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The news expectation predicament: Comparing and explaining what audiences expect from the roles and reporting practices of reporters on right-wing extremism

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Abstract

News about right-wing extremism pertains to the media's information and watchdog functions in democratic societies. Since audience orientation is important to the journalistic profession, it is important to know what different news audiences expect of journalists regarding their professional role and their reporting practices when it comes to media coverage of right-wing extremism. To bridge this research gap, by employing a quota sample representative of the general German population ($n = 1314$) and an independent sample of Muslims living in Germany ($n = 248$), we demonstrated that Muslims expect a more active role from journalists and even accept controversial reporting practices to combat right-wing extremism. More left-leaning individuals were found to expect more controversial reporting unless they were afraid of right-wing extremism. Among these more left individuals, fear of terrorism seems to activate the argument that a democratic society should not give up its core principles, including the professional autonomy of its journalists and ethical reporting practices.

Keywords

Audience expectations, journalistic roles, reporting practices, right-wing extremism

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Introduction

Right-wing extremism is an important issue covered by journalists (Ellinas, 2018). In doing so, however, journalists face several challenges that centre around the crucial question of whether they should play an active role. On the one hand, Western journalists primarily see their role as rather passive, 'reporting things as they are' and 'being detached observers' (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). On the other hand, a passive role conception may be unwittingly associated with providing right-wing extremists with the room to spread their ideology and fear-mongering (Baugut and Neumann, 2019a, 2019b). Journalists might therefore consider playing a more active role to fight right-wing extremism.

Journalists' role conceptions seem to be related to the reporting practices they perceive as acceptable (Baugut and Scherr, 2017). While previous research has extensively investigated whether journalists justify questionable reporting methods such as claiming to be someone else or paying for information (Plaisance et al., 2012; Ramaprasad et al., 2019; Weaver and Willnat, 2012), studies are lacking on whether news audiences actually expect these practices from journalists. Particularly when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremists who sometimes attack journalists verbally or physically (Baugut and Neumann, 2019a, 2019b), audience expectations calling for more aggressive reporting methods can place journalists in an ethical predicament. Against this background, there is a need for research on the characteristics and causes of what audiences expect from journalists when it comes to covering right-wing extremism. For right-wing extremism, at least two audiences must be analytically distinguished: the mass audience and the Muslim minority audience.

From an economic perspective, a focus on the *expectations of the mass audience* seems to be relevant. For example, a large number of US journalists perceived 'feedback from the audience' (47%) and 'audience and research data' (38%) as being very or extremely influential in their work (Vos and Craft, 2016). Therefore, findings on what mainstream society expects from reporters on right-wing extremism are likely to affect their media coverage.

From a political point of view, *expectations among Muslims* appear to be equally relevant since right-wing extremists target this group (Kallis, 2018). Muslims are also confronted with right-wing extremism via news media (Ellinas, 2018). Since they perceive the media coverage to indicate the climate of (public) opinion, journalists reporting on right-wing extremism are likely to also influence Muslims' perceptions of a social identity threat (Saleem et al., 2019). Thus, the normative argument can be made that news reporting about right-wing extremism should consider the news expectations that Muslims have set for them.

Above and beyond religious orientations, we seek to explore a broad set of influencing factors that set audience expectations regarding reporters on right-wing extremism (Lambe et al., 2004). To this end, we conducted two independent quantitative surveys ($N=1562$) with $n=1314$ participants being quota representative of the German general population and $n=248$ mirroring Muslims living in Germany.

Dimensions of audience expectations of journalists' roles

Scholars examining audience expectations of journalism (e.g. Heider et al., 2005, Heise et al., 2014; Lambe et al., 2004, van der Wurff and Schoenbach, 2014; Vos et al., 2019) typically ask for rather general demands, however, these do not necessarily hold true for media coverage on specific issues such as right-wing extremism. In particular, times of crisis (including after terrorist attacks) may change and expand the audience expectations of journalism (McLeod et al., 1993).

The expectations of journalistic roles can be systematized with regard to the literature on institutional roles of journalism in society. Hanitzsch (2007) distinguished between three dimensions – *interventionism, power distance* and *market orientation. Interventionism* refers to an active role conception; it reflects the extent to which journalists actively promote moral or societal values and 'pursue a particular mission' (Hanitzsch, 2007: 372). It remains questionable regarding to what degree audiences would want journalists merely to be 'detached observers' when they report on right-wing extremists who typically benefit from passive mainstream media providing them with a platform for their ideology (Baugut and Neumann, 2019b).

The second dimension, *power distance*, refers to the extent to which journalists challenge the powers that be. Since reporters dealing with security issues such as right-wing extremism typically deal with state security agencies (Lidberg and Muller, 2018), audiences might have distinct expectations concerning the collaboration between journalists and security agencies. On the one hand, audiences can be assumed to want journalists to be distant watchdogs who scrutinize the security agencies. On the other hand, investigative reporting may harm national security as leaks and subsequent public information about the security agencies' measures may impede effective actions such as surveillance of right-wing extremists. Research on audience expectations may help journalists find the appropriate distance from security agencies.

Finally, *market orientation* refers to the extent to which market logic affects journalistic goals (Hanitzsch, 2007). Market orientation is indicated by journalists who address their audiences rather as consumers than as citizens. As the media coverage of terrorism usually attracts large audiences, audiences might wish for informative, yet simple and entertaining soft news (Reinemann et al., 2012).

Audience expectations of reporting practices

Journalists' ethical orientations have been empirically explored across the globe (Ramaprasad et al., 2019; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). However, research is lacking on how audiences want journalists to respond to ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas may emerge in situations in which access to information – a prerequisite for the fulfilment of normative media functions – is hard to achieve. Under these conditions, reporters on the right-wing extremist scene may adopt several questionable reporting practices. For example, previous studies focused on practices such as claiming to be someone else or paying for information, using hidden cameras and microphones or badging and harassing sources (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Utilizing these practices would contradict the ethical ideology of idealism. Less idealistic journalists can be characterized by their outcome orientation, in that they admit that harm is sometimes

necessary to produce good (Hanitzsch, 2007). Put differently with respect to reporters on right-wing extremism, the end (i.e. access to information about the right-wing extremist scene) justifies the means (i.e. questionable reporting practices). Audience expectations may help journalists to respond to the aforementioned dilemmas.

Comparing and explaining audience expectations of journalists

Religious orientation. Given that right-wing extremists typically attack Muslims in Western countries (Kallis, 2018), Muslims might wish for journalists to show a willingness to combat the enemies of their religion. However, this political demand seems to conflict with the role of journalism as an independent, autonomous profession in society (Örne-bring, 2020). Consequently, members of mainstream society, who – in contrast to the Muslim community – can be assumed to be less affected by right-wing extremists, might be more satisfied with the role of journalism as an autonomous actor that does not pursue distinct political goals such as combating right-wing extremism. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

> H1: Muslims expect a more active role and a stronger use of controversial reporting practices from journalists when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism than the members of mainstream society do.

Political orientation. Political attitudes play an important role regarding the expectations for journalists (Nah and Chung, 2012; Vos et al., 2019). More left-leaning individuals can be assumed to expect a more active fight against right-wing extremism from journalists. Conversely, more right-leaning individuals can be assumed to feel less of a need for journalists to fight against right-wing extremism at the expense of the profession's autonomy. Moreover, findings from the USA demonstrated that promoting tolerance and cultural diversity was more important to liberal-leaning individuals compared to conservatives (Vos et al., 2019). We therefore hypothesize:

> H2: The more individuals perceive themselves as left-wing, the more they will expect an active role and the use of controversial reporting practices from journalists when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism.

Education. Furthermore, in line with previous findings (Heider et al., 2005; Nah and Chung, 2012; van der Wurff and Schoenbach, 2014), we assume that formal education should have an impact on audience expectations of reporters on right-wing extremism. In the Netherlands, more highly educated individuals were found to more strongly value the media's traditional informational role in society, including the support of journalistic values such as independence and the separation of facts from opinion (van der Wurff and Schoenbach, 2014). Previous research has also pointed to stronger support for liberal political attitudes that coincides with higher levels of formal education (Jung and Gil, 2019). Against the background of these considerations, we assume that political

orientation and educational level would interact, and thus we propose the following two hypotheses:

> H3: Less educated individuals and more politically left-wing leaning individuals expect a more active role and a stronger use of controversial reporting practices from journalists when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism than more highly educated and more right-wing leaning individuals do.

Risk perceptions and fears of right-wing extremism. Individuals' audience expectations can be assumed to depend on their emotions and risk perceptions that arise when thinking about right-wing terrorism. Previous research has shown that individuals in the process of making judgements tend to consult the 'affect pool' (Slovic et al., 2007) and consider the ease with which relevant instances come to mind (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973): The affect heuristic (i.e. the reliance on fears of terrorism) and the availability heuristic (i.e. the reliance on easily accessible examples of terrorist attacks) may thus explain audience expectations of reporters on terrorism (Breckenridge et al., 2010). To reduce fears and to gain control over the threat (Reich and Infurna, 2016), individuals may direct their demands not only towards politicians but also towards journalists. Therefore, we hypothesize the following with regard to reporting practices and expected roles:

> H4: The more individuals show fear of right-wing terrorist attacks, the more they will expect a more active role to be taken by journalists and a stronger use of controversial reporting practices from journalists when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism.
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> H5: The more likely individuals are to perceive a right-wing terrorist attack to happen, the more they will expect a more active role to be taken by journalists and a stronger use of controversial reporting practices from reporters when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism.

Method

Sample

Between 9 March, 2020 and 31 March, 2020, we conducted a survey that was framed as assessing audience expectations of journalists and their news reporting. A total of $N = 1562$ participants finished the survey and correctly answered all four attention-check items (i.e. 'Please simply answer 5 = *fully agree* here') that were distributed across the survey. The sample recruitment process was administered by the survey company Dynata, which was instructed to recruit two independent samples: First, a quota sample that was representative of the German general population in terms of gender, age and education (n = 1314; 49.9% female, $M_{age} = 44.9$ years, $SD_{age} = 13.1$ years, range 18–75 years, 53.5% with a high school diploma or higher), and second, an independent

sample of Muslims living in Germany ($n=248$; 60.9% female, $M_{age}=34.3$ years, $SD_{age}=11.3$ years, range 18–65 years, 70.2% with a high school diploma or higher). To qualify for the sample of Muslims living in Germany, participants had to be self-reported Muslims. Each participant provided us with their informed consent to participate and received financial compensation for doing so.

Procedure

The survey started off with sociodemographic questions including the participants' sex, age, formal education and political orientation, then it focused on the journalistic news reporting about right-wing extremism in Germany, and it closed with questions about the personal assessment of the dangers coming from right-wing extremists. More specifically, the questions tapped into the participants' expectations of journalists and their professional role, the acceptance of controversial research methods as applied by journalists in order to obtain crucial information for their news about right-wing extremists, and assessments of the subjective fear and perceived risks of being victimized through the terror coming from right-wing extremists.

Measures

Journalistic role expectations. Participants were asked a set of 16 statements about their expectations of journalists when they reported on right-wing extremism. These statements were derived from common typologies of journalistic roles and were transferred to the specific issue of right-wing extremism (cf. Appendix). To capture the *interventionist dimension*, which includes the goal to 'pursue a particular mission' (Hanitzsch, 2007: 372), we asked, for example, whether journalists should pursue the goal of fighting right-wing extremism. Regarding the opposite pole of the interventionism dimension, that is, journalism characterized by detachment, objectivity and impartiality (Hanitzsch, 2007), we asked, for example, whether journalists should pursue the goal of informing the public as neutrally as possible about right-wing extremism. For another example, participants should express their opinion on whether journalists are allowed to let their political views influence news coverage of right-wing extremism. Moreover, we considered the question of whether journalist should sometimes not fulfil their very information function as part of the interventionism dimension. For example, we wanted to know whether journalists should avoid reporting news that could unintentionally support extremists.

To capture the *market orientation dimension*, which is about whether audiences are rather addressed as citizens or consumers whose personal fears and emotional experiences are pivotal (Hanitzsch, 2007), we asked, for example, whether journalists should make their reporting on right-wing extremism as exciting as possible. For another example, we wanted to know whether journalists should also bear in mind when reporting on right-wing extremism that many media users want to be entertained.

To capture *the power distance dimension*, which deals with the extent to which journalists are loyal to the authorities in power (Hanitzsch, 2007), we asked for journalism's relationship to public safety authorities. For example, we wanted to know whether journalists

should collaborate with public safety authorities or whether they should publish no information that make it difficult for the authorities to fight right-wing extremism.

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=*fully disagree* to 5=*fully agree* and they were subjected to principal axis factoring (Promax rotation with κ=4; variance explained=51.2%; KMO=0.867, Bartlett's test $p<0.001$) and yielded a three-factor structure. The first factor (active journalistic role, i.e. mobilizing, active fighter against right-wing terrorism) reflected on the active role that journalists should play in fighting against right-wing terrorism in the eyes of their audience. It comprised both statements about actively informing about and mobilizing the public against the dangers coming from right-wing extremism even in collaboration with authorities this factor was then transformed into a composite measure (six items; Cronbach's α=0.843; *M*=3.7, SD=0.9; German general population: *M*=3.6, SD=0.9; Muslims: *M*=4.0, SD=0.8). Thus, we explored a factor representing audience expectations that seem to be closely associated with an active journalistic role conception as it is typically described in literature (Hanitzsch, 2007). What we call 'an active role' encompasses the interventionist approach to fight right-wing extremism; moreover, it includes low journalistic distance to public safety authorities in order to collaboratively achieve the goal of fighting right-wing extremism. Thus, audiences expecting an 'active role' of journalists can be characterized by their support of an interventionist approach they arguably assume to be more effective if journalists use the means of low power distance.

However, above and beyond the focus of this research, we found two more factors of audience expectations that we will describe here but will not discuss more thoroughly later, since they refer much less to expectations of how journalists conceive of their roles on a more political, activist level. For the sake of transparency, all coefficients referring to the additional factors are nevertheless reported in Tables 1 and 2. Specifically, the second factor of audience expectations described an entertaining journalistic role (i.e. subjective, uncritical entertainment orientation) that is reflective of the audience's expressed desire to see more opinion-driven, entertaining news about right-wing extremism that does not offend extremists, thereby evoking violent reactions (e.g. 'Journalists should be guided by audience preferences when reporting on right-wing terrorism'; 'Journalists do not necessarily have to be objective when they report on right-wing extremism'; 'Journalists should avoid reports that could offend right-wing extremists or make them angry') and yielding a reliable composite measure (six items; Cronbach's α=0.842; *M*=2.4, SD=1.0; German general population: *M*=2.3, SD=0.9; Muslims: *M*=3.0, SD=1.2). Finally, a third factor (awareness of the journalistic role's impact) was reflective of the audience's expectations of journalists being aware of the impact that their news reports could exert on extremists and xenophobes ('Before reporting on right-wing extremism, journalists should think about how it might affect right-wing extremists/xenophobes'). Two items loaded on this factor that were then transformed into an index variable (two items; Cronbach's α=0.850; *r*=0.738; *M*=3.0, SD=1.2; German general population: *M*=2.9, SD=1.2; Muslims: *M*=3.5, SD=1.2). However, we consider the question of whether audiences explicitly want journalists to actively fight right-wing extremism (i.e. the first factor 'active journalistic role') the most relevant aspect in the context of our study.

Table 1. Sample descriptives and audience expectations of journalistic roles and reporting practices in Germany including zero-order correlations, covariances, and group mean differences for gender, education and religious orientation.

	M	SD	Mdn	Zero-order correlations (below) and covariances (above)									Group mean differences[*]		
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Sex t_{sex}	Education t_{edu}	Religion t_{relig}
1　Age (range: 18–75)	43.25	13.38	44.00	–	2.59	–2.66	–1.01	–2.11	0.12	–0.51	–2.29	0.30	**–6.85**	**–11.12**	**–13.29**
2　Pol. Orientation (range: 1–11; right)	5.53	2.06	6.00	0.09	–	–0.06	–0.29	0.30	–0.47	0.25	0.08	0.46	–1.13	–0.25	1.01
3　Fear of personal victimization	2.67	1.40	3.00	–0.14	–0.02	–	0.67	0.56	0.40	0.40	0.44	0.02	**4.25**	–1.68	**12.08**
4　Perceived risk of right-wing terror	3.44	1.16	3.00	–0.07	–0.12	0.41	–	0.23	0.39	0.18	0.32	–0.04	**2.58**	**3.68**	**4.28**
5　Entertaining journalistic role	2.44	0.98	2.33	–0.16	0.15	0.40	0.20	–	0.21	0.62	0.50	0.21	**2.34**	–0.75	**9.00**
6　Active journalistic role	3.68	0.90	3.67	–0.16	–0.25	0.32	0.38	0.23	–	0.29	0.29	–0.01	**2.44**	**2.01**	**7.37**
7　Awareness of journalistic role's impact	3.02	1.23	3.00	–0.03	0.10	0.23	0.13	0.51	0.27	–	0.28	0.32	1.26	–1.00	**6.52**
8　Acceptance of controversial reporting practices	2.54	0.99	2.40	–0.17	0.04	0.31	0.28	0.51	0.32	0.23	–	0.01	**–2.75**	**3.34**	**9.35**
9　Acceptance of not having insights	3.21	1.31	3.00	0.02	0.17	0.01	–0.03	0.16	–0.01	0.20	0.01	–	**2.65**	**–2.62**	0.54

N = 1562; higher values on the Likert scale are indicative of a higher agreement with the construct described; scales range from 1 to 5 unless mentioned otherwise.
[*]Group mean differences (t-tests) calculated based on the following reference groups for dummy variables: sex (D1: female), education (D1: high school/college degree), religious orientation (D1: Muslim).
Positive t values are indicative of higher means in the (D1) reference group; significant mean differences (t test) are in bold print.

Table 2. Hierarchical linear regressions predicting audience expectations of journalistic roles and reporting practices in Germany.

	Journalistic role expectations			Expectations about journalistic reporting practices	
	Active journalistic role	Entertaining journalistic role	Awareness of journalistic role impact	Acceptance of controversial reporting practices	Acceptance of not having insights
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Intercept	3.95 (0.23)***	2.87 (0.25)***	3.30 (0.35)***	3.09 (0.26)***	3.93 (0.38)***
Step 1: sociodemographic variables					
Age	0.008 (0.01)***	−0.009 (0.01)***	0.001 (0.01)	−0.009 (0.01)***	−0.001 (0.01)
Sex (D1: female)	0.020 (0.04)	−0.043 (0.05)	−0.018 (0.06)	−0.300 (0.05)***	0.158 (0.07)*
Education (D1: high school/college degree)	0.163 (0.18)	−0.334 (0.20)	−0.265 (0.28)	−0.240 (0.21)	−0.700 (0.30)*
Religious orientation (D1: Muslim)	−0.162 (0.24)	−0.835 (0.27)**	−0.415 (0.37)	−0.768 (0.27)**	−1.13 (0.40)**
Political orientation (right)	−0.313 (0.03)***	−0.104 (0.03)**	−0.120 (0.05)**	−0.139 (0.04) 0***	−0.042 (0.05)
Step 2: terror risk perceptions					
Fear of personal victimization	−0.040 (0.05)	0.124 (0.06)*	0.073 (0.08)	−0.034 (0.06)	−0.050 (0.08)
Perceived general risk of right-wing terror	0.072 (0.06)	−0.123 (0.06)	−0.166 (0.09)	0.066 (0.07)	−0.210 (0.09)*
Step 3: interaction terms					
Religious orientation × education	0.008 (0.12)	0.089 (0.14)	0.034 (0.19)	−0.111 (0.14)	0.001 (0.20)
Religious orientation × political orientation	0.063 (0.02)**	0.114 (0.03)***	0.061 (0.04)	0.099 (0.03)***	0.135 (0.04)***
Religious orientation × fear of victimization	−0.012 (0.05)	−0.022 (0.05)	−0.075 (0.07)	0.015 (0.05)	−0.176 (.07)*
Religious orientation × perceived general risk	0.034 (0.05)	0.142 (0.06)*	0.169 (0.08)*	0.171 (0.06)**	0.262 (0.08)**
Education × political orientation	0.029 (0.02)	0.022 (0.02)	0.010 (0.03)	0.046 (0.02)	0.021 (0.03)
Education × fear of victimization	0.016 (0.03)	0.027 (0.04)	0.061 (0.05)	0.044 (0.04)	0.116 (0.05)*
Education × perceived general risk	−0.085 (0.04)*	0.001 (0.04)	−0.015 (0.06)	−0.024 (0.04)	0.023 (0.06)
Political orientation × fear of victimization	0.028 (0.01)**	0.017 (0.01)	0.011 (0.01)	0.027 (0.01)**	0.003 (0.01)
Political orientation × perceived general risk	0.026 (0.01)**	0.023 (0.01)*	0.033 (0.01)*	0.009 (0.01)	0.022 (0.02)
Adjusted R^2	0.273	0.248	0.084	0.214	0.057
Observations	1559	1559	1559	1559	1559

Final regression models reported. Higher values are indicative of a higher agreement with said construct or with the category mentioned in brackets; D1 marks (dummy) effect coding; unstandardized coefficients (B) with standard errors (SE) are reported.
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

Expectations about journalistic reporting practices. To assess audience expectations of journalistic reporting practices in order to obtain insights into the right-wing extremist scene, we referred to items used by previous research on journalism ethics (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver and Willnat, 2012) and tailored them to the issue of right-wing extremism. For example, given that previous research asked journalists whether they justified 'claiming to be someone else', we wanted to explore the extent to which our participants agreed with the statement that, in order to get insights into the right-wing extremist scene, 'journalists should claim to be a supporter of the right-wing extremist scene'.

The participants' agreement with six statements was assessed on a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=*fully disagree* to 5=*fully agree* and they were subjected to principal axis factoring (Promax rotation with κ=4; variance explained=68.2%; KMO=0.848, Bartlett's test $p < 0.001$). The first factor reflected upon the acceptance of controversial reporting practices (i.e. the use of otherwise dismissed research practices, identity disguise, wiretapping conversations, paying or pressuring informants; five items; Cronbach's α=0.843; *M*=2.5, SD=1.0; German general population: *M*=2.4, SD=0.9; Muslims: *M*=3.1, SD=1.1). These items deal with reporting practices that are controversial as journalists applying these reporting practices prioritize the end of getting insights into the right-wing extremist scene over the questionable means to achieve this end. The second factor reflected upon the acceptance of not being able to get insights into the right-wing extremist scene (one item; *M*=3.2, SD=1.3; German general population: *M*=3.2, SD=1.3; Muslims: *M*=3.3, SD=1.4). Again, our analytical focus for the data followed our conceptual rationale and therefore excluded the second factor (all coefficients are nevertheless reported in Tables 1 and 2 for the sake of clarity).

Fear of personal victimization through right-wing terror. We collected participants' answers to the statement that they would be afraid of becoming a victim of a right-wing extremist terror attack. Answers were collected on a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=*does not apply at all* (to me) to 5=*fully applies* (to me) (*M*=2.6, SD=1.4; German general population: *M*=2.5, SD=1.3; Muslims: *M*=3.6, SD=1.3).

Perceived general risk of right-wing terror. We also assessed the perceived likelihood of a right-wing extremist terror attack within the next 12 months in Germany using a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=*not likely at all* to 5=*very likely* (*M*=3.4, SD=1.2; German general population: *M*=3.4, SD=1.1; Muslims: *M*=3.8, SD=1.2).

Political orientation and education. Political orientation was captured on a 11-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=*very much left-leaning* to 11=*very much right-leaning* (*M*=5.5, SD=2.1; German general population: *M*=5.5, SD=1.9; Muslims: *M*=5.7, SD=2.8), and education captured whether participants had some form of secondary school degree (i.e. *Hauptschulabschluss*; 10%, German general population: 10.4%; Muslims: 7.7%), secondary school certificate (i.e. *mittlere Reife*; 33.9%, German general population: 36.1%; Muslims: 22.2%), high school diploma (i.e. *Abitur*; 28.7%, German general population: 26%; Muslims: 42.7%), or a college degree (i.e. *Hochschulabschluss*; 27.5%, German general population: 27.5%; Muslims: 27.4%).

Results

Descriptive information about our study variables is depicted in Table 1. The total sample (N=1562) is heterogeneous regarding age (M=43.25 years, SD=13.38 years; range 18–75 years), and the participants politically leaned to neither side (M=5.53, SD=2.06, Mdn=6.00). Interestingly, while our sample perceived a general risk of a terror attack in Germany (M=3.44, SD=1.16, Mdn=3.00) to be present, the participants were not as afraid of becoming a victim of right-wing extremist terror themselves (M=2.67, SD=1.40, Mdn=3.00). Audience expectations regarding the coverage of right-wing extremism were rather high towards an active journalistic role (M=3.68, SD=0.90, Mdn=3.67). The acceptance of controversial reporting practices was lower but somewhat considerable given the ethical questionability of these practices (M=2.54, SD=0.99, Mdn=2.40). Zero-order correlations (below the diagonal) and covariances (above the diagonal) in Table 1 also show that the predictors were predominantly moderately associated with one another, which justifies further exploring their ramifications. In light of this, a stratified analysis separating our total sample into subgroups showed significant group mean differences regarding sex (t_{sex}; df=1557; higher for women), education (t_{edu}; df=1560; higher risk perception with higher levels of education), and religious orientation (t_{relig}; df=1560; higher for Muslims) as indicated by the significant (bold print) t values in Table 1 for all predictors except political orientation. Particularly, stratified analyses (see right part of Table 1) revealed the importance of religious orientation, which had a strong and significant impact on expectations both regarding journalistic roles (entertainment: t_{relig}(1560)=9.00, p<0.001; active: t_{relig}(1560)=7.37, p<0.001; awareness: t_{relig}(1560)=6.52, p<0.001) and the acceptance of controversial reporting practices, t_{relig}(1560)=9.35, p<0.011, but did not sway the acceptance of having no insights, t_{relig}(1560)=0.54, p=0.589. Given these findings, we accept H1 since Muslims (as compared to the general population in Germany) expect a more active role to be taken by journalists and a stronger use of controversial reporting practices from journalists when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism.

As a second step, we subjected all variables to a hierarchical linear regression (see Table 2). We hypothesized that people leaning more towards the political left would expect a more active journalistic role and more controversial reporting practices (H2). The regression analysis shows that more right-wing political views are negatively associated with active role expectations (B=–0.313, SE=0.03, p<0.001) and the acceptance of controversial reporting practices (B=–0.139, SE=0.04, p<0.001), which is why we accept both hypotheses.

However, in contrast to what was hypothesized in H3, there was no interaction effect between less education and political leanings on either active role expectations (B=0.029, SE=0.02, p=0.165) or the acceptance of controversial reporting practices (B=0.046, SE=0.02, p=0.054). We therefore reject H3.

Moreover, we predicted that both a heightened fear of personal victimization and a perceived general risk of right-wing terror would increase the support for a more active role and controversial journalistic reporting practices (H4, H5). However, we found no direct support for either fear (B=–0.034, SE=0.06, p=0.548) or risk perceptions (B=0.066, SE=0.07, p=0.307), and we only found an interaction effect for fear with
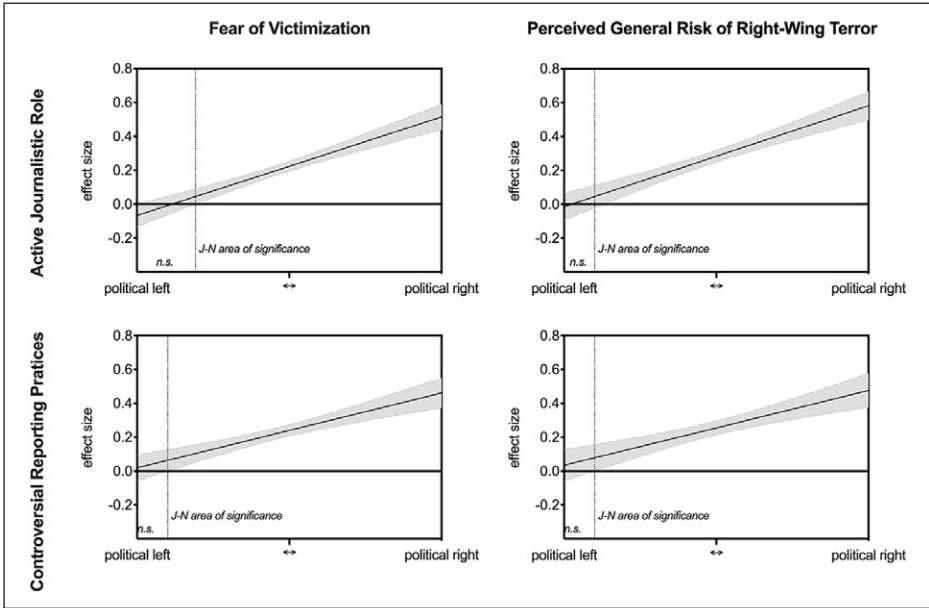
Figure 1. Contingency analysis.
Contingency analysis including Johnson–Neyman (J–N) areas of significance for the effect.

political orientation ($B=0.027$, SE$=0.01$, $p=0.003$), but none whatsoever for risk perceptions and political orientation ($B=0.009$, SE$=0.01$, $p=0.393$). Follow-up contingency analyses showed that both the fear of victimization and terror risk perceptions, only in conjunction with a more right-wing political orientation came with an increased acceptance of controversial journalistic reporting practices (Figure 1; bottom panel). We therefore partially accept H4 and H5.

Moreover, we explored some interesting interaction effects. Political and religious orientations in conjunction with both the fear of victimization and terror risk perceptions were associated with audience expectations of journalists. Specifically, the fear of becoming a victim of right-wing terror was only associated with heightened expectations of journalists playing an active role against right-wing extremism among more right-leaning audience members ($B=0.028$, SE$=0.01$, $p<0.001$); the Johnson–Neyman (J–N) technique revealed that the political orientation had to be higher than 2.92 on a scale ranging from 1 (left) to 11 (right). Similarly, expectations of journalists actively engaging against right-wing extremism increased with perceptions of a heightened general risk of becoming affected by right-wing terror ($B=0.026$, SE$=0.01$, $p=0.003$); however, this was contingent on a stronger right-wing political leaning. The J–N area of significance started from political orientations higher than 2.29 on the same 11-point Likert-like scale (see Figure 1; top panel). Based on these analyses, we can speak more clearly regarding our hypotheses H4 and H5 in which we assumed that both the fear of becoming a victim of right-wing terrorist attacks and heightened general risk perceptions of right-wing terrorist attacks happening would foster expectations of a more active journalistic role and

controversial reporting practices in order to face this. Interestingly, there was no direct effect from fear ($B=-0.040$, $SE=0.05$, $p=0.427$) or risk perceptions ($B=0.072$, $SE=0.06$, $p=0.206$) on active role expectations, but there were significant interactions with political orientations, as indicated by the moderation analyses (see Figure 1; top panel). Given that our findings point in the hypothesized direction, but do not hold true for people with very left-wing political views, we only partially accept H4 and H5 within these boundary conditions relating to the effect.

Post hoc analyses: More expectations and non-linear relationships across the political continuum

Above and beyond the core focus of our study, our survey data showed that more right-wing political views are also negatively associated with more entertaining journalistic role expectations ($B=-0.104$, $SE=0.03$, $p=0.002$) as well as expectations towards journalists to be aware of their work's impact ($B=-0.120$, $SE=0.05$, $p=0.009$). Audience expectations towards accepting of not having insights into the right-wing extremists' scene were not associated with political orientation ($B=-0.042$, $SE=0.05$, $p=0.396$). There were also neither interaction effects between education, political leaning and (a) expectations of an entertaining journalistic role ($B=0.022$, $SE=0.02$, $p=0.345$), (b) journalists' awareness of their work's impact ($B=0.010$, $SE=0.03$, $p=0.759$) nor (c) the acceptance of not having insights into the extremists' scene ($B=0.021$, $SE=0.03$, $p=0.531$). Regarding the support for a more active role and controversial journalistic reporting practices, fear of victimization was not associated with such claims ($B=-0.050$, $SE=0.08$, $p=0.542$), but risk perceptions were ($B=-0.210$, $SE=0.09$, $p=0.024$). Apparently, higher perceived terror risk increases individuals' cautiousness regarding journalists infiltrating the right-wing extremists' scene, and both fear and risk seemed to operate independent of political orientation (i.e. no interactions observed).

Importantly, since contingency analyses assume simple linear relationships between variables, we wanted to rule out the possibility of more complex, non-linear associations. Based on the contingency analyses and a visual inspection of the scatter plot, we identified two joints ($J_1=3$; $J_2=9$) that define three segments of political orientation (i.e. left: $X \leqslant 3$; middle of the road: $3 < X \leqslant 9$; right: $9 < X \leqslant 11$), for which we estimated three different linear slopes (i.e. linear splines) as part of a spline regression (Darlington and Hayes, 2017).

Our analyses show that the linear spline model adequately estimated both expectations of an active role and the acceptance of controversial reporting practices across the spectrum of political orientations while controlling for fear and risk perceptions: Expectations of an active journalistic role did not change within the segment on the political left (overall: $b_1=0.007$, $SE=0.06$; Muslims: $b_1=0.033$, $SE=0.10$; German general population: $b_1=-0.024$, $SE=0.07$), but were lowered for those in the middle of the road (overall: $b_2=-0.152$, $SE=0.06$; Muslims: $b_2=-0.173$, $SE=0.11$; German general population: $b_2=-0.124$, $SE=0.08$), and were heightened more towards the political right segment – especially among Muslims (overall: $b_3=0.326$, $SE=0.07$; Muslims: $b_3=0.659$, $SE=0.12$; German general population: $b_3=0.009$, $SE=0.09$), $R^2=0.251$, $F(3, 1550)=43.402$, $p<0.001$.
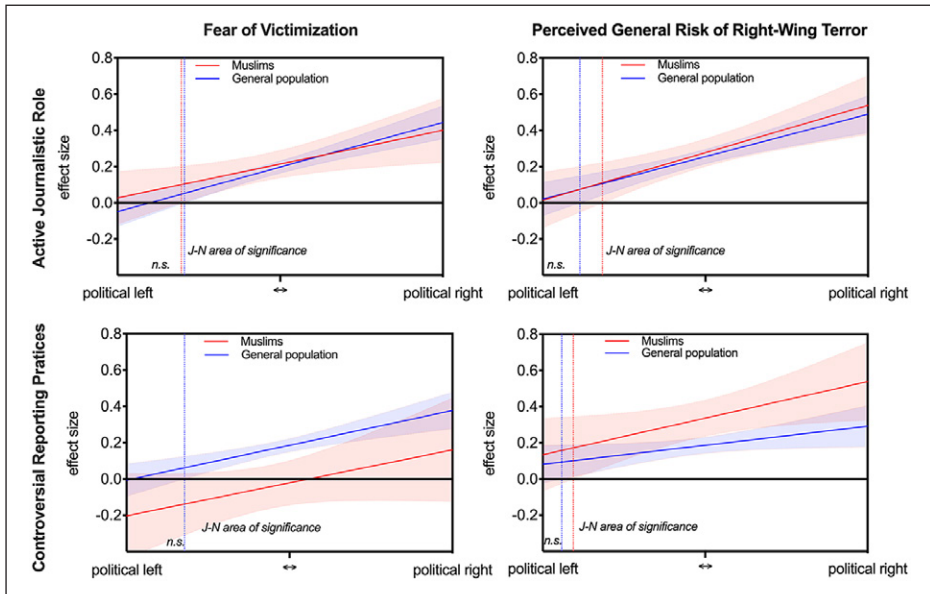
Figure 2. Stratified contingency analysis.
Stratified (by religious orientation) contingency analysis including Johnson–Neyman (J–N) areas of significance for the effect.

The acceptance of controversial reporting practices decreased within the segment on the political left (overall: $b_1 = -0.208$, SE$=0.06$; Muslims: $b_1 = -0.345$, SE$=0.12$; German general population: $b_1 = -0.172$, SE$=0.08$), but increased both for the middle of the road (overall: $b_2 = 0.211$, SE$=0.07$; Muslims: $b_2 = 0.384$, SE$=0.14$; German general population: $b_2 = 0.162$, SE$=0.09$) and for the political right segments, especially among Muslims (overall: $b_3 = 0.535$, SE$=0.08$; Muslims: $b_3 = 0.804$, SE$=0.15$; German general population: $b_3 = 0.162$, SE$=0.10$), $R^2 = 0.222$, $F(3, 1550) = 26.956$, $p < 0.001$.

Finally, our study has demonstrated that both religious and political orientations are contingent factors when explaining audience expectations of journalistic roles and reporting practices. We therefore further explored the moderating influence of religious orientation in conjunction with political orientation on the relationship between (a) the fear of victimization (Figure 2; left panel) and (b) the perceived terror risk (Figure 2; right panel) on both active role expectations (Figure 2; top panel) and on the acceptance of controversial reporting practices (Figure 2; bottom panel). Of note, and only with regard to the acceptance of controversial reporting practices, stratified contingency analyses revealed that Muslims with a more right-wing political leaning tend to accept controversial reporting practices more so than the German general population does.

Discussion

Journalists reporting on right-wing extremism may face difficult situations in which it is important to know their audience expectations about proper journalistic roles

and reporting practices. Importantly, being Muslim was found to be associated with expecting a more active role from journalists as well as a stronger use of controversial reporting practices when it comes to reporting on right-wing extremism. However, if journalists exclusively followed their Muslim audience's expectations, they would run the risk of ignoring (non-Muslim) mainstream society's expectations of a moderate and less active political role for journalism, thus putting journalists in a predicament in terms of role expectations.

Above and beyond this, the present findings underline (cf. Vos et al., 2019) the significance of political orientations in explaining which roles and reporting practices audiences expect of journalists. As more right-wing leaning individuals' attitudes are relatively closer (though not at all identical) to those of right-wing extremists, these audience members prefer a relatively more passive journalistic role that does not cross ethical boundaries in terms of reporting practices. Although more right-wing individuals are typically associated with the need for security and certainty (e.g. Jost et al., 2007), this does not in any way mean that they have a stronger wish for journalists to combat the security threat posed by right-wing extremists. Possibly, more conservative individuals' lower trust in news media (e.g. Lee, 2010) makes them suspicious of a stronger political role for journalism. In contrast, more left-wing leaning audience members plausibly perceive right-wing extremism to be a more serious problem that needs more aggressive (or even controversial) reporting practices in conjunction with a more active journalistic role.

However, and most importantly, when afraid of becoming a victim of right-wing extremism themselves, left-wing leaning audience members did not exhibit heightened expectations for journalists to be more active in opposing right-wing extremism. Paradoxically, it seems that their fear instead makes them rethink (and thus relax) their heightened expectations of journalists fulfilling an active role. On the contrary, the more right-wing audience members changed their expectations in a somewhat pragmatic way when afraid of right-wing extremism. Arguably, fears among politically more left-wing leaning individuals seem to activate the argument that a democratic society should not give up its core principles (Mattes et al., 2017), including the professional autonomy of journalists and ethical reporting practices. This desire for these principles does not necessarily hold true for the most strongly left-wing leaning individuals, who arguably already want to fundamentally change the political status quo, which is indicative of radicalized individuals (Neumann, 2013).

Apart from these extreme-leaning positions, our findings suggest that fears of right-wing extremism may prime 'value rationality' among left-wingers; that is, a rational orientation towards an absolute value (Kepplinger and Knirsch, 2001). Politically left-wing leaning individuals may idealistically display this value in saving the established autonomous role for journalists, whereas more right-leaning individuals tend to show 'expedient rationality'; that is, a less idealistic rational orientation towards individual needs. This outcome orientation that is associated with the position that the end justifies the means is apparently more acceptable to more right-leaning individuals who expect active journalistic responses to their fears of right-wing extremism. In sum, journalists working for audiences with strongly diverging political attitudes must prepare for contradictory audience expectations when fears of right-wing terrorism increase. This underlines that terrorists may be able to polarize audiences.

Interestingly, for the first time, this study demonstrated that Muslims, among the more right-leaning audience members, were found to show even stronger support for questionable reporting practices. Muslims thus seem to follow the less idealistic rational orientation towards individual needs, which can be explained by the fact that they are particularly affected by right-wing extremism.

Finally, fear of right-wing extremism and the perceived subjective risk of becoming a victim of right-wing terrorism alone are not sufficient to predict audience expectations about journalistic roles and reporting practices. Political orientations play a decisive role in conjunction with them in understanding how individuals transfer their emotions and perceived terror threats into journalistic demands.

Limitations

This study has notable limitations. First of all, one could challenge these findings regarding their applicability to other contexts outside of Germany. Germany's Nazi history might have contributed to unique audience expectations. However, the unique German history allows for the following plausible assumption: If the German audience has reservations about interventionist coverage and controversial reporting practices when it comes to right-wing extremism, audiences in other countries with similar political and journalism cultures might be even less accommodating of such practices.

Second, our sample of Muslims living in Germany, a minority group that it is rather difficult to reach, cannot claim representativeness. Despite lacking comprehensive reliable structure data on the Muslim population living in Germany (e.g. Frindte et al., 2009), the comparison of our samples shows, for example, that highly educated were overrepresented in our Muslim sample as in other studies (Haug et al., 2009). In order to address the issue of representativeness, we conducted our analyses within a combined sample demonstrating that religious orientation did not interact with education in explaining our main dependent variables, that is, 'active journalistic role' and 'acceptance of controversial reporting practices' (see Table 2). Moreover, above and beyond addressing relevant sample differences in Table 1, we observed interaction effects between religious orientation and political orientation as well as perceived general risk in the combined sample of the German general population and Muslims, and therefore followed up with contingency analyses separately for both groups. However, although integrating combined samples and separate group analyses helps to better understand sample biases, it is not a remedy for a lack of representativeness of our Muslim sample, which comes with only limited generalizability for our findings.

Third, it is possible that at least some study participants were overstrained by our questions and might have given so-called pseudo-opinions. Audience expectations of journalists can be explored more clearly by means of exposing participants to real exemplars of media coverage. In this case, less complex items can be used, however, using specific exemplars of media coverage may be at the expense of the generalizability of findings. We assume that in Germany, due to the Nazi history and high density of (media) discourses on right-wing extremism (Makovec, 2020), participants are less likely to be overstrained by questions about what they expect of reporters on right-wing extremism.

Fourth, despite our reliance on the established left–right spectrum, a more nuanced survey regarding individuals' political orientations and values (e.g. Thorisdottir et al.,

2007), could help in explaining individuals' expectations of journalism in a more fine-grained manner. For example, the libertarian-authoritarian axis (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) may be helpful in explaining the extent to which audiences want journalists to engage in state authorities' struggle against right-wing extremism.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that journalists covering right-wing extremism face a predicament regarding their audience's expectations. Muslims who are particularly affected by right-wing extremism call for a more active journalistic role and a stronger use of controversial, ethically questionable reporting practices compared to mainstream society. Complying with these role expectations and applying controversial reporting practices could, however, endanger journalists and cause them to become the victims of right-wing terror themselves. Interestingly, right-wing terrorists may make more left-wing leaning individuals, who typically demonstrate more positive attitudes towards minorities (Passini and Villano, 2018), display expectations about journalism that differ from those of the Muslim minority. Our findings therefore underline that right-wing terrorists' ability to divide societies is also evident in diverging audience expectations between Muslims and mainstream society.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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