

# Tail tell tales

How the Indian news media covered the tiger census report launch

In early 2005, wildlife officials in the Sariska Tiger Reserve discovered that poachers had wiped out the entire tiger population in the protected area.

Once the lid was blown off, the tiger remained in the media limelight. Through the constitution of the Tiger Task Force to the launching of its controversial report on the status of tigers in the country, the big cat kept making headlines. Sariska had been the tip of the proverbial iceberg; but the actual aggregate of tigers in the wild in India degenerated into being a guessing game for all and sundry. As mudslinging went on between the so-called wildlife elite and their neophyte critics, there were conservationists who waited with bated breath for the real numbers to come out.

This did eventually. On February 12, 2008, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) announced in New Delhi that just 1,411 adult tigers remained in the wild in India. It was official, it was big news. Or so it ought to have been.

**NewsWatch** decided to look at the news media coverage that the launch of the report *Status of tigers, co-predators and prey in India: 2008* generated. This study was conducted over a six-day period starting the day of the report launch. It was meant to be a qualitative analysis, not a quantitative one. The idea was to look at the way the news media covered the issue, and not to quantify the exact number of publications that did a story.

After the preliminary data collection, items from 30 news publications were shortlisted for a qualitative analysis. The results of the data analysis were not particularly encouraging.

Ten editions of eight newspapers were seen for coverage of the report launch on their front pages. Only three featured the story as its lead, in one it was the second lead but prominently displayed. Four out of every five of the stories tracked had declarative headlines and an equal number of stories were treated as straight news items and features.



Courtesy: MKS Pasha



The stories did not devote too many words to the news. The mean word count was 376.13. Almost one-third failed to mention where the tiger census report was unveiled. The report was a joint publication of NTCA and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). Just six said so. Only four of the 25 that quoted R Gopal referred to him correctly as member secretary NTCA. The rest got it wrong.

The NTCA/WII survey had an error coefficient of 17.43 per cent. The number of tigers could vary from 1,165 to 1,657. This aspect was significant, but was rendered insignificant by half the publications tracked.

Counting was not carried out in three tiger reserves. This fact was statistically important, but more than half the stories ignored this point.

The NTCA/WII report talked of three primary causes for the alarming tiger number decline; close to one-fourth missed out on this point as well.

As a follow-up, **NewsWatch** could track just 36 news items. The tiger is already on its way out of the news. It, not surprisingly, generated less news media interest than did the marriage of Sanjay Dutt and Manyata.

This study is not meant to debate whether the dip in tiger numbers is a newsworthy and significant issue. That it is indeed so, is an incontrovertible truth.

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# the news-break

Of the 74 write-ups tracked, 30 were news items that fell in the 'breaking news' category. The 'breaking news' in this case is not the same as breaking news in a live medium like television, radio or the Internet. In the **NewsWatch** studies, 'breaking news' is the first story of an incident — in this case, the launch of the report by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in New Delhi.

**Headlines and treatment:** The first element of a news story that is read is the headline. An overwhelming four out of every five of these 30 stories had 'declarative' headlines; only six went with 'label' ones. The 'declarative' headlines ranged from 'Tiger numbers sink to record low' to 'Threat to a national symbol as India's wild tigers vanish'. There might have been a stark difference in the numbers of emphatic headlines and flat ones, but an equal number (N=15) of stories were treated as straight news items and features. The yardstick for treatment was stringent — any news item that marked otherwise be taken as straight was marked as a feature either if it was seen to be laced with adjectives or if the reporter/writer was even remotely judgmental.

**Origin and type:** Half of the 'breaking news' stories were from India, four from the UK, three from Australia, and one from the US. The seven stories from news agencies (including Indian agencies) were deemed to be international. Eighteen stories were from newspaper websites/epapers, three from websites of television news channels, two from online publications. The balance seven stories were from news agencies.

**Visual reality:** Graphic elements always add visual relief to a story — more than half (N=17) used images of different sizes with the story, while three used infographics. One-third of the stories did not use visual element of any kind.

**When, where, what:** The hackneyed use of the five Ws and one H in the intro of a story always calls for longwinding convoluted first paras — it holds value only in journalism schools steeped in archaic styles of news-writing. But, they have their uses.

Over 70 per cent (N=22) of the stories reported the date of the event. However, almost an equal number (N=23) failed to mention where the report was unveiled. A dateline is only indicative of when the story was reported and from where the correspondent was filing the story — it is never an indicator of either when or where the incident took place.

Hence, it was shocking to see two cardinal rules of news-writing being discarded with impunity. The NTCA-WII report was not a nameless one — it had a definitive title: *Status of tigers, co-predators and prey in India: 2008*. The title was significant in that the report was not just about tigers; it was as much about the habitat. A brute majority of the stories did not mention the title — 80 per cent (N=24) did not refer to it in the story. Only a minuscule 10 per cent (N=3) — the *Hindu*, Environment News Service, Kalinga Times — mentioned all three elements (when, where, what) in the story.

**Quote, unquote:** The main person at the report launch was NTCA member secretary R Gopal. Around 83 per cent (N=25) quoted him in the story. One of these also quoted Union minister for environment and forests S Raghupathy. The minister was not quoted by anyone else.

Eleven publications quoted six other experts on the issue. Tiger conservationist Valmik Thapar was quoted in six publications, and Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) Executive Director Belinda Wright in two. Wildlife Institute of India (WII) scientist Qamar Qureshi, WWF-India director for special conservation Sujoy Banerjee, WII director PR Sinha, and Maharashtra Chief Wildlife Warden B Majumdar were quoted in one publication each.



Courtesy: Hindustan Times

**The authority and the project:** The report was a joint publication of the recently-constituted National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and the Dehra Dun-based Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

Over 70 per cent (N=22) mentioned NTCA in the story. Five referred to NTCA as Project Tiger and one as Tiger Project. Only the *Hindu* and NDTV did not mention either NTCA or its earlier avatar in their 'breaking news' stories.

The references to Project Tiger, which has ceased to be a legal entity, may have been so because of the confusion that still prevails over the issue. This sense of bafflement in the news media was all the more evident from the varied designations that were ascribed to R Gopal. Only four (the *Age* – Australia, *Deccan Herald*, *Hindustan Times*, the *Hindu*) of the 25 publications that quoted Gopal referred to him correctly as member secretary NTCA.

What the others said: member NTCA: 4; head NTCA: 3; member secretary Tiger Project: 3; member secretary Project Tiger: 2; member secretary NTCA and director Project Tiger: 2; of NTCA: 2; director NTCA: 1; secretary NTCA: 1; of Project Tiger: 1; secretary Tiger Project: 1; director Project Tiger: 1.

The fact that it was WII which conducted the field survey was ignored by most. Six (Agence France-Presse, *Deccan Herald*, the *Pioneer*, the *Telegraph*, Asia News International, Kalinga Times) said it was a collaborative effort, while one (*Hindustan Times*) did not elaborate why WII had been mentioned in the story at all.

**The long and short of it:** The stories did not devote too many words to the news either. This was across the board – the mean count of the stories was 376.13. Geographically, there was not much variance. The average number of words used in Indian publications was slightly more than the total mean with 381.33; news agencies devoted around 372.57 words each to the stories; foreign publications chipped in with 369.5 words each. The longest

story ran into 654 words (Kalinga Times); the shortest wound it up in 161 (*Business Standard*).



**Number crunching:** Of course, most publications mentioned the exact number of 1,411 estimated to be left in the wild in India. One (Kalinga Times) did not mention the figure at all, while another (the *Guardian*) rounded off the tally to 'just over 1,400'.

The NTCA-WII study had a coefficient of variation of 17.43 per cent. In other words, the number of tigers in the wild could vary from a minimum of 1,165 to a maximum of 1,657. This aspect was significant, but was rendered insignificant by half the publications tracked. Fourteen mentioned the exact variance, while one gave only the maximum count.

The finding that the number of tigers in the Indian wild has apparently dwindled by 50 per cent in the last five years was a major news point. This fact could come through only if the 2002 census tally of 3,642 was mentioned in the copy. Just over half (N=16) did that accurately. Two (the *Asian Age* and *Deccan Chronicle*) said it had been "around 3,500"; two (United Press International and Press Trust of India) mentioned an "estimated 3,500"; one (Agence France-Presse) said it was an "estimated 3,700"; one rounded it off to an exact 3,600. One (the *Indian Express*) referred to the 1997 census figure of 3,508. There was a glaring mistake in one – *Mint* mentioned 2002 but gave the 1997 census figure. The comparative element was given a go-by in four stories: the *Assam Tribune*, the *Pioneer*, CNN-IBN, Asia News International, Kalinga Times, the *Times of India*.

The study was conducted to look primarily at the coverage of the launch of the tiger census report in the news media. The tracking of stories was done by browsing through the websites of news establishments as well as monitoring stories through Google News. In all, 30 stories were selected to be analysed for this 'breaking news' category. The 'breaking news' in this case is not the same as that in a live medium like television, radio or the Internet. In the Newswatch studies, 'breaking news' is the first story of an incident – in this case, the launch of the report by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) on February 12, 2008.

- Over 200 stories were identified in the first round. Over two-thirds of these were rejected for being duplicates – these had their origins in agency creeds.
- Agency stories were selected if the originals were available on their websites. In case they were not, the longest reproduction of the agency's story in any publication was selected. The credit, however, went to the agency and not to the publication which carried the story.

There was also a need to see how the news-break



Courtesy: MKS Pasha

was being followed by different publications. A five-day period was chosen. Since newspapers needed to be given a day's leeway, the study had to look at stories that were published between February 12 and 17, 2008.

Stories of newspapers were tracked primarily through their websites. The e-paper version of a paper, if available, was also checked. The Web renditions were checked both for reasons of convenience, as well as the empirical evidence that there is rarely any difference between the version printed in the paper and the one published online. Websites of television news channels had to be tracked more for the lack of wherewithal to track live news bulletins.

The stories selected for the analysis were coded on basis of over 30 parameters. Each of these data entries were subsequently cross-checked by two other persons to avoid errors of omission and commission.

There is but one shortcoming in the study – it looks only at the English language media. This was done, or not done, only because of logistical drawbacks – lack of adequate financial resources. It would have been interesting to see how the language media covered the event.

**Problems and prospects:** The tiger has not been vanishing without reason – the NTCA/WII report talked of three primary causes. The report emphatically stated, "Assessment has shown that though the tiger has lost much ground due to direct poaching, loss of quality habitat, and loss of its prey, there is still hope".

Close to one-fourth (N=7) missed out on this: *Business Standard*, Environment News Service, CNN-IBN, *Mint*, United Press International, Kalinga Times, Press Trust of India. The *Times of India* just mentioned the fragmentation of ecosystems as a reason. The context of the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was mentioned surprisingly by only publication – that too, not an Indian one – *Herald Sun*.

The report had its set of recommendations. Suggested conservation measures were mentioned by only 30 per cent (N=9) of the publications: the *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Times*, BBC News, the *Asian Age*, the *Assam Tribune*, Indo-Asian News Service, the *Indian Express*, and the *Pioneer*.

**The census itself:** Another news point was the departure from the controversial technique(s) used in the earlier tiger counts. The pugmark method of counting tigers had come under severe criticism in the recent past, especially from the Tiger Task Force which had minced no words about it in its August 2005 report, *Joining the Dots*. Almost one-fourth (N=8) of the stories did not even make a passing mention of this noteworthy aspect.

The counting was not carried out in Indravati Tiger Reserve

(Chhattisgarh) and Palamau Tiger Reserve (Jharkhand) because of Naxalite threats, while estimation is on in the massive Sunderbans area (West Bengal). These are bound to affect the total count of tigers in the wild. Needless to say, this was important.

More than half (N=17) the stories missed this point altogether.



Just six (the *Hindu*, BBC News, Indo-Asian News Service, the *Pioneer*, *Hindustan Times*, Deutsche Presse-Agentur) mentioned all the three tiger reserves in question. Two mentioned only Indravati and Sunderbans, one Palamau and Sunderbans, one Indravati and Sunderbans, and three Sunderbans alone.

### front page

Ten editions of eight newspapers were seen for coverage of the report launch on their front pages. Three featured the story as the lead, in one it was the second lead but prominently displayed. One daily had the story as a single column with a turnline to the rest of the story inside, while two editions used jumps from image teasers on the masthead. One newspaper did not carry the story on the front page, but had it tucked away in one of the nation pages inside; two dailies missed the story altogether.

- **Lead:** Hindustan Times Delhi, The Times of India Delhi, The Times of India Mumbai
- **Second lead:** The Indian Express Delhi,
- **Single column:** The Asian Age Delhi
- **Jump:** The Telegraph Kolkata, Hindustan Times Mumbai
- **Inside page:** Deccan Chronicle Hyderabad
- **Missed altogether:** The New Indian Express Chennai, Kashmir Times Srinagar

**NB:** The ePaper editions of The Hindu and Deccan Herald could not be accessed; the rest were not seen.



### the follow-up

**News items:** In the five-day follow-up period, 36 news items were tracked down. The most were found on the websites of the *Times of India* and NDTV. Of these 11 were straight news items, 22 features, 3 commentaries/criticisms. Of the headlines, 18 were labels, 17 declarative, and one was a question. In terms of origin, three were from news agencies, and one was from the UK; the rest were from Indian publications. The average word count was 386 with the longest being a 1066-word feature on the *Times of India* site and the shortest a 110-word news item from an agency on the NDTV site.

**Editorials:** Edit pieces are the best way to track the importance that a newspaper officially attaches to an issue. Of the 16 papers individually tracked during the five-day period, edit pieces were found in only six. The average word count of these edits was 414.

**Editorial/opinion articles:** The study could trace only two editorial/opinion articles about the tiger issue in newspapers during the period – one each in *Hindustan Times* and *Deccan Herald*.