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RIGHT-WING BIAS IN JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

How journalists perceive public opinion is important in democracies. These perceptions help journalists to construct meaningful stories and might influence news content. However, little is known about how accurate journalists' perceptions of public opinion actually are. Using a survey with Belgian (Flemish) political journalists, we analyze their perceptions of public opinion on concrete policy proposals, next to their general political leaning. We combine the estimates from journalists with evidence about 'real' public opinion, collected through a parallel citizen survey. Further, our quantitative survey results are complemented with qualitative explanations offered by journalists themselves. We find that the surveyed political journalists perceive their outlets' audiences' political leaning as more right-wing than their own. Regarding specific policy issues, the political journalists perceive the public almost consistently as being more right-wing than they actually are. Right-wing journalists are better at correctly assessing public opinion. Moreover, the more experienced journalists are, the smaller the right-wing bias in their estimations. Journalists seem to be well aware of their own center-left leaning and overcompensate for, rather than project, their own leaning in their assessment of public opinion. In all, our study shows that looking into journalists' public opinion perceptions is a relevant and promising research track.

KEYWORDS

Bias; Journalist Survey; Perceived Public Opinion; Political Journalists; Political Leaning

To inform their audience adequately, journalists need to understand what their audience thinks; this allows them to construct meaningful news stories. Knowledge of public opinion helps them build news that is of interest to their audience and that represents (their perception of) public opinion. Journalists furthermore need public opinion information to provide a mirror to citizens and defend the legitimacy of their reporting (Silverstone, 2013). Journalists' perceptions of the public have consequences for the news they produce. There is ample evidence that journalists rely on their perception of public opinion on a specific issue when producing news on the issue. Gingras and Carrier's (1996) interviews with Canadian journalists show that a majority of them considered information about public opinion central to their construction of the news. Behavioral studies find that journalists adapt the content of their coverage to their image of public opinion. There is an impact of journalists' audience perceptions on the sources interviewed, the framing of news items, the specific events that are covered in the news, and on how they report on public opinion itself (Entman & Paletz, 1981; Hoewe, 2016; King & Schudson, 1995; Matthews & Al Habsi, 2018). One of the most clear cut examples of conventional journalistic wisdom contradicting actual public opinion is King and Schudson's (1995) account of how President Reagan was systematically lauded in the media by journalists for his popularity despite consistently low approval scores in the polls. Entman and Paletz (1981) also found journalists to rather follow their own perceptions instead of more valid poll results. In a more recent study, Hoewe (2016) found that the more optimistic individual journalists were about public opinion, the more they reported on it and gave the word to ordinary citizens.

Despite the fact that journalists' perceptions of public opinion clearly matter, we know little about them. Are journalists biased in their perception of what the public thinks about issues? Although essential for journalists, making accurate public opinion estimates is a difficult task for every human (Herbst, 1998; Key, 1961). To this point, no study has analyzed to what extent journalists' estimates of public opinion are actually accurate. Previous research focusing on journalists' general perceptions of public opinion only considered the aggregate level. However, some individual journalists may have a better feel for public opinion than others. We know close to nothing about whether individual characteristics of journalists influence their estimates of public opinion. Since news items are mostly made by individual journalists, it is likely that their personal perceptions of public opinion influence news coverage. Therefore, it appears crucial to take the research down to the individual level. Previous studies found, for instance, that journalists generally define themselves as being politically left-leaning. Does their left-leaning positioning affect their judgment of what the public thinks? And, as a consequence, do right-leaning journalists know better what the public thinks? At this stage, we do not know.

This study sets out to provide preliminary answers to these questions. It specifically focuses on political journalists, for whom a correct estimation of public opinion appears most pertinent and

possibly consequential. Concretely, we surveyed 148 Belgian (Flemish) political journalists, asking them to assess the political orientation of their outlet's audience and general public opinion on eight concrete policy proposals. We combine this journalistic evidence with evidence about 'real' public opinion collected by means of a survey on a sample of Belgian (Flemish) citizens with regard to their political orientation and their opinion on the same eight policy proposals. This allows us to assess the accuracy of public opinion judgments by Belgian journalists, the direction of a possible bias in their judgments, and the variation in accuracy and bias across individual journalists. Finally, our quantitative survey results are complemented with qualitative explanations for the estimation 'errors' journalists make offered by themselves in short interviews.

Journalists' Political Leaning and Their Perception of their Audiences

The general political leaning of journalists is well-researched. It is often connected to discussions about media bias and the democratic role of the news media. Recently, the debate was fueled again as the media were blamed for being too liberal and distant from ordinary citizens thus failing to predict political outcomes such as Brexit and the election of Trump (Beckett, 2016; Boydston & Van Aelst, 2018; Perryman, 2019; Smarsh, 2016; Zelizer, 2018). A large body of research investigates the partisan leanings of journalists across countries and media contexts. This work almost consistently finds that journalists, compared to the general population, are situated more on the left side of the political spectrum (e.g. Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Raeymaeckers et al., 2013; Van Dalen, 2012; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2009).

However, although journalists perceive *themselves* as left-wing, studies find that they perceive the *outlet* they work for as more right-wing (or conservative) compared to themselves. Patterson and Donsbach (1996) questioned journalists in five countries (U.S., U.K., Germany, Italy, Sweden), and showed that journalists place themselves left of where they perceive their outlet's audience to be. In a more recent comparative study, Van Dalen (2012) basically comes to the same conclusion: journalists in four European countries rated the outlet they work for as being moderately right-wing.

These well-established findings from previous work lead to our first two hypotheses meant to, drawing on our recent Belgian evidence, replicate what we already know. If confirmed, we can conclude that our sample of Belgian journalists is not extraordinary when it comes to their own political leaning and their perception of their audience's political leaning. We can then build on these findings and develop novel hypotheses about journalists' biases in estimating public opinion.

H1: Political journalists have a left-leaning political orientation

H2: Political journalists perceive their outlets' audiences' political orientation as more right-leaning than their own

Accuracy and Bias in Journalists' Assessments of Public Opinion

Although we know that assessments of public opinion by journalists are consequential, our knowledge of whether those assessments are accurate or biased is extremely limited. As far as we can tell, no study measured the accuracy of journalists' public opinion perceptions. However, there is some evidence with regard to a similar 'elite' group, namely politicians. In an important study, Broockman and Skovron (2018) studied how well U.S. politicians were able to estimate public opinion on several topical political issues. Both in 2012 and 2014, politicians' beliefs were strongly biased in a right-wing direction. They believed that a much larger share of the public in their constituencies preferred conservative policies than what was actually the case, and this finding applied to both Republicans and Democrats. These scholars argue this is because the 'information environment', in which they operate is dominated by conservative voices. Conservative citizens, they show, are much more active in getting their voice heard and in spreading their message in the public realm than their liberal counterparts. Several studies—mostly in the U.S. context—have indeed found that right-wing conservative groups and voters take on a more active role in society than liberal, left-wing groups (Goss, 2010; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). Political journalists, who operate in the same public domain as politicians, may be influenced by the same information environment. We thus expect them to suffer from similar biases in their judgment of public opinion. Our study, however, deals with Belgian (Flemish) journalists instead of U.S. journalists. The question remains to what extent the information environment is equally tilted in a right-leaning direction in Belgium. Though we cannot be certain, we believe it is reasonable to assume that we will find the same right-wing bias in public opinion perceptions by Belgian journalists, considering the recent electoral successes of right-wing parties and the presence of a center-right government during the study.

H3: Political journalists' perceptions of public opinion have a right-wing bias

Hypothesis three related to an overall perception bias among journalists in a conservative direction. Yet, we also expect there to be differences across journalists. Gans (p. 237) found that journalists mostly project their self-image on their perceived audience, taking the congruence of their own and the audience's attitudes for granted. In other words, journalists project their own opinion on their perception of their audience. Based on psychological research, one would expect this to be the case indeed. There is a quasi-general human tendency to overestimate popular support for one's own

position (Allport, 1924; Mullen & Goethals, 1990). Patterson and Donsbach (1996) found a modest correlation, across countries and news outlets, between journalists' own opinion on issues and how newsworthy they perceived the issues to be. Martin, O'Keefe, and Nayman (1972) studied the agreement between journalists' own positions regarding specific policy issues and their perceptions of their audience; journalists overestimated the similarity between the public and their own opinions. In sum, this work suggests that social projection will occur.

H4: Political journalists' perceptions of public opinion are affected by their own opinions

A core task of journalists is to adequately assess and represent public opinion in the news. Over the course of their professional life, journalists come into contact with many sorts of public opinion about many issues and via many different channels. We think there are reasons to expect that correctly assessing public opinion is something that characterizes in particular experienced journalists. Little research exists about the role of professional experience in the quality of journalism (see for example Nikunen, 2014), but we can still expect that more experienced journalists are better at assessing public opinion. Two mechanisms may bring about the association: learning and selection. First, experienced journalists have simply learned to make correct appraisals of public opinion. As knowing public opinion is important for journalists to do their job properly, they learn how to do it over the years. They build diverse networks, for example, that allow them to assess what the public thinks; they come to trust more reliable sources of public opinion and discard the less reliable one (such as social media), they have experienced that the opinions of their personal environment are not representative of what the people think, or they may have come to realize that public opinion as a whole tends to be rather stable (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). Previous research found more experienced journalists to have better relations and information at the policy level. Journalists establish personal relationships with civil society actors and politicians, enabling them to have better access to information on public opinion (Davis, 2009). Second, since getting it right is important, selection may play a role as well. Among the younger journalists, those who do not have the skills or the talent to sense what the people want are selected away while those who appear to be good public opinion guessers are kept and can stay long enough in the profession to become experienced. Yet, the opposite argument could be made as well: the longer someone works as a journalist the more (s)he gets entrenched in the journalism industry, the more one's social circles are populated by other journalists; this should then lead to more accurate guesses by junior journalists. Yet, we believe that the first argument about learning and selection is more compelling and expect journalistic seniority to positively affect accuracy.

H5: Experienced journalists' perceptions of public opinion are more accurate than those of less experienced journalists.

Methodology

JOURNALIST SURVEY — Our design consists of two surveys with overlapping questions: a survey among Belgian (Flemish) political journalists and a parallel survey with a random sample of Belgians (Flemings). We departed from a list of political journalists drawn from the database of the Flemish journalist association (*Vlaamse Vereniging voor Journalisten*), supplemented with journalists found in different news media. The survey ran from June 19th till October 12th 2018. 296 Journalists were contacted through email and requested to complete the questionnaire online. Those who did not respond to the email were contacted by phone asking them to participate. The response rate was 57%: 168 journalists completed the survey. Since we started from a list that used a broad definition of political journalists (including those that report on societal issues), we wanted to exclude journalists that only occasionally report on (national) political matters. We operationalized this by asking the respondents how many of the last 10 news reports they made contained either politicians or political parties. If respondents indicated that in three or more of their last ten reports such actors were mentioned, we considered them as being political journalists. This leaves 148 political journalists for our analyses. Note that in the multivariate models below, we control for the share of political reports in a respondent's news production.

After measuring socio-demographics such as age (in years) and gender (1 = male, 2 = female), we questioned the journalists about their years of experience as a journalists and the news outlet they work for. The majority of journalists were male (81%) and they averaged 42 years ($M = 42.4$, $SD = 11.5$), ranging from 25 till 71. On average, journalists had 18 years of experience as a journalist ($M = 17.9$, $SD = 10.3$), with a minimum of three years and a maximum of 47. The majority of journalists worked as regular reporters for (online and offline) print media (49%), followed by television and radio (34%), magazines (9%) and news agencies (8%). It is difficult to estimate conclusively whether our survey of 148 political journalists is representative of all Belgian (Flemish) political journalists since a good baseline measure of the population is nonexistent. Yet, circumstantial evidence from a large, authoritative survey of Belgian (Flemish) journalists (all journalists, not only political journalists) from 2018 (for the descriptive report of the study, see: Van Leuven et al., 2018) shows that our sample is not far off the mark in terms of gender (19% female (our sample of political journalists) vs. 31.4% female (all journalists)), mean age (42 years old (our sample) vs. 48 years old (all journalists)), and average seniority (18 years (our sample) vs. 21 years (all journalists)). So, all in all, we believe our sample is plausibly more or less representative for the population of Flemish political journalists.

The journalists were asked about their own political leaning: *In politics, people sometimes talk of “left” and “right”. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means left and 10 means right? Next, we asked them about the leaning of the audience of their outlet: Now think about the audience of your medium. Can you tell us whether you think they are representative of the Flemish population as a whole when it comes to their political views? Please indicate where you think the audience of your medium can be placed on a scale from 0 (audience is much more left wing) over 5 (audience is representative) to 10 (audience is much more right wing)?*”. The largest part of our sample of political journalists worked for mainstream, national media¹. None of the journalist worked for partisan or politicized media (examples of smaller media are regional broadcasters or financial broadcasters/newspapers). This increases the chance that journalists were thinking about a similar ‘audience’ when making their estimations. In Belgium (Flanders), mainstream media are no longer politicized and all more or less occupy a political middle position (just like citizens do) (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy & Nielsen, 2018).

The main dependent variable of this study is journalists’ public opinion perception with regard to specific policy issues. Here, the journalists were asked to think about the entire Flemish population. Journalists were presented with eight different policy statements, of which five were situated on the left-right cleavage. The meaning of left-right has evolved over the years and political scientists now distinguish two dimensions: a socio-economic and a socio-cultural left-right dimension (see among others: Kriesi et al., 2012). The socio-economic dimension deals with equality, redistribution, labor, and state intervention; the statements that *Company cars should be more heavily taxed*, *The right to strike should be restricted*, and *The retirement age may not exceed 67 years* clearly relate to those dimensions. The socio-cultural dimension refers to opinions about immigration, environment, European identity, etc.; two policy statements relate to that dimension: *In cities, the most polluting cars should be forbidden* and *Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated*. The fact that these five statements are tapping into the left-right cleavage can also be validated empirically².

Further, during the survey period, none of these policy proposals was particularly mediatized or the subject of a public controversy. For each of the policies three things were asked: (1) journalists’ own opinion, (2) their estimation of the percentage of Flemish citizens that is undecided or has no opinion about the policy, and (3) the estimation of, among those who do have an opinion, who agree with the policy proposal. We consider the answers on the second question as a measure of perceived issue salience: the more journalists think a large share of the public has no opinion, the more they consider the issue to be not salient for the public.

CITIZEN SURVEY — The citizen survey, conducted online through the research agency SSI in the first half of 2018, counted 1,192 Belgian (Flemish) respondents. The sample was representative for age ($M =$

55.8, $SD = 14.2$, min = 19, max = 93), gender (50% female), and level of education (scale from 1 to 5, $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.8$). As this is a political survey, we asked respondents for their party vote at the last elections and weighed the dataset for that. As the survey was parallel to the one for journalists, citizens' own political leaning was asked in a similar manner as the journalists (see above). Moreover, they were exposed to the same eight policy statements as the journalists and had to indicate to what extent they (dis)agreed with the policy proposal or were undecided/had no opinion. Although the citizen survey data we work with appear to be valid and representative, we performed an extra check with regard to the left-right placement of the citizens in our sample and compared with another study conducted on Belgian (Flemish) citizens at about the same time, being the *RepResent* study where more than 2,000 citizens got the exact same question. Note that this study was carried out online as well but by a different polling agency and, thus, drawing on a different pool of potential respondents (TNS-Kantar). Comparison revealed that the differences between the two samples are really small³. This increases confidence in the citizen data we employ in the present study.

Results

Are journalists left or right? In **Figure 1** the black bars show that the journalists place themselves at the center-left of the political spectrum, which is in line with the literature and H1. The average journalist placed him/herself at 4.3 ($SD = 1.5$) on the 11-point left-right scale. As five is the center of the scale, this means that the average journalist places him/herself just left of the center. It is fair to say that the journalists we surveyed are left-leaning but by no means left-wing.

[Insert Figure 1 around here]

H2 held that journalists would perceive their outlet's audience as more right-wing than they themselves are. The lighter-grey bars in **Figure 1** indicate the perception of journalists of the political leaning of their audience. Comparing both bars, we see that journalists, as expected by the hypothesis and suggested by ample previous work, perceive the audience of the medium they work for as significantly more to the right ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.5$) than they perceived themselves ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 1.5$, $t(125) = 7.07$, $p < 0.001$). H2 gets confirmation. Are self-placement and placement of one's audience related? This is not the case ($r = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$). Journalists do not seem to perceive a link between their own general political leaning and that of their outlet's audience. They do not seem to believe that left-leaning journalists work for left-leaning outlets or vice versa.

We now know that, in terms of general political orientation, journalists are center-left while they perceive their audience to be more on the right side of the political spectrum. These findings

replicate earlier work and show that the Belgian journalists in our sample ‘behave’ very similarly to what we know about journalists in other countries. But what about public opinion perceptions on specific policy issues? Do we see the same right-wing perception of public opinion there as well? We compare journalists’ perceptions with regard to the five policy proposals with left-right content (the higher the agreement score, the more leftist the viewpoint is) with the actual opinions of the general public (i.e. the entire Flemish population). **Table 1** shows that journalists overestimate support for right-wing positions on average by between 17.6 and 21.6 percentage points. Only with regard to the third statement (right to strike) are journalists correct when they estimate that the population is strongly divided about the issue, and we see a smaller deviation (and if there is one, it is rather in the left-wing instead of in the right-wing direction). But on all four other issues, the error is quite potent in the right-wing direction. It thus seems that journalists’ perceptions of public opinion are clearly biased towards the right, consistent with H3.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

To further explore just how prevalent the right-wing errors journalists make are, **Table 2** presents evidence about the share of journalists making a left- or right-wing error for each of the five left-right statements. The percentage of journalists giving a correct estimate (maximum two percent off) is also displayed. For all statements (except the third) a sometimes overwhelming majority of journalists overestimates the share of right-leaning citizens. It is thus not the case that a small group of journalists makes large mistakes pulling the average in that direction; journalists in general and systematically make the same error. Our support for H3 has further gained confidence.

[Insert Table 2 around here]

H4 states that journalists would project their own opinion with regard to policies onto the public as a whole. In operational terms, those who hold right-leaning preferences themselves should even more erroneously overestimate the degree to which the public has a right-wing position than those who hold left-leaning preferences. In **Table 3**, journalists are split up in three groups based on their general political orientation (left 0-3, center 4-6, right 7-10). For three out of the five statements, we see that right-leaning journalists are actually *better*, not worse, at assessing public opinion when compared to left-leaning and centrist journalists. H4 is refuted. We do not observe much projection among journalists, maybe even rather the opposite: especially left-leaning journalists seem to ‘over-correct’ their tendency to project and make larger errors as a consequence. Journalists’ own leaning does

influence their public opinion judgement but rather in the opposite direction—overcorrection instead of projection—than hypothesized.

[Insert Table 3 around here]

Can we explain where the misperceptions come from? Who are the journalists who misperceive the public's position in a right-wing direction and with regard to which issues do they make those mistakes most? In the multilevel models in **Table 4** the right-wing bias in journalist public opinion perceptions is the dependent variable, a higher value meaning a larger error in the right-wing direction. We test a number of factors that may explain why such errors are made both on the level of journalists and on the level of issues.

On the issue level, we see that the skew in the public opinion distribution for a specific issue matters a great deal. For each of the five issues, we calculated Pearson's coefficient of skewness. What the results basically show is that the more public opinion on an issue is skewed in the left-wing direction, the more errors are made in the right-wing direction. Or, in other words, journalists tend to think that the public is more equally divided than it actually is. The variable is not of substantive interest, it just controls for the apparently general tendency to think that there is more division among the public than there actually is. The results are more interesting with regard to the perceived salience of an issue: it does not exert an effect on the size of the right-wing error. It is not the case that journalists are better at assessing public opinion on issues they consider to be salient for citizens.

On the journalist level, two of our hypotheses are at stake. First, the multivariate model confirms again that right-leaning journalists are better estimators, refuting H4. They make fewer right-wing estimation errors. Journalists do not seem to 'project' their own political leaning on the public. We even find the opposite to be true. Second, and fully in line with H5, the more years of experience a journalist has, the smaller the right-wing bias in his/her estimations. It thus seems that, over the years, journalists' image of public opinion becomes less biased and that they become better at assessing public opinion (or that only those who are good at it have a longer career as a journalist).

Further, the models in Table 4 also include a number of variables grasping alternative explanations of the right-wing bias in journalistic perceptions. All of them turn out not to have a significant effect. The degree to which a journalist focuses on politics—measured by the share of the last ten news items that mentioned a political actor or politician—has no effect. Journalists who are more 'political' are not better or worse than journalists who are less political. There are no gender differences either. Nor are there differences between journalists working for different media types.

[Insert Table 4 around here]

Post-hoc: What do journalists say about the right-wing bias in their perceptions?

We observed an outspoken right-wing bias in the public opinion perceptions of Belgian journalists. We expected this to be the case to some extent, but the strength and the consistency of the bias surprised us. Confronted with this puzzle, we sent an email to all participating journalists asking them to indicate possible explanations for why we found what we found: *For what reasons do journalists perceive the public as being more right-wing than is actually the case?* The answers provided by ten journalists who wrote back to us or called us via telephone certainly do not yield definite explanations of the right-wing bias in journalistic perceptions. But they open up potential avenues for a further, more systematic and quantitative examination of how journalists form perceptions, and why those perceptions are biased in a certain direction. Although the journalists that responded are diverse in terms of the media outlet they work for and include some of the most experienced and well-known political journalists of the country, we do not claim they form a representative sample.

In general, two explanations were suggested by several of the responding journalists: social media signals and, what some called, the ‘current populist opinion climate’. First of all, almost all journalists referred to the role of social media. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow ordinary citizens to react to media coverage and even engage in discussions with journalists. These online ‘information environments’ seem to have amplified the visibility of right-wing discourses. According to several journalists, there is a clear right-wing slant in readers’ comments on social media:

*‘What’s going on on Twitter’ has become a standard question at many editorial meetings. Well, for some reason, Twitter often thrives on the right. That determines journalistic perception.
(Senior journalist, former editor, written press)*

*The explanation is Twitter. It is the law of the large numbers, all those right-wing voices, it is really overwhelming. Even if you make a neutral analysis, it is strongly attacked on Twitter.
(Senior journalist, radio, public broadcaster)*

Journalists are convinced that these right-wing reactions on social media are part of a coordinated struggle, and note the mobilization of internet trolls aimed at traditional media outlets to influence their reporting and perception of certain issues. Although this vocal minority creates the impression that their opinions represent those of the majority, journalists tend to agree that the real majority remains silent or contributes only sporadically to the discussions online. Hence, they argue that social media leave them with a twisted image of the actual public opinion:

We notice, certainly on social media, that agreements are often made in the right-hand corner to respond in bulk. That might present us with a distorted image. (Editor of current affairs program, radio, public broadcaster)

I should more often remind myself that it is a small but noisy minority. (Journalist, TV, public broadcaster)

Belgian journalists' perception that the reactions they get from the public more often come from the right-wing corner is confirmed by research in other nations. For instance, a study from Switzerland found that online commentaries on news articles are more often written by people with right-wing views (Friemel & Dötsch, 2015). It also matches studies in the U.S. claiming that right-wing voters make their voices heard more often than left-wing voters (Goss, 2010; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, 2016).

A second reason relates to the broader (right-wing) populist opinion climate that journalists struggle to capture. Since the unexpected electoral wins of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and of the Leave campaign in the British referendum on membership of the European Union, the media have been blamed for their failure to understand the disenchantment of the working class. Multiple journalists in our inquiry referred to these victories of right-wing populist politicians that took them entirely by surprise:

We get our professional honor from observing and reporting, yet we absolutely did not see Trump coming. This should never happen to us again, so we make sure that the frightened, white, right-wing male gets too much rather than too little attention in the newspaper or on TV. (Senior journalist, former editor, written press)

We missed Trump and Brexit. Now we are looking for the 'real people.' It is a kind of self-correction. (Senior journalist, TV, public broadcaster)

For several journalists, the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit are part of a broader populist trend. They furthermore referred to the revival of the radical right party in Belgium, and the success of leaders like Matteo Salvini in Italy or Viktor Orban in Hungary. They consider these electoral successes as proof that the public 'cannot be but right-wing'. One journalist noted that popular populist politicians attack the media for being part of the left-wing elites. This, he said, results in journalists feeling the need to show that they are not left-wing and compensate by giving a voice to

non-elites and the ordinary (right-wing) man in the street. In sum, journalists feel that they need to (over)correct after being confronted with (indirect) electoral evidence that a certain group is apparently underrepresented—in this case, a group that is more on the right side of the political spectrum. Potentially, if in the future radical left political actors would be on the rise, journalists might do the same and overcompensate their perceptions in the opposite direction.

Discussion

The accuracy of journalists estimations of public opinion is important, as their judgments influence the news they produce (e.g. Hoewe, 2016; King & Schudson, 1995; Matthews & Al Habsi, 2018; Perryman, 2019). If journalists systematically misperceive public opinion, this may have unwanted effects on the content of the news. Our study of Belgian (Flemish) journalists found that the journalists in our sample have a systematic right-wing bias in their perceptions of public opinion. Journalists systematically think the public is more conservative than it in reality is. The bias in perceptions is smaller for those (fewer) journalists who consider themselves to be right-leaning. This is surprising, as Belgian journalists consider themselves predominantly as center-left. It is thus *not* the case that journalists engage in wishful thinking and consider the people to be close to their own opinions. This makes journalists—or at least the ones we surveyed here—a unique group for social projection has been found to exist almost ubiquitously in psychological studies. Instead of projecting their own opinion, journalists make the exact opposite error. Being well aware of their left of center orientation they overcompensate and overestimate the difference between their own opinion and the opinion of the public. Instead of being convinced that they are right and that the others cannot but share their opinion (projection), they over-perceive the difference between their own and others' opinion by adjusting their assessment of what other people are thinking.

This is not what we expected to find. Therefore, we started to explore potential explanations using the input from a small sample of journalists in our survey. When asked why their perceptions are biased towards the right, they almost consistently refer to the audience reactions they get via social media. This is in line with studies concluding that right-wing voters take on a more active role on social media. We believe this offers a fruitful pathway for further research on differential engagement of partisan social media users regarding both the share and rhetoric used on social media platforms and its effect on journalistic practice. Accusations and threats aimed at individual journalists or the profession as a whole have become a frequent occurrence on social media and in the public domain more generally. This heated atmosphere might be difficult to ignore and likely shapes journalists' perception of public opinion and, as a consequence, their journalistic production. This might be in particular the case for more junior journalists who are often more involved with social media reporting.

Our study shows that more experienced journalists are better at assessing public opinion than junior journalists. We cannot tell whether this is related to their use of social media or whether it is a learning or a selection effect.

Another reason journalists give is that they overcompensate for failing to predict recent, conspicuous right-wing political successes such as the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president which provides ‘proof’ of the fact that the public holds right-wing preferences. Such a ‘need to overcompensate’ based on the perceived own failures should be particularly true for journalists who operate in public domains that have recently experienced a ‘shock’ result, such as in Britain and the United States. Also in several other European countries, traditional media have been taken by surprise by the success of right-wing (and left-wing) populist surges. An investigation of journalistic overcompensation after unexpected events may provide a further interesting possibility for future (comparative) research.

Indeed, this overcompensation process, as revealed by the data and confirmed by journalists, is a phenomenon that scholars of journalism should look at in greater depth. As no earlier study has, systematically and based on actual measures of policy preferences, examined journalists’ perceptions of public opinion it is not really a surprise that the literature has been silent about the biases in journalistic perceptions as well and in particular about the possible role that overcompensation and projection might play in this regard. There is a lot of work on the pressure journalists experience with regard to the balance and neutrality of their coverage and how this affects actual coverage (see for example: Engelbert & McCurdy, 2012; Cushion & Lewis, 2017; Lewis & Cushion, 2019). But we have no clear idea to what extent pressure or, more generally, external signals—as reported here in the interviews: social media feedback and election results—have an effect on the *perceptions* journalists hold about what the public wants and cares about. Therefore, we can only speculate to what extent what we find here for the Belgian (Flemish) case applies across time and place. Is it really simply caused by the recent unexpected election victories by Trump or the Brexiteers, or is it a more general phenomenon? Maybe journalists are more than any other segment of the population (maybe with the exception of scholars of journalism) aware of the fact that they, as a professional group, hold political preferences that are left of center and do not match with what the average citizen wants. After all, the many journalist surveys that consistently point in the same direction, and the often very negative reactions these studies receive from politicians and citizens on the right-side, may have made journalists extremely aware of their ‘divergent’ political orientation. So, ironically, it may be that studies as the present one here, help to explain why journalists tend to overcompensate in their perceptions. If this were true, we would expect the overcompensation process to have been happening long before social media and recent conspicuous right-wing election victories. However, the rise of social media, and the apparent prominence of right-wing voices on these platforms, have probably

increased the idea among journalists that their own political preferences diverge from ordinary citizens. Comparatively speaking, we would expect to find more overcompensation in countries with more prevalent (right-wing) media criticism. It is worth noting that in the country under study here (Belgium, Flanders) media criticism has remained quite subdued so far (De Mulder, 2019). So, our results beg for replication in other countries.

This immediately brings us to the most important limitation of the study: it remains confined to journalists who operate within a single political system. Since our findings are in line with circumstantial evidence from other countries, we believe they have some generic value. Yet, we must be careful not to over-interpret our findings until replicated. Furthermore, we need measures for a wider range of policies in order to be able to compare perceptual accuracy and bias across issues with different characteristics. A third limitation is that regarding general political leaning, we only asked journalists to estimate the political leaning of their own audience, and not that of the entire population, which made comparison more difficult. However, the bias systematically went in the same direction. Moreover, no highly politicized or partisan media were included and the journalists mostly came from mainstream news media.

Our study shows, we hope, that looking into journalists' public opinion perceptions is a relevant and promising track for further research. It may be an important and novel element in the ongoing debate on the liberal bias in news media coverage. Even if journalists are, by and large, center-left it could very well be that those personal preferences are overruled by their perceptions that the public is situated much more on the right. Journalists, then, when making news, are torn between their own preferences on the one hand and their perceptions of the preferences of the audience on the other. It would be valuable to be able to further scrutinize this potential internal 'clash' journalists experience on a daily basis.

NOTES

1. To be more precise, of the political journalists in our sample, 31.5% worked for the VRT—the national public broadcaster that has by far the largest newsroom in the country and is bound by explicit neutrality rules. VRT news programs are still the main source of political information of most Flemings. Journalists from the main newspapers form the biggest group in our sample: *De Standaard* (9.1%), *De Tijd* (6.3%), *Het Laatste Nieuws* (5.6%), *Het Nieuwsblad* (4.9%), *De Morgen* (4.2%), *Het Belang van Limburg* (2.1%) and *Gazet van Antwerpen* (2.1%). Sizeable segments come from the most important political magazine *Knack* (4.9%), from the Belgian press agency *Belga* (7.7%), and from the commercial broadcaster *VTM* (3.5%). Journalists working for regional media (11.2%) and alternative media (2.8%) form a relatively small group in our sample. These proportions are quite similar to the shares of journalists working for different Flemish news media as reported by Raeymaeckers et al (2012: 144) in their large study of Belgian (Flemish) journalists.
2. In fact, in the framework of a larger project, we also presented the same five policy statements to a large sample of MPs from all six main political parties in Flanders. Their responses when

asked about their own opinion about the statements largely validated our classification. In fact, when ranking all parties from most left (Groen) to most right-wing (Vlaams Belang) we found that MP-answers were strongly structured along the left-right cleavage with left-wing and right-wing parties taking opposite positions. A second way of validating the 'left-rightness' of the statements is testing whether citizens' answers to them were structured according to citizens' left-right self-placement. For four of the five statements (not for the retirement age statement; no significant correlation) there was a significant correlation between policy opinions and self-placement in the expected direction.

3. Here is the comparison: citizens who consider themselves to be in the center (5 on the 0-10 scale): this study 31,5% vs. RepResent 28,9%; citizens who place themselves on the left side of the scale (0-4): this study 26,7% vs. RepResent 30,7%; citizens who place themselves on the right side of the scale (6-10): this study 41,8% vs. RepResent 40,3%. Further, for none of the 11-points of the scale the difference between the two surveys exceeds 3%.

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Table 1 - Journalists' public opinion perceptions and actual public opinion on five policy statements (N=148)

	Actual public opinion (agreed=left)	Journalists' public opinion perception	Difference (error in the right-side direction)
In cities, the most polluting cars should be forbidden	69.7%	52.1%	17.6%
Company cars should be more heavily taxed	71.4%	49.8%	21.6%
The right to strike should be restricted (reversed)	43.1%	45.8	-2.7%
Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated	69.3%	48.6%	20.7%
The retirement age may not exceed 67 years	91.5%	70.9%	20.6%

Table 2 - Share of journalists making a left- or right-wing error in estimating public opinion (N=148)

	% journalists making a left- wing error	% journalists correct (-2% – +2%)	% journalists making a right- wing error
In cities, the most polluting cars should be forbidden	14.4%	6.5%	79.1%
Company cars should be more heavily taxed	6.5%	6.5%	87.1%
The right to strike should be restricted (reversed)	47.5%	7.1%	45.4%
Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated	9.2%	7.8%	83.0%
The retirement age may not exceed 67 years	12.8%	9.2%	78.0%

Table 3 - Journalists' public opinion perceptions and their political leaning (N=148)

	Actual public opinion	Journalists' perception		
		Left	Center	Right
In cities, the most polluting cars should be forbidden	69.7%	51.2%	51.8%	59.6%
Company cars should be more heavily taxed	71.4%	45.7%	51.1%	61.7%
The right to strike should be restricted (reversed)	43.1%	44.1%	48.1%	41.4%
Belgium should never expel someone to a country where human rights are violated	69.3%	46.8%	49.4%	57.9%
The retirement age may not exceed 67 years	91.5%	71.3%	71.7%	71.6%

Table 4 - Multi-level models with right-wing bias in journalist perceptions as the dependent variable

	Model I	Model II	Model III
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Issue-level variables			
Skew of publ. op. distribution	-7.31*** (0.96)	-7.42*** (1.001)	-7.37*** (0.992)
Perceived salience	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)
Individual-level variables			
Political orientation (right; H4)		-1.71** (0.53)	-1.70*** (0.53)
Experience (in years; H5)		-0.25** (0.08)	-0.23** (0.08)
# Political articles		0.13 (0.32)	0.07 (0.33)
Gender (female)		-0.16 (2.23)	0.05 (2.29)
Media type (ref cat = print)			
<i>Audiovisual</i>			-0.57 (1.87)
<i>Online</i>			-0.34 (2.56)
<i>Press agency</i>			-1.50 (5.62)
Intercept	11.54 (4.03)	27.43 (5.42)	26.73 (5.43)
# Observations	687	612	612
# Groups	143	124	124
AIC (0 = 6190)	6015	5331	5331

*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01