

YOUNG ACADEMICS

Environmental
Studies
1

Stephanie N. Hartwig

Wolves in the German Print News Media

Content Analysis of Attitudinal
Expressions, 2010–2020

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With a Foreword by Dr. Karen Potter

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Foreword

Wolves have a stronghold in the human imagination, they trigger strong emotions yet divide opinion. We can all recollect childhood stories that provoke fear – who's afraid of the big, bad wolf? The Brothers Grimm's Little Red Riding Hood and her sly, stalking wolf, or the three little pigs and their wolf antagonist seeking to demolish their homes and gobble them up. Yet wolves are also mythologised and worshipped by humans, revered for their wild spirit and intelligence, seen as the ultimate symbol of an untamed natural world. In reality, from an ecological perspective, wolves are vitally important as a keystone species. By regulating prey populations, they maintain, or revitalise and restore the health of ecosystems, improve habitat and even the landscape. Similarly in reality, the wolf is a damage causing carnivore, killing domestic animals and attacking humans.

Our author, Stephanie Hartwig, lives in Germany, where wolf populations have been growing. From near extermination in the 19th century, Germany is now home to an estimated 161 packs of wolves (Federal Wolf Documentation and Advisory Office). This is a remarkable conservation success story, but again wolves are stirring up a fierce debate, questions are being asked if humans and wolves can co-exist in the country. Stephanie carefully and clearly situates her novel research to monitor attitudes towards wolves in order to gain a better understanding of this societal debate. Attitudinal surveys have been undertaken by previous researchers, but often limited in scope, both spatially and as a snapshot in time. Here Stephanie builds on previous research with longitudinal surveys, undertaken in other countries, such as the United States, Canada and France. She makes a contribution for Germany, understanding how attitudes change

over time, across regions with varying experience with wolf contact. This is set against the context of a change in wolf distributions, a rise in wolf attacks and as controversial laws were passed to allow wolves to be killed. To add to this, the research thoroughly examines the role of the media in disseminating information to the public and how, as an agenda setter, this shapes public attitudes.

This contribution is clearly necessary. For those involved in wolf conservation efforts, the findings highlight pivotal moments and regions to target for clear communication to influence public opinion. With this deeper understanding of the influential role of the media, it should promote a constructive dialogue with the media to desensationalise and help support co-existence with wolves. Masters students inherently struggle with coming up with a clear rationale or justification for their research. For those embarking on their own research journey, I would recommend reading this book as an exemplar of how to set the stage through an understanding of the literature in your field, determining the originality of your research with the potential to make a real-world impact. I would finally recommend Stephanie Hartwig's book to those who are just fascinated by wolves.

As an academic and research supervisor, then there can be nothing more rewarding than seeing the talent and hard work of your student being recognised through acceptance for publication. Stephanie has spent a huge amount of time on her research, working late into the evening, sacrificing annual leave and weekends. Whilst I talk about the topic, the quality of the research and the contribution to the literature, what I most admire is Stephanie's focus and singlemindedness to achieve her aim and now a greater goal of the research, to get it published. The research is presented with great care and scientific objectivity, but her own passion for wolves has lain at the heart of this endeavour, driving for a deeper understanding of living with these majestic creatures, and to make a difference to conservation efforts.

Congratulations again Stephanie, your own mate, pups and wider pack should be very proud.

Dr. Karen Potter
Associate Lecturer & Research Fellow (Environment),
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Preface

This master thesis is entitled “Wolves in the German Print News Media. Content Analysis of Attitudinal Expressions, 2010–2020,” and has been written to fulfil the graduation requirements of the Environmental Management programme at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. I was engaged in researching and writing this thesis from February to July 2021 (distinction level).

My own initial encounter with the topic of wolves occurred in the winter of 2020. At that time, both local media outlets and numerous neighbours in the vicinity drew substantial attention to a wolf sighting within our district of Erlangen-Höchstadt in Middle Franconia. The lone wolf in question merely passed through the area, without any notable interactions. A local farmer had initially spotted the animal. The images of this sighting were subsequently shared on social media and eventually reached my phone. My primary interest in this occurrence was not in catching a glimpse of the wolf itself, but rather in observing the diverse reactions of local residents to his crossing. I began to consider the potential implications of wolf presence on the various stakeholders, as well as their collective impact on wolf perception. I conducted further research into the legal status of wolves, and as I gathered more information, it became increasingly evident to me that our coexistence with wolves is a matter of attitude. In countries where wolves have always been present, wolf sightings may be perceived as a relatively normal occurrence. However, in Germany, the concept of coexisting with large carnivores is still a novel idea, and all thoughts, emotions and experiences are immature and require time and experience to develop. It is evident that con-

flicts between wolves and humans can impede the potential for coexistence. However, there are numerous roles that wolves can play in our lives, beyond attacks, spanning from traffic accidents or illegal killings to public presentations, political debates, wolf parks, eco-tourism and most of all, a balanced ecosystem. The engagement with wolves evokes a variety of thoughts and emotions, influencing our attitudes towards them. This diversity of attitudes was the subject of my master thesis.

From a technical standpoint, in order to maximise the learning outcome, I sought to approach the thesis by selecting a subject that I had no previous knowledge of and that would necessitate the acquisition of skills which I had not yet developed. In the process, I was able to utilise unfamiliar computer programs, such as Nexis Uni® as a part of LexisNexis® and NVivo Pro12, and I also gained more experience in the collection and analysis of large amounts of data. I advanced my experience with software and programs that I was already familiar with, such as Excel and Python 3. I have learned that struggling is an inherent part of the process. In the words of John C. Maxwell (2009), “The process of achievement comes through repeated failures and the constant struggle to climb to a higher level.” Consequently, this thesis has imparted me with invaluable insights, both in a professional and personal capacity.

Objectivity is key to research, no matter what your professional background. However, I must admit that from a personal perspective, I was delighted to discover that wolves are living in Germany. This is undoubtedly good for nature. I am certain that the addition of large predators will bring balance back to our ecosystem – and send a tingle down my back when I go for a walk in the woods, but of the good kind! One context in which we humans see our natural environment is as a recreational space, and we use it as such. I love to walk, hike, cycle and enjoy the outdoors. I am a real nature enthusiast. However, it undeniably affects the environment, especially when we seek that extra thrill off the beaten track, and that’s where the wolf comes in: It is important to recognise that we are not the only intelligent species in the world, and that we may be outmatched in certain situations by other creatures that have evolved in different ways. This does not have to be a source of fear or insecurity, but rather a reminder to be humbly aware of the natural world and to respect all living beings

on this planet. The wolf is a beautiful and intelligent creature that lives in families, just like us. They take care of their young for as long as they can until the pups grow up and leave the pack to start their own families. Sometimes they live by themselves, sometimes they go back to look after the elders. Sometimes they live with their aunts, uncles and cousins, and sometimes they start patchwork families. Are you still wondering if I'm talking about wolves? I am. But doesn't it sound familiar?

The wolf population in Germany has remained relatively stable over the recent years since submitting the thesis: There has been an increase in the number of wolf packs since the monitoring year of 2020/2021, from 159 to 184 in 2022/2023, representing a 16 % growth (DBBW 2024a). The number of wolf pairs has also increased by 26 %, from 38 to 48. Additionally, the number of wolf pups has risen by 11 % since that time, reaching 640. The distribution of wolf populations in Germany remains concentrated in the north-east of the country, with only few packs and pairs spreaded towards the south. In general, it can be stated that there has been little change in public attitudes towards wolves over the past three years. Those who are opposed to the presence of wolves continue to maintain their stance, while those who are in favour of continued wolf existence defend their position with great passion: Sheep farmers in Germany experience a pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future in relation to the presence of wolves (Gieser T., 2023). This is significant in the wider debate given that 88.6 % of animals killed or injured by wolves in 2022, were sheep or goats (DBBW 2024b). Hunters are concerned by the loss of attractive hunting grounds with wolves being present and there is an overall consensus among hunters, that wolf populations must be managed and limited (Richardson J. 2022; Grima N. et al. 2019; Gieser T. 2023). Those who feel generally enthusiastic towards wolf presence in Germany, perceive a sense of familiarity with wolves and understand it to be a profound and intimate connection to the natural world. (Gieser T. 2023). This highlights the strong differences to the lives of shepherds and hunters, who have a more utilitarian approach to nature, which they understand as a 'cultivated landscape' (Gieser T. 2023). In Germany, wolf reintroduction into the ecosystem has led to a heightened awareness of socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban populations (Niedzialkowski K. 2023; Gie-

ser T. 2023). There is a pervasive sense of political alienation among rural residents, who perceive themselves to be dominated by the worldviews of the urban population (Zscheischer J. and Friedrich J. 2022). Additionally, wolf experts dismiss their fear of wolf attacks on humans as baseless, leaving the rural population with a sense that their concerns are not taken into account by those in decision-making positions. (Zscheischer J. and Friedrich J. 2022.) In particular, during elections the wolf becomes a matter of political contention (SZ 2024) and it appears that wolf opposers' influence is increasing in the political sphere (Geiser T. 2023). In the context of the upcoming 2024 European elections, a number of parties are attempting to exploit the emotional debate about wolf presence among voters (SZ 2024), especially with respect to the aforementioned concerns expressed by farmers and hunters. Particularly in the wolf context, this perceived marginalisation by the political establishment has so far facilitated electoral success for the far-right party, Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) (Leser J. and Pate R. 2022). People who have experienced livestock predation by wolves in their neighbourhood tend to vote for far-right political parties that are critical of nature conservation (C. v. Hohenberg B. and Hager A. 2022). The media also bears some responsibility for the prevailing atmosphere, which portrays wolves as attackers of hunting dogs (DJZ 2024a) and approaching human settlements (DJZ 2024b). However, it is common practice for conservation organisations to counterbalance such reports by creating informative webpages about wolves (NABU 2024) highlighting the wolf's protected status (WWF 2024). Despite the intensification of these tensions, there has been a continued commitment to EU-wide conservation policies to date, which has served to maintain a balance between the interests of conservationists and those of land users (Niedzialkowski K. 2023). However, in light of the emotionally charged nature of the debate surrounding the presence of wolves in Germany, it is possible that this may soon change: Following the attack on the family pony of the current EU Commission President by a wolf in Lower Saxony in 2022, the president made statements expressing her desire to limit the population of wolves in Europe (SZ 2024; FAZ, 2022), and using the term 'massacred' (SZ 2024), a word which has been widely interpreted by the public and the press to convey the severity of her feelings about the incident. For many wolf opposition groups, this

represents a pivotal turning point in their efforts to regulate wolf populations in Germany (SZ 2024). Given the constant calls for a factual discourse on wolves, it seems paradoxical that there is so much emotion surrounding the issue. It also raises the question of the extent to which such an important part of this discourse is being omitted when wolves are discussed in a purely factual manner. Overall, it can be said that in countries where wolves are undergoing a period of recolonization after decades of absence, such as Germany, the coexistence of humans and wolves is contingent on the population's willingness to adopt appropriate behaviours (Zanni M. et al. 2023). The first step towards such behaviours is a reflexive reorientation to a more positive attitude towards wolves as an integral component of the German ecosystem.

As previously stated, it is my opinion that the long-term survival of wolves in Germany hinges on the ability to shift attitudes towards a more positive outlook. This is a challenging task, particularly when considering the numerous obstacles that farmers must overcome on a daily basis in order to ensure the safety of their cattle. It is clear that a great deal will have to happen before farmers in Germany are convinced that it is in their best interest to have wolves in the countryside, and it is very likely that day may never come. In addition to these robust convictions, this study also gauges ambivalence in attitudinal expressions. This category encompasses the proportion of the public with less robust opinions and the potential to be swayed in a positive direction towards wolf recovery. Further research into this category is necessary to identify the topics that elicit these ambivalent sentiments. Should I conduct a comparable study again, I would devise a questionnaire to ascertain the current attitudes towards wolves amongst the general public, in addition to analysing the existing attitudes in the newspaper media. This would serve as a control group for the study that observes the current sentiment towards wolves. Moreover, interviews with individuals representing different stakeholder groups would provide a valuable comparison to the results of the study and elucidate the reasons for these attitudes.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of those who have facilitated the success of this thesis. I am grateful to all those who engaged in discussions about wolves during my research and assisted me in comprehend-

ing the intricate relationship between humans and wolves. Among those I would like to specifically mention are Dr. Sara Benetti, Head of School at the University of Ulster, Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, for her support and guidance throughout the study programme. Sara's passion and perceptive insights constituted an invaluable source of motivation and guidance. Particularly during the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, she demonstrated remarkable leadership abilities, providing clarity, stability and direction during a period of considerable uncertainty. Her encouragement and support have proven to be invaluable during periods of significant challenge, a fact for which I am sincerely grateful.

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Karen Potter, now at the Open University. She was the ideal person to guide me through my studies, as she consistently presented me with challenges that forced me to think more deeply and engage with complex concepts. This approach has undoubtedly maximised the learning opportunities available to me. When I was satisfied with the solutions I had devised, with a single question, she would challenge me to identify further opportunities for improvement. However, when I encountered difficulties, she would encourage me to persevere. Her experience as a supervisor, tutor and academic proved invaluable. She responded to every question, regardless of its perceived absurdity, with patience and her trusting and understanding nature facilitated open discussion of methods. These admirable qualities set me on a positive trajectory. I am profoundly grateful for her support.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Loraine Hanna, Ulster University's Open Research Officer, and Edward Carlsson Browne, Copyright Officer for Digital Learning and Enhancement at Ulster University, for their guidance in the selection of Open Access licenses. Furthermore, I would like to thank Joan Atkinson and the library team for their unwavering support throughout the study programme.

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- Content Analysis of Attitudinal Expressions towards Wolves in the German Print News Media, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

After more than 150 years, wild wolves have returned to Germany and caused intense, ongoing debate (Carter and Linell 2016). A successful coexistence in Germany strongly depends on whether people will accept their return (Kaczensky 2006). Thus, it is important to monitor people's attitudes, beliefs, and judgments towards wolves, to gain a better understanding of the public debate (Lehnen et al. 2021). While attitudes towards wolves in Germany have been explored from different angles, e. g. over media presence and emotions (Kaczensky 2006), information sources (Arbieu et al. 2019), and experiences (Arbieu et al. 2020), so far, little is known about attitudes in the media over time, as wolf presence is relatively new in Germany. Therefore, this content analysis set out to explore whether attitudes towards wolf recovery in Germany was changing over time, and if there was a difference in attitudes towards wolves in regions with no wolves and no wolf experience, some wolves and short wolf experience or many wolves and long wolf experience over time. Several different samples were taken from a pool of all news publications available from 2010 to 2020. One sample represented total publications across the decade, another all nationwide publications. The regional samples originated from news coverage published in Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Saxony-Anhalt, which were the three federal states representing the regions with no wolves and no wolf experience, some wolves and short wolf experience or many wolves and long wolf experience. To analyse the overall time trend, a regression analysis was performed on the samples of total and nationwide publications. The results indicate increasing negative attitudes towards wolves in total publications over the measured period

Abstract

and decreasing positive attitudes in nationwide publications. The regional analysis was performed via a two-way ANOVA with the factors being 'time' and 'the three regions'. There was a significant difference over time and between the regions. The region with no wolf experience had the highest number of attitudinal expressions, followed by the region with long wolf experience and finally followed by the region with short wolf experience.

Keywords: Attitudes, wolf recovery, *canis lupus*, human-wolf coexistence, Germany, conservation