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Journalists' Misjudgement of Audience Opinion

David Nicolas Hopmann[1] and Andreas R.T. Schuck[2]

Abstract

Prior studies have reported a right-leaning bias in the media's reporting of how the public thinks of political issues, raising the question: Why, and to what extent, is this the case? One reason in particular has been discussed in this regard: Journalists judge public opinion to be more right leaning than it actually is (Beckers et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2004). This paper therefore studies to what extent journalists misjudge audience opinion. The analyses are based on large-scale representative surveys of journalists (1993/2005) and the voting-age population (1994/2005) in Germany. Results show that German journalists (mis-)judge audience opinion to be more right-leaning than the audience sees itself. The results also show that journalists judge audience opinion to be to the right of their own stances, and that journalists in federal states with a right-leaning government and in West Germany judge audience opinion to be even further to the right. Audience feedback does not push journalists' judgements of their audience towards the right, however. These results are discussed vis-à-vis research showing that there is a consistent bias in the depiction of opinions expressed by ordinary citizens, and research documenting that political elites overestimate public support for right-wing policies.

Keywords

bias, opinion perception, public opinion, survey, Germany

This paper was triggered by a puzzle: Why do journalists portray ordinary citizens expressing right-leaning opinions more often than ordinary citizens with left-leaning ones? Journalists all around the world cherish impartiality and factualness as important

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standards of their profession (Hanitzsch et al. 2019). Yet, research on the ideological views expressed by ordinary citizens appearing in the news media uncovers a consistent picture of bias—in favour of a disproportionally strong representation of politically right-leaning viewpoints. In a large-scale longitudinal study, Cushion (2018: 639) reported that 'voters were portrayed as favouring more right- than left-wing policies despite evidence to the contrary' (see also Gaskins et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2004; Tolson 2019). Ordinary citizens are a common type of source appearing in the news (Beckers 2018; De Swert and Kuypers 2020), which makes Cushion's finding all the more worthy of consideration.

These findings beg an answer to the question why in the news the appearance of ordinary citizens is imbalanced as favouring the political right. Prior research has suggested that this bias is driven by journalists judging public opinion as being more right leaning than it actually is (Beckers et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2004). A number of studies have investigated how journalists perceive their audiences (e.g., Donsbach 1983; Martin et al. 1972; Weischenberg et al. 2006a), and many journalists' news decisions indeed are about perceptions, conclusions, and judgements (Donsbach 2004); only recently, however, has research embarked on a more systematic investigation of how precisely journalists perceive public political opinion (Beckers et al. 2021). This research found that, indeed, "Journalists systematically think the public is more conservative than it in reality is" (p. 254). This misjudgement matches the bias found in the ideological views expressed by ordinary citizens as they appear in the media.

This present work builds upon and extends the intriguing study by Beckers et al. (2021) in several ways. Empirically, their study was based on a smaller sample of 148 political journalists from Flanders in Belgium. The present study is based on two large-scale, representative surveys of German journalists interviewed in 1993 and 2005. In these surveys, German journalists were asked how they judged their audience, which is why this paper primarily speaks of journalist judgment of *audience* opinion. The 'audience' is but one specific part of the (wider) public. The survey data employed is not the latest, but these data sources have the advantage of covering representative samples of German journalists at two different points in time and of a larger sample size (1993 N = 1,498; 2005 N = 1,536). Employing German data also has the additional advantage that analysing them adds insights from another media system to the emerging debate on journalists' misjudgements of public opinion. Hence, analysing these data enables us to see whether the same patterns exist across time and space. Theoretically, the findings reported by Beckers et al. (2021) were not in line with their expectations on the drivers of journalists' misjudgement. This calls for additional theory-development on what drives journalists' judgements of public opinion, an endeavour in which additional analyses from a different time and context and based on larger, representative data sets can prove valuable. In sum, this paper hopes to make a small, but relevant contribution to the debate on journalists' (mis-)judgements of audiences by adding to previous considerations on the possible patterns and drivers behind these.

The present paper begins with theorizing three drivers of journalists' judgements of audience opinion. These drivers are seen, neither theoretically nor empirically, to be

mutually exclusive; they can be at work simultaneously and therefore together can help to explain misjudgements. Firstly, public debate about bias in news reporting emphasises the fact that journalists on average tend to hold political views left of the population average. Therefore, journalists, by positioning themselves left of centre, will judge audience opinion to be to the right of their own. Secondly, journalists may also deduce audience opinion from the regional context. Journalists working in regions with right-leaning governments will judge audience opinions to be more right-leaning than journalists in regions with left-leaning governments. After all, their audiences—as members of the public—elected these governments. Based on prior research (Hebenstreit 2020; Rainer et al. 2018), it is also plausible to assume that audiences in East Germany will be judged to be more left-leaning. Thirdly, journalists may also infer audience opinion from their own interactions with members of the public. Prior research indicates that citizens on the political right tend to be more vocal than their fellow liberal citizens (see e.g., Friemel and Dötsch 2015; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2002).

The theoretical reasoning driving the analyses in this paper is first presented in more detail, followed by data sources and analytical strategy, and finally the results of the analyses. This presentation begins with estimating to what extent the judgement by German journalists of audience opinion is skewed towards the right, and continues by investigating to what extent the theorized drivers can help explain journalists' judgements of audience opinion. In a concluding section, the results are discussed vis-à-vis prior research results.

Literature Review

Prior research has repeatedly documented a right-leaning bias in the media coverage of public opinion. The Republican politician Ronald Reagan, President of the United States from 1981 to 1989, was generally depicted in the media as a remarkably skilled communicator highly popular amongst American voters. This depiction of Ronald Reagan was neither impartial nor factual. Rather, Ronald Reagan tended to perform substantially less well in the polls than his predecessors. There was no factual basis for depicting him as particularly popular with the American electorate (King and Schudson 1987). In fact, in recent years research evidence is accumulating that the portrayal of opinions expressed by ordinary citizens is skewed to the political right; public opinion is portrayed as more right-leaning than it actually is (Cushion 2018; Gaskins et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2004; Tolson 2019).

This right-leaning bias has even been observed when ordinary citizens appear in poll coverage, that is, news reports based on factual information on public opinion. Gaskins et al. (2020) studied the characteristics of survey respondents interviewed as part of poll coverage in the *New York Times*. Their results showed that the survey respondents interviewed were more often Republican and less often Democrat compared with the polls covered. That is, the distribution of Democrats and Republicans interviewed was not representative of public opinion, but rather in favour of Republicans.

The findings on the right-leaning bias in the attitudes appearing in the news as expressed by ordinary citizens matter and are concerning. An extensive strand of research has documented that the appearance in the news of the views of ordinary citizens has substantial effects on those consuming the news (e.g., Daschmann 2000; Gaskins et al. 2020; Hopmann et al. 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2015; Lefevere et al. 2012; Peter 2019). The opinions expressed in the news by ordinary citizens matter.

The findings also raise the question as to *why* we can observe this right-leaning bias in the media's reporting of public opinion. Prior research has highlighted one reason in particular: Journalists judge public opinion to be more right-leaning than it is (Beckers et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2004). The study by Martin et al. (1972) also showed that journalists' perceptions of the audience influence the way journalists lean in their reporting, and that they have a tendency to overestimate how right-leaning the audience is. The message to be taken from this strand of research therefore appears to be that a right-leaning bias in the *judgments of opinions* appears to drive a right-leaning bias in the *depictions of political opinion* as more right-leaning than it actually is.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to explore and explain judgements by journalists of audience opinion. To see whether a right-leaning bias in judgments of opinions can be corroborated across time and location, the first hypothesis to be explored is: *German journalists judge audience opinion to be further to the right than the public places itself (H1).* If this hypothesis is to be supported by the empirical results, the question arises what drives journalists' judgements of audience opinion. Therefore, the next three hypotheses address the question as to which factors affect journalists' left–right placement of their audiences.

Journalists' own Political Stance

Across the Western world, prior research repeatedly and consistently has documented that journalists tend to place themselves left of the political centre and that they more often support political parties on the left than does the public on average (e.g., Albæk et al. 2010; Beckers et al. 2021; Patterson and Donsbach 1996; van Dalen 2012; Weischenberg et al. 2006b). In and of itself it does not come as a surprise that journalists tend to place themselves left of centre. Practicing journalism typically requires some type of higher education, and individuals with higher education in general tend to place themselves left of centre (Albæk et al. 2010: 60).

A wide array of research has documented a human tendency to perceive others as more similar to oneself in their behaviour, attitudes, and values than they actually are. Such a bias in the perception of others has been investigated as 'looking glass perception' (Fields and Schuman 1976), 'false consensus effect' (Ross et al. 1977), or 'social projection hypothesis' (Krueger 1998). There is reason to assume that journalists do not fall into this trap when asked to judge audience opinion, however. Prior results showed that journalists, indeed, do perceive themselves as further to the left than their audiences (Donsbach 1983; Patterson and Donsbach 1996). Moreover, Beckers et al. (2021) reported that while journalists correctly do not project their own opinion on the public, they instead 'overcompensate'. The result is that they estimate public

opinion as more to the right than it actually is: "well aware of their left of center orientation [journalists] overcompensate and overestimate the difference between their own opinion and the opinion of the public" (Beckers et al. 2021: 254). Moreover, it turns out that Flemish journalists leaning to the political right in fact are substantially better at estimating public opinion than their left-leaning colleagues.

In short, when journalists face the task of judging audience opinion, one straightforward strategy that suggests itself to journalists is to locate audience opinion to the right of themselves. After decades of academic, political, and public debate about journalists holding opinions left of centre, any politically aware journalist likely will start from the assumption that he or she belongs to a group of professionals located to the left of 'average' opinion. Therefore, audience opinion on average is assumed to be to the right of their own point of view. If asked to locate audience opinion, a journalist therefore will reason that the audience—knowing "the rule" that journalists generally tend to be politically more left-leaning than the public at large—*must be more right-leaning than the journalist him- or herself is*. There likely will be a limit to such a reasoning, however; as journalists place themselves further to the right they eventually will not assume that audience opinion is yet even further to the right. Against this backdrop, the following hypothesis is formulated: *Journalists judge audience opinion further to the right than themselves with decreasing tendency the further right journalists place themselves (H2).* Unlike the well-documented tendency of humans to judge others to be like themselves, this hypothesis suggests that most journalists tend to perceive audience opinions as different from their own opinion. Such judgement of audience opinion being more to the right than their own opinions may well be correct, of course, given the journalists' own—on average—more left-leaning position, and does not in and by itself represent a misjudgement. However, if, compared to public opinion data, journalists generally judge their audiences to be more right-leaning than the public places itself (as stated in H1), then it is relevant to understand the drivers of journalists' judgements of audience opinion, of which this is hypothesised to be one.

The Regional Context

Another possible strategy for estimating the political leanings of the public is to consider the regional context. If the journalist resides in a region governed by right-leaning politicians, it would be reasonable to locate audience opinion further to the right. Their own audience as a part of the electorate thus would have participated in the election of the ruling politicians. In addition, prior research has shown a pattern of the public—on average—locating itself further to the left in East than in West Germany in the years around the time when the data to be analysed here were collected (1993 and 2005) (e.g., Hebenstreit 2020; Rainer et al. 2018). This East–West divide will likely also be reflected in the judgement of journalists.

The reasoning described here is similar to prior research on the perception of how political preferences are distributed in social networks. Research on social networks has shown that when asked to report opinions of individual interlocutors there is a notable tendency towards assuming that the interlocutors hold opinions in line with

their surroundings (Huckfeldt 2007). Prior research also has shown that there is a bias with regard to the perception of party or candidate preferences held by individual interlocutors. The preferences of those individuals supporting minor parties or candidates are less often correctly perceived compared to those individuals supporting larger parties or more popular candidates (e.g., Huckfeldt et al. 1998, 2005; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Ikeda and Huckfeldt 2001). The driver of this pattern is the reasoning that the more popular a party or candidate is, the more likely it is that others support this party or candidate. This pattern of deductive reasoning is perfectly logical, but it also leads to a bias in perceptions of the political environment at large. The result is that the support for dominant parties or candidates is overestimated while the support for minority parties or candidates is underestimated.

In short, another driver of judgements of audience opinion may be the following: when asked to judge audience opinion, journalists will deduce their judgement from the regional context in which they are located, at least to some extent. If this driver helps explain audience opinion judgements, then this hypothesis will be supported by the data analyses: *Journalists working in regions governed by right-leaning governments and in West Germany will judge audience opinion further to the right than journalists working in regions governed by left-leaning governments and in East Germany (H3)*. Here again, such judgement of audience opinion being more right-leaning in certain geographical areas than in others might be correct as such but does not itself necessarily represent a misjudgement. However, it is important since it could be another relevant driver of journalists' audience judgements.

Audience Feedback

A third possible driver for judging audience opinion may be inferences from the interactions journalists have with members of their audience. Journalists regularly receive input and reactions from members of their audiences. One classic interaction is letters sent by citizens to newsrooms (Greulich 1979; Reader 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2004). The emergence of the internet and e-mail has facilitated contact between members of the audience and journalists (Holton et al. 2016; Rössler 2017; Wolfgang 2018).

When facing the task of judging their audience politically, a strategy that suggests itself is inferring audience opinion from the input and feedback received from audience members. Citizens contacting journalists directly, however, are not representative of the audience or even the public at large (Greulich 1979). Prior research has documented a tendency that citizens who submit letters to the editor or comment on the news predominantly have a right-wing political background and express right-leaning preferences (e.g., Forsythe 1950; Friemel and Dötsch 2015; Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Tarrant 1957; Vacin 1965; Wahl-Jorgensen 2002; but see also Reader et al. 2004). Moreover, writers and readers of audience comments struggle to recognize the bias of comments and tend to understand comments as valid representations of public opinion (Friemel and Dötsch 2015).

Summing up, if judgements of audience opinion are driven by inferences from contacts with audience members, it is reasonable to assume that such inferences may drive

judgements of audience opinion to the right. The fourth hypothesis to be investigated therefore states that *interactions with audience members will lead journalists to judge audience opinion as further to the political right (H4).* Again, it might well be that such interactions warrant the judgement that audiences are more right-leaning, depending on their actual content. However, if journalists perceive their audiences to be more right leaning than audiences locate themselves, and there is evidence that audience feedback more often has a right-leaning background, then it is important to test if we can identify audience feedback as another driver of journalists' judgement of their audiences' political position.

Data and Analytical Strategy

To answer the four hypotheses outlined above, we need data on how journalists judge audience opinion and self-reported data of audience opinion. Previously gathered surveys of German journalists and the German public available through the GESIS —Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften archive allow for this investigation. Hence, the analyses to be presented in this paper are based on the use of secondary data.

Prior research differed with respect to investigating how journalists judge *public opinion* in general (Beckers et al. 2021), or how journalists judge *their audience* (Martin et al. 1972). The data sources employed here asked journalists to judge their audiences, but the data do not allow for an analysis on media outlet level. The data however allow for grouping journalists by media type (focusing on television and newspapers which can be matched with audience data). To match these journalist judgement data with measurements of reported audience opinion, election campaign surveys will be employed. These election campaign surveys allow for grouping respondents by use of media types—some of these media types reach large parts of the public, e.g. public service television. The analyses will thus focus on how journalists judge their audience across the board and grouped by media types, and how the public and audience groups judge themselves.

Surveys of journalists

In 1993 and 2005, survey projects entitled 'Journalismus in Deutschland' (*Journalism in Germany*) were conducted (Malik et al. 2015; Scholl and Weischenberg 2008). The details on sampling, including how 'journalists' were defined, have been described by Scholl and Weischenberg (1998: 305–321) for the 1993 study and by Weischenberg et al. (2006b: 227–228) for the 2005 study.

In both surveys, journalists were asked to place their audiences on a left–right scale from 1 (politically left) to 5 (politically right). In 1993, journalists were asked to judge to what extent 'the audience [which they reach] is …'; in 2005, journalists were asked to judge to what extent 'my audience is …'. This variable is the main variable of interest in the following analyses. To be precise in the presentation of the results, we will speak of judgements of the *audience* when referring to these data. The datasets also include information on the respondents' (journalists') political self-placement,

needed to address H2. In 1993, journalists were asked to pick a political leaning from a list ranging from 'communist' via 'liberal' to 'national-democratic' ('Independent of the political stance of your company, where do you rank yourself politically?'). This variable is treated as a continuous variable. In 2005, journalists were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 (politically left) to 100 (politically right) ('And your own political stance: Please also judge it on the scale from 1 to 100, where the number 1 stands for 'politically left' and the number 100 for 'politically right'). The left–right variables for journalists' judgement of audiences and self-placement were rescaled to reach from 0 to 1. To capture a possible non-linear relationship, a squared term of this variable will be included in the analysis.

For the surveyed journalists we know whether they work in East or West Germany (relevant for H3). For the 2005 study, we also know in which federal state journalists primarily work. This variable was recoded, assigning '1' to journalists primarily working in states with a left-leaning government (Social democrats, Greens), '2' to journalists primarily working in states with a mixed government (including one case of Social democrats + Liberals/FDP government, and one case of the change from a left-leaning to a right-leaning government during data collection), and '3' to journalists primarily working in states with a right-leaning government (Conservatives/CDU + CSU, Liberals/FDP).

To address H4 we need information on journalists' interactions with their audiences. In the 1993 study, respondents were asked whether they received reactions from "readers/listeners/viewers" in the past 2 weeks (yes/no). In the 2005 study, an additional measurement was included, which will be analysed here. Respondents were asked how they "inform themselves about their audience" (no/yes/don't know/no response). Two variables were computed based on the answers given. One variable covers informal sources, computed as an additive index: reactions directly from the audience (e.g., letters to the editor), private contacts with audience members, information about the audience provided by colleagues, contacts in public, and internet/discussion forums. The second variable is dichotomous and covers a formal source, audience and opinion research.

Inspired by previous research (Beckers et al. 2021; Martin et al. 1972), the analyses include a number of control variables: years of experience, education, gender, and media type. The number of interviewees was similar in both studies. In the 1993 study, the number was 1,498; in the 2005 follow-up 1,536 journalists participated.

Surveys of the public

To compare journalists' judgements with self-reported audience opinions, two election surveys will be used. The first survey was fielded as a cross-sectional survey following the 1994 federal elections (ZUMA Mannheim et al. 2012). Given that the main variable of interest is left–right placement (which is not assumed to be highly fluctuating), the temporal distance between the surveys of the journalists in 1993 and the public in 1994 most presumably is of no major concern. The second survey was fielded as pre-/post-election panel survey on the 2005 federal elections (Schmitt-Beck and Faas 2009). Of this panel, the pre-election wave will be utilized.

The most relevant question to be used from both surveys is the left–right self-perception of the public. In 1994, respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 (left) to 10 (right): '"Many people use the terms "left" and "right" when labelling different political stances. […] When considering your own political views, where do you rank these on this scale? Please tick one of the boxes below.' In 2005, respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 (left) to 11 (right): 'In politics, one often speaks of "left" and "right". We would like to know from you whether you rank yourself as more to the left or to the right. Please again use the scale from 1 to 11. […]'. Both variables were rescaled to 0 to 1, excluding missing values and don't-knows.

The surveys also covered questions on media use during the election campaigns. In 1993, respondents were asked how often they read the politics section in daily newspapers[1]. Respondents were also asked how often they watched news on public-service television (ARD, ZDF) and commercial television (SAT.1, RTL). The answers to these questions were combined in three categories (daily newspapers, public-service television, and commercial television) and those respondents using these media types at least 1 day a week are included for this sub-group analysis. In the 2005 survey, respondents were asked which sources they used 'in the past week'. Four different types of media are included in the analyses: regional/local newspapers; cross-regional newspapers[2]; public-service television news (ARD, ZDF); commercial television news (e.g., RTL). In this subgroup analysis, respondents using a media source at least 1 day in the past week were included. For each respondent it is also known in which federal state they lived. The total number of respondents was N = 2,046 for the 1994 survey and N = 3,583 for the 2005 survey.

Results

In their study of Flemish journalists, Beckers et al. (2021) found, as mentioned, that '[j]ournalists systematically think the public is more conservative than it in reality is' (p. 254). The results of German survey data show the same picture (Figure 1). In 1993, journalists judged audience opinion to be right-leaning. When the public was asked to place itself on the left–right scale in the following year, it on average placed itself to the left of the political centre. The scale used in the 1994 election survey (going from 1 to 10) may by its design have pushed responses towards the left side of the scale. The value 5 may mistakenly have been interpreted as a middle category and social desirability may have pushed German respondents to the left (see Zuell and Scholz 2016). Still, it is evident that audience opinion is judged to be substantially further to the right, by journalists, than the public placed itself ($t = 11.07$; $P < .001$). The same picture emerges when taking a closer look at subroups, i.e. the audiences of public-service television news, commercial television news, and daily newspapers. Journalists consistently and significantly judge audiences further to the right than the audiences of these media types locate themselves.

The results for 2005 point in the same direction, though somewhat less pronounced. On average, journalists judge their audiences to be centrist (.50), while the public on average places itself (again) to the left of the political centre (.45). The difference is

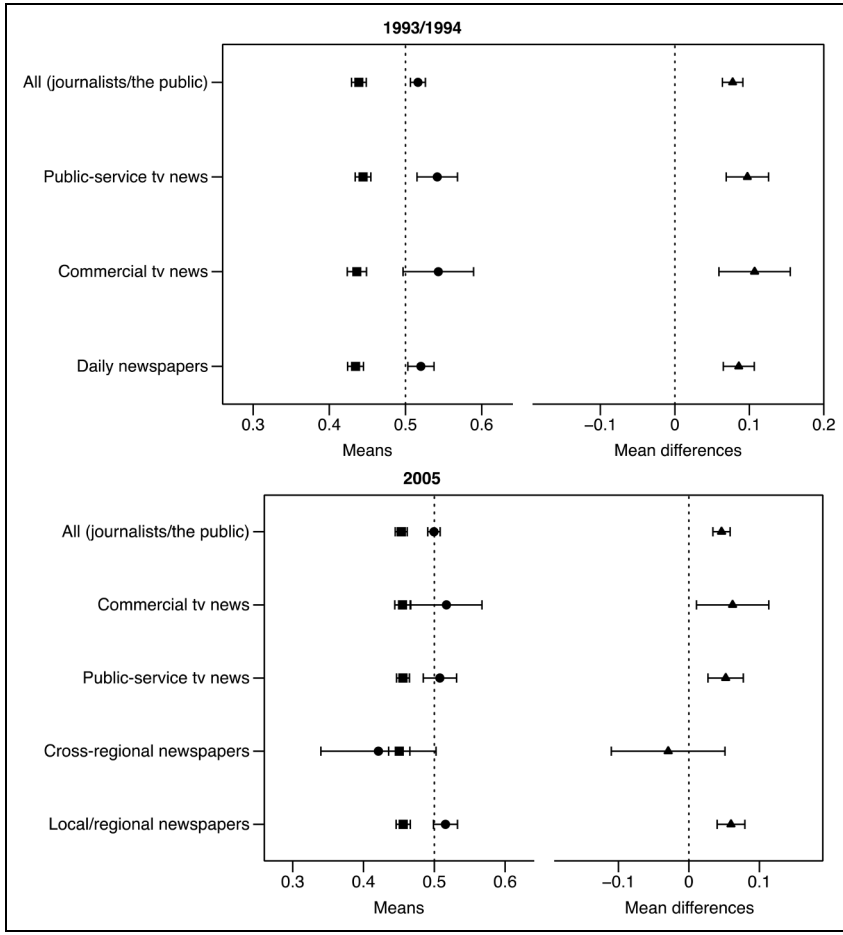

Figure 1. Left–right audience judgements by journalists (circle) and self-placement of the public (square), with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Notes: The number of respondents varies across categories. Journalists in 1993 (from top to bottom): 1,471; 126; 58; 532; the public in 1994: 1,911; 1,699; 1,146; 1,632. Journalists in 2005: 1,499; 44; 159; 38; 444; the public in 2005: 3,452; 2,104; 3,004; 1,066; 2,413. Data are not weighted.

significant ($t = 7.44$; $P < .001$). For three of the four subgroups, we also see significant misjudgements. Commercial television news, public-service television news and local/regional newspaper audiences are judged significantly further to the right than they locate themselves (commercial television news: $t = 2.43$; $P = .019$; public-service television news: $t = 4.09$; $P < .001$; local/regional newspapers: $t = 5.96$; $P < .001$). There are no significant misjudgements by journalists for cross-regional newspapers. It is important to note that the subgroups for the journalist survey are rather small (which also is evident from the larger confidence intervals shown in Figure 1). In

Table 1. Characteristics of Journalists and Their Left–Right Judgements of Audiences (Linear Regression Analyses).

	Journalists' left–right judgements of audiences	
	1993	2005
Journalists' left–right self-placement (H2)		
Left–right scale	.561**	.358**
Left–right scale^2	−.330**	−.215*
Region (H3)		
East (ref.)	–	–
West	.045**	.074**
Left–state govt. (ref.)	–	–
Mixed–state govt.	–	.046**
Right–state govt.	–	.058**
Audience input (H4)		
Feedback	−.012	−.011
Audience research	–	.011
Experience (years)	−.001*	<.001
Female	−.027*	−.009
Constant	.250**	.316**
R^2	.089	.084
N	1,280	1,466

N: * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$. Additional control variables included in the analyses: education and media type. Data are not weighted.

any case, the results provide support for H1: German journalists judge audience opinion to be further to the right than the public places itself.

What drives journalists' judgements of their audiences' political leaning? Three drivers have been theorised: journalists own political stance (H2), region (H3), and journalists' interaction with audiences (H4). Results from two linear regressions investigating these hypotheses are shown in Table 1. Regarding H2 (journalists' own political stance), the results from both regressions reveal a similar picture. To get a better sense of the results reported in Table 1, predicted values are depicted in Figure 2(a,b).

Figure 2 reveals several interesting findings. At first sight, the figure confirms the finding that more right-leaning journalists perceive their audience as leaning more to the right. Note, that only a minority of journalists position themselves at the extreme left (or the extreme right), which also is indicated by the large confidence intervals at both ends of the scale). Instead, the majority of journalists positions itself centre-left. From Figure 2 therefore, it also follows that the majority of journalists perceives the audience as more right leaning than they themselves are (which they do until the value on the *x*-axis exceeds the corresponding value on the *y*-axis).

The interpretation of Figure 2 also recalls that the mean left–right position of all respondents in 1993 was ∼.44 and in 2005 was ∼.45 (shown in Figure 1).

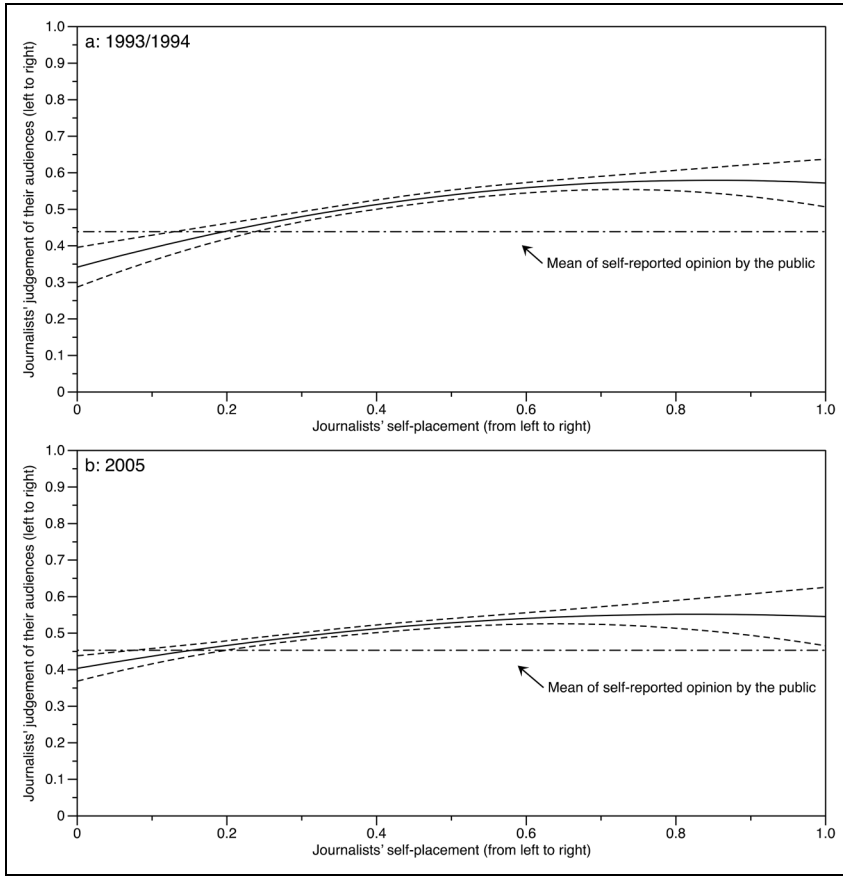

Figure 2. Relationship between journalists' left–right self-placement (*x*-axis) and their left-right judgement of their audiences (*y*-axis).
Note: Dashed lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Estimates are based on the regression results reported in Table 1.

Therefore, it also becomes evident from Figure 2 that the majority of journalists perceive their audiences as further to the right than the public sees itself. Summing up the findings regarding H2, it was found that the majority of journalists judge their audiences to be more right leaning than they themselves are. There also appears to be a decreasing tendency to do so the further to the right journalists lean. Although, as the squared terms in Table 1 (1993: $t = -2.75$, $P = .006$; 2005: $t = -1.99$, $P = .046$) and the depiction in Figure 2 reveal the relationships are concave to a certain extent only. In any case, support for H2 is found.

Next, we consider the region in which journalists are based (H3). For both 1993 and 2005, it was found that journalists based in West Germany tend to judge their

audiences as further to the right than journalists based in East Germany (see Table 1). This finding is plausible considering prior research on differences between East and West Germany, and the estimated differences between East and West Germany are also reflected in public opinion survey data.[3]

For the 2005 data, it also was possible to include information on the political stance of the governments of the federal states in which journalists were based. The results reported in Table 1 show that journalists in states with a left-leaning government judge their audiences to be more left leaning, as expected. Rearranging the reference category reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between mean judgements made by journalists in states with mixed governments and journalists in states with right-leaning governments ($t = .88$; $P = .380$). In substantial terms, the results indicate that journalists in states governed by right-leaning governments judge their audiences to be .058 points more right leaning than journalists in states with left-leaning governments. According to the survey data, the difference between states with a right-leaning and a left-leaning government is .004 points only ($t = .42$; $P = .676$).[4]

In short, the overall conclusion is that we find support for H3, journalists working in regions governed by left-leaning governments judge their audience further to the left than journalists working in regions governed by right-leaning governments, and we find the expected difference between East and West Germany. Moreover, for 2005 we find that a difference in judgements driven by the colour of the government is larger than the difference between states found in public opinion poll data.

As a fourth hypothesis, it was suggested that feedback from the audience may push the judgement towards the right (H4). The results shown in Table 1 do not provide indications of such a relationship. It is not the case that journalists who report interactions with audience members perceive their audience as leaning more to the right, neither in 1993 nor in 2005. Remember, that the information available tells us whether (1993) or how many types of feedback occur (2005), but not the individual frequency with which they occur, or their actual content. In any case, the analysis does not reveal support for the final hypothesis (H4) that audience feedback pushes judgements to the right (see also the appendix).

Finally, in 1993, there appears to be a tendency for journalists with more years of work experience judging their audience to be leaning less to the right. This relationship is not found for 2005 (for further analyses on the role of experience see also Beckers et al. 2021; Martin et al. 1972). Another difference between 1993 and 2005 reported in Table 1 is that in 1993 female journalists judged their audience to be leaning less to the right (compared to their male colleagues), but this gender difference is not found in the 2005 data.

Discussion

As stated in the introduction, this paper was triggered by a puzzle: Why do journalists more often portray ordinary citizens expressing right-leaning opinions than ordinary citizens with left-leaning ones? This paper does not provide a definitive answer to this question, but it adds to an emerging debate on the drivers of this right-leaning

bias in media content. Journalists perceive their audiences as more right-leaning than the public places itself. From a journalism practice point of view, it could be argued that the present study is of lesser relevance given that it focused on ideological left–right judgements and self-placement. News media reporting presumably rarely deals with politics on this aggregate level, but more often with specific political issues. Yet, Beckers et al. (2021) and Martin et al. (1972) studied specific issues and their findings are similar to the patterns reported here.

On the one hand, the consistency of these findings across studies is striking when considering that impartiality and factualness of news reporting are frequently discussed hot topics and of central concern to many media practitioners (e.g., Cushion and Thomas 2018; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Tuchman 1972). Moreover, journalists also report that knowing public opinion and audience feedback are important for them (Donsbach 1983; Weischenberg et al. 2006b). Yet, on the other hand, the findings are in line with results reported on politicians. Research on political elites reported a picture similar to the one painted of journalists here: Politicians and their employees overestimate public support for right-wing policies or preferences of the better-off (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Pereira 2021; see also Sevenans et al. 2021) and attempts to correct misperceptions amongst political elites are, so far, not overly encouraging (Kalla and Porter 2021; Pereira 2021).

Building on this prior research—Beckers et al. (2021) in particular—this paper therefore also presented a systematic discussion of the drivers of journalists' judgements of their audiences' political stances. Following the hypothesis that journalists judge audience opinion to be further to the right than the audience locates itself, the second hypothesis suggested that journalists abductively base their judgement of audience opinion on their own left–right stance assuming that they themselves are more left-leaning than their audiences. In line with this assumption, the analyses showed that most journalists judged their audiences to be more right-leaning than themselves, but with a decreasing tendency the further right-leaning journalists are. The third hypothesis suggested that journalists working in regions with a right-leaning government and in West Germany deductively judge their audiences to be more right-leaning. This hypothesis is supported. Finally, a fourth hypothesis stated that journalists will infer audience left–right placement from feedback from audience members, pushing judgements to the right. This assumption was not corroborated by the results (see also the appendix).

As mentioned, the available information on audience feedback tell us whether (1993) or how many types of feedback occur (2005), but neither the individual frequency with which they occur nor their contents. Indeed, the analyses presented in this paper have limitations. The analyses are based on secondary data use. A common challenge of secondary data use of several data sources is whether variables are scaled similarly across studies. In particular, the left–right variables have been scaled differently. Therefore, the variables have been rescaled from 0 (left) to 1 (right). The pros and cons of using different scales when measuring left–right placement have been discussed in prior research (Kroh 2007; Zuell and Scholz 2016). For the 1993 journalist data, there is the particular challenge that journalists' self-placement was measured

using a list ranging from 'communist' via 'liberal' to 'national-democratic', rather than a truly continuous left–right scale. Overall, it is notable that the results from both 1993/1994 and 2005 appear to tell similar stories, despite these differences in measurement. Also, prior research documented some differences in response behaviour depending on the construction of the left–right scales in East and West Germany (Weber 2011). In this vein, one suggestion for future research therefore is investigating how the construction of scales affects *journalists'* judgments of others' opinions.

Another limitation is that the journalist surveys asked journalists about *their* audiences. The answers were matched with election surveys of public opinion. It was possible to conduct subgroup analysis of the public by looking at groups using specific types of media, but a more fine-grained matching of journalists' judgements and audience data of course would have been preferable (e.g., Martin et al. 1972).

A third limitation of the data used is their age. They have been gathered before social media became a central player in journalism and political communication. This limitation of the data is important to consider regarding audience feedback. Beckers et al. (2021) discuss that the prevalence of right-leaning expressions on social media in part may explain why journalists judge public opinion to be more right leaning than it actually is. Moreover, research has documented that journalists rely on social media in their reporting of 'public' opinion despite being aware of the unrepresentativeness of social media commentary (McGregor 2019). Hence, future studies on journalists' judgements of public opinion need to consider social media in more detail.

In addition, the political landscape in Germany is changing. Right-wing and right-extremist movements such as PEGIDA ('Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes') originated from East Germany and the party Alternative for Germany (AfD) is particularly successful in East Germany (see e.g., Pesthy et al. 2021). These developments likely influence how journalists—and anyone else, for that matter—perceive the left–right placement of the public in East German states. The emergence of PEGIDA and the AfD may also influence survey response behaviour. Given Germany's history, it may be that some German respondents used to locating themselves further to the left than they truly felt, that is, that their response behaviour was, to some extent, driven by social desirability (see also Zuell and Scholz 2016).[5] Finally, although the paper speaks of 'drivers' of journalists' judgements, the analyses presented are based on cross-sectional data, which limits the extent to which one can be certain about causal relationships beyond theoretical reasoning. And, while we first establish that journalists indeed misjudge the political stance of their audience, our subsequent models, given the data available to us, explain the drivers behind journalists' judgement of their audiences' political position, not the degree of bias or misjudgements itself.

Despite these limitations, the data come with the advantage of enabling new detailed analyses illuminating our understanding of how journalists judge public opinion and their audience. This paper was driven by the hope to make a small, but relevant contribution to the debate on journalists' judgements. Given the limitations of the data also cited above, the main contribution lies in extending the discussion of the possible drivers of journalists' misjudgements. Future studies are needed to understand in

more detail the antecedents and consequences of journalists' distorted perceptions of public opinion. So far, only few studies have systematically investigated journalists' judgements of public opinion, and clearly many more questions still need to be answered. Future studies should address the question of the extent journalists' misjudgements drive bias in the voices of public opinion appearing in the news (cf. Martin et al. 1972)—and how this bias could feed into a reinforcing spiral and result in even greater bias in journalists' perceptions of their audience and so forth. As noted above, there is good reason to believe that it is a right-leaning bias in journalists' judgements of audience opinion that drives a right-leaning bias in media depictions of public opinion as more right leaning than it in fact is. Extending prior bias studies asking journalists to pick headlines from a defined pool of headlines (Donsbach and Patterson 2004), one approach could be asking journalists to select candidates to be interviewed from a defined pool of exemplars. In this overall context, the current study provides further support for the argument that journalists misjudge their audiences' political stance; however, the list of factors which drive such audience judgements, at this point still remains far from complete.

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Notes

1. The question was asked in a way excluding the only major German tabloid, the BILD-Zeitung. An additional question specifically on the BILD-Zeitung was not included in the analyses (see also the following note).
2. Note that Germany has no tradition of nationwide newspapers, though some cross-regional papers are available across the country. Even the major German tabloid, the BILD-Zeitung, is published in regionalized versions (the BILD-Zeitung was measured as a separate item in the survey, but not included in the analyses of the 2005 data, which also improves the comparability with the 1994 data).

3. For 1994, the East–West difference is .044 (t=4.47; P<.001); for 2005, the East–West difference is .069 (t=6.26; P<.001) (see also Hebenstreit 2020; Rainer et al. 2018). Note also that the results seem to suggest that the long-term East–West divide trumps the current colour of the regional government, at least in 1993 when the majority of East German state governments was in fact right-leaning, which was not the case in West Germany. For 2005, both the East–West divide and the colour of the regional government are captured separately by the included variables. We further elaborate on the East-West difference and more recent developments in German politics in the discussion section.
4. A more detailed analysis reveals that the public residing in states grouped in the political middle category is more left-leaning than the public in states governed by right-leaning governments and the public in states governed by left-leaning governments. The differences in means between these three groups never exceeds .032 points, however.
5. We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this question.

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Appendix

The results presented in this paper are based on unweighted data. Below, the same analyses (as reported in Figure 1 and Table 1) are presented with weighted data. Using the weights included in the datasets does not lead to major differences. For 1993, the coefficient for audience feedback (yes/no) becomes statistically significant ($z = -1.97$, $P = .049$). The finding suggests that feedback from the audience leads to judging the audience as *less* right-leaning with .022 points in 1993, contrary to hypothesized direction, adding to the conclusion that no support for H4 is found. For the 2005 data, no such change in significance levels is found. The role of audience feedback for journalists' judgements needs more extensive study, in particular because of the advent of social media, as discussed in the concluding section.

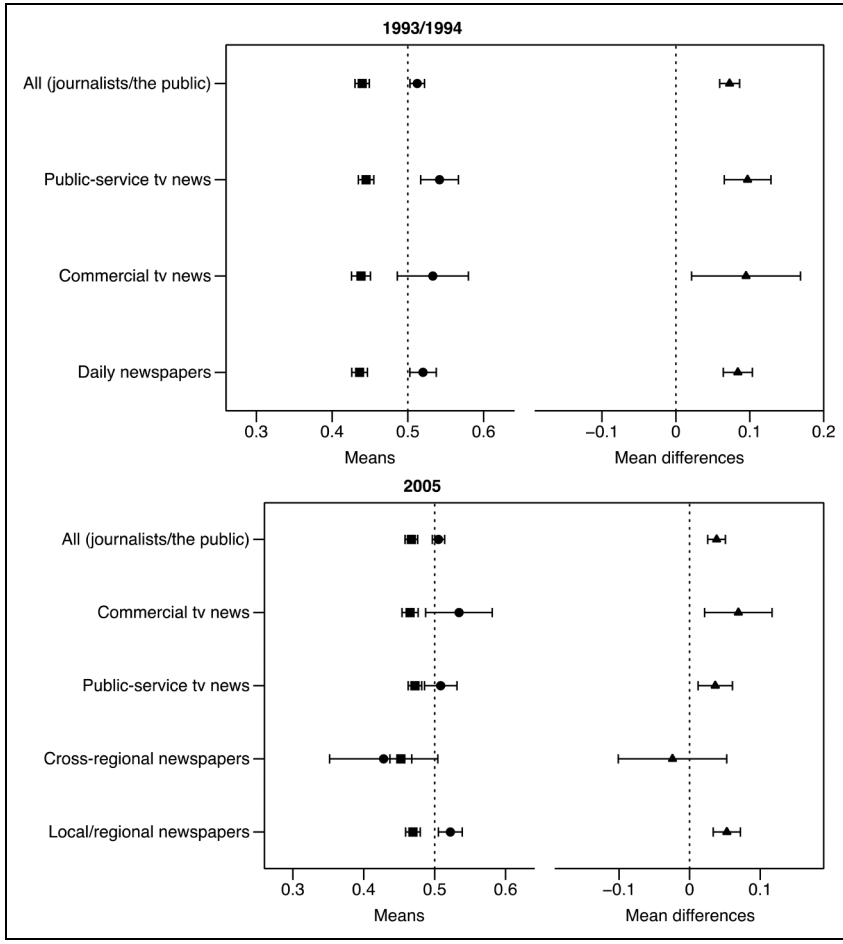

Figure A1. Left–right audience judgement by journalists (circle) and self-placement of the public (square), with 95 percent confidence intervals.
Notes: The number of respondents varies across categories. Journalists in 1993 (from top to bottom without weights): 1,471; 126; 58; 532; the public in 1994: 1,911; 1,699; 1,146; 1,632. Journalists in 2005: 1,499; 44; 159; 38; 444; the public in 2005: 3,452; 2,104; 3,004; 1,066; 2,413. Data are weighted.

Table A1. Characteristics of Journalists and Their Left–Right Judgements of Audiences (Linear Regression Analyses).

	Journalists' left–right judgements of audiences	
	1993	2005
Journalists' left–right self-placement (H2)		
Left–right scale	.657**	.448**
Left–right scale^2	−.450**	−.386**
Region (H3)		
East (ref.)	–	–
West	.045**	.073**
Left–state govt. (ref.)	–	–
Mixed–state govt.	–	.047**
Right–state govt.	–	.061**
Audience input (H4)		
Feedback	−.022*	−.010
Audience research	-	.010
Experience (years)	−.001*	<.001
Female	−.037**	−.012
Constant	.319**	.327**
R^2	.106	.087
N	1,280	1,466

N: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Additional control variables included in the analyses: education and media type. Data are weighted.