide, regional, local and niche newspapers; 37 media in total.² The sample comprises 1,940 articles in total, of which most (51%) were published in Norway, while the other half were distributed equally between Denmark, Sweden and Finland. These national differences appear to be related to the completeness of the databases. The analysis distinguishes between articles focusing on *Mad Men*, and articles that simply mention *Mad Men* "en passant" (Figure 1).³

The first parts of the analysis are based mainly on the quantitative data, emphasizing the extent of the coverage, the genres used, the journalists writing the pieces, etc., with weight on structural similarities across the Nordic countries. The last parts combine the quantitative data with qualitative examples of the journalistic discourses, drawn from three genres of importance in appraising quality in cultural journalism: 38 reviews, 18 analyses and 54 commentary articles. The focus here is on a somewhat rudimentary analytical distinction between work-internal and work-external quality dimensions of the series: work-*internal* markers concern its aesthetics, pointing either to the *form* of

the series (e.g. complexity), its *expression* (e.g. authenticity and coherence), or its *content* (e.g. characters and themes), while *work-external* or industrial markers concern production context, viewer success and prizes.

Mad Men ran for seven seasons from 2007 to 2015 in the USA, it won numerous awards, and it was produced by the American cable channel AMC (American Movie Classics) and Matthew Weiner, who was previously connected to HBO (Lavery et al. 2011). In the Nordic countries, *Mad Men* was broadcast on commercial and premium channels with a certain time lag in relation to the USA, from 2008 (Sweden, Finland and Norway) and 2009 (Denmark).⁴ *Mad Men* was a critical success in all of the Nordic countries, but it was less successful in terms of TV viewers.⁵ DVD sales, streaming services and illegal downloading do, however, increase the number of viewers, but also escape precise statistics for the series' success.

Results

Intensive hype and prolonged attention

Even though *Mad Men* premiered in the USA in 2007, it did not win attention in the Nordic region until it became available to Nordic television audiences in 2008 and 2009 (Figure 1). There are relatively equivalent awareness patterns across the four Nordic countries, but displaced in relation to when the series reached the respective national screens. The pattern is first and foremost characterized by a relatively concentrated *hype* in 2010–2012. The peaking, then declining, coverage over time can be explained by journalism's topicality logic, which prioritizes the new so that the first seasons of a TV series naturally have greater news value than the following seasons. This coverage pattern can also be explained by the theory of cultural mediation and legitimization: the journalists' intensive coverage at the start of the period reflects their central role in terms of creating awareness of the TV series' aesthetic, historical and socio-cultural quality; interest declines as the series becomes part of mainstream culture and the ordinary media user's repertoire. The early years with more intensive

coverage thus indicate a period in which arguments that contribute to legitimizing the series as an example of “quality TV” are established, while this is of less importance in the later period.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Despite the declining coverage over time, the attention pattern is also characterized by how the series is actually debated and constitutes a cultural reference point *throughout* its lifetime. This confirms its significance in a broader societal and (media) historical context – or that it was not just a *hyped* flash in the pan. Finally, it is a shared characteristic across the Nordic region that nationwide newspapers anchored in the capital and/or with a broad circulation show most interest in the series – *Politiken* and *Jyllands-Posten* in Denmark, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Iltta-Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* in Finland, *Dagbladet*, *Aftenposten* and *Verdens Gang* in Norway, and *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet* in Sweden. Besides the fact that many of these newspapers target the typical “quality TV series” viewer segment, they are central to general journalistic agenda-setting, also in the cultural arena.

Mad Men quickly became an important reference point for the *entire* journalistic field and was thereby not just a TV phenomenon that engaged *cultural* journalists. Rather than focusing specifically on the series as a cultural product, most of the articles in all four countries referred to *Mad Men* “en passant” as part of a wider argument. In fact, mentioning *Mad Men* in passing multiplied quickly along with the establishment of the series’ fame and remained high, even after articles focusing on the series were decreasing. The series was used as an example of the current advertising and PR industry, of capitalism’s influence on society, as a reference on sub-/counter-cultures, feminist and civil rights movements, and of changed gender roles. It was also used as a marker of lifestyle or consumption within fashion, body ideals, hairstyles, design and interior decoration, food and drink, etc. Finally, a number of celebrity stories about actors in the series, particularly in the tabloid newspapers, referred to *Mad Men*, which served as a quality marker for these celebrities’ overall repertoire.

Mad Men was thus, during its entire nine-year lifespan, incorporated into very different cultural, economic and societal contexts as a point of reference for both nostalgic longing and moral indignation concerning a bygone time, but also for lifestyle and celebrity culture. This exemplifies cultural journalism's blurred lines with a traditional cultural journalism topic seeping into other journalistic, and more politicized and celebrified subject areas (Kristensen and Riegert 2017). In terms of the theory of the (cultural) journalist as gatekeeper and mediator, this shows that for many journalists the series had a continuous significance and quality as an illustrative marker, but in many different ways.

News and views on Mad Men

Even though most of the stories mention *Mad Men* incidentally, there were naturally a large number of articles (323 in total) that focused on the series. Around half of these articles (175 in total) were written within more analytical, debate and opinion-oriented genres. Both news and debate articles are part of the cycle of selection, publicity/marketing and cultural legitimation, which emphasizes the need to look beyond the review – the genre most often in focus when analyzing cultural valorization – and also pay attention to other types of opinion- and appraisal-borne genres such as columns and analyses.

In light of the series' critical success and recognition, and the fact that its first run stretched over eight years in the Nordic region, it is remarkable that there were relatively few reviews of the series (38 in total). There was for instance no journalistic consensus that a new season of *Mad Men* must be reviewed. Some newspapers reviewed several seasons at once, others the entire series, some reviewed individual episodes, while the issue of a DVD box set was also reviewed by some newspapers. This exemplifies how the institutionalized framework for TV series criticism is still subject to negotiation (Rixon 2011), and it suggests the individual journalist's or reviewer's freedom to define the subject of scrutiny. Yet the fact that several seasons were reviewed shows that the series' long lifetime was given sustained critical attention by cultural journalists. Furthermore, *Mad Men* was the focus of attention in a broad repertoire of opinion genres, besides the review, to discuss the series'

aesthetic qualities and significance. In this manner, the journalists used cultural journalism's tradition for voicing opinion and subjective views across a broad range of articles to signal their professional and personal preferences for the series.

Mad Men's cultural mediators

When using the concept of cultural mediators, it is relevant to consider *who* the (cultural) journalists behind the *Mad Men*-focused stories are, since they play a central role as gatekeepers and legitimizers in terms of raising awareness of the series. The quantitative data shows that a great diversity of journalists in all the Nordic countries contributed to the cultural discussion and valorization of the series. In Denmark, 33 different name-given journalists wrote one or more articles focusing on *Mad Men*, while the respective figure for Finland is 27, for Norway 65 and for Sweden 42. While only few journalists wrote several *Mad Men*-focused articles, there were many different gatekeepers that signaled their cultural capital with articles about *Mad Men*. Put boldly, it seems that every self-respecting cultural journalist wrote about *Mad Men*, suggesting that Nordic TV journalism and criticism is characterized by a certain cult of generalism rather than a set corps of TV specialists (Poole 1984; see also Rixon 2011). This is supported by that fact that the journalists had very different backgrounds and areas of cultural expertise – from literature, theatre, media and film, to wine, food, fashion, beauty and lifestyle, again suggesting that a particular expertise on TV series is not a prerequisite to write about this cultural phenomenon. Finally, the series also inspired leading cultural editors and critics to pick up their pens, again signaling the position of *Mad Men* as a cultural phenomenon of broader cultural significance.

Mad Men's work-internal quality markers

Inspired by the existing research into "quality TV" this part of the analysis provides a combined quantitative and qualitative outline of the quality markers used by cultural journalists in their articles on *Mad Men* – across the material (Figure 2). Quotes, translated from the Nordic languages, and

qualitative arguments, illustrating the journalists' legitimating discourse, are based on a close reading of a total of 110 articles, consisting of reviews (38), comments (54) and analyses (18).

[Insert figure 2 here]

As noted, we make an analytical distinction between work-internal and work-external markers, drawn upon by cultural journalists: the former concern expression, form and content, while the latter concern production context, viewer success and prizes.

A prominent quality marker, mentioned by the cultural journalists in every other article, is the series' ability, in terms of its *content*, to reflect the *Zeitgeist* of the 1950s and 1960s, and how this spirit also reflects the 2010s. A Norwegian critic, for example, writes:

The impressive, detailed reproduction of America of the 1960s, for which the series has received so much praise, really actually functions as an exquisite backdrop. In theory, the *Mad Men* universe could be moved to the 1980s or to our own time, without this making the series any worse. (*Aftenposten*, April 4, 2012)

This frequent referral to *Zeitgeist* exemplifies Thompson's (1996) point that "quality TV series" often engage with complex themes. In the Finnish material, *Mad Men* is described as a "time machine of style and habits" (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 7, 2011), while a Danish article characterizes it as an "at the same time disturbing and seductive picture of the 1960s" (*Berlingske*, September 19, 2010). Swedish *Svenska Dagbladet* also comments on the series' ability to reflect current trends: It "takes place at the dawn of the modern age and depicts the foundations of the world we live in today", while it also "manages to connect with our times on an existential level" (March 24, 2012).

According to the cultural journalistic discourse, the credibility of this *Zeitgeist* is supported by the series' references to historical events, cultural trends and key issues, e.g. how it portrays consumer

culture, and how the protagonists reflect “the Cold War’s emotional structure”, with the PR industry as a metaphor for the advance of capitalism, or how the series depicts gender issues. Finnish *Hufvudsbladet* writes:

We usually ascribe a sense of confidence in the future to the 1960s [...] The downside is the increasingly accelerating capitalism, which contributes to the sense of being ever more stuck in the rat race. [...] Looking at *Mad Men* we continuously see parallels to the consumption culture and the history of consumerism. (January 6, 2015)

The cultural journalists’ discourse and criticism exemplify Rixon’s (2012, 399) point that (TV) criticism is not just a question of an aesthetically focused quality appraisal of the individual work, but also contributes to an understanding of society at large and its values. This signals that work-*internal* attributes may in fact reach beyond the work itself by touching upon aspects that are *external* to the series.

The *Zeitgeist* is also discussed in relation to the series’ *production values, aesthetics and narrative structures*, which are mentioned in two out of five articles and which emphasize the series’ ability to capture the aesthetics of the 1960s – a characteristic which is highlighted throughout the series’ long lifetime: According to the Finnish *Ilta-lehti*, “every last detail is so true that it is like seeing life in the 1960s” (May 31, 2010). Similarly, Danish reviewers consider the typical aesthetic atmosphere of the time as a quality marker: “The classic 60s’ scenography design is incredibly beautiful” (*Politiken*, January 31, 2010). Also, the series’ HBO-like aesthetics and tone are underlined: “the incredible wit, carefully selected music and splendid image quality”, and deemed characteristic of the series’ producer Matthew Weiner (*Politiken*, March 29, 2011).

The *protagonists* are also named as quality markers, including their complexity and how the series’ slow tempo allows them to develop over time, i.e., a characteristic referring to both content and expression. Norwegian *Vårt Land* (November 10, 2010) recommends the series as the story of a

“male-dominated society heading towards its ruin”, while *Dagens Næringsliv* (September 11, 2010) points out that “*Mad Men* puts the macho man to a hard test, and describes a society on the brink of enormous upheavals”. Especially Swedish and Danish journalists focus on the patriarchal and race-related perspectives of the series, which are represented through the female characters, including the straitjacket of the nuclear family and the consumer society. Swedish *Dagens Nyheter* (March 17, 2012) writes that the series shows that not much has changed – men are still over-privileged. *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (February 26, 2011) addresses how the “monster Betty Draper”, whose dissatisfaction with life as a housewife makes her a “genuinely bitter person”, is in fact liberating from a feminist perspective since it challenges the illusion of contented motherhood. Under the heading of “*Mad Men*’s Sexism” Danish *Politiken* (March 3, 2011) responds to bloggers and commentators who criticize the series’ depiction of women, since it can also be seen as an important reminder of how women, black people and homosexuals were treated not many years ago.

The emphasis on the *Zeitgeist* and characters as quality markers are linked to the series’ *originality, complexity and depth*, criteria that are often emphasized in relation to art and in cultural policy (Bielby, Moloney and Ngo 2005, 7). Nordic cultural journalists compared *Mad Men* to the novel and thereby with highbrow culture, indicating its artistic aspirations. A Swedish critic argues for “why TV series such as *Mad Men* and *Sopranos* are the quality novels of our time” (*Dagens Nyheter*, May 26, 2010), while a Finnish writer claims that “the best of the new series such as *Sopranos*, *The Wire* or *Mad Men* remind me of an epic novel [...] They can be compared with Tolstoy and Proust” (*Suomen Kuvalehti*, July 11, 2014). Others compare *Mad Men* with Richard Yates’ famous *Revolutionary Road* and describe it as “a very literary series” (*Hufvudstadsbladet*, January 6, 2015) – or with Balzac: “It is like seeing *La Comédie Humaine* [...] brought to life on the screen in an updated form. In this way, the series represents a revitalization of a quality-borne narrative tradition” (*Jyllands-Posten*, February 6, 2011).

The comparison with other artistic fields also reveals the few critical voices in the material – or, the exception that proves the rule in terms of the uniform, positive discourses across the Nordic

region: A Finnish journalist finds that *Mad Men* resembles the aimless soap operas without a start or finish, “although with serious subjects and realistic portrayals” (*Aamulehti*, May 11, 2011). A Swedish critic attributes his experience of the series’ lack of progression to how TV is not as intelligent as a novel, and can therefore never replace good literature (*Expressen*, May 5, 2010), whereas another Swedish commentator points out how “extremely banal” it is to compare art forms (*Göteborgs-Posten*, June 18, 2010).

Even though few journalists and critics did not agree on the designation of “art” in *Mad Men*’s case, or would subscribe to the TV series as the “middle class’ new novel”, these examples illustrate that journalists and critics discussed and valued *Mad Men* as a “literary” “quality TV series”. This was done with reference to internal qualities such as complex characters, thematic weight and the ability of the series to mirror the spirit of the 1960s in terms of form and content. Their reception and analytical discussions thus reflect a traditional, aesthetically-oriented appraisal and critique of art and culture.

Mad Men’s work-external quality markers

Work-external or more market-oriented conditions are also central to the cultural journalists’ critical discussions (see Figure 2). More than two out of five articles mention the series’ *reception by the public*, which points to the international recognition as an important quality marker. Here we are reminded of Thompson’s (1996) point that viewer figures and critical success do not necessarily go hand in hand, since “quality TV series” often have considerably more success among the cultural bourgeoisie compared to mainstream TV viewers. Indeed, a Finnish critic points to how the “Finns were not impressed with the series, even though the reviewers did their best to praise it, and even though it won many awards” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, February 17, 2011). It could be said that the lack of Nordic viewer success even cements *Mad Men*’s designation in contrast to mainstream culture. Or to put it another way: the paradox of the series’ considerable critical recognition and the lack of broad support is in itself presented as a quality marker. As one Finnish journalist writes: “*Mad Men* is too

luxurious and smart for a mass audience”, which makes the series a “favorite among those who see themselves as frontrunners” (*Aamulehti*, May 6, 2011) and elsewhere calls the series a “masterful counter-attack on the simple, with a sense of style” (*Ilta-Sanomat*, May 7, 2011). A Norwegian critic writes that the limited viewer figures have “little to do with the series’ qualities” and points to how the series is “for the benefit of the few of us who cultivate the weak sides of Don Draper” (*Dagsavisen*, April 10, 2013). The enthusiastic Nordic cultural journalists thus typically position themselves as part of *Mad Men*’s (small) fan base who share the secret joys of the series, and in which they break from the traditional distance to the cultural object under review (Rixon 2011). A Danish TV reviewer, for example, writes, “we who have signed up under the drama series *Mad Men*’s fan colors...” (*Politiken*, January 31, 2010).

The changed TV series culture in terms of production, distribution and viewing is also addressed by Nordic cultural journalists, exemplifying Rixon’s point that “criticism is not just about the programmes but also about television, and the way it operates” (2012, 396). The actual term “quality” is at times used to describe this change. Danish *Berlingske* (May 13, 2011) illustrates, for example, how drama has moved away from the cinema screen, and successful TV series, including *Mad Men*, have contributed to this shift: “In recent years, especially the American TV drama series have taken the lead when it comes to combining quality with business.” The changes in how series can be consumed – the opportunity to “binge watch” *Mad Men* – is another occasion to compare with the novel and thus with established high culture: “When you watch the series on a DVD box it’s like experiencing a novel” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, February 17, 2009). Uninterrupted watching is an important part of the viewing experience: “Much quality TV is based on awakening this hermeneutic desire. This is part of the enjoyment. That you start to think about the structure” (*Hufvudstadsbladet*, January 6, 2015).

Mention of *quality TV producers and distributors* such as HBO, ABC, AMC, Netflix, etc. is also prominent. In fact, these culture industry actors are mentioned in every fifth article (see Figure 2). This exemplifies Janssen and Verboord’s (2015) point that cultural journalists will often draw on

culture industry players as contextualization, which, in this case, also places the series within the framework of “The Golden Age of Television”, often associated with certain quality series producers and distributors. For example, *Svenska Dagbladet* (July 28, 2013) refers to the “‘third golden wave’, a separate art form, but also a third golden age for modern American fiction [...]” and continues: “This coincides [...] with TV viewing’s radically increased status and TV drama which completely rewrites the rules.”

The many *awards* for which *Mad Men* has been nominated or has received are a last significant quality marker in the cultural-journalistic discourse – or, in Bourdieu’s terms, an expression of its institutionalized cultural capital. Awards are actually highlighted in one out of three articles, e.g. in most reviews and commentaries. These nominations and awards are typically mentioned briefly, rather than being subject to more detailed comment, yet they contribute to legitimizing the Nordic cultural journalistic interest in the series, while at the same time this interest cements the media/culture industrial cycle’s recognition of the series.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the ways that cultural journalism and TV criticism in the Nordic countries approach the question of quality in popular culture, in the specific case of the TV series *Mad Men*. Nordic cultural journalists applied similar academically inspired quality discourses to assess the series, and this contributed to the cultural legitimization of TV series as a new cultural phenomenon with both aesthetic and commercial qualities.

The quantitative analysis demonstrated that journalists in all four Nordic countries paid extensive attention over a long period of time to *Mad Men*, falling in roughly two categories: articles focusing on the series, and articles that use the series as a cultural reference, by mentioning it passing. Thus, in their capacity of gatekeepers, journalists put the TV series on the cultural public agenda. This applies especially to journalists from newspapers anchored in the Nordic capitals. Despite this shared city-dweller characteristic, which reflects the series’ target group, the journalistic gatekeepers

were numerous and represented many different areas of expertise, indicating that Nordic TV criticism is not yet an established field with a homogeneous group of specialized critics. The study demonstrates that not only *cultural* journalists, but a broad range of journalists, had an interest in positioning themselves – typically positively and with a personal voice – in relation to the series, a positioning which was often expressed through a variety of commenting and appraising journalistic genres besides the review.

The qualitative examples, drawn from reviews, analyses and comments, illustrated how cultural journalists contributed to classifying, valorizing and legitimizing *Mad Men*'s qualities by focusing on both *work-internal* and *work-external* grounds. Especially the series' ability to capture the spirit of both the 1960s and the 2010s in terms of content and aesthetics was emphasized as an expression of quality, together with the characters and their links to the current manifestations of male and female roles. Furthermore, *Mad Men* was compared to canonical literary works and thereby not only with the literary field itself, but with specific works typically connected to aesthetic quality. The external quality markers mentioned were the international (positive) reception of the series, the many awards it won, and the "auteur TV-producers" typically connected with "quality TV drama". All these references were not unique to specific Nordic countries, but constituted a shared, positive description of *Mad Men* as quality. Explicit commercial conditions such as product placement were not described to any particular degree, which means that even though many articles mentioned how the series was a reference for lifestyle and consumption, its more direct commercial ties were hardly addressed.

Overall, the analysis contributes to discussions on the part cultural journalists, not only critics, play in the valorization and legitimation of popular cultural phenomena such as a TV series. The highly uniform discourses in the Nordic context concerning the qualities of *Mad Men* reproduce in many ways what TV studies have described as characteristic of the latest wave of "quality TV". To this extent, the analysis also demonstrates the interaction between two established cultural critical institutions – academia and the press – in the definition of cultural quality. On the other hand, the analysis also exemplifies how the cultural mediators explicitly combine their professional expertise

and authority with their personal taste in more informal discourses (see also Janssen 1997; Janssen and Verboord 2015; Rixon 2011). This means they combine institutionalized, contextualizing and “objective” criteria with subjective experiences and emotional reactions. Here, the journalists serve as personal ambassadors for the series by expressing their own admiration for its aesthetics, universe and characters, thereby adding an extra layer to the academic discourses concerning “quality TV”. The media coverage and criticism of *Mad Men* in the Nordic countries exemplifies a dual legitimization strategy in which a cultural “connoisseurship” meets “personal predilection” with fan-like connotations. Even though the series never got high viewing figures in the region, the cultural mediation contributed to making the series a generally known cultural reference for a broader public, thus marketing it to future viewers of the libraries of the new Nordic streaming services. The Nordic journalistic community’s uniform, positive reception thus played a significant role in the production, reproduction and renewal of the cultural canon. Future research must show whether this homogeneity of the Nordic region is comparable to other regions, or whether the successful effort of American, commercial TV series producers to compete with the strong position of public service institutions is unique to the Nordic context.

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Endnotes

1 This perspective distinguishes between *cultural journalists*, writing about culture using the journalistic toolbox, and *critics* or *reviewers*, who are more likely to have an aesthetic background and often work on a freelance basis (e.g. Jaakkola 2015, 85). Space limitations prohibit more discussion on this.

2 Search words in Norway and Finland were “Mad Men”, and in Denmark and Sweden: “TV-series* Mad Men”. Danish newspapers: 1) *Berlingske*, nationwide, 2) *BT*, tabloid, 3) *Ekstra Bladet*, tabloid, 4) *Fyens Stiftstidende*, regional, 5) *Information*, niche, 6) *Jyllands-Posten*, nationwide, 7) *Jyske Vestkysten*, regional, 8) *Kristeligt Dagblad*, niche, 9) *Politiken*, nationwide. Finnish newspapers: 1) *Aamulehti*, regional, 2) *Helsingin Sanomat*, nationwide, 3) *Hufvudstadsbladet*, niche (Swedish-language), 4) *Iltalehti*, tabloid, 5) *Ilta-Sanomat*, tabloid, 6) *Kaleva*, regional, 7) *Kansan Uutiset*, niche (weekly newspaper), 8) *Suomen Kuvalehti* (weekly magazine), 9) *Turun Sanomat*, regional. Norwegian newspapers: 1) *Adresseavisen*, regional, 2) *Aftenposten*, nationwide, 3) *Bergens Tidende*, regional, 4) *Dagbladet*, tabloid, 5) *Dagens Næringsliv*, niche-weekly newspaper, 6) *Dagsavisen*, national-regional, 7) *Klassekampen*, niche, 8) *Morgenbladet*, niche, 9) *Verdens Gang*, tabloid, 10) *Vårt Land*, niche. Swedish newspapers: 1) *Aftonbladet*, tabloid, 2) *Dagens Industri*, niche, 3) *Dagens Nyheter*, national, 4) *Dala-Demokraten*, regional, 5) *Expressen*, incl. *Kvällsposten GT*, tabloid, 6) *Göteborgs-Posten*, regional, 7) *Svenska Dagbladet*, national, 8) *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, regional, 9) *Upsala Nya Tidning*, local.

3 In particular, there is an overrepresentation of Norwegian articles mentioning *Mad Men* “en passant”, while there is a more equal distribution as to articles focusing on *Mad Men*, i.e., the articles of most importance to this analysis.

4 In Denmark, *Mad Men* was shown on premium channels (TV3+ and later HBO Nordic), while in Finland, Norway and Sweden, it started on free-to-air channels (Nelonen in Finland, Viasat 4 and

later MAX and VOX in Norway, and Kanal 9 in Sweden). In Finland, however, the last two seasons were shown behind pay walls on Ruutu+.

5 Viewer ratings from Finland and Sweden exemplify this: In Finland, the first run of the first season reached a moderate 107,000 viewers, on average (population in 2008: 5,3 million), while the figure decreased by the fifth season to no more than 33,000 viewers, on average. In Sweden, the highest average ratings for 2009 as a whole was 42,920 viewers (population in 2009: 9,3 million). In 2015, it declined to under 10,000.

Figures/tables

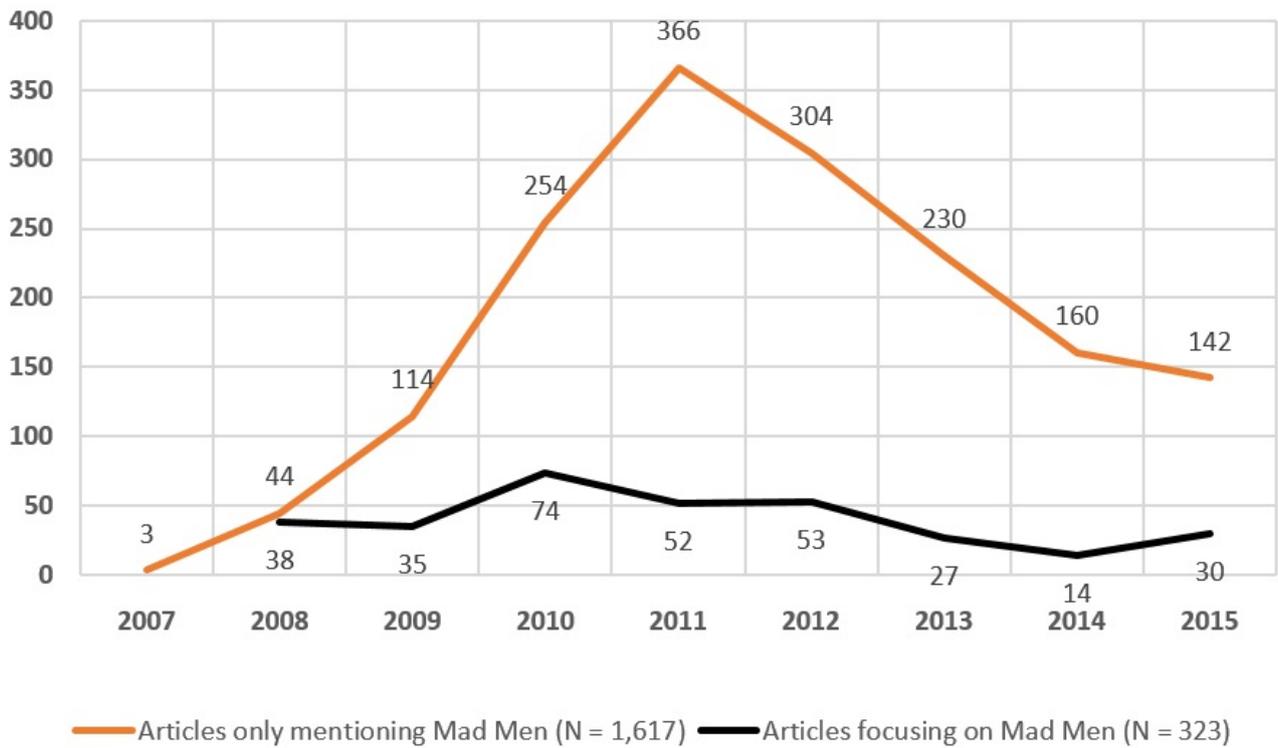


Figure 1. Articles on *Mad Men*, 2007–2015 in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (N = 1,940).

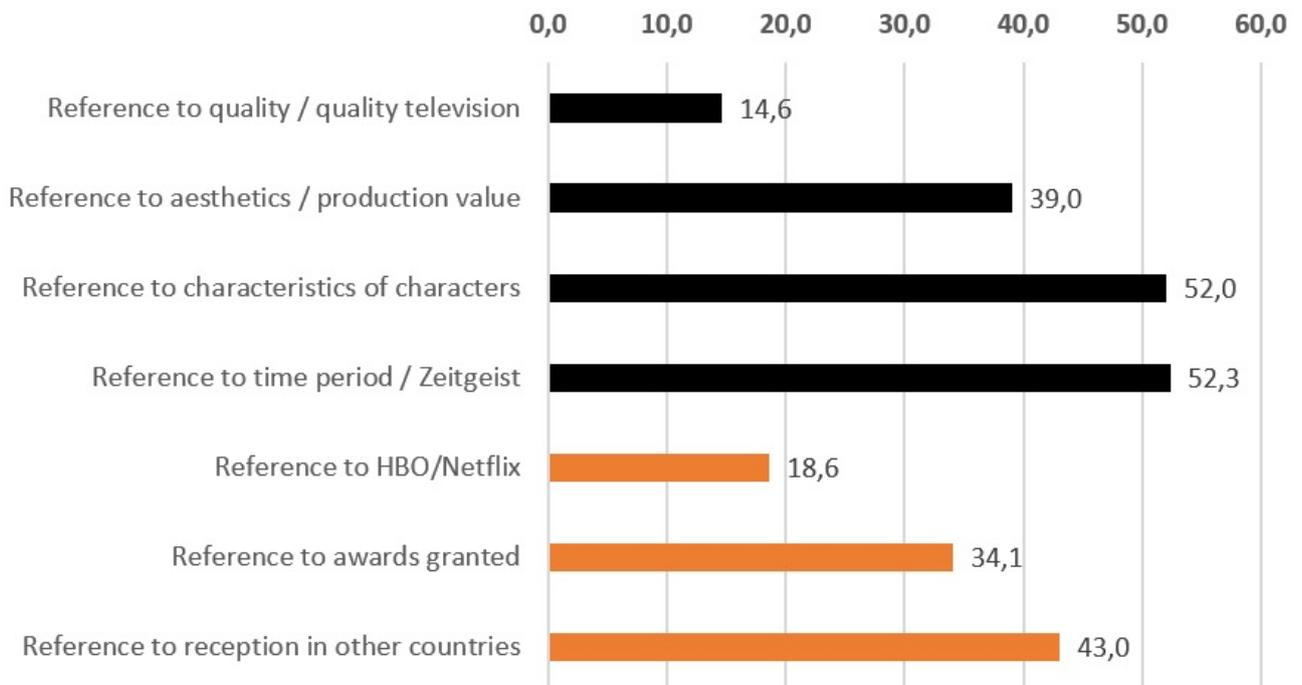


Figure 2. Reference to internal and external quality markers in articles with *Mad Men* in focus (N = 323). Provided in percentages of articles.