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Subordination and Legitimation of Self-Publishing: Shifting the Basis for Evaluation of Cultural Goods

[Accepted version]

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Abstract

A do-it-yourself culture and amateur production are significant features of creative industries. Self-publishing is an eloquent expression of these features. Self-publishers invest in and make decisions to publish their creative goods without the involvement of an established and external production company or publishing house. In creative industries, claims are made about the inferior quality of self-published works, creating a stigma for self-publishing. This article investigates the ways in which aspiring writers who are considering self-publishing as an option to publish, handle the tension between their aspiration to publish a book and the possible stigma of self-publishing. The study draws on an analysis of interviews with 59 writers who are considering self-publishing as an option or who have self-published a book. The aspiring writers are aware of the subordinate status of such publications and while some avoid self-publishing, others seek ways to establish and legitimise the quality of their work to avoid the stigma. Legitimation is produced through the perception of a transitioning author role and by shifting the basis of evaluation of publishability to the consumer side in creative industries, to non-professional judgement, and to the experience of being published. The outcome of the decision to self-publish, and the underpinning culture for making such assessments, has consequences for how books and other cultural goods are currently produced and the type of cultural goods that reach consumers. The assessment of self-publishing as an option among writers exposes tensions and transformations in the evaluation of cultural goods in contemporary creative industries.

Keywords: Artistic commodity market, artistic labour market, creative industries, cultural production and consumption, do-it-yourself culture, evaluation, fiction writing, quality assessment, self-publishing, stigma management

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Introduction

Do-it-yourself cultures and amateur production are significant features of creative industries. Self-publishing is an eloquent expression of these features. Self-publishers invest in and make decisions to publish their creative goods without the involvement of an established, external production company or publishing house. Cultural goods such as films, podcasts, music, and literature are examples of goods that may be self-produced and published. While self-publishing in the creative industries is not a new phenomenon (Laquintano, 2016), with such diverse examples in literature as the literary author Marcel Proust and erotic romance writer E. L. James, this form of cultural production has recently become more prevalent due to advancements in technology. The creation, production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods have become computerised. Print-on-demand services have reduced the costs of book production and audiences may be reached by a larger number of books due to the rise of online retailers (Svedjedal, 2000; Thompson, 2012: 326–339; Waldfogel, 2017). While computerisation and the internet have made new routes to self-publishing possible, the legitimacy of becoming a self-published author is still in question.

In contrast to self-publishing, traditional publishing involves an artistic commodity or labour market where artists and their work are selected or rejected by gatekeepers at, for example, record companies, radio broadcasting companies, television production companies, and publishing houses (Ahlkvist and Faulkner, 2002; Aspers, 2005; Jones, 2002; Kuipers, 2012; Menger, 1999). Writers, and sometimes literary agents¹, are sellers, and publishers are buyers of manuscripts as commodities in the publishing market. The convention, status, and reputation associated with being selected in the publishing market by a particular publishing house are generally held as a way of categorising the publication and the publication's quality as legitimate or appropriate in the literary world (see Laquintano, 2016). The quality of a publication is here defined as the generic attribution of experiential value to the cultural good. The publishability of a book is whether or not the good is of legitimate or appropriate quality to be published. As self-publishers are not selected by a particular publishing house in the publishing market, the convention, status, and reputation associated with such a match, cannot be used to signal publishability, i.e. the publication being of appropriate quality to be legitimately published.

By circumventing the selection by an external and established publishing house, self-publishing and the cult of the amateur have been praised for offering liberation from established hierarchies in the art world and conventional procedures for publication (Dunn and Summer Farnsworth, 2012;

¹ In Sweden, manuscripts from aspiring writers usually reach publishing houses through unsolicited submissions or networks and not through literary agents. Between the years 1997 and 2014, only one percent of 796 fiction debut books presented in the Swedish trade magazine *Svensk Bokhandel* were mediated through a literary agency. This situation stands in contrast to the United States and the United Kingdom (Thompson, 2012: 71–74), where it is more common that writers and publishers are matched with the help of a literary agent.

Jenkins, 2006; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018; Shirky, 2008). As self-published books have not been selected by a publishing house, claims are sometimes made by producers and consumers of literature about the inferior quality of goods produced in the category of self-published books (Laquintano, 2016). This stigma of inferior quality also stems from the history of vanity publishing (Laquintano, 2013, 2016). In vanity publishing, a publishing company publishes almost anything for a fee without any content or quality control. As Laquintano (2013) writes, “[t]he diverse dimensions of the vanity stigma and the term’s derogatory power meant that it was relatively easy to appropriate and use it to describe the rapid rise of new publishing technologies when they began circumventing twentieth-century professional publishing infrastructures.” The stigma of inferior quality of goods produced in the category of self-published books casts suspicion on the publishability of self-published books and influences the decision to self-publish among authors.

Aspiring writers assessing the option to self-publish thus confront a tension between their aspiration to publish a book and the possible stigma of becoming a self-published author. This article *investigates the ways in which Swedish aspiring writers assessing the option to self-publish handle the tension between their aspiration to publish a book and the possible stigma of self-publishing*. The ways in which the tension is handled are the justifications for having or not having chosen the option to self-publish. Moreover, Sweden is a prime example of country with a self-publishing culture. The printed book is the main outlet for self-publishing and in recent years the country has seen a rapid rise in such publications. More than one in every ten book printed and published is a self-published book (National Library of Sweden, 2018).

At the heart of the tension between the aspiration to publish a book and the stigma of self-publishing are the cultured ways in which the publishability of the category of self-published books is judged. Artists arguably use different heuristics, or what in this article will be discussed as devices, in the form of the actual or suggested outcomes of comparisons and competition. Devices signal the degree to which the work produced is of legitimate quality to be published. The signalling works as a proxy for status, where status is “the perceived quality of that producer’s product in relation to the perceived quality of the producer’s competitor’s products” (Podolny, 1993: 830). The evaluation of the publishability of a cultural good is contingent on devices being used to signal a legitimate or appropriate quality of a cultural good or a category of cultural goods. Evaluations are about using pre-existing value standards to assess the value or appreciation of an object (Aspers, 2009b; Lamont, 2012). The prevalence of ways in which a cultural good may become signalled as being publishable is important for artists’ legitimisation and delegitimation of self-publishing and has consequences for the type of books produced and consumed in society.

Focusing on ways that judgement of publishability is made, the study contributes to the growing field of valuation studies (Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013; Lamont, 2012; Muniesa, 2011; Zuckerman, 2012). The field of valuation studies has not covered self-publishing before. The

article specifically contributes to studies of evaluations involving products and producers in the creative industries (Beckert and Rössel, 2013; Hutter, 2011; Karpik, 2010; Kharchenkova and Velthuis, 2015; Menger, 2014; Strandvad, 2014). The study also illuminates the state of self-publishing where computerisation and the internet have become major aspects of new ways of producing, consuming, and evaluating cultural goods such as self-published works.

Insights from valuation studies are used to understand attempts to shift and stabilize the basis for how self-publishing is evaluated and what these processes mean for the status of do-it-yourself cultures and amateur production (and consumption) in creative industries. The main argument of this article is that while some authors refrain from self-publishing, self-publishers and those who seek to self-publish are aware of the subordinate status of self-publishing but seek ways to establish and legitimise the quality of their work through shifting the basis of evaluation. The shifting basis of evaluation occurs through perceiving an author role in transition, moving (1) from evaluations of the object to the experience of being published, (2) from the importance of professional judgement to non-professional judgement, and (3) from the production side of publishing (the publishing market) to the consumption side (consumers and reviewers). The outcome of the decision to self-publish, and the underpinning culture for making such assessments, has consequences for how books and other cultural goods are currently produced and the type of cultural goods that reach consumers. The assessment of self-publishing as an option among writers exposes tensions and transformations in the evaluation of cultural goods in contemporary creative industries.

Ways of evaluating cultural goods

When judging cultural goods in the creative industries, the quality of the good is initially uncertain (Caves, 2000; Karpik, 2010; Menger, 1999, 2014). The judgement of the quality of cultural goods is based on standards where the value and appreciation of a good are not only assessed but also established, e.g. the publishability of a cultural good. Standards are conventions of cultural production that function as common reference points, making cooperation easy and mutual understanding possible (Becker, 1982). Standards are used, for example, when scoring a music album in relation to a quality ranking or rating, making the album's quality identifiable and comprehensible to prospective listeners (Karpik, 2010). The quality uncertainty inherent in the art world is, at least temporarily, settled through the creative good's quality rating or ranking (Karpik, 2010; Menger, 2014).

The process of evaluation using standards has been described as an object being attributed to a category and related to other categories or evaluated in relation to the standard of the category (Aspers, 2009b; Lamont, 2012: 206; Zuckerman, 1999). A book could be attached to the category of 'self-published books' and evaluated according to the standards of quality in the category,

creating a quality ranking or rating of the book. The book can also be valued or devalued simply by belonging to the category of self-published books. The outcome of this evaluation is a quality assessment that creates the value or appreciation attributed to the book and signals its publishability, i.e. whether or not a book is of the appropriate quality to be legitimately published.

Classifying goods and artists through standards transforms artists and their goods into ranked hierarchies of relative worth producing artistic identity and reputation (Becker, 1982; Karpik, 2010; Menger, 2014). A writer may have the identity of a self-publisher with the reputation of producing a cultural good of subordinate quality. Nevertheless, hierarchies of relative worth are unstable, imperfect, plural, and bound to situations of evaluation (Beljean et al., 2015; Lamont, 2012), which makes it possible to shift the basis for evaluating a cultural good or producer.

In the creative industries, new ways of measuring and establishing quality have been introduced, which potentially are important to anchor quality assessments of cultural goods. Most notably there has been a rise in non-professional or amateur public assessment of the quality of products, through for example user-generated online rankings, ratings, and reviews (Shirky, 2008). The value of these rankings, ratings, and reviews has been debated. A focus for the debate has been whether non-professional critics alone, or as collectives, are able to make a sound judgement on cultural products (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Keen, 2007), and whether such judgments should legitimately be used to assess the quality and anchor the value and meaning of cultural goods. These types of amateur evaluations have often been associated with spontaneous reactions, such as the intensity of applause or the number of votes for certain songs (Hutter, 2013: 162). Experts, on the other hand, make more enduring evaluations using external criteria when assessing and ranking goods and artists in relation to a wider range of previous performances (Hutter, 2011: 207, 2013: 162). The assessments from these experts build ranking pyramids, where few are substantially praised and many are not. Depending on the authority of the evaluator, it is possible for artists and cultural goods to be consecrated by this praise and symbolically endowed with status in the eyes of other people involved in, for example, literature (Bourdieu, 1993). The authority of an evaluation depends on whether the production is oriented towards peers and symbolic rewards or towards economic rewards on a mass market (Bourdieu, 1993). The status of these lay and expert evaluations is central to the functioning of art worlds, and the status of how self-publishing should be evaluated. If self-published works are not assessed and selected by gatekeepers in traditional artistic labour or commodity markets, could these ratings, rankings, and recommendations be used instead?

This question connects to the basis for evaluation and the way artists and consumers handle the quality uncertainty of cultural goods. Karpik (2010) presents the idea of judgement devices, which are heuristic tools used by consumers to indicate the quality of cultural goods of uncertain quality. These tools reduce uncertainty, making it possible to make informed decisions about what to hear,

read, and watch by relying on such factors as experts and rankings. In consumer markets, the uncertainty of quality of products is also handled by relying on networks to determine quality (Cheshire and Cook, 2004; DiMaggio and Louch, 1998) and the product's or producer's reputation (Beckert and Rössel, 2013). Awards are other devices that reduce complexity and solve quality uncertainty in the situation of an abundance of cultural products (see Childress et al., 2017). The use of awards in this way may, for instance, explain the inflation of prizes in the literary world (English, 2005). In short, people need guideposts, such as literary awards, to at least signal the quality of products and to evaluate them, e.g. to allow reasonable purchasing decisions to be made. These guideposts are also of importance to industry insiders to signal the quality as well as the publishability of self-published books.

The mirror concept of judgement devices is appraisal devices (Fürst, 2018). The concept of appraisal device has been introduced to understand how artists themselves handle the uncertainty about whether or not their work and they themselves are good enough to succeed in an artistic labour or commodity market. Appraisal devices come from knowledgeable and trusted sources, where artists are informed by their chances of success or risk of failure. Artists' abilities and works are evaluated *as if* they were being evaluated on the artistic market. Assessors (such as mentors) are able to act as stand-ins to evaluate artists' work as if it were being evaluated by gatekeepers in the artistic markets. Competitions (such as awards and prizes) become useful appraisal devices when they are seen to be indicative of how competitors' work and abilities would be evaluated in the artistic market in the future.

The concept of the device is used in this paper to show how writers try to find proxies, on the consumer and production side in the literary world, for assessing the quality of a self-published book and for ensuring or undermining the value of the work produced. Hence, these ideas about cultural evaluation will be used to analyse how the issues of quality and legitimacy are handled in deliberations about self-publishing.

Interviewing writers and analysing ways of evaluating

The analysis follows a phenomenologically oriented approach to studying the meanings attached to self-publishing, and draws on interviews with 59 writers. The interviews were carried out in 2013 and 2014 in Sweden and are part of a larger dataset.² To obtain variation of perspectives and positions on getting published and self-publishing among writers, the sampling of writers to interview was based on a maximum variation strategy (see e.g. Becker, 1998). Writers at different stages on the path to getting published were interviewed: those who had attempted to be published

² The interviews (which included four group interviews) are a subsample of a larger data set of 80 interviews with people involved in the Swedish publishing industry, such as publishers, writers, literary agents, and retail agency representatives.

and had either failed or succeeded, those who were still attempting to be published at the time of the interview, and writers who no longer aspired to be published.³ Both writers aiming for self-publishing and who had self-published a book were interviewed. Writers who had been or aimed to be published, at different traditional publishing houses of different status were also interviewed. The authors interviewed had written manuscripts of novels, collections of poetry, and collections of short stories aimed at adult audiences. With the purpose of studying the variations of meanings, positions, and perspectives on self-publishing, the writers were asked about their attempts to become published and their views of self-publishing.

The research material was collected in two steps (Aspers, 2009a). The first step involved a pre-study of Swedish trade publishing, where different actors working in different areas of publishing industry (production, distribution, marketing, retail, and consumption) were interviewed about the publishing industry in Sweden, for instance, their view on issues of self-publishing and traditional publishing. During the second step of the project, the research focus was narrowed and the interviews with writers mainly focused on their attempts to get published. The data collection ended when no more significant variations, in terms of attempts to get published and the meanings attached to self-publishing, were detected during interviews.

The interview material was coded in two cycles (Saldaña, 2013). The first cycle was an inductive coding procedure focused on outlining roles, relations, and issues in trade publishing. The coding involved making codes about how people talked about self-publishing in relation to what status in trade publishing they had, e.g. published or unpublished, self-published or traditionally published and so on. In the second cycle, the codes and material about self-publishing were revisited. The material pertaining to self-publishing was once again coded, with a focus on how people talked about self-publishing in relation to how they handled their own aspirations to be published and the possible stigma of becoming self-published. The coding of the positions taken as well as acknowledged and considered by all the 59 interviewees is presented in Appendix A and analysed in the next section.

Findings

The findings section is structured around the ways in which aspiring writers considering self-publishing handle the tension between their aspiration to be published and the possible stigma of self-publishing. The tension is handled by justifications for having or not having chosen the option to self-publish.

³ I sampled aspiring writers by accessing (1) the social networks of the published and unpublished authors interviewed, (2) approaching writers in different literary settings (e.g. literary festivals and online writing communities), and (3) conducting group interviews with participants in writing groups and at creative writing classes, where many aspiring writers are usually found.

First, writers attempt to resolve the tension when the aspiration to be published or experience of it outshine the possible stigma of becoming self-published. Writers may also avoid self-publishing due to the stigma outshining the aspiration to publish. Second, writers see a resolution to the tension by arguing for a general tendency in publishing where the stigmatised status of self-published authors is transitioning to become more legitimate. Third, writers use the device of the publishing market as a gold standard for evaluating publishability, and refrain from self-publishing if not selected in this market. Nevertheless, writers attempt to resolve the tension by using alternative devices to the gold standard to claim publishability for self-published books, especially turning to evaluations on the consumer side of the creative industry.

The results show that while some writers avoid self-publishing, others who are self-published or seek to self-publish are aware of the subordinate status of such publications, but seek ways to establish and legitimise the publishability of their work through shifting the basis for evaluation of quality.

The aspiration to publish outshining the stigma of becoming a self-published author

The tension between writers' aspirations and the collective stigma of self-publishing are handled by some writers by making their aspiration more important than the stigma. The stigma prevails but attempts are made to shift the basis for evaluation to the experience of being published. Other authors refrain from self-publishing by letting the stigma outshine the aspiration to become published.

As with stigma more generally (Goffman, 1963), the stigmatised category of self-publishing is not always made visible or expressed by those who may belong to such a category. The stigma is more often freely and elaborately expressed by those who considered but refrained from becoming self-published. The traditionally published author Monika⁴ summarises a perceived general conception of how books of legitimate quality are published: "There is a conception in the society that good quality literature is published by traditional publishing houses and in print. That is what you need to take into account when you want to be published". By this way of reasoning, becoming selected and thereby accepted by the gatekeepers, legitimises the cultural product as worthy of publication. What matters is not just to be published but to be published in a certain way. The stakes when attempting to be published by a traditional publishing house may, therefore, be high as conveyed by the traditionally published author Jonas. When asked about whether he had considered self-publishing, he said the following:

⁴ I use pseudonyms for all writers to protect their anonymity.

I have thought about self-publishing [...] It sounds horrible, and I do not think this is a retrospective construction, but I remember that I thought that it would feel like giving up if I did everything myself. I would give up, in several ways.

Feeling bad for criticising the practice of self-publishing and not acknowledging it as a viable option for him, the author Jonas shows an awareness of the institutionalisation of the collective stigma. To become a self-published author would be a signal to others of having given up on being published in a legitimate way. Authors who share this sentiment may nonetheless consider self-publishing to finish their project. Elin says she has considered self-publishing after several rejections: “I have considered self-publishing, for my own sake. To end it. Give one copy to my mother, to show that something came out of all those years and money she lent me.” Such self-publication lacks the signals of prestige and quality she wanted to achieve. The publication is not intended to be read by a general audience but by a close social network. The possible stigma is downplayed in order to be disburdened of the aspiration to be published in some form.

The self-published author Fredrik recognises the risk of producing a work of inferior quality. He says: “in self-publishing, if you really want to publish, then there is no one that will say no”. He is a self-labelled entrepreneur who found it “fun to learn how everything worked in trade publishing.” He argues for the option of self-publishing to realise his aspiration to be published and to circumvent traditional publishing. He values being able to experience autonomy and control. Autonomy and control are central to individualised cultures such as do-it-yourself cultures as well as to what are traditionally seen as legitimate artistic practices (Pang, 2015). Realising the values of autonomy and control leads to happiness, empowerment, and self-fulfilment, which are indirectly seen as more important than the agony of being rejected by a traditional publishing house. While the evaluation by the publishing market concerns the manuscript, his own assessment is based on evaluating his experience of becoming published. Like Elin, he thereby shifts the ground of evaluation from the object to the experience of being published.

Tomas says: “In self-publishing, you can publish things that aren’t ready to be published, and the very few good quality books drown in the abundance of poor quality books.” Nevertheless, he sees his own self-publication as the realisation of a long-cherished dream.

Interviewer: What was your reasoning behind deciding to self-publish?

Tomas: It was a dream I had, to be published. So I did like everyone else, sent my manuscript to a publishing house and then was rejected. In order for me to be able to hold the book in my hands, I turned to self-publishing. I used a print-on-demand service. It has worked okay. It is easy to publish a book nowadays, it does not cost much. But to find buyers and readers is harder.

Tomas felt a reluctance to buy the publishing services due to the stigma of self-publishing. The tension between aspiration and stigma may not be resolved as the claim of producing a work of inferior quality remains. The author valued realising a long-cherished dream as more important than the risk of stigmatisation. Like Fredrik and Elin, he individualised the publication, making himself into the consumer of an experience, buying services to experience being published.

Linus followed the same route: the self-published book was a way to realise a long-cherished dream. He sees himself as a “punk” who initially embraced do-it-yourself cultures and questions the authority of traditional publishing houses. “Just publish the shit”, he says. His reasoning downplays the importance of quality and legitimises self-published books. Nevertheless, when he was traditionally published, he says “it was a totally different feeling, this time it was for real.” Linus thus moved from legitimising self-publishing, presumably with an awareness of the subordination of self-publishing, to realising that the quality assessment of the publishing house were necessary for him to legitimise his writing and his ambition of being a writer.

This section shows how the stigma of self-publishing shapes the reasoning of authors. While some authors refrain from self-publishing because they wish to avoid the stigma, others attempt to shift from evaluating the quality and publishability of the book, to the author’s own experience of publishing to legitimise such publications. The self-publishers are not only producers of literature but also consumers of publishing services. As discussed below, self-publishing also presents an alternative basis for evaluating their role as author, because self-publishing offers autonomy and control over the production process. For authors, to realise such values and to be published becomes at least temporarily more important than the possible stigma of self-publishing.

The status of being a self-published author in transition

Some writers resolve the stigma of self-publishing by focusing on the perception that self-publishing is becoming more accepted. Writers identify a transition of the status in self-publishing and may themselves be actively working towards such a shift. This standpoint is summarised by the author Olivia, who says: “I think self-publishing will become more accepted. Just look at [the large publishing houses] and their interest in self-publishing.” When the established actors in the field change their position on self-publishing and engage themselves in self-publishing, they signal a change of status in self-publishing and possibly remove the tension between aspiration and stigma.

The self-published author Kristina describes her experiences of the transition of the status in self-publishing. She describes the contempt and questioning she faced when she started out with self-

publishing. The quality of her work had been indirectly questioned in a daily newspaper and directly by the journalist.

The journalist wondered if self-publishing wasn't actually for those who had failed, a community of losers. [My publishing partner and I] thought it was a tough question. I do not see it that way; you take the project into your own hands. It is big in music and now it is time for literature.

While emphasising the value of autonomy and control in self-publishing, Kristina also emphasised that questions arose the journalist's questions were based on the assumption that she and her publishing partner had self-published something of inferior quality that the traditional publishing houses had or would have rejected. Nevertheless, Kristina later detected a change in tone. Two years later, the same newspaper described her as 'a successful self-published author', which she saw as a sign of self-publishing becoming more legitimate.

In spite of this perceived shift in attitude, it is still possible that the reporter in the later article viewed her and her work as an exception. She was successful *despite* being a self-published author. For Kristina, the project of self-publishing was, in fact, a way to get published after being rejected, but also a way to position herself, attempting to establish a reputation for self-published literature among people involved in more highbrow culture. She wanted the basis for the evaluation of self-publishing to be transformed to make space for highbrow self-published literature.

When writers are looking for signs that self-publishing is becoming more legitimate they attempt to find examples of successful self-published authors, or exemplars (Dekker, 2016). Exemplars include E. L. James, the author of the international bestseller *Fifty shades of grey*. The published author Robert acknowledge James as an example of a shifting landscape, and says "In Sweden, we have the example of Emelie Schepp [...] she self-published her book and it became a commercial success." Schepp is often used by authors in Sweden to exemplify the potential commercial success of self-publishing. Successful self-published books send signals that other self-published books may be of appropriate quality to be consumed.

Another example of a self-published author is Lotta Lotass, a former member of the *Swedish Academy*, which awards the *Nobel Prize in Literature*. When the traditionally published author Maria is talking about the example of Lotass, as a self-published author, she contrasts it to "ordinary self-publishing". This type of self-publishing is part of a highbrow do-it-yourself culture belonging to the traditional restricted field of cultural production, where producers produce for other producers, rather than the mass market or large-scale production in the national book market (Bourdieu, 1993). This often means small print runs and experimentation, the traditionally published author Tuva says that she could consider such self-publishing: "I could think that you

do something collectively, like put your text on a wall [...] or make some kind of soundscape and publish it on a C60 cassette [...] I mean, I might move towards a do-it-yourself culture". The aspiring author Filippa takes a similar stance and may self-publish in the future: "then I would work with the physical form creatively somehow, to think about the physical object. [...] It needs to be special." Having such highbrow ambitions is part of actively trying to make self-publishing into something prestigious, as described by Kristina: "the one who started [our] self-publishing house only knew about sad self-publishing stories. She wanted it to be different, that it would be prestigious to take things into your own hands. She knew this ambition was timely, and then we started the publishing house together." They are thus actively trying to change the status of self-publishing.

The status of self-publishing in literature is also connected to the transformation and status of self-publishing in other creative industries. The aspiring author Charlie says, "if you become self-published you are self-made, you do your thing, like playing in a music band. You pay for the things yourself, but you need some filter [so you know it is good]". Signs of the self-publishing movement can be seen in other creative industries and can be used to describe the potential transformation in book publishing, but the problem of possibly making things of inferior quality remains. Other authors, as the traditionally published author Lena, wants the sign of approval from traditional publishing houses. By stating that she "is a bit like a 20th-century human being", Lena acknowledges that the position and status of self-publishing may be on the way to becoming more legitimate.

This section shows that self-published authors are aware of the subordinate status of self-publishing and seek signs of a shifting landscape of the status and evaluation of self-published authors or are involved in attempting to shift the landscape, making self-publishing more legitimate. They also seek out devices, such as exemplars of successful self-published authors, to benchmark and evaluate the status of self-published books.

Moving beyond the gold standard of the publishing market to claim publishability

A basis for the stigma of self-publishing is that on the production side, the publishing market is the gold standard for evaluating the quality and claiming the publishability or legitimacy of published books. Writers use the outcome of assessment in the publishing market as a device to judge their own abilities and the quality and publishability of their work. Others in the publishing industry use these outcomes to signal the writer's abilities and the publishability of the work produced. To claim publishability for self-publishing, therefore, alternatives to the publishing market are needed.

The traditionally published author Stina acknowledges her reliance on the gold standard for ensuring the quality of a publication.

Stina: If I was [sic] to become self-published, I would see it as a failure. You cannot make a living out of that. How can you make people understand that your book is a work of quality and that it is worth reading? It feels like there are a lot of self-published authors who gladly publish print-on-demand books and tour different shopping malls to promote their book. Often, I think these books are not particularly good.

Interviewer: You want the seal of approval from a traditional publishing house?

Stina: Yes.

Among writers and people in the publishing industry, a common conception is that self-published books of good quality are few and far between. Like Jonas, Stina believes that the self-published writer will feel and be perceived as a failure by having produced such a work. The assumption is that if there is no gatekeeping involved when producing and publishing the work, the published work will not become legitimate in the literary world. The book will automatically be seen as something of poor quality because it is perceived as having been or potentially been rejected by the gatekeepers in the publishing market. The traditionally published author Eva expresses it similarly: “I needed a traditional publishing house with their name on the cover, I wanted legitimacy for what I had created.” Although some traditionally published authors become legitimate by being published by influential publishing houses acting as central literary institutions, self-published authors do not become legitimate in the same way.

While the publishing market is generally perceived as the basis for the evaluation of quality and publishability, it is not the only point of reference for claiming quality and publishability in the literary world. For both traditionally published writers and self-published writers, there are several other alternative forms of competitions and comparisons, such as the reception of the work in literary circles, which can signal status and the underlying quality of the work and the writers’ artistic abilities.

Authors test the quality and publishability of their work by hiring freelance editors, asking friends and family to read their work, or by submitting work to literary journals and magazines. The self-published author Mikael acknowledges the problem of isolation when attempting to produce work of quality. He surrounded himself with readers of his manuscript and bought editorial and proofreading services for a large sum of money to be sure he was able to produce something of sufficient quality. Fredrik uses the same strategy. Working with an editor also meant that the quality would be assessed (on the production side) before the book was published and that he could

improve the quality and claim the publishability of the book. When reasoning about self-publishing he says:

You have to get filters. I tested my manuscript on friends and family. But I understood that this was not a sufficient test. I hired a freelance editor. I asked her for her tough opinion. The comments could surely have been tougher. It was really important to me that there was quality assurance.

He goes on by telling me that the book went on to be translated into different languages and that he won an award for the book. To be translated and win awards are outcomes of competition and are devices used to signal not only quality but also publishability. Nevertheless, this is not only the case for self-published authors but also for traditionally published authors as well. This kind of competition comes after the books are published and for this reason cannot be the basis for deciding to self-publish.

The importance of these evaluations is exemplified by Mikael, who says “I got many reviews in newspapers, and especially on the internet, weblogs, and people writing about books.” To him just to have been reviewed or noticed was a sign of quality, or a sign that what he had produced was good enough to be published, even though the reviews were not always from professional critics. The number of reviews from consumers shows that the value of amateur evaluations lies in the quantity of the responses (Hutter, 2013: 162).

The aspiring writer Otto also focuses on the consumption side to legitimise self-publishing. He thinks that consumers should be the judges of quality: “I do not think you should hinder texts from reaching the public. The readers should choose, not the publishing house. That is my opinion.” The writer sees the benefits of recommendations, ratings, and rankings online, such as customer reviews at online bookstores. Because customer reviews and rankings signal status and underlying quality he sees them as an alternative route for self-publishers to claim legitimacy and quality. This is also part of the cult of the amateur (Keen, 2007), where amateur public assessment of the quality of products is important. The findings suggest a shift from evaluations on the production side to a situation where quality is primarily assessed on the consumption side of the creative industries.

Self-published writers may, as noted earlier, also feel frustration and even express resentment towards publishers and publishing houses because of their role as gatekeepers who assess and decide upon the fate of manuscripts. To find success in the consumer market, among audiences and reviewers, can then not only be seen as a sign of quality assurance but also as revenge. The self-published author Staffan elaborates this point.

I sent this manuscript to some publishing houses; they answered “It is not for us”, “We do not have the time to publish you”, “Perhaps another time”. Standard rejections. Let me tell you, I published it myself and sent it to the ones who assess new books for the libraries in Sweden. They were positive. I have sold more than a thousand books to libraries around the country. People call me up and tell me that I have written a fantastic book. But the publishing houses say no, we are not interested, but people read the book and think it is really interesting.

While the author acknowledges the central place publishing houses have in determining quality and publishability, the quote also shows how a book gains value or meaning in other ways than through the publishing market. Staffan tries to present instances of consecration (Bourdieu, 1993) other than the publishing market. Here the success in finding a wide readership among consumers is equated with quality and publishability. While it is clear that traditionally published books might achieve the same type of success, the writer’s argumentation is a way to attempt to destabilise the gold standard, to claim that the publishers cannot catch good manuscripts or at least not all of them.

This section has shown that the publishing market is the main way of evaluating the quality and publishability of books. Due to this baseline for evaluating quality and publishability, people considering self-publishing need to handle the assumption that they are producing works of inferior quality. Writers also attempt to shift the basis for evaluation to the consumer side of the creative industries and to non-professional judgements of quality and thereby legitimise self-publishing.

Discussion: attempts to shift the basis for evaluation of self-published cultural goods

The assessment of self-publishing as an option to publish among aspiring writers reveals tensions and transformations in the evaluation and legitimation of self-publishing. Writers are aware of the subordinate status of becoming self-published. Some writers refrain from self-publishing and others seek ways to establish and legitimise the quality of their work through shifting the basis for evaluation of cultural goods. The shifting occurs through perceiving the author’s role in transition, moving (1) from evaluations of the object to the experience of being published, (2) from the importance of professional judgement to non-professional judgement, and (3) from the production side of publishing (the publishing market) to the consumption side (consumers and reviewers). These shifts are interwoven and may be signs of broader tensions and transformations in the evaluation of cultural goods in contemporary creative industries.

First, shifting the basis of evaluation from the object being published to the experience of being published indicates that self-publishing is part of what Pine and Gilmore (1999) call the “the experience economy”. The experience economy constructs memorable events for consumers. Through self-publishing, authors are able to hold *their own* book in their own hands and to claim that they actually have published a book. The experience of publishing a book becomes more

important than the potential stigma of self-publishing. Companies offering self-publishing services have become part of this shift by not only asking writers to buy their services but also to buy into a particular identity, image, and aura surrounding getting published. Self-publishing and the companies offering such services capitalise on the status and experience of getting published and becoming a published author.

Second, part of legitimating self-publishing practices is the attempt to shift the basis of evaluation by confronting and criticising the traditional ways of evaluating the quality and publishability of manuscripts and books; thereby making room for a new way of producing culture. Self-publishing can be legitimated by being expressed as a reaction towards the limitations of traditional publishing houses. This reaction is expressed as a questioning of traditional publishing houses' practices, their sense of quality, and what they publish and who they publish. Authors may move on from rejections to self-publishing with the sense that they are publishing something that the publishing houses have missed out on (Fürst, 2016). Self-published writers actively use self-publishing as a strategy to position themselves as legitimate actors and producers by questioning the status quo in the publishing industry. Hence, self-publishing can be seen as a broader innovation within the publishing industry and other creative industries and can be used as a means of rebellion to shift the basis for evaluation and open up new ways of cultural production. On a broader scale, the self-publishing movement may become an example of what Sennett (2017) describes as a public culture becoming replaced by informality and self-centred counter-cultures.

Third, another attempted shift in evaluation not only criticises traditional ways of evaluating the quality and publishability of manuscripts and books but offers an alternative to the publishing market by giving emphasis to the importance of consumer experiences, valuations, choices, and actions as factors ensuring quality. The shift entails a de-professionalisation of judgement and the public's challenge of professionals' accountability and control over a specialised body of knowledge (Haug, 1972). Through technology, the public gets access to information which previously was unavailable to them (Haug, 1972). The cult of the amateur online exemplifies such a de-professionalisation, where consumers' choice through ratings, rankings, and recommendations become the new measuring rod and the means for making a claim about a cultural good's legitimacy or quality.

A shift of evaluation towards the consumer side of the creative industries presumably depends on the extent of the digital transformation of the creative industry studied. Creative industries have a potential for "mass amateurization" of production and evaluation of creative goods due to advancements in technology (Shirky, 2008). A hypothesis, for future testing, would be that as cultural goods are largely distributed and consumed in digital form, the acceptance of consumer feedback as a signal for publishability is increasing and the importance of signals for publishability that come from the artistic labour or commodity market is diminishing.

At the time of this study, it was uncommon for Swedish writers to publish their full-length books online. Nevertheless, the above hypothesis may be tested on writing communities online, such as *Wattpad*, which has producers and consumers of stories sharing the same space (Laquintano, 2016; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018). Future research should study the decision to self-publish online and the ways of assessing quality and legitimacy in online publishing. This research has already been started, by for example Laquintano (2016).

The advancements of technology have made it practically and economically possible to self-publish and produce books, podcasts, vlogs, fanfiction, and blogs that literally go beyond traditional gatekeepers and curators of creative industries. At least in literature, the legitimacy of becoming self-published is still in question and influences the decision to self-publish, which in turn has consequences for what and how literature is produced. The article indicates a shifting landscape of evaluative practices in literature and the creative industries, creating a new ground for legitimate cultural production. The rise of amateur producers, consumers and evaluation seems thereby to be re-shaping the creative industries, while the importance of traditional curators and gatekeepers lives on in both new and old forms.

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