Research Notes

The Term 'Lone Wolf' and its Alternatives: Patterns of Public and Academic Use from 2000 to 2020

by Lars Erik Berntzen and Tore Bjørgo

Abstract

Prominent cases of terror attacks planned and perpetrated by individuals have generated an ongoing public and academic debate about how to understand this phenomenon. The moniker "lone wolf" stands at the center of this debate. In this Research Note, we highlight three overarching points of criticism levelled at the use of this term: one conceptual, one normative and one empirical. While the solution to the latter problem primarily lies in being stringent, proposed solutions for the first two problems involved the exchange of the metaphor "lone wolf" with terms such as "lone actor" and "solo terrorist". This Research Note focuses on patterns in public, popular cultural and academic use of "lone wolf" as well as the proposed alternatives "lone actor" and "solo terrorist". It does so by utilizing data from Google Trends, Google Books Ngram Viewer and Google Scholar for the period 2000 to 2020. Trends in Google searches across the world indicate a moderate increase in public attention whereas using English language literature as a proxy for popular cultural attention shows a steady increase. Finally, academic use of the term "lone wolf" exploded in the aftermath of the July 22, 2011 terror attacks and has remained at high levels ever since. Among the proposed alternatives to "lone wolf", only "lone actor" has truly gained academic prominence. While overcoming some of the issues with the "lone wolf" metaphor, patterns in the data indicate that the neutrality and abstract nature of the term "lone actor" also comes with some drawbacks. To help counteract this, we suggest that researchers avoid using shorthand versions and consistently use the full term "lone actor terrorist".

Keywords: Big data, concept, lone actor terrorist, lone wolf, metaphor

Introduction

Terror attacks planned and perpetrated by single individuals has been on the rise, constituting an increasing proportion of attacks by right-wing as well as by Islamist extremists.[1] Thus far, the deadliest act of terrorism planned and carried out by one person only was committed by the Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik on July 22, 2011. [2] In terms of casualties, attacks carried out by such individual perpetrators represent most deaths ascribable to right-wing extremists during the last decade.[3] In both academic and public discourse, Breivik and similar perpetrators have been defined as "lone wolves". The use of this definition has been met with criticism from several angles – both in broader public debates and amongst academics. This Research Note provides a brief overview of key points raised in the academic debate concerning the understanding, conceptualization and classification of such perpetrators and attacks, followed by an analysis of patterns in public, popular cultural and academic use of the term "lone wolf" as well as the proposed alternatives "lone actor" and "solo terrorist". This is based on data from Google Trends, Google Books Ngram Viewer and Google Scholar in the period between 2000 and 2020. We begin with the term "lone wolf" and the main criticisms leveled at its general and academic use.

### The Lone Wolf Concept and its Critiques

What precisely is covered by the term "lone wolf"? Let us start with its etymological origins. In their natural state wolves are pack animals. Only those that have been driven from their pack or are left on their own are described as lone wolves. Used for human beings, the term "lone wolf" is best understood as a metaphor. A

characteristic of metaphors is that by labelling one thing or being (a man) as something else (a lone wolf), one is causing a semantic paradox where a multitude of meanings are transferred between the two contexts – similarities as well as dissimilarities – and this transfer goes in both directions.[4] Human traits are transferred to an animal species (anthropomorphism), but a diversity of traits associated with the animal are also transferred to a human being. However, which traits of the lone wolf are ascribed to the human individual is ambiguous and open to diverse interpretations. As wolves have been both reviled and admired throughout human history, the use of the term wolf can be perceived in many ways. Wolves are first and foremost predators par excellence, and in this sense the term conveys deadliness. Some people perceive wolves as symbols of malevolence and brutal death, other see them as powerful, beautiful, and honorable. The prefix "lone" may signal abnormality – that the individual is an outcast, loser, or desperado, but others may ascribe something noble to this recluse. Thus, the notion of "lone wolf" may evoke positive as well as negative connotations. The representation of "lone wolves" in popular culture adds even more layers of meaning.

Using the term "lone wolf" to describe persons that plan and perpetrate acts of terrorism all by themselves has been criticized recurringly.[5] Three main critiques bear mentioning; that it is misleading, that it valorizes the perpetrator and that it has been misused. All three forms of criticism may surface in a hodgepodge manner during public debate but are nevertheless distinguishable from one another. These are presented in a Venn-diagram in Figure 1 and elaborated on below.

The first two critiques reflect the fact that "lone wolf" is a metaphor. We begin by unpacking the issue of "lone wolf" being misleading (a conceptual issue). This critique draws on a similar interpretation of the term as that which we presented in the previous paragraph. Signaling both abnormality and carnivorous behavior, some argue the metaphor can easily be misinterpreted and misused to mean that the perpetrator is completely ideologically and socially unaffiliated.[6] If one subscribes to this logic, applying the term "lone wolf" transforms the acts of violence and the process leading up to them into something wholly apolitical. Seen from this angle, "lone wolf" can therefore easily be understood as a strategic term that plays into the hands of those that for whatever reason wish to describe the terrorists as simply deranged, insane or some such. Attaching an ideological label such as "right-wing", "left-wing" or "Islamist" becomes self-contradictory.

Figure 1. Conceptualization, Normative, and Classification: A Venn Diagram of the Three Main Forms of Criticism Regarding the Use of the Term "Lone Wolf"
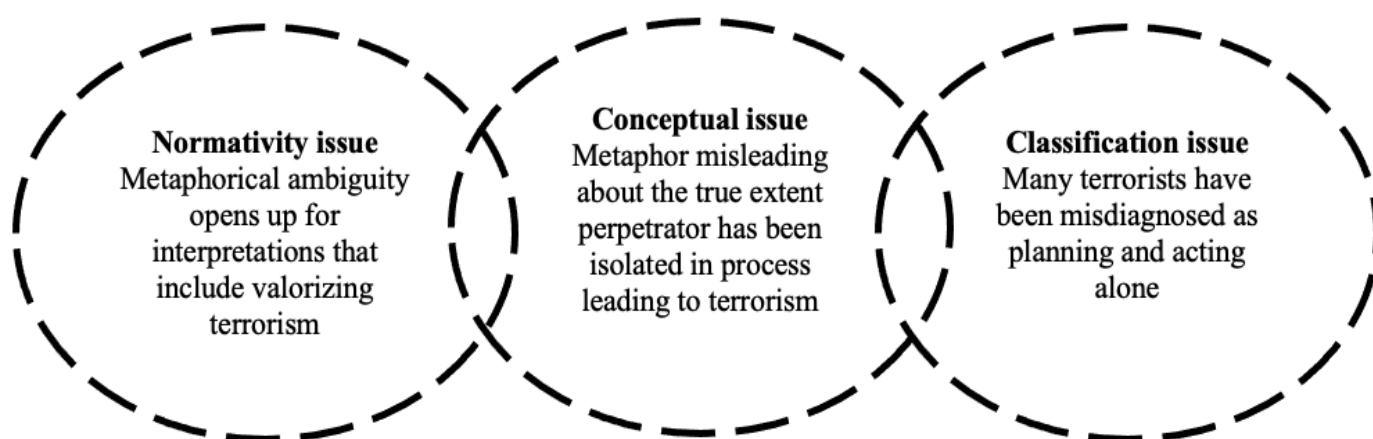
A second form of critique that stems from the metaphoric character of the term "lone wolf" is that the multitude of meanings are open to a variety of interpretations loaded, as it were, with different values (a normativity issue). Although the term may evoke negative images of outcasts and losers, the substantive history of the term "lone wolf" indicates that it has been used in a positive, normative manner by right-wing extremists themselves. This "original sin", the critique goes, taints the term up to the point that it serves to valorize murderers.

Neither of these two critiques can be directly met and rebutted through the academic exercise of clearly and precisely defining the term "lone wolf". This is because both critiques rest on assumptions about what the reader or listener attribute to the term. The inherent ambiguity of metaphors reminds us that we should avoid using such tropes as analytic concepts in academic research. To escape these various associations and all the cultural baggage that comes with using the term "lone wolf", academics have therefore proposed substituting the term altogether. The two main proposals on the table have been "lone actor" and "solo terrorist".

The third and final overarching point of criticism is more exclusively tied to the issue of research, namely that many terrorists initially categorized as "lone wolves" turn out to have been misdiagnosed (a classification issue). [7] This criticism overlaps with the first (that "lone wolf" is a misleading term) and is often presented together, but it is important not to conflate the two. The issue of misclassification does not disappear by replacing "lone wolf" with another term referring to an isolated individual. Rather, it can be met by operating with clear and precise definitions, exhibiting caution when initially categorizing an event and/or perpetrator and judiciously revisiting and evaluating relevant cases. Unlike the other two points of critique, it is therefore an issue which is eminently solvable by being methodologically stringent and transparent.

Tracking the Use and Interest in "Lone Wolf" and "Lone Actor" over Time

Setting aside the issue of misclassification for the remainder of this Research Note, we delve into the use of "lone wolf" and the competing terms proffered as a solution to the issues of it being a misleading and/or valorizing term.

We present data on the use of both "lone wolf" and "lone actor" over time, concentrating on the period between 2000 and 2020 while distinguishing between their public, popular cultural and academic usage. Public and popular cultural interest is measured by their use as search terms on Google across the world in addition to their use in (digitized) English language literature. The overview of their academic usage is derived from Google Scholar. Data for search trends are available from Google Trends, while use in English language literature stems from Google Ngram.

Based on our own prior knowledge of the field, our belief was that that the data from these sources would show a substantial spike in interest in lone wolf terrorism following July 22 across the board, and then a gradual replacement of lone wolf with lone actor in the academic literature. The evidence gives some support to our initial belief, but also provided us with some surprises.

We begin with public interest as gauged by their use as search terms based on Google Trends. Google Trends does not provide access to absolute numbers but offers information about the relative public interest in one or more search terms. Search terms can in practice be anything, commonly ranging from a single word to a short sentence. Figure 2 shows the trends in regular Google searches across the world for "lone wolf" and "lone actor" as search terms, respectively. As we can see, use of the term "lone wolf" has hitherto peaked in 2017, whereas the peak for "lone actor" came in 2013.[8]

While there has been a moderate increase in the use of "lone wolf" as a search term, the take-home point is that there has been surprisingly little fluctuation in its' use over the last fourteen years. This indicates that while "lone wolf" is used by ordinary citizens, it is not utilized on a very large scale. In any case, it is plausible that the July 22 terrorist attacks and subsequent attacks of a similar nature factor into the moderate increase in the use of both terms, but this is not a given.

Figure 2. Relative Search Term Interest for "Lone Wolf" and "Lone Actor" on Google across the World, Years 2006-2020 [9]

Source: Google Trends.
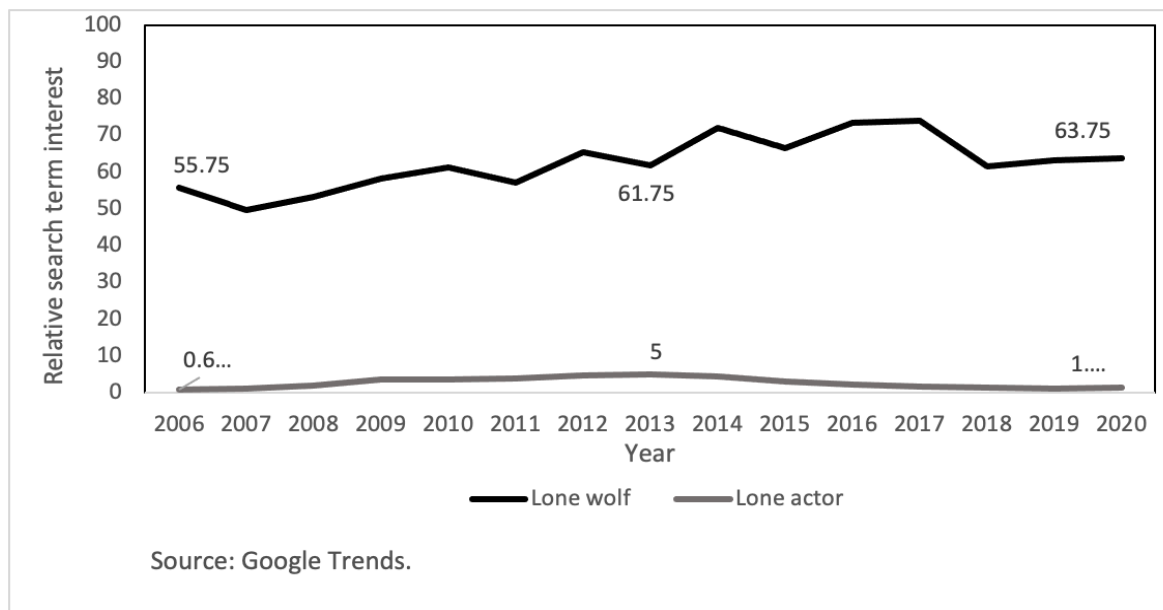
Let us now turn to our second indicator for general interest – popular culture – in the form of use as terms in digitized English language literature. This is available through the Google Ngram service. See Figure 3 below. Google Ngram allows us to see the relative popularity of words and phrases in comparison to the use of all other words in the corpus of available text. In this sense, Google Ngram data is superior to what is available from Google Trends, since the numbers represent something more tangible. We repeated the previous exercise by searching for the terms "lone wolf" and "lone actor", delimiting the time span to 2000 – 2019.[10]

Figure 3. Use of "Lone Wolf" and "Lone Actor" as Terms in Corpus of English Language Literature by the Relative Frequency of Use Compared to all other Words, year 2000-2019


Source: Google Ngram.
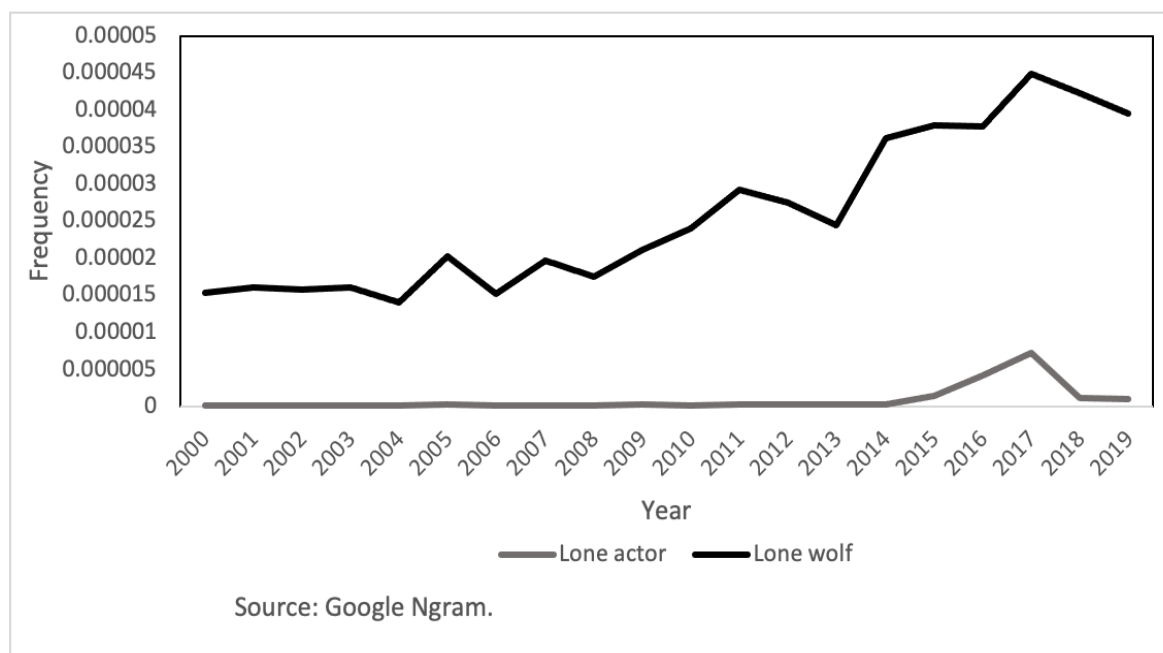
Note that the span (y-axis) ranges from 0 to 0.000005 percentage points. This number might seem miniscule, and in some regards it is. As a point of reference, we can compare it to the use of the word "you" in English language literature. In the year 2019 the word "you" accounts for 0.467 percentage points of all words used. That is just over four orders of magnitude more than the number of times "lone wolf" appears for the same

year. Naturally, if the frequency of terms "lone wolf" or "lone actor" would be anything near that of the word "you", it would either indicate that something was seriously wrong with the algorithm or with the world itself. Looking to the animal kingdom, "black cat" is a term that sees about the same amount of use as "lone wolf". As for the term "lone actor", we found a term that was just about as frequently used from the realm of plants – cloudberry (or "multebær" in Norwegian).[11]

What we see is, all things considered, a sizeable increase in the use of the word "lone wolf". This is in line with our general expectation, but any strong causal claim that the July 22 terrorist attacks or subsequent attacks were the main driver of this increase is unwarranted. For "lone actor" we can see a rise from near-nothing to something of note since 2015. This is in line with what we would expect if its increase also reflected the introduction of the term "lone actor" as a replacement for "lone wolf" in the 2010s. But again, we cannot positively ascertain that this is the case.

We now turn to the use of these terms in the academic literature based on Google Scholar data (Figures 4-7 below). These data provide us with a clear picture. Here we see a tremendous increase in the frequency of use of the term "lone wolf" in academic texts by 2013 (Figure 4), indicating that the July 22 terrorist attacks played a role. We then see a subsequent drop, but the term "lone wolf" still occurs at a much higher rate than before. The two-year time lag between the attacks and the spikes are a natural reflection of the timespan between the start of a research project and the publication of results. Turning to the occurrence of "lone wolf" in titles and abstracts (Figure 5), the pattern is one of continued increase after a similar spike in 2013 up until and including 2019. At this point we see a marked drop.

Figure 4. Use of "Lone Wolf"* (N = 15 243) and "Lone Actor"**(N = 1 856)
as Terms in Full Text of Scientific Publications (Absolute Numbers, Years 2000–2020) [14]


Source: Google Scholar.
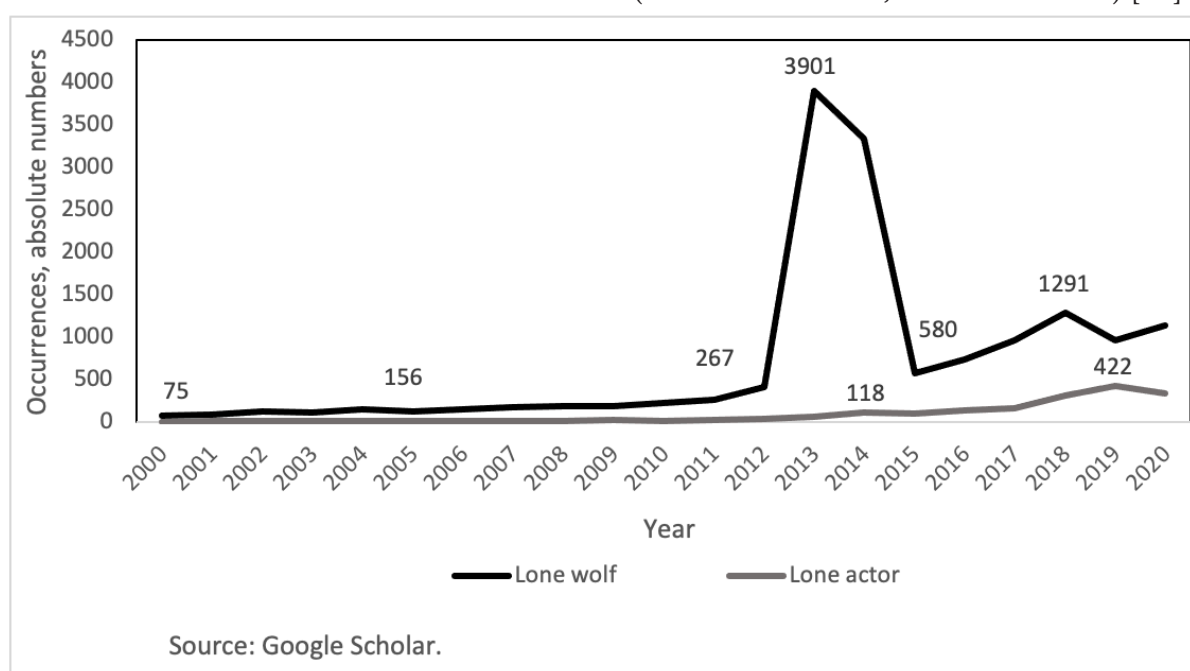
The sudden peak during 2013-14 of academic publications on "lone wolf" terrorism indicates that this became a very hot topic around the time and in the immediate aftermath of the July 22 attacks in 2011. [12] This attack by a perpetrator from the extreme right was obviously the main event but from 2008 onwards there had also been an increase in lone actor attacks by jihadists, but mostly on a small-scale in the beginning.[13] However, after the attacks in Norway in 2011, academics who had never before written anything substantial about terrorism jumped on the bandwagon of "lone wolf" studies, producing a one-off article on the latest fad, and then moving on to some other topic. Few of these isolated contributions produced anything of lasting value to the field. However, there were also a number of dedicated terrorism researchers who continued to explore the phenomenon of lone wolves/lone actors during the following years,

building both datasets and theory. An important agenda setting was a research call by the EU's Framework Program 7 in 2012-13, calling for research projects that should address "individual fascinations with extreme violent ideas, and what would bring a single person from ideas to action."

As for "lone actor", we see a gradual increase in its' general use in academic texts from a very low level before 2013 (Figure 4). In titles and abstracts we see that its use almost reaches parity with "lone wolf" by 2020 (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Number of Scientific Publications that use "Lone Wolf"* (N = 416) and "Lone Actor"** (N = 143) as Terms in Titles and Abstracts. (Absolute Numbers, Year 2000–2020)[15]

Source: Google Scholar.
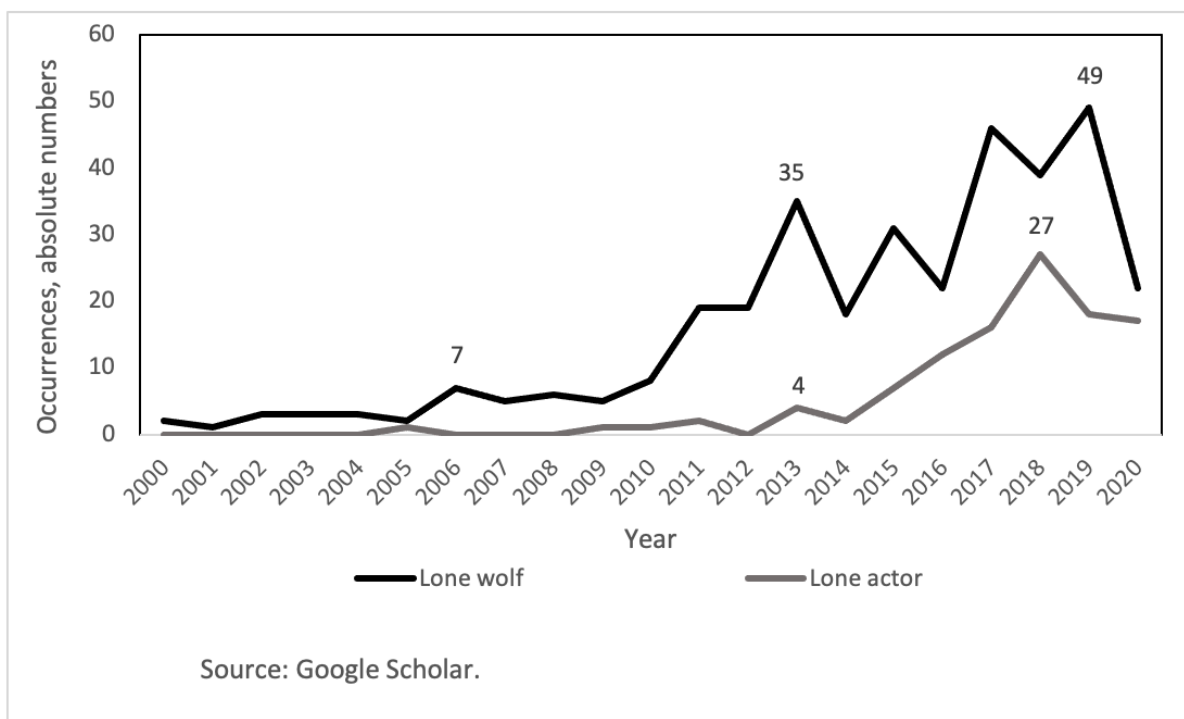
Finally, we briefly looked at the publications where the terms "lone wolf" and "lone actor" occurred most frequently. See Figures 6 and 7 below, respectively.

Figure 6. Top Five Scientific Journals Ranked by Number of Articles that Use "Lone Wolf"* as a Term, Years 2000–2020 [16]

Source: Google Scholar.
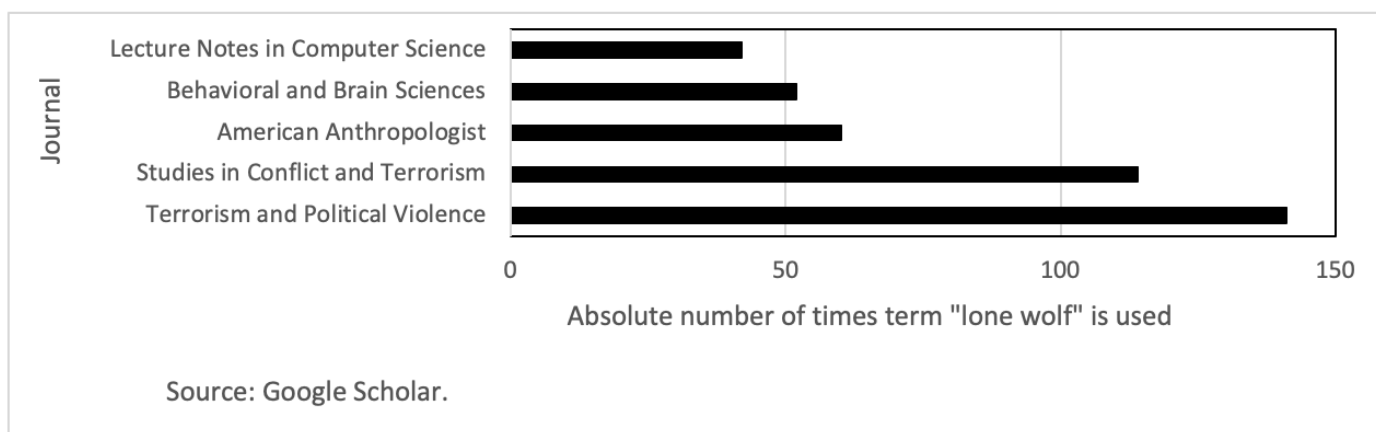
Not surprisingly, the flagship journal for terrorism research *Terrorism and Political Violence* is situated at the top. This is followed by *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. We can note some subsequent deviation between "lone wolf" and "lone actor", with the *American Anthropologist* taking the third place for "lone

wolf" while for "lone actor" the third place is taken by the *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* – a journal oriented toward professionals and scholars whose work focuses on operational aspects. Beyond this deviation, the take home message here is that terrorism planned and perpetrated by single individuals is of broad academic interest.

Figure 7. Top Five Scientific Journals Ranked by Number of Articles that use "Lone Actor"* as a Term, Years 2000–2020 [17]
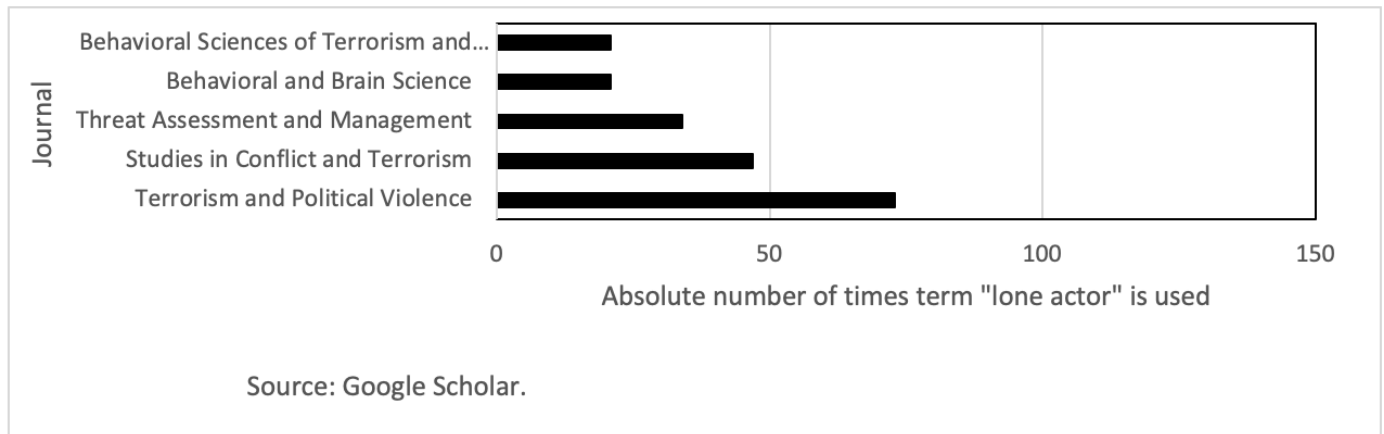
We now briefly discuss the use of the two terms in a more comparative manner. Contrasted with "lone wolf", "lone actor" has seen far less use as a search term in English language literature. Both terms, however, are frequently used in academic texts. It is important to note that for "lone actor", most of this use is <u>not</u> related to research on terrorism or related topics. Using only "lone actor" as a search query in Google Scholar returns just over 96,000 publications, ranging from drama to film science and economics. We therefore specified that the texts must either include the word "terror" or "violence" as well. This resulted in 1,931 publications. Based on this we can see that "lone actor" has been used relatively infrequently until recently, but that it is used more frequently now. A similar search query specification for "lone wolf" where we added that the text must either include "terror" or "violence", did not result in any substantial changes in the number of publications.

It is also clear that "lone wolf" is used as a popular cultural term. This has been noted and identified as a major issue in the academic debate. The findings presented here indicate that this popular cultural anchoring can have some upsides. That is, "lone wolf" comes across as culturally well-defined term that people have a shared understanding of. Much of its popular use refers to terrorists who operate all by themselves. Relatedly, the most prominent pop cultural examples that are not directly related to terrorism include the Japanese manga *Lone Wolf and Cub*. It is about a warrior on a quest for vengeance against his former feudal overlord. Another pop culture example is *MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf* – a video game from 2004 where the player controls a bipedal war machine. In the academic literature the term is used almost exclusively in connection with terrorism. Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that the term is metaphorically and normatively ambiguous. Such ambiguity can create obvious problems and unnecessary antagonism when communicating with the wider public, for instance if members of an audience see "lone wolf" as a term that valorizes the perpetrator, thereby (wrongfully) deducing something about the researchers' motives from this.

The increasing use of the term "lone actor" within the scholarly field of terrorism research indicates that it is well on its way to becoming an established, academic term. The data nevertheless indicate that using "lone actor" instead of "lone wolf" has some potential costs. Its appeal lies in its neutrality. This neutrality can also be a hurdle for outsiders – both academics and others – that are not steeped in the internal debates within the field of terrorism studies that have played out in the last decade.

Solo Terrorist – An Alternative with Very Limited Acceptance

We did a similar exercise with the term "solo terrorist", another term that has been proposed to replace "lone wolf". Amongst others, its use has been advocated for by one of the co-authors of this piece (Tore Bjørgo). Compared to "lone wolf", it has seen very few uses as a regular search term on Google and appears to be non-existent in the general English language literature which has been digitized. There are two scientific publications that use the term in their title/abstract. One is the book by Hemmingby and Bjørgo from 2015 titled "The Dynamics of a Terrorist Targeting Process: Anders B. Breivik and the July 22 attacks in Norway". [18] The other is an article from 2011 by Kendall Coffey, titled "The Lone Wolf-Solo Terrorism and the Challenge of Preventative Prosecution".[19]

Between 2005 and 2020, the term "solo terrorist" appears in 162 scientific texts. Half of these were from 2018. In the years before and after 2018 it has seen very limited use. The first publication available via Google Scholar that employs the term is James McHugh's and Fadi Deek's "An Incentive System for Reducing Malware Attacks" from 2005.[20] This is followed by Magnus Ranstorp's and Magnus Normark's 2009 anthology titled "Unconventional Weapons and International Terrorism: Challenges and new Approaches". [21] The lack of use does not impugn directly on the merit of the term, but it is unlikely that it will supersede the others.

Conclusion

The growing number of attacks both planned and perpetrated by seemingly isolated individuals has generated public and academic debates about how to best understand and define such perpetrators. Much of this debate centers around the term "lone wolf". Here we have highlighted three overarching problems raised in debates about using "lone wolf" to characterize these perpetrators – one normative, one conceptual and one pertaining to classification. "Lone actor" and "solo terrorist" have been proposed as solutions to the first two problems that derive from the metaphorical basis of the term. Our subsequent analysis detailed the overarching trends in the use of these terms among the broader public, in popular culture and in academic publications. In addition to uncovering general tendencies, the data presented allow us to shed some new light on the terminology-centered critique.

The data indicate that "lone wolf" has seen some more frequent use by the public during the preceding decade, but the frequency of usage has nevertheless remained relatively stable over a nearly twenty-year period. In popular culture, the data tell a clearer story: the term "lone wolf" has seen a sharp increase in recent years. In comparison, use of the term "lone actor" has not been adopted by the general public. This should probably come as no surprise since it is a relatively new term. Finally, the patterns from academic publications tell a remarkably clear story. There was an explosive growth in the use of "lone wolf" in academic texts in 2013 and use levels have subsequently remained high. Within the last seven years, "lone actor" has risen in popularity and is now set to outcompete "lone wolf" within academic terrorism studies. The results further indicate that our assumption about the impact of the July 22 terrorist attacks within academia were correct. While many other factors play into these developments, this event has played an important role in the rapid increase.

When delving a bit further into these data, two findings bear highlighting. First, our data suggest that the arguments in favor of using "lone actor" instead of "lone wolf" can also be held against it. While limiting problems of normative and conceptual associations, the "lone actor" term's lack of culturally ascribed meaning can also present a barrier to greater public use and for academics outside the field of terrorism studies. For one thing, "lone actor" is used in many other scientific domains to indicate all sorts of actors – not specifically individual perpetrators of political violence. Second, due to the abstract nature of the term, "lone actor" is unlikely to remain associated with terrorism in other research fields. While it is useful to be aware of these possible drawbacks linked to the use of the term "lone actor", the advantage of moving away from the loaded term "lone wolf" for analytical purposes seems more clear-cut. In communication intended for a non-specialist audience, some of these issues can also be (partly) counteracted by consistently using the

full term "lone actor terrorist" rather than the shorthand "lone actor".

We see similar struggles over other terms and definitions for issues that are sources of political controversy. Some are resolved in favor of the "culturally dominant" term, whereas others tip in favor of specialized terminology – or jargon – proposed by a given academic sub-discipline. A comparison can be made with use of the term "Islamophobia". Some argue it should be replaced by two distinct terms: "anti-Islamic" and "anti-Muslim" – for similar normative, terminological, and methodological reasons.[22] Nevertheless, the current consensus seems to be a continued use of the term "Islamophobia" precisely because it has become widely established and is easily understandable. Within the subdiscipline of terrorism studies, the opposite seems to be the case: the term "lone wolf" is gradually replaced by the term "lone actor".

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Notes

[1] On right-wing perpetrators, see Ravndal, J. A., Lygren, S., Jupskås, A. R., & Bjørgo, T. (2020). RTV Trend Report 2020. *C-REX Research Report (*Oslo: C-REX-Center for Research on Extremism/University of Oslo, 6-7; on Islamist perpetrators, see figure 3 in Nesser, P., Stenersen, A., & Oftedal, E. (2016). "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *10*(6), pp. 3-24.

[2] Hereafter referred to as July 22.

[3] Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Sofia Lygren, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Tore Bjørgo, op. cit.

[4] For a discussion about metaphors and their use in political rhetoric, see Daniel Heradstveit & Tore Bjørgo (1992) *Politisk kommunikasjon* (Oslo: Tano, 2nd. ed.), chapter 5; Paul Ricoeur (1978). *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language.* London: Routledge and Keagan Paul.

[5] For the case of Anders Behring Breivik, see e.g., Berntzen, L. E., & Sandberg, S. (2014). "The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *26*(5), 759-779; generally, see Spaaij, R., & Hamm, M. S. (2015). "Key Issues and Research Agendas in Lone Wolf Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *38*(3), 167-178; see also the pioneering work and scathing critique by Schuurman, B., Lindekilde, L., Malthaner, S., O'Connor, F., Gill, P., & Bouhana, N. (2019). "End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *42*(8), pp. 771-778.

[6] Lars Erik Berntzen and Sveinung Sandberg, op. cit.

[7] As points of reference (but otherwise not comparable): "lone wolf" is in the same search word popularity range as "leech" and somewhat more popular than "pinecone", whereas "black cat" is about three times as popular.

[8] Numbers represent averaged search interest per month within each year, relative to the single month with the highest level of interest for the entire time span.

[9] For one of the first systematic overviews, see e.g., Nesser, P. (2012). "Research Note: Single Actor Terrorism: Scope, Characteristics and Explanations," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *6*(6), pp. 61-73; Bart Schuurman et al., op. cit.

[10] As of February 2021; 2019 was the last year available from Google Ngram.

[11] Tongue-in-cheek comparisons: the frequency with which "cloudberry" is used remains relatively constant over time, whereas "lone actor" begins its ascent in the 2010s. Curiously, use of the term "lone wolf" begins to trail "black cat" from the 1940s onwards.

[12] Using the search string "lone wolf" AND "Breivik" OR "22 July" OR "July 22" OR "ABB" on Google Scholar to identify academic publications with co-mentions of lone wolf and Breivik returned a total of 3.050 results up until the end of the year 2020.

[13] Nesser, Petter. *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* (pp. 243 ff). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

[14] *Based on search string: "lone wolf" AND terror OR violence. ** Based on search string: "lone actor" AND terror OR violence.

[15] *Based on search string: "lone wolf" AND terror OR violence. **Based on search string: "lone actor" AND terror OR violence.

[16] *Based on search string: "lone wolf" AND terror OR violence.

[17] *Based on search string: "lone actor" AND terror OR violence.

[18] Hemmingby, C., & Bjørgo, T. (2015). *The Dynamics of a Terrorist Targeting Process: Anders B. Breivik and the 22 July Attacks in Norway*. New York: Palgrave Pivot.

[19] Coffey, K. (2011). The Lone Wolf-Solo Terrorism and the Challenge of Preventative Prosecution. *Fiu L. Rev.*, *7*, 1.

[20] McHugh, James A. & Deek, Fadi P. (2005). "An Incentive System for Reducing Malware Attacks," *Communications of the ACM*, *48*(6), pp. 94-99.

[21] Ranstorp, M. & Normark, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Unconventional Weapons and International Terrorism: Challenges and New Approaches*. London: Routledge.

[22] For a brief synopsis on Islamophobia and alternative proposals, see Berntzen, L.E., & Rambøl, A.H. (2020) "What is Islamophobia?" in Anders R.J., and Eviane, L., (Eds.), *Knowing What's (Far) Right. A Compendium*. University of Oslo: Center for Research on Extremism Report, 2020, pp. 24-27.