

# Biases in news reporting

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I'd like to illustrate an example of how bias can and often gets built into news reporting, and how a simple difference in highlighting of different facts involved can twist the tale. Even to the extent of painting the victims of an event as the villains, distracting the reader from the root causes of an issue, and advocating the wrong solutions by misinterpreting the problems. [This article](#) published by the New York Times on environment conservation efforts in the Indian state of Nagaland, paints a picture of Naga villagers following a harmful practice of hunting an endangered species of migratory birds. It then tells how through persistent "education" and awareness efforts by State and NGOs, the villagers are getting reformed. But there's more to this story than what most of it portrays. Some important questions were neglected: [Have the villagers been indiscriminately hunting this bird to near extinction since time immemorial? If not, since when? How did they come to this situation?](#)

The answer to these comes almost as an aside, in 3 small paragraphs halfway down the article: ***"Their other sources of income had run into problems after the Doyang dam, a huge structure generating 75 megawatts of electricity, was commissioned in 2000. In a wet, mountainous state like Nagaland, it is not irrigation but flat land that is most coveted by farmers. The Doyang reservoir came up in some of the flattest areas in Doyang, submerging cultivable fields. Attracted by the new body of water and the sugar cane and wild bananas that were growing on the banks of the reservoir, wild elephants trampled over several crops, say villagers. Suffering losses, villagers decided to capture Amur falcons, which were now congregating in dizzying numbers over the reservoir, for their livelihood. Villagers have argued that if they are not allowed to hunt wild birds and animals, then they need to be provided an alternative way to generate seasonal income."*** In this article, the "hunting is steeped in their tradition" got a lot more stress, even getting downright repetitive. An image was built that these villagers are inherently, by their very culture and way of life, inclined to hunt the falcons to extinction. Whereas the part quoted above was seldom referred to in the rest of the article. It's almost as if these paragraphs were inserted later as an afterthought. Omitting these parts out completely would have exposed the bias for what it really is, so other tactics are used. This is a typical example of control over what inference the reader makes. Even without outright lying, by choosing which parts of a story to lay stress on and which to downplay, a totally different picture can be conveyed. This happens regularly in our present mainstream media at the reporter/writer's level or the editor's level; in the latter case, the original author might find out about the ideological edits made by their superior only after the article gets published. Look at how much it is downplayed :

"Their other sources of income had run into problems after the Doyang dam.."

:: Other sources of income, or primary livelihood? If you permanently stop an entire community engaged in a livelihood like farming from doing it, then that doesn't mean that their "

other sources of income

" have "

run into problems

". It means you've deprived them of their livelihood, their way of life, their food security. At an average farmer's level, it means that unless he takes some drastic, desperate measures, his family is going to go hungry, and in the absence of community support (true here as everyone's in the same fix), they might even die. In this case, the desperate measures manifested in resorting to hunting of Amur falcons. Hunting which was until now a cultural ritual (which inherently has limits and wouldn't lead to overhunting), was now commodified (which doesn't have any limits: the more you hunt, the more you earn). All these millennia these people didn't over-hunt any bird to extinction : it started happening only after their livelihoods were taken away from them, by the State and the power industry building a dam over their farmlands. Of course, the proceeds from the dam cannot be expected to go to these "backward" villagers to compensate them monthly for their livelihood losses (which would be a certain very large amount to be paid monthly for ever): that would make the dam non-profitable for the entities who built and operate them. A miracle is then conveyed over the killing of the birds dropping down to zero in just an year of efforts. This happened because the over-killing had only recently started, after the dam was made. It wasn't an inherent feature of the villagers' cultural traditions as is repeatedly indicated. So, which entity was really responsible for the endangerment of the birds? Those who were evicted from their ancestral lands, desperate to feed their families and given no other choice? Those who flooded flat farmlands in a mountainous region with a dam made to sell electricity for a profit? Or those consuming the electricity for whose consumption the dam was built? (The north east states sell electricity to various states on the mainland.. it could be your own city) The article decisively points fingers at the villagers, albeit giving some small defense on their behalf towards the end, but never going into the root causes. And now we come to the truly dangerous part. By misinterpreting the problem itself, it becomes possible to justify any narrowly-focused solution, as professed all over this article. We're not fixing any problem by "educating and reforming" the villagers : a feat trumpeted like a heroic effort by the government and NGOs involved. This also highlights a serious problem with field-specific specialization of NGOs that come in from the outside : You cannot expect a Natural History Society to be telling anyone anything about dams, even if it's clear that it was a dam's hasty construction that is causing the problems they're endeavoring to solve. So here's an exercise for the reader : If you were given an opportunity to rewrite the article under discussion, would you write it differently? What would your inferences be, and what would you be more comfortable with your readers inferring? What would your advocated solution look like? Nikhil Sheth, Shikshantar nikhil.js@gmail.com, <https://www.facebook.com/nikjs>, <http://www.nikhilsheth.tk/>