

**THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE LION FROM BERLIN
IN SUMMER' 23: HOW INTERNET MEDIA SHAPES RISK
PERCEPTION FROM WILDLIFE-HUMAN CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. This paper explores the reactions of citizens to a perceived security risk at the human-wildlife interface mediated by social and traditional media sources. We take the case study of a reported 'lioness' appearing in the outskirts of Berlin as a risk to human and domestic animal life, sparking media frenzies.

Methods. The subjects' reactions to and perceptions of risk can be analysed through a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach to information obtained via the respective media channels in covering the phenomenon as a newsworthy event. We identify three distinct peaks in public interest and response.

Results. Following a Foucauldian tradition of problematisation, and a scholarship of critical media studies, we demonstrate that the ordering of animals in relation to society

allows for a normalisation of certain threats from human-wildlife conflict while placing others in a state of exception which needs immediate action. We do not take the social conditions of predator-prey relations as a given, but seek to 'de-normalise' them and question the level of risk constructed, which plays out across public and media spheres and may carry over into human-wildlife conflicts. Our case study shows how social media posts can lead to the emergence of a perceived risk to society, which is reacted to dramatically, and whose emergency situation becomes a newsworthy event that confirms and seems to justify the level of security measures taken. The engagement of citizens online and with the emergency response teams can be viewed as overreacting to the situations based on having a real sense of danger of a 'lioness' penetrating perceptions of encounters with large wildlife.

Conclusions: That is, until it is determined that no immediate risk exists, and the actions taken are critiqued as a hysterical misinformed approach of 'city dwelling' officials lacking knowledge of wildlife in one's region. We then speculate about what ethical and political repercussions this may create for multispecies co-existence with predators and pests in Germany.

Keywords. wildlife in the media, social panic, human-wildlife conflict, mixed-methodology

INTRODUCTION: VIRTUAL HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

In the dark early morning of Thursday the 20th of July 2023, a low quality 6 second-video taken from the side of a roadway outside the German village of Kleinmachnow on the border between the capital of Berlin and the Bundesland Brandenburg was posted on twitter. The video was taken by a friend of twitter user @lqzze1 who posted it to their account (https://twitter.com/KB11_1/status/1682299734403297281). This video seemed to show a large mammalian body scrummaging in the bushes with only the animal's side, back and neck/ears visible. The question arose whether this was a lioness, and a second reported sighting from the police the next morning started the 'wildcat' chase that would see two days of panic turn to peace and then laughter, as the lioness would be confirmed by scientific expertise to be a wild boar.

Social media has been used as a lens through which to analyse the risk of human-wildlife interactions for potential conflict over time (Jarynowski, Buda, et al., 2019). Trends suggest humans often problematise wildlife in human deaths, for instance from sharks (Sabatier and Huveneers, 2018), or leopards (Crown and Doubleday, 2017). While extremely low in comparison to the habitat destruction and death caused by humans they are sensationalised in the media. Additionally, the traditional media seeks to create content out of newsworthy events such as the risk of (exotic) wildlife to society (human and domestic animal lives) for generating viewership, which adds fuel to the (social media) wildfire and the state of crisis. Broz et al (2021) argue for viewing human-wildlife relations through a lens of co-existence rather than conflict, and join a scholarship on critical social media studies towards wildlife coverage in doing so (Bathia et al, 2020). This article does not seek to promote or explore alternative ways of viewing human-wildlife relations, rather it dives into the affective dimensions across the media and in-person

engagements, revealing the media's strong influence on narratives such scholars problematise.

The escalation of the situation from a tweet to a full-blown security situation reveals the potentiality of such social media engagements to be taken seriously and inform perceptions of risk to domestic life from 'the wild'. After our initial analysis of the social dynamics of the security crisis at the human-wildlife interface in Berlin-Brandenburg as a result of the 'lioness' on 29 August, 2023 (Oelke et al, 2023), an article produced by *Welt am Sonntag* on September 24 (Stibi, 2023) similarly traced the events of the days, but with 'exclusive access to the operation's diary'. The article covers social (and totally ignores traditional) media, only a part of the article as the starting point for the crisis to play out in 'real life'. In doing so, the authors miss the affective dimensions that plays out between social and traditional media and the on the ground operation which creates a virtual lioness. An omnipresent realness of the lioness exists via the associated risk to human and domestic animal life as conveyed by the securitised presence of authorities and which is seemingly all but confirmed by widespread national and international news media coverage (from Britain to India). This realness dissipates only when a scientific expert voice provides the needed reasoning of evidence suggesting a wild boar, which settles the affected minds of fearful citizens.

Human-wildlife conflict may be perceived as an event deemed as 'critical', for instance in the ASF epizootic that reconfigures human-wildlife relations of co-existence (Broz et al, 2021), or as 'newsworthy' phenomenon which poses risks to spheres of social relations, specifically the environment in Allen et al (2000). We understand events of human-wildlife conflict when viewed across both media and in-person engagements as 'virtual' surveillance efforts. The concept of the 'virtual' (is) being borrowed from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (Person, 2005). In the (curious) case of the lioness from July 20-21, the virtual events making up the surveillance of wildlife conducted to locate a lioness required attention from citizens and authorities, while acquiring attention from media outlets. We take a look at the role the interplay between the media (e.g. by using clickbait-techniques or fuelling emotions) and in-person efforts to remove the risk which the lioness posed to human and domestic animal life. Virtual engagements occurred when a perceived risk was present, whether or not the focused risk factor was actually present, that worked across both the media and in-person reactions. Descriptions of engagements and interviews with citizens in press releases and media coverage actualises a 'realness' of the threatening wildlife to the domestic sphere.

Here, intimacy with smartphones is more common than with wildlife, and the alerted risk for human-wildlife conflict in Germany is only enlivened for a short period of time as a result of the virtual lioness. This, despite the growing concern among farmers of wolf attacks on domestic animals (mostly small-holding outdoor livestock) across Germany (especially in the federal states of Lower Saxony, Saxony and Brandenburg) which hunters are quite aware of.

In order to explore the virtuality of the events of the human-wildlife conflict, we use a mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) approach regarding the narrative of security and responsiveness in the face of a 'dangerous lion'. We gath-

ered the demand of information (Google Trends) in Berlin and Brandenburg on the topic of the 'Lion' (regional but also international audiences, especially in the metropolis), and the supply of information (Brand24) - 2159 mentions in social and traditional media with a given keyword "Löwe" (due to the major discussion taking place in German among citizens). The methods are combined in extracting interview and observational material from video and written reports about the 'lioness' from July 20-21 that give details to the potential human-wildlife conflict 'virtual events' reflected in the number of representations (news articles) with spikes in the time series of information flow (and its sentiment in case of mentions).

RESULTS: THE VIRTUALITY OF WILDLIFE SURVEILLANCE

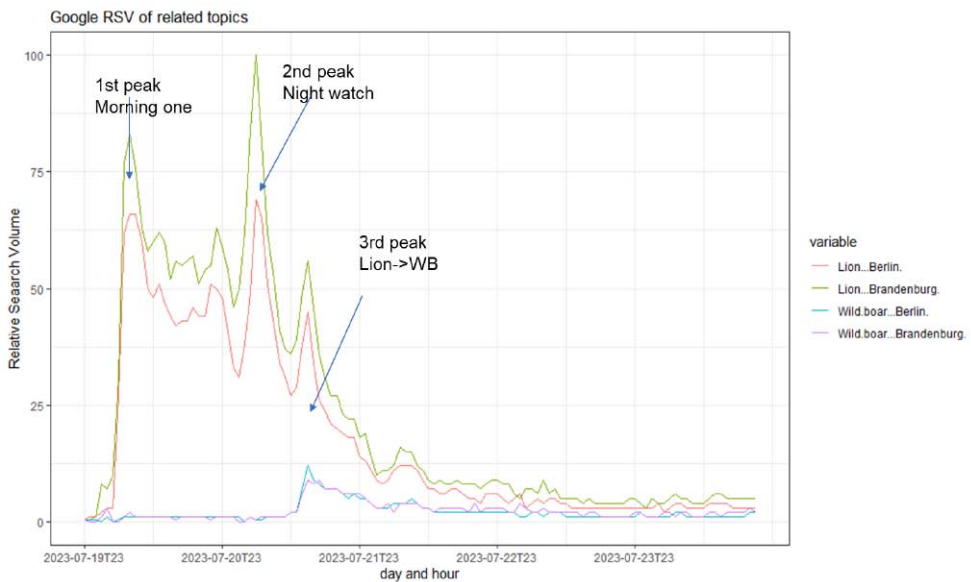


Fig. 1. Interest over time by searching given queries in Google in Berlin and Brandenburg Source: Own research with GTL Google Trends:<https://trends.google.pl/trends/explore?date=now%207-d,now%207-d,now%207-d,now%207-d&geo=DE-BE,DE-BB,DE-BE,DE-BB&q=%2Fm%2F096mb,%2Fm%2F096mb,%2Fm%2F0dr47,%2Fm%2F0dr47&hl=en-GB>

The 1st virtual event, or peak of information concerning the emergence of and awareness regarding the threat occurs around 7am on July 20th, when people woke up and checked social media before work, or heard the news from a personal contact, and later inquired further into the situation about the alleged lion. In the meantime, crisis management teams made up of police, military, veterinary officers, and citizens (between 100-200 personnel) split into units to handle the situation. The story grew as more disinformation spread about the lion having

chased after and/or consumed a wild boar. The mayor of Kleinmachnow, Michael Grubert, updated citizens and spectators in his largest press conference ever on July 20th, officially speaking of the threatening ‘lioness’ roaming at large. The media interest then dropped and levelled out, as news reached the bigger metropolis of Berlin. A concern was apparently tied to the ‘green’ wildlife corridors in the city as wild boars or lions may move between there and Brandenburg via the Grunewald-forest. A correspondent for the English newspaper “The Guardian” provided an analytical-voice to the situation, detailing the forest canopies in Grunewald at the edge of the village to be an ideal ‘jungle’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35dgio4HQOQ>) substitute to hide and that wild boars and other wild life other wildlife and would provide nutritious and abundant food sources - thus, building on the misinformation.

The 2nd peak occurred around 5am on July 21st and was at its peak when people were eagerly waiting for the resolution of the issue during the sleepless night of July 20th and into the morning after. The threat to other potential food sources, specifically pets, as ‘ideal lion food’ were among the major subjects of focus in the media.

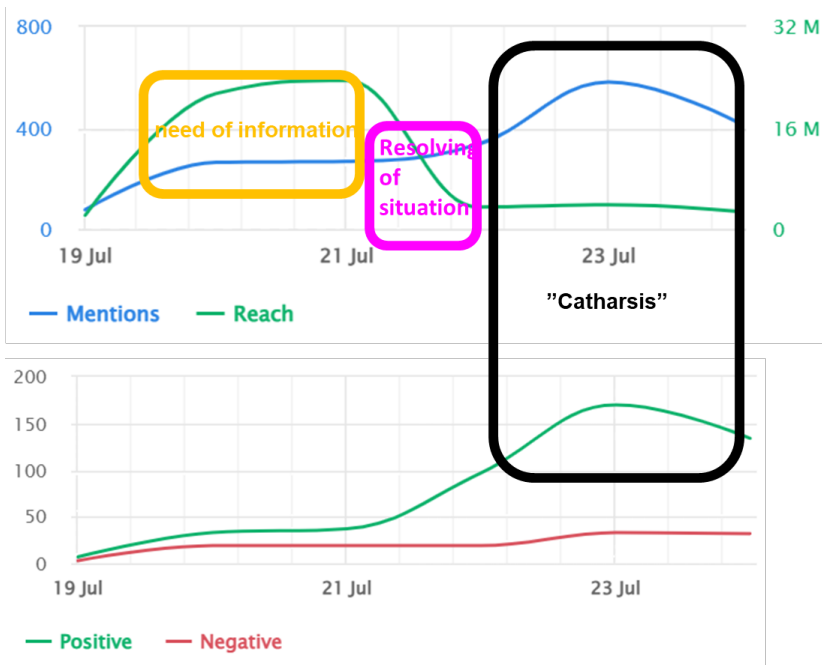


Fig. 2 (top): Interest in the “Lion” in social and traditional media

Source: Own research with: Brand 24

Fig. 3 (bottom): Emotions in social and traditional media

Source: Own research with: Brand 24

The values in fig. 2 and 3 were provided on a daily basis and smoothed. In fig. 3, the sentiment shows the amount of charged emotions in social and traditional media posts on the internet. The increased attention of the general public (seen in fig. 1) as well as traditional (high reach) and social media continued as the lioness had still not been found (which, according to the data, carried a high frequency of mentions and negative corresponding emotions).

A discourse about securing a solution to effectively reduce the wild boar population, viewed to be a threat to local traffic and residents' gardens was started online about 'wild boar(s)', as according to the mayor of Kleinmachnow, people were spreading disinformation that the lion(ess) may have been released by the city as a possible new wild boar hunting system. He explicitly stated that "we are still trying to do it normally (hunting of wild boars) and will not set up a Serengeti Park in order to be able to solve the wild boar problem. But it is a serious situation (Global News on July 20th, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lexYfs0CyiM>). This perception was increased because boars are the main host of the African Swine Fever virus (ASF; we will touch more on this (Jarynowski, Buda, et al., 2019)). Native predators naturally manage other wild animal populations but, as we can see with the return of wolves in Brandenburg and Saxony, many other issues follow such as wolf attacks on livestock and hunter-wolf confrontations (<https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/mammals/wolves-germany/>).

The interest in the alleged lion continued until around 11AM on July 21st with some level of negative emotion, but without signs of panic. The large police force was represented in the media through the voice of one interviewed citizen, as providing a sense of control and security. Therefore, also justifying the 30 hours straight search that required large financial resources to conduct such an investigation, with infrared cameras, combat weapons, etc (July 22nd, 2023, DW News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiZ0U3vgyIo>). Consequently, the streets were reported to remain 'more quiet than usual (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiFGfIrl_PM)' in response to the 'stay at home order'.

The demand for news [Fig. 1] increased for the third time around 12AM on July 21st. Around this time, the investigation of the search, an examination of faeces/stool samples (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/potsdam/potsdam-mittelmark/wir-haben-das-video-viel-zu-spat-ausgewertet-doch-keine-lowin-in-berlin--behorden-vermuten-wildschwein-10178605.html>), and a deep analysis of video footage conducted by an expert determined that the Berlin lioness was, in fact, most likely a wild boar. This was announced by the police chief Peter Foitzik and the town mayor, who held up a picture showing the visual differences between a wild boar and a lion in front of an audience of reporters and citizens, and was accompanied by an official press release on the town's website (<https://www.kleinmachnow.de/index.php?object=tx,3692.5.1&ModID=7&FID=3692.21073.1>).



Image 1. (Left) wild boar footprint being measured and compared; (right) body construction of wild boars versus lions

Source: 'Doch keine Löwin in der Region', Gemeinde Kleinmachnow, July 22nd 2023

The 3rd and final peak started around 12 pm on July 21st as a wild boar supplanted the lioness, becoming the protagonist. However, fig. 2, 3 show that the online-mentions across both forms of media are still high despite the decrease of news releases. Here, a positive emotion observed in social media [Fig. 3] could correspond to optimism and humour and irony appearing in the discourse. This is likely caused by social media carrying the weight as people's mood started to change from worry to amusement. Panic died down as the situation was resolved. The media circus' conclusion emerged in the shape of memes and satirical discussions on social media at the expense of the involved authorities during the week-end of July 22nd and 23rd.



Image 2. Wild boar vs. lion sample of Netnography

Source left: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.morgenpost.de%2Fberlin%2Farticle239019115%2Floewenjagd-kleinmachnow-was-haaranalyse-verraet.html>; source right: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0GKWGURu2LMcrV4qii1JHjdGGnF8atgyor3HVp491jQZVhRbiqShARJtJMyCYC7Xvl&id=100063899042511

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The additional stoking of fear is an unintended consequence that may worsen the situation and make it seem more of a real threat due to mostly trusted media outlets covering the topic seriously. While at the same time normalising other human-wildlife conflicts, namely with wild boars, or overlooking more rural human-wildlife issues, such as the growing presence of wolves, that city dwellers are oftentimes unaware of or want to promote coexistence despite being deeply removed from spaces of conflict. Rural actors' voices are often silenced in such crisis situations, i.e. hunters, who expressed their bafflement over social media, having clearly seen a wild boar. However, the event had already taken on the full blown emotional and pressure charged atmosphere while Berlin, Germany and other parts of the world looked on.

The social media event of a potential lion spotted at the roadside spiked interest and concern for both self and loved ones. The narrative of a 'dangerous lion' subsequently generated viewership and advertising revenue. When sensationalised by the traditional media, such an event's spread reveals an agenda of highlighting phenomenon that, although far-fetched, is in demand and has potential for far-reaching viewership.

It is interesting to note that such virtual events seem to have no effect on often unknown (wolves) or normalised (wildboars) wildlife on the life of everyday city folk. Citizens usually do not accept hunting in and around the city (Oelke et al., 2022). Risks of human-wild boar interaction covered in the media include monitoring and mitigating the spread of disease, such as from wild boars to hunters (McLean et al., 2021), which can be captured through surveillance technology, in addition to damage to fields and aggression towards other wild boars, animals or people (Von Essen et al., 2021). Efforts to restrict wild boar movement as a result of being major carriers of ASF has also been of less interest for urbanites and major newspapers, with most coverage coming from rural border regions. This has led Larissa Fleischmann to frame the fencing of wild boars and the border with Poland as a 'depoliticisation' of bordering practices in the more-than-human realm (presented on "Notes from a compartmentalized border: Fencing African Swine Fever in the Eastern German Periphery" at *More-than-human Borderlands and Mobilities in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2022).

Although sentiments of disbelief or disappointment existed in finding out that there was no lion at all, as revealed through informal surveys by news reporters, once the risk to life was negated, the sentiment among the public turned to relief, likely due to the normalised presence of wild boars in and around the region. The state of security ended and citizens were seen walking around freely with-out police presence in forests or at road stops. The first two authors of this article were casually strolling near the FU Berlin campus in the lake district of Berlin and observed an abundance of evidence of wild boars rooting up grass and bushes along the bike and foot paths.

The false identification of a lion could have been avoided had the expertise of hunters been asked for, but the deferral to 'scientific expertise' to determine whether the animal was in fact a lion reflects a general promotion of science as the major authority of knowledge in society. The general deferral to veterinary expertise was also obvious in the *Welt am Sonntag* report (Stibi, 2023), and fur-

ther supports the argument made by Broz et al (2021) that we are undergoing a ‘veterinisation of society’ when it comes to human-wildlife interactions. In the aftermath, one hunting school on the outskirts of Berlin jokingly offered to teach interested people about how to distinguish between these kinds of animals. A skill that the media promotes to lie with scientists as the experts on such topics.

Media campaigns have been created by hunting and agriculture associations to try and draw attention to the issue of livestock attacks by wolves, in addition to a plethora of articles in regional newspapers. Yet, very little to no articles mention wolves as threats near city centres such as Berlin. Furthermore, a wolf would likely not receive the same attention by the media because they are generally known to have returned to the area and urban citizens with environmental sentimentalities largely supporting this reintroduction of a previously wiped-out species (Personal communication with hunter, 2023). Media agencies, Berliners and officials would be reminded of the power of urban animal activists following the successful cam-paign to save ‘Elsa’ at Teufel Lake. Therefore, media coverage of wolf attacks on livestock and pets, increasing over the years as their numbers increase with no legal hunting scheme for population management, is limited to regional coverage. We may look at how this ambiguous position of wild boars (and this includes pigs, generally), being dangerous but more often seen as somewhat cute but dirty, pestilent animals, may even cause citizens to be injured in overlooking the risk of wild boar encounters captured by social media and spread via traditional media. Examples include the case of the wild boar at Teufel lake who stole a nudist’s laptop, onlookers captured images and videos, one of which went viral (https://www.facebook.com/alandaauer/posts/10207757967503350?ref=embed_post) 18k likes, 4.6k comments, 21k shared on social media) of the man chasing after and catching the wildboar, which was then covered across international news media outlets.

The risk of a lion in and around Berlin, however, was extremely low and was an opportunity for the media to break the internet and capitalise on a wide viewership, rather than a genuine concern for public safety. Modern legends attached to unknown wildlife residents of the neighbourhood (as city drawers of big cities such as Berlin seem to lose understanding of nature more and more, even attempting to do so in other contexts (Schürmann, 2023)), may loom large in the public imagination.

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