

Research Article

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Online local newspaper coverage of an EU-funded rewilding project: The case of brown bear reintroduction in Trentino, Italy

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Abstract

Positive human–wildlife coexistence, especially in contexts of rewilding and the reintroduction of large carnivores, partially depends on communication between stakeholders. The media, and in particular local journalism, can play a crucial role in determining people’s knowledge of and attitudes towards wildlife. In this article, we analyse the online coverage of bears produced by the most widely circulated local newspaper in Trentino (Italy), where bears have been reintroduced thanks to a rewilding project funded by the European Union. Employing quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 375 articles, we look into the main features of the media coverage of bears over one year (2024). We find that articles tend to focus on controversial and uncommon events, such as culls and interactions. The most prevalent sources of quotations in the articles are politicians and activists, while experts, local residents, and individuals in the farming sector are less often quoted. The majority of articles are framed through the lens of the socio-political struggle generated by bear presence. Micro-dynamics of the online media coverage include high polarisation, fragmentation of narratives, and the marginalisation of relevant stakeholders (i.e., local communities, experts, European institutions).

Impact statement

Communication plays a crucial role in the coexistence of humans and large carnivores, especially in rewilding contexts. In this article, we explore a little-known topic, namely local journalistic coverage of human–bear coexistence in the mountainous Province of Trento in the Italian Alps. Here, the reintroduction of bears in the 1990s generated friction between large carnivores, local communities, animal rights associations, and political movements. Our article observes how, on a local level, human–bear coexistence is narrated mainly through the frame of socio-political struggle. Polarisation, fragmentation, and imbalance are the main characteristics of the online media coverage of bears in this area. Scientists, local communities, and the agricultural sector are marginalised. Assertive and aggressive statements and sensationalist language are common. Based on these empirical findings, we propose a number of possible explanations, from the crisis of local journalism to the presence of populist political dynamics. Finally, we offer some suggestions for improving media coverage of human–bear coexistence.

Introduction

On 26 May 1999, a brown bear from Slovenia was released in the Italian Province of Trento. It was the first of 10 bears to be released there as part of a reintroduction project (Life Ursus) that involved local bodies such as the Adamello Brenta Nature Park and the Autonomous Province of Trento. The project was financed by the European Union’s (EU’s) Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE), under the umbrella of the Habitats EU Directive.¹ The EU has played a central role in implementing many rewilding projects aimed at protecting large carnivores such as bears and wolves and favouring the expansion of their dwindling populations.

Bears were persecuted for centuries in Europe (Zedrosser et al., 2011) and they became locally extinct in several areas during the 19th and 20th centuries due to overhunting, habitat loss and fragmentation, and increased anthropisation (Tosi et al., 2015). In the 1990s, amid fears of further local extinctions (for instance, in the Western Pyrenees and Eastern Cantabrian Mountains, see Wiegand et al., 1998; Martínez Cano et al., 2016; Dupré et al., 2000), conservation efforts were planned and implemented across Europe. A reintroduction project in Austria failed, while a similar project in the Pyrenees did not manage to save the local bear population, leaving the area

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¹<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/life/publicWebsite/project/LIFE96-NAT-IT-003152/ursus-project-brenta-brown-bear-conservation-plan>. Last accessed 24 January 2025.

with only bears of Slovenian origin (Tosi et al., 2015). On the other hand, the reintroduction project in the Central Italian Alps has been considered rather successful. In the 1990s, brown bears were nearly extinct in Trentino, but by 2023 the population consisted of at least 79 bears (with a consistent estimated population of between 86 and 120), and was slowly but constantly expanding its area of presence (Groff et al., 2024).

However, the “return” of large carnivores, such as bears and wolves, can generate friction and conflicts with local communities, who may not be accustomed to their presence. In the case of bear reintroductions, such challenges have arisen in different areas. For example, in the Pyrenees, where eight Slovenian bears were released between 1996 and 2006 (as part of another LIFE-funded project), the conflict between the shepherding sector and these large carnivores has grown, generating narratives of “imposition” and “dispossession” that have recently been recounted in a Catalan documentary and some anthropological studies (Freixa and Camps, 2021; Pons-Raga et al., 2021; Vaccaro and Beltran, 2009). In Trentino, a 1997 survey conducted as part of a feasibility study found that a majority of the local population, including beekeepers, agriculturists, and breeders, had a favourable view of the reintroduction of bears (Dupré et al., 2000). However, since then, the relationship between local residents and bears has become increasingly conflictual. A 2011 survey confirmed a sharp decrease in the support for bear repopulation (Frapporti et al., 2018), and a recent survey commissioned by the Province of Trento (the main local administrative and legislative institution) found that 73% of locals viewed the presence of bears in their territory negatively.²

Conflicts between humans and large carnivores are not new: they tend to arise wherever people coexist with such animals since the latter can pose challenges and risks to people’s safety as well as to human activities such as farming and shepherding. From a sociological standpoint, human–wildlife conflicts can have broader socio-political implications when they involve local beliefs, values, traditions, and ultimately power relations (Tokarski, 2019). In such cases, the concrete implications of coexistence (e.g., potential damage and safety concerns) and symbolic implications (e.g., bear reintroductions as a symbol of the complexities of the rural–urban cleavage) are bound up with each other. Moreover, in highly anthropised contexts, the boundaries between wild and domestic are blurred, as wild animals are to some extent incorporated into forms of “hollow domestication” produced through techno-scientific management and forms of bureaucratisation (Brighenti and Pavoni, 2018). Understanding these conflicts is crucial in contexts where rewilding efforts are taking place, as the success of rewilding plans depends on how they are perceived and interpreted by local communities (Herrero et al., 2021). Moreover, in contexts where reintroduction is occurring, such challenges multiply, and conflict can escalate rapidly as local residents and farmers may not be used to the coexistence of humans and large carnivores. In Trentino, for example, while such a conflict had gradually been increasing over a number of years, it remained relatively latent until April 2023, when a young local man was killed by a female bear with cubs while he was running in an area near his village.³ Since then, the

conflict regarding human–bear coexistence has flared up quickly, revealing a socio-political dimension.

In the management of conflict between humans and bears, people’s knowledge about these carnivores and their biology is critical, especially in areas where there is rewilding, reintroduction, considerable anthropisation, and the presence of farming activities. Knowledge enables local dwellers and farmers to take all necessary preventive measures to avoid, as much as possible, conflictual situations, such as attacks, livestock depredation, and damage to crops. This can increase the likelihood of positive coexistence. To this end, communication and collaboration between stakeholders are central to promoting positive human–bear coexistence (Sakurai, 2021). The prevention of conflict depends, among other things, on public awareness and education (Can, 2021), as well as on balanced public communication of the benefits, risks, and control measures associated with bear presence (Slagle et al., 2013). As some research has shown, the degree of acceptance of bears is linked to perceptions of the risks and effects of their presence (Siemer et al., 2023), as well as to people’s trust in conservation policies and their management (Kaczensky et al., 2004; Sakurai and Jacobson, 2011; Sakurai et al., 2013; Herrero et al., 2021).

In this context, journalism plays a critical role as its functions include informing citizens and contributing to the development of deliberative public spheres (Hanitzsch, 2017). Conservation scholars have recently pointed towards the crucial role that the news media can play in determining people’s knowledge of and attitudes towards wildlife, to the point of claiming that the news media constitutes one of the four major actors in conservation processes, the other three being scientists, policymakers, and the public (Papworth et al., 2015).

When talking about large carnivores such as bears, the news media are relevant not only because of their well-known role in influencing public opinion, and even management decisions (Fernández-Gil et al., 2016) but also because most people do not usually interact with large predators and therefore rely on external sources of information about them (Bombieri et al., 2018). Some studies have found that the news media coverage of bears tends to be episodic, oversimplified, conflict-oriented, polarising, and focused on “negative” events, such as attacks, killings, and predation (Siemer et al., 2007; Kaczensky et al., 2001; Sakurai et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2020; Neagu et al., 2022; Berti and Castelló, 2024). Ecological and conservation matters, statistics, and scientific knowledge are rarely presented in media reports (Siemer et al., 2007; Sakurai et al., 2013; Nanni et al., 2024). Wildlife experts are seldom quoted as sources of information in news content, with institutional or political sources, or animal rights activists, being preferred instead (Sakurai et al., 2013; Berti and Castelló, 2024). Moreover, according to a recent study, journalistic content of this kind is often also reproduced on social media, reinforcing a bias towards a negative and sensationalistic view of large carnivores (Nanni et al., 2020).

Research also points towards the potential for the media to influence perceptions of risk, which has implications for how wildlife management should design communication campaigns and structure their relationship with the media (Gore et al., 2005; Gore and Knuth, 2009).

Considering such findings, conservation scholars have suggested the need for experts, practitioners, and wildlife managers to reinforce their engagement and cooperation with journalists to improve the quality of news about human–large carnivore coexistence and to counter the spread of biased information (Bombieri et al., 2018; Nanni et al., 2024).

Despite the importance of this topic, there remains a lack of research in this area. In addition, most studies on the media

²Ufficio Stampa della Provincia Autonoma di Trento, “Tre trentini su quattro contrari alla presenza dell’orso”, COMUNICATO no. 2040, 3 August 2024 (<https://www.ufficiostampa.provincia.tn.it/content/view/pdf/258578>). Last accessed 24 January 2025.

³“Bear kills runner in northern Italy”, ANSA, 6 April 2023 (https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2023/04/06/bear-kills-runner-in-northern-italy_2f346474-7aeb-40f4-abf9-6df7329dd35a.html). Last accessed 24 January 2025.

coverage of bears refer to the global or national level, whereas local media coverage might be a more relevant influence on human–wildlife coexistence. For this reason, some have called for further investigation of media reports on this topic at the local level (Bombieri et al., 2018: 583).

In this article, we focus on the local media coverage of bears in the Italian Province of Trento, where the reintroduction of brown bears has generated a conflict that is not limited to human–bear coexistence, but also has a broader socio-political dimension. Adopting a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we analyse the online media coverage of bears over a single year, to disentangle the structure of the public debate as represented by local journalism. Through our analysis, we wish to understand *a*) how the journalistic coverage of bears is structured at the local level, *b*) what the main voices represented in the media debate about bears are, and *c*) what the main frames of this coverage are. Overall, we aim to understand the macro- and micro-dynamics of the local media coverage of bears and to outline potential challenges and issues in media representations of human–bear coexistence.

Methodology

Our analysis centres on the local newspaper *L'Adige*. According to data from Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa (ADS), *L'Adige* is by far the most widely circulated local media outlet in the Province of Trento (estimated population of about 545,000⁴), with an average circulation, in 2023, of 14,270 daily copies.⁵ However, we choose to focus on online articles, rather than the print newspaper, since most people currently inform themselves online,⁶ and *L'Adige*'s online content is free to read for anyone, and thus is readily available even to readers without a subscription. According to data from Audicom,⁷ in November 2024, *L'Adige*'s website had an average daily digital audience of 62,688 unique visitors and a monthly digital audience of 994,577. While focusing on the online version of a single newspaper has limitations (for instance, we do not investigate TV or radio coverage), it enables us to focus on journalistic content that we know is consumed mostly by local readers. We searched all articles containing the word “orso” (bear) in its main variations (masculine and feminine, singular and plural) published in 2024, and then manually eliminated all entries that did not focus on bears. This led to a final sample of 375 articles. It is possible that some articles were left out of the final sample, perhaps because they were only published in the print version. However, we assume that this sample is representative of *L'Adige*'s online coverage of bears during 2024.

Several studies on the media coverage of large predators, particularly bears, make broad use of quantification. Quantitative content analysis can employ strategies such as word counting and the quantification of originally qualitative data (e.g., analysing the tone of articles through useful techniques like sentiment analysis). Though quantitative analyses tend to perform better in reliability

calculations and facilitate the reproduction of a study, they limit the extent to which the analysis of journalistic content can delve into nuances and details. In our opinion, the features of our case study require a mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis to fully disentangle the dynamics at work. Therefore, we choose to focus on analysing the sources of quotes in the articles (which can be quantified rather easily), coupled with analysing the framing of the articles.

According to Entman (1993: 55), framing “essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text [...]”. For example, journalistic texts on bear culls can focus on their conservation aspects, the controversies that they generate among local socio-political forces, or the legal battle pursued by certain animal rights associations to stop the culls. While the topic would be the same in each case, the way it is framed will vary and, as a consequence, give salience to a particular perspective on the interpretation of the problem, its causes and consequences, and its evaluation (Entman, 1993).

Through in-depth reading of the dataset and with the help of previous literature (Van Gorp, 2010), we generated four main issue-specific frames (and a set of subframes). These are described in detail in [Supplementary Annex B](#). These frames are characterised by specific lexical choices, keywords, stock phrases, the choice of sources and quotes, and narrative and rhetorical devices (Linström and Marais, 2012). The structure of a newspaper article is hierarchical, with the headline and subheading usually containing the information considered most important and setting its tone. Thus, in coding for the main frame, we looked initially at the headline; if the headline was ambiguous, we considered the subheading and, if the ambiguity persisted, we considered the first paragraphs as more important than the subsequent ones (Trumbo, 1996). Using the ReCal2 online tool, we conducted an intercoder reliability check (Freelon, 2010) for the frames on a subsample of articles ($n = 40$, > 10%; 2 coders), obtaining satisfactory results (percent agreement: 90%; Krippendorff's Alpha: 0.829).

To summarise, we coded all identifiable direct and indirect quotes in the articles according to the following categories for the source of the quote: national political actor; local political actor; EU-level political actor; animal rights or environmentalist actor; institutional actor; judiciary; expert actor; local dweller; farmer/breeder/beekeeper; other sources.

Moreover, we coded each article according to the following frames: socio-political frame; judicial frame; conservation frame (subframes: communication and education; damage prevention and control; management of critical situations and problematic bears; monitoring)⁸; human–bear interaction frame (subframes: encounter/sighting with no physical interaction; encounter with physical interaction; accident; damage; dead bear; killing).

It should be specified that coding the sources of quotes can, in some cases, be challenging. For instance, some activists who are members of environmentalist non-government organisations (NGOs) may also be conservation experts and may work in public institutions. Likewise, some politicians may also be members of NGOs or institutional bodies. In all ambiguous cases, we chose to

⁴Ispat Comunicazioni, “La popolazione al 1° gennaio 2024 in Trentino - Dati provvisori”, May 2024 (http://www.statistica.provincia.tn.it/binary/pat_statistica_new/popolazione/Popolazione1Gennaio2024InTrentinoDatiProvvisori.1714640232.pdf). Last accessed 25 January 2025.

⁵<https://www.adsnotizie.it/Home/Index>. Last accessed 20 December 2024.

⁶Pew Research Centre, *News Platform Fact Sheet*, 17 September 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>). Last accessed 24 January 2025.

⁷Audiweb Database, “Sintesi dei dati Novembre 2024”, <https://www.audiweb.it/dati/sintesi-dei-dati-novembre2024.html>. Last accessed 23 January 2025.

⁸These categories were partially drawn up by PACOBACE, the official document regulating bear conservation management in the Italian Alps. See: *Piano d'Azione interregionale per la Conservazione dell'Orso bruno nelle Alpi centro-orientali* – PACOBACE. Quad. Cons. Natura, 33, Min. Ambiente – ISPRA (https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/files/publicazioni/quaderni/conservazione-natura/files/Qua_CN_32_10_PACOBACE.pdf). Last accessed 30 January 2025.

categorise sources according to how they were prevalently identified in the news media content under analysis. For instance, in 2024, Michela Vittoria Brambilla was both a Member of Parliament and a key figure within the animal rights NGO Leidaa: we chose to code her as a national politician as this was how she was mainly identified in the majority of articles that mentioned her. Finally, when coding quotations, one should acknowledge that journalists might also draw and use information from other sources that are not overtly quoted or mentioned (see Rupar, 2006). Thus, what we analyse here is not the sources of information of journalistic content, but rather those voices that are explicitly identified and legitimised in the public debate conducted through the news media.

We also conducted a quantitative analysis of the distribution of articles over time to identify peaks and their significance in the overall media coverage of bears. Furthermore, we used examples and extracts from the dataset to investigate some relevant micro-dynamics of the media coverage.

We conducted the analysis with the aid of the software Atlas.ti. Quotes and extracts were translated into English by the first author; original quotes can be found in the original articles listed in [Supplementary Annex A](#) (each article has been assigned an identification code, i.e., A1, A2, A3, etc.).

Results

Macro-dynamics of media coverage: human–bear coexistence as a socio-political struggle

The first striking finding is undoubtedly the overall number of online articles published during 2024: 375. To establish a comparison, a study conducted with the same keywords and on the online version of the same newspaper for the year 2022 resulted in only 49 articles (Berti and Castelló, 2024). Most likely, this is due to the

increased attention to the topic generated by the death of a local man due to a bear attack in April 2023. Another study (Scillitani, 2023) identified the trend of an increase in news about bears in *L'Adige* over the period 1990–2019 (although in that case, the research focuses on the print version), with a peak in 2014. However, even at the highest peak of coverage identified in Scillitani's study, only 80 articles were counted. Thus, we can conclude that bears have become increasingly relevant in the local public debate and, therefore, in the news media, and that this relevance rapidly spiked after the trigger event of the killing of a local man.

Figure 1 helps us answer the first research question about the structure of journalistic coverage at the local level. As the figure shows, coverage is uneven, being characterised by peaks and troughs. These peaks tend to correspond to particular events: the culling of three bears (M90, KJ1, and M91); two physical interactions in which a bear wounded a person; a bear sighting near a village; and the approval of a local bill (*disegno di legge*) that allows the culling of a maximum of eight bears each year, under certain conditions. These fluctuations are not surprising, as media coverage tends to increase around controversial and uncommon events. In these moments, public attention towards the topic increases as well, thus rendering these events potentially crucial for the development of a public debate. Therefore, it is interesting to look at this particular media coverage by considering the voices heard through the media and the specific frames given to news content.

Figure 2 provides answers to the second research question: namely, what are the main voices represented in the media debate about bears? Politicians (local and national) and activists (animal rights and environmentalists) account for over two-thirds (68%) of all the quotes present in the dataset. Despite the centrality of EU policies and funding instruments in the management of bears in Trentino, European political actors are completely absent. The President of the Province (Maurizio Fugatti, right-wing) and the

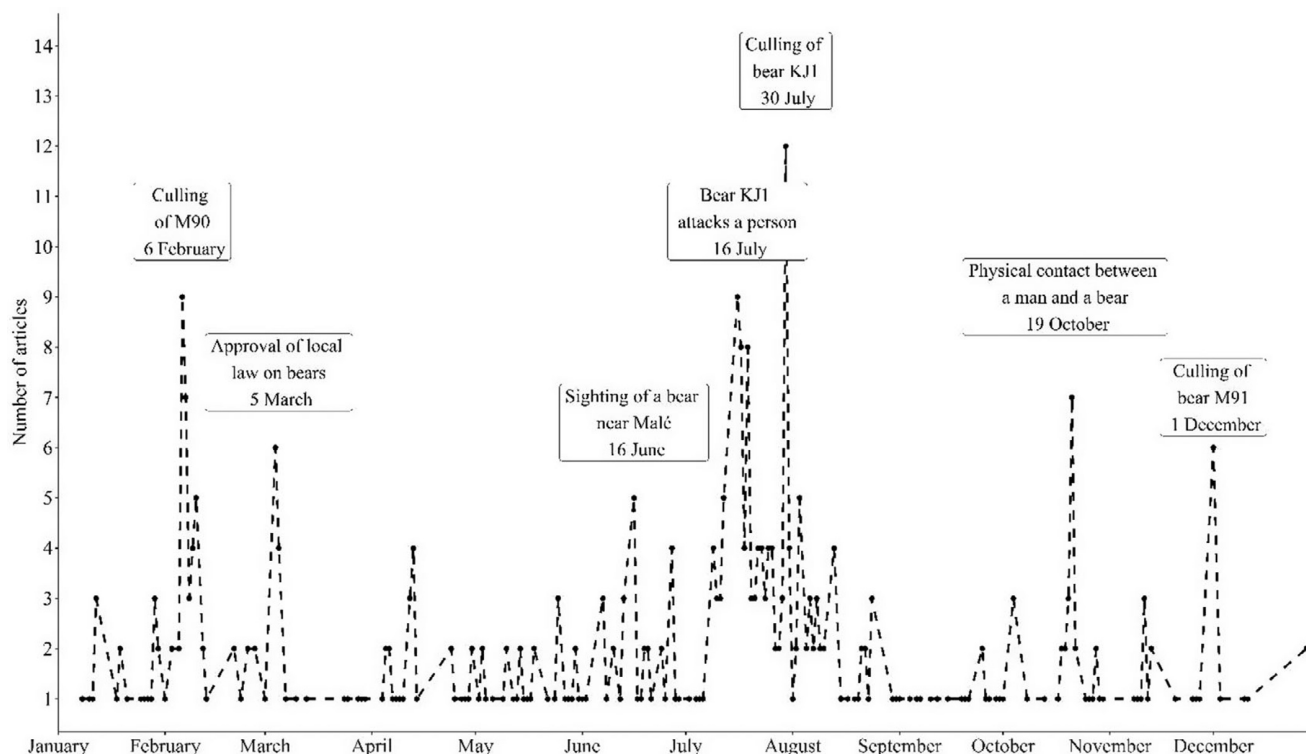


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of L'Adige online articles about bears in 2024.

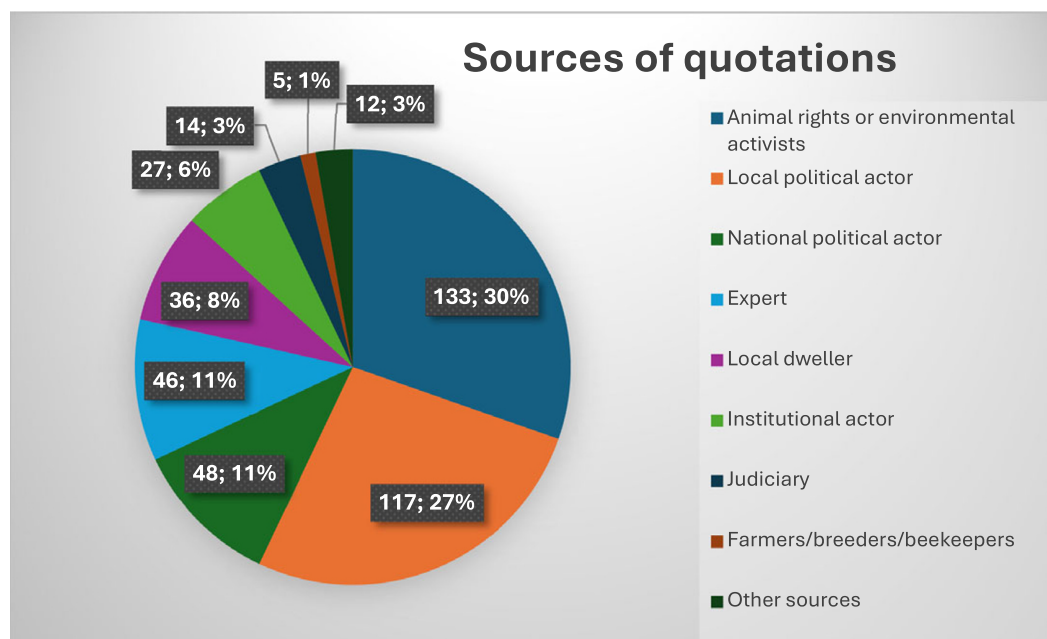


Figure 2. Sources of direct and indirect quotations within the articles surveyed (percentages refer to the total number of quotations) (2024).

Assessor for Crafts, Trade, Tourism, Forestry, Hunting and Fisheries (Roberto Failoni) account for 50 of the 117 quotes of local politicians, while among national politicians the most present are the Minister of the Environment and Energy Security, Gilberto Pichetto Fratin, and the two MPs Michaela Biancofiore (centre-right) and Michela Vittoria Brambilla (centre-right and President of animal rights NGO Leidaa). Among the 48 quotes from national politicians, only six are not from right-wing politicians. As for local politicians, a plethora of local council members and mayors are quoted, though none of them is quoted more than three times throughout the year.

Experts are quoted only 46 times (11%). In 10 cases, quotations come from the *Dipartimento protezione civile, foreste e fauna* (Civil Protection, Forestry and Fauna Department) of the Province, in six cases they come from specialist texts (e.g., scientific reports), in eight cases they come from parks, and in five cases they come from the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA). Zoologists and veterinarians are quoted a few times.

Local residents are also rarely quoted. They are explicitly quoted 36 times (8%), but a more in-depth look at the dataset shows that most of these quotes come from three specific groups: 13 from the family of Andrea Papi, the man killed by a bear in 2023 (mostly his father, but also his mother and girlfriend); 10 from the “*Comitato Insieme per Andrea Papi*,” a civil society organisation created after the death of Papi and aimed at supporting Papi’s family as well as promoting a “radical revision of the “Life Ursus” project to guarantee the safety of the population and the protection of traditions and lifestyles whose implementation is prevented by the situation that has arisen”⁹; and 10 from people who either had an interaction (sighting or physical contact) with a bear or experienced some kind of bear-related damage. The other three quotations are from a

representative of a local mountaineer association, a local artist, and a small local association.

Even more notably, the farming sector (a central stakeholder in human–bear coexistence) is heard from only five times (1%), much less than institutional sources and the judiciary.

Figure 3 answers our third research question about the dominant frames in *L’Adige*’s coverage of bears. Our analysis shows a rather pronounced imbalance, with socio-political frames dominating. Combined with judicial frames, which usually represent the consequences of socio-political conflict (as they are linked to legal struggles between activists and local institutions, as well as to legal action aimed at stopping management measures such as capturing or culling bears), they suggest that the dominant framing of human–bear coexistence is socio-political/judicial. Frames related to conservation and human–bear interaction are less common. Among them, the most frequent is related to the management of critical situations and problem bearers. A closer look at this sub-frame shows that most of these articles focus on culling or capturing bears (with only a few exceptions discussing sterilisation and dissuasion measures). Some articles also focus on communication and education about bears (e.g., reports on local wildlife, expert opinions and interviews, and a new documentary on human–bear coexistence in Trentino), and a similar number of news items deal with encounters or sightings with no physical interaction, demonstrating that such encounters, despite being rather predictable and usually without consequences, are considered relevant news. Despite the relevance (both in terms of economic consequences and perceived level of conflict) of bear-related damage to crops, breeding farms, and beekeeping stations, the two frames related to “damage prevention and control” and “damages” produced by bears are rare, appearing in 14 and seven articles, respectively.

Micro-dynamics of media coverage: imbalance, polarisation, and fragmentation

Figure 2 shows that the sources of quotations in the articles are unbalanced, with a bias towards political actors and animal rights/

⁹“Proporre tutte le iniziative possibili per una radicale revisione del progetto “Life Ursus” al fine di garantire la sicurezza della popolazione e la tutela delle tradizioni e stili di vita la cui attuazione è impedita dalla situazione venutasi a creare”. Source: www.insiemeperandreapapi.it. Last accessed on 16 January 2025.

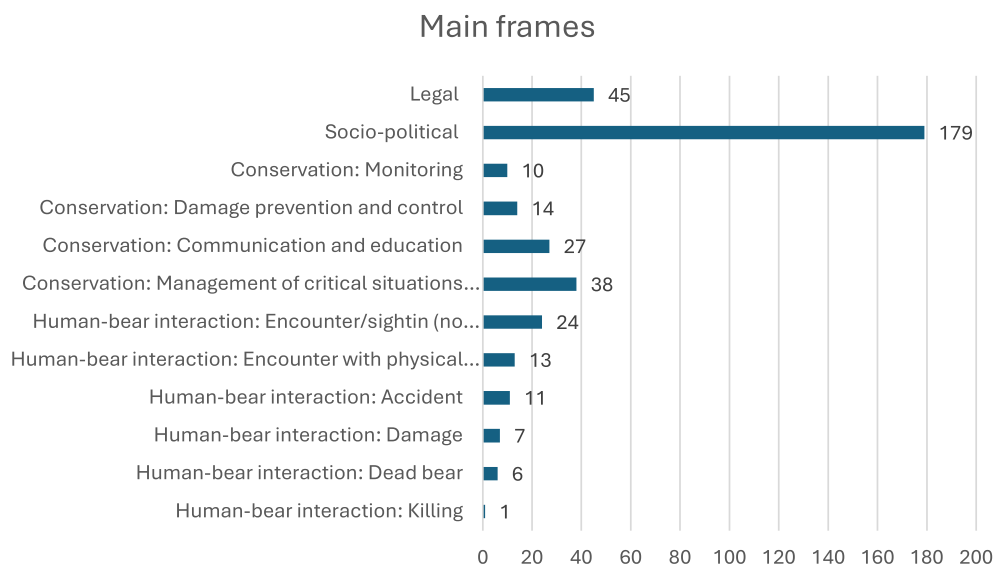


Figure 3. Distribution of articles' main frames (2024).

environmentalist organisations and with very little space given to experts (especially researchers and academics), and even less to local people and the farming and livestock sectors. This asymmetry alone could produce an unbalanced public debate, where some stakeholders hold limited discursive power, while others (in this case, politicians and activists) dominate the public sphere. However, to further understand this imbalance, it is necessary to delve into an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the coverage of bears and the use of quotations. In the dynamics of the news media, the most relevant – and usually most impactful – content is produced in response to events that attract a higher level of public attention, likely because of their particular or controversial nature. In our case, these moments correspond to the peaks identified in Figure 1.

The first peak is on 6 and 7 July, when bear M90 was culled. In those two days, 16 articles were published online. Sources quoted include local politicians (10), national politicians (four), activists (six), a local dweller (Carlo Papi, the father of the person killed by a bear in 2023), and another five sources from the world of journalism and sport. After a couple of articles quoting extracts from the culling decree, the debate proceeds with attacks from various NGOs towards the President of the Province as well as some prominent politicians (e.g., Minister Pichetto Fratin and MP Brambilla) criticising the decision to kill M90. Other local politicians are quoted defending the decision. One article quotes the football team “Pescara Calcio” (a team from another part of Italy, Abruzzo, home of the Apennine Brown Bear) criticising the cull and, finally, some space is given to a story about a journalist from the national broadcaster RAI who announced her decision to cancel a report from Trentino to protest the killing of M90. No scientist or expert is quoted, and even local residents (except for Carlo Papi) remain marginal in the debate. The tone is sometimes sombre as activists talk about the “massacre of Trentino bears” (A29), and local politicians define the cull as “brutal” (A34) and “an unprecedented act of short-sightedness, arrogance and cruelty” (A32).

Another peak corresponds to a man being attacked by a bear (later identified as KJ1, a female with cubs) in the woods on 16 July. In the four days after the event, 29 articles were published. Quotations include 12 from local politicians, 11 from activists, five from national politicians, four from local residents (in two cases it is again Carlo Papi, while the third is the man who was attacked and

the fourth is a local biker who had an unrelated encounter with a bear in the same period), two from the judiciary, two from experts (a veterinarian, and a local forestry manager), one from an institution, and one from the farming sector. Once again, the prominence of political actors and activists is evident. While in this case two experts are quoted (the veterinarian is interviewed extensively in an article about the event), the debate remains skewed towards a socio-political struggle centred on reciprocal criticism and attacks among local and national politicians as well as an ongoing socio-legal battle between the Province and several associations who had tried to stop (temporarily) the killing of KJ1 by appealing to the regional administrative tribunal (TAR). In some cases, the debate takes on a heavy and assertive tone, with local politicians claiming that “the project [of bear reintroduction] is not compatible with reality” (A192), or that “[We made] Trentino dangerous for its own people [...]” and “[...] more bear culling and more bear capturing is needed immediately, there is no time to lose before an evidently already deteriorated situation gets completely out of hand [...]” (A194). One article’s headline (A200) describes the “rage of the animal rights activists,” quoting associations talking of “persecution,” “bear-killing laws,” “bear slaughter,” “provincial councillors extolling the culling,” “senseless and violent retaliation against bears.”

Several days later, on 30 July, another peak was reached when KJ1 was killed in accordance with a decision by the Province. On that day, 12 articles were published online. Quotes come from animal rights activists (nine), local politicians (four), national politicians (four), institutions (two), and experts (two). Expert quotes include one report cited in the culling decree by the Province and two from a representative of ISPRA (the already mentioned Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research), who talks about the chances of KJ1’s cubs surviving and the possibility of managing bear attacks by sterilising aggressive females. Overall, the coverage is largely focused on the cull (with extracts from the decree, and reports about the killing of the bear) and on the subsequent socio-political struggle. A national politician claims to be “outraged, disheartened, upset, concerned” for a bear “led to the gallows, hooded, just like an executioner would do to show no mercy [...]” (A255). An animal rights activist based in Rome is reported yelling “Fugatti – murderer!” during a violent action (A259). Associations talk about Fugatti’s “ursicidal obsession” and “anti-bear strategy” (A250).

Looking at these three peaks, we see that experts are quoted merely five times, and local residents (except for a few individuals who are not representative of the population) and the farming sector are nearly absent. While these groups are core stakeholders in human–bear coexistence, and while experts are the main holders of scientific knowledge related to the risks, possibilities, and challenges of coexistence, they are structurally left at the margins of the media debate. The debate is dominated by political actors (mainly at the local level, but partially also at the national level) and activists, who represent the main sources of quotations throughout the year and during the peaks. What seems to get the most attention is the struggle – often conducted through legal action, aggressive language, and assertive statements – between local politicians and local activists. Moreover, in many cases, the different opinions of these actors are not integrated and presented in a balanced and complete article, but rather are fragmented and spread across more articles published throughout the day or over several days. Around the time of the first anniversary of Andrea Papi's death, for instance, several articles were produced (A81 to A87), each of them containing single sources of quotations: Papi's parents (three articles) and girlfriend (one article), local institutional actors (two articles), and an animal rights association (one article). Although this coverage gives voice to different relevant actors, the chance of constructing an integrated narrative over such a crucial moment seems to have been missed. In other cases, the fragmentation appears to be linked to an even harsher tone and juxtapositions of ideas. For example, on the same day that a man was attacked by a bear (16 July), several reactions were reported online, with each article containing the responses of a particular category: the farming sector (A190), animal rights associations (A191), local politics (A192), national politicians (A194), the local administration (A195), and a short explanation of the situation by the local forestry management (A193). Although there is a degree of balance of sources in the coverage, its structural development fragments the coverage since we find several articles with a specific focus on a single category (rather than one or two articles integrating a mix of information and opinions). This fragmentation potentially contributes to polarisation and reduces clarity. The usual pattern of print newspaper reporting – a small number of articles, usually appearing on the same page, integrating all available and relevant information into a coherent story – is lost in the online coverage (although there are, in many cases, links to related articles). Thus, to fully understand the story and the public debate surrounding it, readers must find and read several articles, constructing their own narrative through the fragmented material. Balance and diversification are often lost within a single article. For instance, article A203 reports a senator's response to a statement by an animal rights association, but we are given no information about the previous statements by this association. The article is made up of quotes from a press note by the senator, with no context except a brief explanation of who this person is.

The tendency to generate articles by simply using excerpts from one or more press releases, without proper contextualisation, is evident in several articles: A156 reproduces parts of a press release by the Province, with no contextualisation, comment, or explanation; article A157 includes a press release by ENPA, an animal rights association, criticising the Province, with no context, comment, explanation, or response by the attacked institution; article A159 reports on a poster campaign by two associations, by simply using their press release, with no explanation of the campaign whatsoever (except a photo of the posters, and a mention of the campaign in the title); articles A199 and A205 use press releases by two national politicians, both criticising the Province's President,

Fugatti, without offering any context or response by Fugatti, and the same occurs in article A221, where a press release by an animal rights association is used. Article A317 reports a press release by a local association with a very critical stance on bear reintroduction, attacking a prominent bear expert (Piero Genovesi of ISPRA), but there is no response by Genovesi, nor any indication that he had declined to respond. There are some exceptions to this dynamic, such as article A225, which focuses on a legal battle to stop the killing of KJ1 by the Province. In this article, many voices are heard, including the judiciary, animal rights associations, and local and national politicians, but the emerging narrative remains one of juxtaposition and polarisation between positions, and the voices of scientists and rural communities are not heard.

Finally, some other microdynamics in the local coverage of bears deserve attention. In some cases, word use points to a risk of sensationalism. On 27 April, a close encounter (with no contact or other consequences) between a man and a bear in the forest is reported in an article with the headline "Fear at high altitude: a close encounter with a bear for a hiker in Molveno" (A102); the following day, an article on a car accident involving a bear (with no major consequences) is titled "Scare in Valle di Cavedine: a bear is hit by a car" and starts with the words "An evening of fear yesterday, 27 April, in Valle di Cavedine" (A103). In other cases, the news value of particular events is questionable. Article A229 reports on a bear cub sighted near a street, but it is mainly based on a Facebook post by provincial councillor Claudio Cia, who exploits the event to attack animal rights activists. The article reports a rather normal event (the sighting of a bear cub in an area with a bear presence) and gives visibility to the social media post of a single politician making general claims about safety.

Discussion and conclusion

Since the beginning of the EU-funded bear reintroduction project in Trentino, there has been a trend of growing local media coverage of bears (Scillitani, 2023). However, our research shows a radical change in 2024 compared to previous years, with a sharp increase in the online news coverage of the newspaper *L'Adige* that is most likely explained by the death, in 2023, of a local resident in an attack by a bear. This offers a useful case study for investigating the evolution of the media debate over bear reintroduction and human–bear coexistence during a crucial moment when clear conflicts emerged and several local actors were faced with the need to take a stance and, in some cases, to develop policies that were expected to shape future dynamics of coexistence and the success or failure of the rewilding project.

As the news media are considered crucial for the success of such projects (Papworth et al., 2015). Due to their capacity to spread information and knowledge, as well as to shape the agenda and tone of public debate, local journalism might play the most important role, as it is mostly directed at those local communities that find themselves cohabiting with bears.

However, our analysis depicts a far from ideal situation. Our results show a media debate shaped by local and national political sources and by a plethora of animal rights and environmental associations. These are all, of course, legitimate and important sources. However, the dynamic of this debate is often characterised by a polarised struggle: local administrators defend their management decisions, usually skewed towards attempts to reduce the bear population (by culling or capturing several individuals), while other local and national politicians harshly criticise these decisions. Activists oppose most decisions by the local administration, both by voicing

dissent (sometimes aggressively) and by conducting legal battles to stop culls and to influence management choices. The major local newspaper covers these events and offers a platform that reproduces the discourse of political actors and activists alike. At the same time, other relevant stakeholders are relegated to the margins of the public debate, as represented in the news media. Experts, local residents, and especially the farming sector are rarely heard in the analysed articles, and their absence is particularly evident during the news peaks that occur around crucial events for the discussion of coexistence.

This exclusion can result in potentially negative effects on the development of successful coexistence. As previous research has noted (Nanni et al., 2024; Berti and Castelló, 2024), the marginalisation of experts, scientists, and rural communities is a recurring phenomenon in this and other locations, such as the Pyrenees, where bears have been reintroduced.

Moreover, previous research has pinpointed the tendency of Italian journalism to favour “sources located within a power structure” (Splendore, 2020: 992) and politicians’ statements (Cornia, 2014). This might lead to political actors strongly influencing the agenda, as well as the tone and frames, of news.

As our results show, through a mix of press releases, social media communication, legal actions, protests, and, in some cases, disruptive actions, several animal rights and environmental organisations succeed in getting media coverage, but other, less organised stakeholders struggle to be represented. Local and national documentary productions are seen to partially compensate for this imbalance, by offering a space for local dwellers, rural workers, and scientists to voice their opinion and contribute to the public debate (see for instance “*La frequentazione dell’orso*,” by Federico Betta, and “*Pericolosamente vicini*,” by Andreas Pichler). However, our research shows that during a full year of online coverage, these actors find little space in the most circulated local outlet, and are eminently absent during crucial events (such as interactions, attacks, and culls). The absence of the voice of these actors can generate frustration, especially in a context where bear reintroduction has been conducted under the direction of scientists and experts, and where local communities have had to learn to live with bears without feeling able to properly voice their concerns and receive proper answers. Between the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, several local communities organised public consultations to express their concerns about coexistence. While highly controversial, these actions suggest a need to further engage with locals, not only at a political and administrative level but also by increasing their opportunity to participate in the mediated public debate.

Moreover, over-reliance on political and activist sources generates polarisation, driven by some particularly aggressive words and campaigns by certain associations, as well as by a provincial administration led by a political party (the far-right League) known for its populist communication style (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). As a result, the debate is dominated by a socio-political frame focused on the battle between the local administration and activists, or between local politicians and national politicians, who are depicted as detached from the local reality. European politics is completely absent, despite its prominent role both in funding rewilding and conservation projects and in determining the possibilities of local policies regarding bears. This might increase, among the local population, a sense of distance between policies designed and implemented in Brussels and their consequences at the local level.

Despite this being a long-standing feature of Italian journalism (see Tiffen et al., 2014), the reliance on a single source in several articles contributes to generating fragmented and polarised narratives.

We do not know exactly what drives these dynamics of journalistic coverage. Based on existing literature in journalism studies, however, we can make several hypotheses that would need to be tested in the future through, for instance, ethnographic research in newsrooms or interviews with journalists. These dynamics are probably the result of multiple factors. The first is the imbalance of power (mostly in terms of economic and political resources, and visibility) between political actors and organised associations, vis-à-vis citizens and local workers, or scientists and experts. Politicians can rely on public relations offices, and they are often major sources of news and quotes for local journalism (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008). NGOs can usually also rely on organised public relations, as well as on the visibility of protests and legal actions (Scheuch et al., 2024). Citizens, instead, seem to get access to the media only if they are directly involved in encounters with bears, or if they manage to organise themselves (such as the *Comitato Insieme per Andrea Papi*, established to voice concerns about the rewilding project after the death of Andrea Papi). This, however, may generate further polarisation, as these particular citizens tend to have rather radical opinions (often negative) towards bears.

As for scientists, a possible explanation of their relative absence in the media coverage is suggested by a study conducted in Romania through interviews with journalists: while recognising the fundamental role of experts as sources of information, journalists claim that contacting them can be time-consuming and that scientists are often unavailable or use language that is considered too complex for the general public (Salcudean et al., 2025). We do not know if these reasons apply, either wholly or partially, to our case study, and further research is needed to unpack and understand the dynamics at work.

We do know, however, that in many areas of the world, local journalism is experiencing a crisis, with shuttered print newspapers, the appearance of “news deserts,” and the transfer of local news mostly online (Royal and Napoli, 2022; Harte et al., 2018). This crisis has led to dwindling economic resources for local news, time constraints, high workloads, and under-resourced newsrooms (Hayes and Lawless, 2018; Hendrickson, 2019). Italian local journalism, including in the Province of Trento, has not been immune to this crisis, as some local newspapers have closed their print versions and moved fully online.¹⁰ *L’Adige* itself has gradually seen the circulation of its print edition decrease over the years. The increasing relevance of online journalism is usually accompanied by changes in journalism practices, with the growing importance of metrics (and thus of single articles over full editions) and more reliance on external sources such as press agencies and press releases (Thurman and Myllylahti, 2009). We have seen in our analysis that articles are often constructed by making large use of press releases, press notes, social media content, and other public relations documents. While politicians and associations tend to use these instruments with high frequency, thus offering journalists plenty of readily available materials, scientists are less used to communicating in this manner. Moreover, in the heated socio-political climate of Trentino, we may ask if scientists prefer to avoid entering the public debate entirely or, as they often work for public bodies linked to politics, if they feel subject to pressures.

¹⁰Pietrobelli, G., “Il quotidiano Nuovo Trentino chiude dopo neanche un anno. I sindacati dei giornalisti: ‘Rammarico e preoccupazione’”, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 3 August 2023 (<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/08/03/il-quotidiano-nuovo-trentino-chiude-dopo-neanche-un-anno-i-sindacati-dei-giornalisti-rammarico-e-preoccupazione/7249709/>). Last accessed 28 January 2025.

To conclude, a reflection is in order on the current state of journalism in general. Lack of economic resources, time constraints, the need to generate traffic, and perhaps even the lack of expertise, can all play a role in the media coverage of human–bear coexistence. Previous research (Siemer et al., 2007; Kaczensky et al., 2001; Sakurai et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2020; Neagu et al., 2022) has shown that journalists prefer to report on controversial and negative episodes, such as encounters and attacks, and that this increases the negative coverage of large carnivores. Scientists are rarely heard, even in other contexts, such as Romania (Neagu et al., 2022) or Japan (Sakurai et al., 2013). More research is needed to unpack and disentangle the multiplicity of factors that lead to such coverage. Nevertheless, what is clear is that this type of coverage is far from ideal, as it leads to polarisation, oversimplification, fragmentation, and the marginalisation of important voices. Politicians might claim to speak in the name of the people, but their press releases, declarations, and culling decrees cannot substitute a really deliberative public sphere. Journalism could, in this sense, become a platform not just for factual, complete and impartial information, but also for the exchange of ideas – a platform where all stakeholders can voice their concerns, and can debate possible solutions, and where scientists and experts can present their knowledge and respond to the needs of rural communities. On such a platform, bears, who are unable to speak for themselves, could be transformed from strangers into real cohabitants.

Of course, it should be remembered that our analysis has focused on the online version of a single media outlet, although a widely circulated and visited one. Other outlets might offer a different type of coverage. For example, the local online outlet *ilT Quotidiano* produced an eight-episode podcast on bears in Trentino with the participation of veterinarian Alessandro de Guelmi.¹¹ In the Central Apennines, another area of bear presence, local journalists' associations (Ordine dei Giornalisti) co-wrote, with the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise, the “Carta di Pescasseroli,”¹² a document containing “guidelines for environmental awareness in the journalistic profession,” encompassing coverage of the endangered Apennine Brown Bear. Collaboration between journalists and scientists, in various forms, such as the joint creation of guidelines or the co-creation of media content, is certainly a step in the right direction.

Despite the difficulties and the potential for controversy, citizens should be involved, to the maximum extent possible, in the media debate. Moreover, events and debates relating to this topic should be organised locally, and promoted in such a way as to maximise their possibility of reaching the news media. Journalists should participate in these events and report on them, in order to increase their reach.

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Data availability statement. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

¹¹ *ilT Quotidiano*, “L’orso nel bosco”, 2024 (<https://www.iltquotidiano.it/articoli/orso-nel-bosco-un-podcast-sui-grandi-carnivori-ep-1/>). Last accessed on 22 January 2025.

¹² “Carta di Pescasseroli - Linee guida per la consapevolezza ambientale nella professione giornalistica”, 13 December 2023 (<https://www.odg.abruzzo.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Carta-di-Pescasseroli.pdf>). Last accessed on 22 January 2025.

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