

Sounding the Horn:

Howling about the moral outrage of the politics of the Gray Wolf

Paul H. Veridian

Utah State University

SOUNDING THE HORN

In this paper I will show how through the use of a moral argument, the article titled “OR-7’s Sister Dies Grisly Death....” is used to persuade the audience about the moral outrage being perpetrated upon the gray wolf population by the state of Idaho. I will show how the author uses the tactics of vilify and ennoble, melodrama, naming, god and devil terms, and the tragic frame to get this done. The use of the moral argument creates moral outrage in the audience, which polarizes the issue.

The reintroduction of a virtually extinct apex predator to a small portion of its historical hunting grounds has been met with polarizing cultural divisions. The gray wolves reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), took to their ancestral hunting ground well, too well for some people. This has led to discussions with the USFWS to remove the protections across the entire country (Moore, 2014^a). Denny Iverson a Montana rancher states “I’ll make it perfectly clear. I’d just as soon these wolves weren’t on the landscape. It’d make my life a whole bunch easier” (As cited in Rott, 2014^a). “The animals had been hunted to extinction by 1926 in the park, which straddles Wyoming, Idaho and Montana” (Moore, 2014^b) however, “today, many consider the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction one of American conservation’s greatest success stories” (Nijhuis, 2014). Many believe the job is not done yet. While the number of wolves has exceeded the set limits for safe wolf populations (limits that must be maintained for a healthy pack to survive) in several Rocky Mountain States, including Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, their protection status needs to remain in tact for the rest of the country. With their numbers high enough for ‘safe’ removal of their protection status in these states, the gray wolves are once again being hunted and legally killed. Bruce Stell, an outdoorsman and hunter states that “the main reason I hunt wolves is because I’ve seen what they do to other animals. They’re killers. I want to do my part in managing them” (Rott², 2013).

SOUNDING THE HORN

While some people see wolves as killers others see them as something altogether majestic. Some of these people are considered by Taylor Phillips, “a Jackson-based lead naturalist guide and owner of Eco Tour Adventures, as ‘super-avid wolf fanatics’ [...] and that some wolf-watchers have moved to towns such as Bozeman and Livingston ‘so they can be close to Lamar Valley and their passion’” (Mishev, 2014).

The blog posting I reviewed “Howling for Justice” is by an individual named “Nabeki.” The author lives in the Northern Rockies, which is “ground zero for Wolf Wars.” The primary audience of the article is wolf supporters and wolf followers, who track wolves around the country and monitor their lives. The secondary audience would be citizens interested in understanding more about the polarizing politics of wolves. The article is both an informational post about the death of a wolf as well as a cry for action. The post gives context of importance, a call to action, and clearly frames the victims and villains inside of a moral argument.

Moral argument

The main thrust of this article is to bring about the recognition of the moral argument within the audience. Ettema and Glasser (1988) defined the moral argument as “the evocation of righteous indignation – indignation at the plight of victims who are, if not entirely innocent by [set] standards [...], at least innocent enough to make what happened to them an outrageous injustice, and also indignation at the demeanor of officials who are, if not guilty of criminal behavior, at least guilty of indifference and hypocrisy” (pg. 270). The author of the blog Nabeki states the innocence of the wolves being tortured and killed, stating they are guilty of nothing other than their inability to understand boundaries. The author also shows strong indignation towards the state of Idaho at-large as well as the Obama Administration because they “declared

SOUNDING THE HORN

war against [the wolf populations].” The author then calls to action the boycotting of Idaho and to “Speak Out!” as the author believes the events are “heart breaking” and unjust.

Through the use of social media as a platform for reporting and documenting what the author believes are “heart breaking” events in the Northern Rockies, the author is able to disseminate the information rapidly and broadly. Reporting and documenting is “the ability of ordinary citizens to document, report, or even expose conditions on the ground – to document their observations of the natural world or report environmental problems to others” (Cox, pg. 186). As the primary audience of the posting is wolf supporters and wolf followers, the authors embracing of social media as a platform to communicate the information on the ground is vitally important.

Vilify and Ennoble

The article’s main focus is to vilify the state of Idaho because of its hunting practices and to ennoble the cause of protecting wolves. To vilify is to formulate “specific adversarial opponents, casting them in an exclusively negative light, attributing diabolical motives to them and magnifying their power” while simultaneously ennobling your own cause (Lange, pg. 248). These criteria are met through the use of the author’s rhetoric, where the reader is given an impression of a state that allows off season hunting and trapping of wolves without repercussions. The author ennobles the cause of protecting wolves through the use of the vilification of the state of Idaho because of its hunting practices by stating the killing of the wolves that accidentally cross into the state are being tortured and are “suffer[ing] and dy[ing] for nothing.” While 89 countries have banned the practice of using leg snares and other inhumane traps, Idaho remains one of the last vestiges on the planet that these practices of “hunting”

SOUNDING THE HORN

remain legal. The author also uses the victimization of the wolves to further assist in the ennobling of the cause by stating that the wolves “innocently don’t understand boundaries” furthering the case for a moral argument to be made on behalf of the wolves.

Melodrama (Victims, Villains, and Heroes)

The author of the article presents the information in a melodramatic frame with the wolves as pure Victims, while simultaneously presenting themselves (the author) as also a victim, and the state of Idaho at-large as the Villain. Elisabeth Anker (2005) defines the cultural mode of melodrama as having five primary qualities. Those being:

- (a) a locus of moral virtue that is signified throughout the narrative by pathos and suffering and can be increased through heroic action; (b) the three characters of a ruthless villain, a suffering victim, and a heroic savior who can redeem the victim’s virtue through an act of retribution [...]; (c) dramatic polarizations of good and evil, which echo in the depictions of individuals and events; (d) a cyclical interaction of emotion and action meant to create suspense and resolve conflict; and (e) the use of images, sounds, gestures, and nonverbal communication to illuminate moral legibility as well as to encourage empathy for the victim and anger toward the villain (pg. 24).

The author presenting themselves as also a victim of the narrative in the text is clarified by Anker, stating that you do not just have to acknowledge the victims, that if you also feel the victims pain you “thus embodying the pathos necessary to become an empathic victim [yourself]” (pg. 34). The presentation of this idea that the author is also suffering from the loss of life is shown through the individualization of each wolf.

SOUNDING THE HORN

Naming

The use of naming by the author to clearly define who the villain is and who the victims are, continues the melodramatic framing of the moral argument. Cox defines naming as “the means by which we socially represent objects or people and therefore know the world, including the natural world” (pg. 61, 2013). By continuously naming the state of Idaho as “the wolf killing state of Idaho” while not shaming any other state mentioned by name, i.e. Oregon, Washington, the audience is given a clear villain. The audience is also given the names of the victims, OR-9 and OR-5, brother and sister to “Iconic Oregon wolf, OR-7.” Tracked wolves are given numbers rather than names, though extremely popular wolves are also given nicknames (Mishev, 2014). By referring to OR-5 by name throughout the story, the narrative becomes more personal. When we are given her history, family lineage, and told that she is the sister of the “Iconic OR-7”, the narrator is creating an ethos about this wolf for the audience. When we are told of her death and how she suffered just like her brother by the same villain, the author is hoping to evoke the sense of moral outrage in the reader about their deaths.

God and Devil terms / Tragic frame

The article is laden with Devil terms while the usage of god terms is reserved for very few instances. “*God terms* carry blessings, demand sacrifice and obedience. e.g. progress, value” (Weaver, 1953). The author uses the following god terms, exclusively when talking about wolves: Sweet; Iconic; Right decision; Innocent; Little; and World-renowned and beloved (x2). “*Devil terms* are reviled and evoke disgust. E.g. fascist, pedophile” (Weaver, 1953). The author uses the following Devil terms all of which refer to the treatment of wolves: Grisly Death; Killing state (x2); Die(s)/Died (x6); Killed (x7); Poached; Banned; Lives are worth nothing; Life

SOUNDING THE HORN

snuffed out; Cruellest of ways; Heart breaking; Suffer; Torture (x2); Death sentence (x2); Lonely (x2); Terribly painful (x2); Tyranny; Declared war; and Frenzy. The authors' rhetorical choices frame the argument in a polarizing manner that does not allow for the audience to find excuse or reason of justification.

By framing the issue within the tragic frame, the author is able to highlight individual actions juxtaposed against global dogma to assist in identifying the state of Idaho at-large as the villain. This is done simultaneously, while reframing historical stereotypes' the audience may have about wolves, by showcasing them as innocent victims. Schwarze defines the tragic frame as using the "scapegoating tactic" and having the "advocates identify villains and polarize competing positions" (pg. 256, 2006). Through the usage of the god and devil terms, the villain is clearly identified and the positions are extremely polarized. The audience is left with a clear sense of moral right and wrong. With the call to action at the very end of the main article, the author hopes to capitalize on the moral argument within the audience.

Constructing reality

The article constructs a reality about the world the wolves live in that presents an extreme prejudice towards and a war being waged against them. The constructing of reality is defined as "the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet—the nexus between culture and politics" (Hartley, p.3). In the reality being created by the author, the wolves are victims of a "perpetual wolf hunt" being left to die "a lonely, terribly painful death in a steel-jawed leghold trap." With the construction of this reality that the victims are being tortured the author presents the audience with a moral quandary. If the audience chooses to do

SOUNDING THE HORN

nothing, they are acquiescing to the villain, acknowledging the torture and accepting the uncomfortable reality.

In conclusion, I have shown how through the use of the moral argument the author is presenting an article where the moral outrage over the treatment of wolves has polarized the politics surrounding the gray wolf to leave some ‘howling for justice.’ The author’s use of naming the villain and victims in the narrative to vilify and ennoble the cause to change the hunting practices in Idaho, fall firmly within the melodramatic frame. Through the authors’ continuous usage of god and Devil terms to frame the situation as tragic by setting up a powerful enemy and a helpless victim and by naming the villains and victims the author is able to create the melodramatic narrative. Finally, by creating an ethos for the victim (OR-5) the author is able to create a sense of empathic victimization in the audience, which is then used to call the audience to action by “Speak[ing] Out!” and to “Boycott Idaho!!”

Works Cited

- Anker, E. (2005). Villains, victims and heroes: Melodrama, media, and September 11. *Journal of Communication*, 55(1), 22–37.
- Cox, R. (2013). *Environmental Communications and the Public Sphere*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ettema J. S., and Glasser T. L. (1988). Narrative form and moral force: The realization of innocence and guilt through investigative journalism. *Journal of Communication*, 38(3).
- Hartley, J. (1993, January 21). *The politics of pictures: The creation of the public in the age of popular media*. New York: Routledge.
- Lange, J. I. (1993). The logic of competing information campaigns: Conflict over old growth and the spotted owl. *Communication Monographs*, 60, 239-257.
- Mishev, D. (2014, February 08). The wonder of wolf watching in Yellowstone. *The Washington Post*.
- Retrieved from
- <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/entertainment2/57516816-223/wolves-wolf-pack-park.html.csp>
- Moore, D. (2014^a, January 19). Transplanted Canadian grey wolves too successful for some in

SOUNDING THE HORN

the U.S.. The Canadian Press.

Retrieved from

[http://www.edmontonjournal.com/technology/Transplanted+Canadian+grey+wolves+successful+some/9405444/story.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+canwest%2FF264+\(Edmonton+Journal+-+News\)](http://www.edmontonjournal.com/technology/Transplanted+Canadian+grey+wolves+successful+some/9405444/story.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+canwest%2FF264+(Edmonton+Journal+-+News))

Moore, D. (2014^b, February 11). Panel says U.S. should maintain protection for transplanted

Canadian wolves. The Canadian Press.

Retrieved from

http://www.mysask.com/portal/site/main/template.MAXIMIZE/?javax.portlet.tpst=f059e2ed0c0e3921802ac01060315ae8_ws_MX&javax.portlet.prp_f059e2ed0c0e3921802ac01060315ae8_viewID=story&javax.portlet.prp_f059e2ed0c0e3921802ac01060315ae8_topic_display_name=National%20News&javax.portlet.prp_f059e2ed0c0e3921802ac01060315ae8_topic_name=National&javax.portlet.prp_f059e2ed0c0e3921802ac01060315ae8_news_item_id_key=27161588&javax.portlet.begCacheTok=com.vignette.cachetoken&javax.portlet.endCacheTok=com.vignette.cachetoken

Nabeki. (2014, February 26). OR-7's sister dies grisly death..... . *Howling for Justice:*

Blogging for the Gray Wolf.

Retrieved from

<http://howlingforjustice.wordpress.com/tag/idaho-wolf-killing-fields/>

SOUNDING THE HORN

Nijhuis, M. (2014, February 10). Howls of outrage. *on earth: A Survival Guide for the Planet*.

Retrieved from

<http://www.onearth.org/articles/2014/02/flawed-science-behind-efforts-to-delist-gray-wolves>

Rott, N. (2013^b, February 3). The politics of wolves in the west. *NPR*.

Retrieved from

<http://apps.npr.org/wolves/>

Rott, N. (2014^a, February 08). Montana ranchers learn ways to live with wolves. *NPR*.

Retrieved from

<http://www.npr.org/2014/02/08/273577607/montana-ranchers-learn-ways-to-live-with-wolves>

Schwarze, S. (2006). Environmental melodrama. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92(3), 239-261.

Weaver, R. M. (1953). *The ethics of rhetoric*. Chicago: Henry Regnery.

Retrieved from

http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/ultimate_terms.htm