

# Hedging devices in Philippine newspaper editorials

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## Abstract

This study examines the types of hedging devices and the similarities/differences in their uses in Philippine newspaper editorials. Using a mixed paradigm design, the study examined 30 editorials taken from three leading newspapers in the Philippines: the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the *Manila Bulletin*, and the *Philippine Star*. Hedges were categorized by adapting and modifying the classification of hedges in different studies and were then analyzed based on the study of Hyland (1997) and Filipinos' interpersonal communication by Worthington (2010 as cited in Labor & de Guzman, 2011). Findings show that nearly 50 percent of the hedges in the editorials are references to official reports or authorities while a little over than 30 percent of the hedges consist of modals and adverbs. These show how incorporating other sources of information help minimize the editors' responsibility in facing negative reactions from readers. If ever there are problems in one of the editorial statements, the editors can point to the readers references cited in the text. The modals used also show approximation, distancing, and vagueness. They may be used to avoid questions from the readers, lessen the force of statements, and control the commitment of the editorial in its claim. Furthermore, some adverbs are used in decreasing the certainty of statements, concealing exact figures, and distancing the writer's presence. These adverbs may be used when specific statements cannot be made because of inadequacy of information or when showing respect or politeness. The study shows that hedges are used for effective discourse, especially in regulating the strength or impact of a statement.

**Keywords:** Hedging devices, Philippine newspaper editorials, corpus linguistics

## 1. Introduction

Assisting writers in expressing their beliefs and assumptions while, at the same time, moderating possible unfavorable reactions from the readers require various linguistic styles and devices. Among these linguistic styles and devices is hedging. For the past five years, several research (Coetzer, 2009; Dallyono, Hidayati, & Muhammad, 2008; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Nivales, 2011; O'Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011; Tahririan & Shahzamani, 2009) have examined the use of hedging.

Hedging may be used to lessen the force of one's claim using cautionary language. Writers can use hedging to lessen their accountability to particular assertions. It can also be used to consider discourse-community values. Although there is an increasing interest in the use of mitigating devices in communication, a number of studies (Atai & Sadr, 2008; Coetzer, 2009; Hyland, 1994, 1998; Lewin, 2005; Nivales, 2011; Vartalla, 1999, 2001) have focused on the use of hedges in academic writing, theses, and articles in scientific journals. Other studies have also focused on hedging in the political discourses of presidential candidates (Al Rashidy, 2012) and conference proposals (Uysal, 2014). While there are research that considered hedging in newspaper editorials (Buitkiene, 2008; Tahririan & Shahzamani, 2009), the number of these studies seems to be minimal. This scenario is also described by Buitkiene (2008), who pointed out that the number of studies investigating the function of hedging in newspaper discourse is not as numerous as those studies dealing with academic or scientific discourses.

Although newspaper editorials are worthy of analysis since, as suggested by Tahririan and Shahzamani (2009), errors committed in using hedges in journalistic language can cause "misunderstanding, misinterpretation, ambiguity, and vagueness" (p. 202), it appears that very little attention has been given to examining hedging in newspaper editorials in the Philippines. Newspapers also have a number of readers, and their editorials are among the important sections, for they manifest the position of the paper on particular national concerns. Hedging is assumed to be useful in these editorials since hedges are "used to reduce potential risk of a claim or prevent embarrassing situations in case one is found to be wrong" (Vartalla, 2001 as cited in Tahririan & Shahzamani, 2009, pp. 200-201). Editors may place a risk on the newspaper's reputation if they are not cautious in their language use, especially in claiming a particular stand, attacking a particular issue, or calling for the public's action. To mitigate the effects of such claims,

attack, or persuasion, the use of hedging devices is therefore important in editorials. Buitkiene (2008) further adds that since editorials aim to persuade or even influence public opinion, editors rely on various syntactic structures or linguistic devices. If editors present their claims using absolute statements, this can cause problems since these statements might “backfire if the message is inconsistent with popular thought” (p.16). The controversial topics sometimes discussed in newspaper editorials also prompt editors to be wary about their language use by softening their claims when they are not confident in validating their assertions with facts that the majority of their readers consider acceptable. Milanovic and Milanovic (2010) further explain that “the concern about the writer’s reputation and the one of his publisher as well as the complexity of the subject ... may be greatly responsible for softened words and expressions” (p. 122).

In relation to the use of hedging devices and its connection with culture, the cultural specificity by Hyland (1997 as cited in Tahririan & Shahzamani, 2009) states that members of a particular society use language in a way that manifests some of their specific culture or traits. Furthermore, Dahl (2004 as cited in Tahririan & Shahzamani, 2009) argues that “the natural culture affects the written discourse conventions and is the main cause for the differences in text across languages” (p. 215).

As such, the use of hedging devices in Philippine newspaper editorials may also be analyzed by considering the writers’ and readers’ language use, discourse-community values, and norms. Filipinos are regarded as among the most polite peoples in the world (“Pinoys among the most polite, least rude people in the world,” 2012); thus, hedging devices are probably utilized in Philippine newspaper editorials. Moreover, Worthington (2010 as cited in Labor & De Guzman, 2011) explains that “Filipino interpersonal relationships are described as being characterized by harmony and non-confrontational communication” (p. 201). To be specific, the politeness of the Filipinos can be seen when they address the elders with the expressions *po* and *opo*. This politeness might also be manifested when they try to build an amiable interpersonal relationship with others.

The use of hedging devices in Philippine newspaper editorials is, therefore, worthy of study since this can show the language norms of Filipinos and can reveal how Filipino writers utilize hedging devices to mitigate the impact of a paper’s position on particular national issues. Furthermore, as pointed out in the previous discussion, it seems that there are limited studies which investigated the use of hedging in Philippine newspaper editorials. In

this account, this paper examined the use of hedging devices in the editorials of three leading newspapers in the Philippines identified in the 2012 web ranking and by Nielsen Media Index/Consumer and Media Views Survey conducted in 2011. These are the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the *Manila Bulletin*, and the *Philippine Star*. Generally, this paper sought to offer valuable insights to Filipino media practitioners and journalism students regarding the kind of language used in newspaper editorials. Specifically, the paper aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What types of hedging devices are found in the leading Philippine newspaper editorials?; and (2) Are there similarities or differences in the hedging devices used among the newspaper editorials?

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework

Over the years, several studies have partly shown the interfacing categories and classifications of hedges (cf. Hyland, 1998; Machin & Mayr, 2012; O’Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011; Varttala, 1999, 2001). Considering these somehow confusing classifications, the researcher examined numerous research articles and reference books regarding hedging devices to formulate the present study’s classification of hedges.

The aforementioned studies classify hedges into: (1) modal verbs; (2) main verbs; (3) nouns; (4) adverbs; (5) prepositional phrases; (6) reference to an official body, report, or expert; (7) agentless passives; and (8) other hedging devices.

The first type includes the modals *must*, *may*, *would*, *can*, *could*, and *might*. The use of these modals can lower the degree of certainty in statements. The second type consists of the main verbs or epistemic verbs like *estimate*, *seem*, *suggest*, and *indicate*. Allowing writers to adjust the tone of their statements depending on the sufficiency of information supporting particular claims can be one of the uses of this type. The third type refers to nouns used in statements which can include among other words the following: *claim*, *possibility*, and *assumption*. These differ from other nouns since they indicate a not-too-specific or conclusive meaning. Employing these words may emphasize an indefinite stance and can help minimize overgeneralization. Adverbs, sometimes regarded as approximators, comprise the fourth type. Some of these are *probably*, *quite*, *some*, *perhaps*, *somewhat*, *almost*, and *about*. Aside from showing indefiniteness, some of these are used in quantifying claims in the absence of specific figures. Composing the fifth type are the prepositional phrases like *at least* and *at the very least*, which, similar

to the other previously mentioned types, can indicate avoidance of specific quantifiers. The sixth type is reference to an official body, report, person, or experts, which writers may opt to use if they are cautious of accepting full responsibility for claims made. Examples include direct references to sources. Some of these are also introduced by the phrase *according to*. Including other sources of information to support claims is the strategy for this type. The seventh type refers to the agentless passive that can be used by writers if the identity of the doer is unknown or if the identity of the doer needs not to be disclosed. In this manner, the focus is given to the action seen in the statement. The last type consists of other possible hedges. These may include other modifiers and phrases showing personal convictions like *I believe*, *I find*, and any other similar phrases.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The study employed a mixed paradigm design in examining the hedges used in the corpus. The number of hedges was counted, and then these hedging devices were classified into different types. An explanation of how the hedges were used in the selected extracts from the study corpus was also provided. Frequency and percentage counts were used to analyze the data gathered.

### **2.2 Sources of Data**

The corpus of the study includes newspaper editorials from three leading newspapers in the country, namely, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the *Manila Bulletin*, and the *Philippine Star*. Ten editorials from each of these newspapers published on August 24 to August 28, 2013 and September 1 to 5, 2013 were considered, thus, totaling to 30 editorials.

### **2.3 Data-Gathering Procedure**

Through microanalysis, the study analyzed the hedging devices used in the editorials of the three aforesaid newspapers. All the editorials were downloaded from the newspapers' respective websites.

A context-sensitive analysis was done manually to ensure correctness in coding. Since there were a number of hedging devices to be classified

and coded, the researcher examined the editorials three times. Furthermore, an assistant professor, who has been teaching language courses for almost 20 years in the tertiary and graduate levels of a comprehensive university, reexamined the coding of hedges to ensure the correctness of classification. After individually coding and classifying the hedges, the researcher and the intercoder reexamined and reclassified together the hedges that were not correctly classified in the coding.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Types of Hedging Devices in Philippine Newspaper Editorials

Table 1 shows the types of hedges used in the three newspapers, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PDI), the *Manila Bulletin* (MB), and the *Philippine Star* (PS).

**Table 1**  
*Types of hedging devices in Philippine newspaper editorials*

Type of Hedge	PDI		MB		PS		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Reference to official reports, authorities, etc.	45	42	16	100	2	11	<b>63</b>	<b>45</b>
Adverbs	16	15	0	0	8	42	<b>24</b>	<b>17</b>
Modal verbs	18	17	0	0	5	26	<b>23</b>	<b>16</b>
Main verbs	6	6	0	0	1	5	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>
Nouns	3	3	0	0	1	5	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>
Prepositional phrases	5	5	0	0	1	5	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
Agentless passives	9	8	0	0	0	0	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>
Other hedges	4	4	0	0	1	5	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100</b>

As seen in Table 1, nearly 50 percent of the hedging devices used in the newspaper editorials are references to official reports and persons or authorities while a little over than 30 percent of the hedging devices consist of two types, the modals and the adverbs.

It is not surprising that almost half of the hedging devices in the editorials are references pointing to other sources of information. Since

the editorials focus on national concerns, particularly economic, social, and political issues, the writers seem more cautious in using language to state a particular stand or claim. As pointed out by Hyland (1998), writers “generally seek to disguise both their interpretive responsibilities and rhetorical identities behind a screen of linguistic objectivity” (p. 16).

The following statements taken from the corpus show how incorporating other sources of information helps minimize the editors’ responsibility in facing possible negative reactions from readers if these readers find the editorial’s claim unacceptable. The statements that follow are unedited excerpts from the editorials.

- (1) No less than the DPWH chief had noted that in reducing flooding in Metro Manila, the first order of business for the government was to clear the waterways of garbage, reduce siltation and relocate illegal settlers. (PDI, August 27, 2013)
- (2) The allegations against Napoles and the findings of the COA were—to use COA Chair Grace Pulido-Tan’s choice adjective—horrible.

Excerpt 1 shows how the editorial tries to avoid possible problems in its strong assertion to remove illegal settlers along waterways by emphasizing that it is the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) chief himself who issued the statement about the removal of illegal settlers. In the Philippines, squatting is a massive social problem, with some of the illegal settlers throwing rocks and other sharp objects at the government demolition teams. Perhaps, to avoid problems with some of the readers who are on the illegal settlers’ side, the editors referred to the statement issued by the DPWH chief. In Excerpt 2, lessening the writer’s responsibility for a possible mistake or misinterpretation in describing the allegations against Janet Napoles, a businesswoman accused of corruption and fraud in the use of the government’s fund, is made possible by referring not only to a source, the Commission on Audit chair, but also by including what the source specifically said to describe the allegations against Napoles.

Interestingly, while the editorials hedge by citing references, the references themselves also tend to be cautious about their statements by referring as well to other sources as evident in Excerpt 3.

- (3) “Secretary (Albert) del Rosario said that the marked deterioration of peace and order in Egypt, exacerbated by the ongoing political instability and grave security challenges in that country, makes working and living there increasingly difficult and dangerous,” the Department of Foreign Affairs said last Tuesday. (PDI, August 24, 2013)

In issuing the statement in Excerpt 3, the person from the Department of Foreign Affairs tried to be careful in saying that it is difficult and dangerous to work in Egypt by citing Secretary Del Rosario, who said the original statement.

The use of modals, the second type of hedging commonly used in the study corpus, is also manifested in statements that show lowering of certainty by approximating, distancing, and vagueness. In this study, *may*, *would*, and *can* top the list of the hedges in this type. The statements that follow reflect this particular use of hedging.

- (4) Under his new scheme, the latitude may have narrowed down – but it is still there. (PDI, August 26, 2013)
- (5) We hope the President would take the next necessary step, and abolish not merely the PDAF. (PDI, August 26, 2013)
- (6) Abaya, however, said it would be up to Torres if she wanted to go on leave while the investigation is ongoing. (PS, September 3, 2013)
- (7) But the first clause of the sentence can still be improved. (PDI, September 1, 2013).

Toning down through the use of *may* in Excerpt 4 is perhaps used to evade questions from readers regarding the true extent of the latitude’s narrowing down. As Tahririan and Shahzamani (2009) note, the use of *may* connotes an “air of imprecision,” further indicating that the writer “wishes to control his commitment regarding the accuracy of what is being said” (p.201). Showing a careful use of the language to give respect to authorities is also considered hedging as evident in Excerpts 5 and 6. To lessen the force of the statement concerning an action the editorial wants the President to take, the

editor used the modal *would* in Excerpt 6. Similarly, Excerpt 7 shows the use of hedging probably for politeness since the person involved is the country's Land Transportation Office chief. Softening an editorial's suggestion, with the use of *can*, is another modal used as hedging in Excerpt 7.

Adverbs, also referred to as approximators, comprise the third commonly used type of hedging in this study. Reducing the certainty of statement, concealing exact figures, and distancing the writer's presence are some of the uses of this type of hedging (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Topping the list in this study are *some*, *quite*, and *perhaps*. Examples are:

- (8) ...some 1,200 are permanent residents ... (PDI, August 24, 2013)
- (9) But there is something quite unseemly, too, about Gazmin's indiscreet announcement... (PDI, September 3, 2013)
- (10) Perhaps the public had good reason to. (PDI, August 28, 2013)

Allowing provision for possible error in quoting an exact figure might have prompted the use of *some* in Excerpt 8. Excerpt 8 involves reference to a huge number of residents, and to avoid a possible error, the editorial writer tried not to be specific and used *some* as a hedging device. Toning down because of uncertainty is evident in Excerpts 9 and 10. In Excerpt 9, a hedged statement is written perhaps because of uncertainty or deference to the country's Defense Secretary. In Excerpt 10, hedging is also seen on how the editorial tries to phrase its statement in a manner that will not provoke serious negative reactions. A reference to the public and its good reason is even pointed out.

It is also interesting to note that the editorials do not just solely use one hedging in a sentence but also use varied hedging devices in single sentences as shown in the excerpts that follow:

- (11) The government estimates that some 60,000 families in Metro Manila live on waterways. (PDI, August 27, 2013)

Two types of hedging are used in the above sentence: verb and adverb. The use of *some* shows that the editorial tries to "gloss over lack of concrete

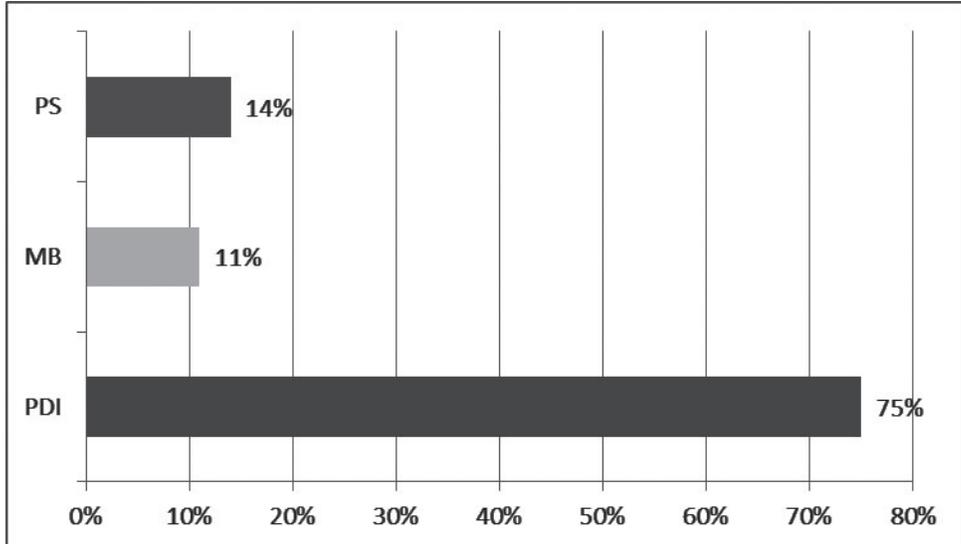
evidence” (Sunoo, 1998 as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 193), specifically in citing the figure involved. This lack of concrete evidence is further made obvious by the verb *estimates*, exemplifying the lack of authoritative claim to the exactness of information.

### 3.2 Similarities and Differences in the Use of Hedging Devices among the Three Philippine Newspaper Editorials

The percentages illustrating the possible similarities or differences in the use of hedging devices in Philippine newspaper editorials are shown in Figure 1. As gleaned from the figure, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has the highest percentage of hedging devices. PDI’s remarkable percentage is evident as it gets three-fourths of the total number of hedges in all editorials. With a little over than ten percent, the *Manila Bulletin* has the least number of hedges; the *Philippine Star* also has minimal hedging devices with barely 15 percent.

**Figure 1**

*Percentages of hedging devices used in Philippine newspaper editorials*



Acknowledged by the Nielsen Consumer and Media View survey covering the fourth quarter of 2012 as the newspaper with the highest number of readership in the country, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* editorials mostly deal with political, economic, and social issues. Such topics may necessitate

the use of hedging devices to counteract untoward reactions from captured daily nationwide readers of 2.7 million. This huge number of readers reported in the PDI's website may compel editorial writers to use hedging devices. The editorial's regular reference (42% usage) to official reports, authorities, and similar sources shows its constant use of hedging. The number of hedging devices used in this newspaper might also be affected by the number of words the editorials have since a comparison among the corpus in the study shows that the PDI always has the longest editorial compared with the *Manila Bulletin* and the *Philippine Star*.

Identified by the Nielsen Consumer and Media View survey ("Philippine Daily Inquirer widens lead in leadership," 2012) as the second in terms of readership, the *Manila Bulletin*, surprisingly, has only a little over than ten percent hedging usage. That this newspaper does not discuss political or social issues unlike the usual editorials in national newspapers and that it has the shortest editorials compared with others are probable reasons why its editorials contain the least number of hedging devices. Its somehow pro-administration stance seems to be evident in its exclusion of topics on national governance and pressing social and political concerns. Thematic issues, such as honoring government officials or celebrating anniversaries/establishment of public or private organizations or establishments, support the newspaper's tagline of good news. Hedging seems to be of greater use in collaborative discourse exemplified in the *Manila Bulletin*. This particular discourse is made more evident by the generic congratulatory closing paragraph complimenting particular persons, establishments, or agencies. With the *Manila Bulletin*'s editorial's standard parting words *congratulations and Mabuhay* and positive commentaries on general thematic subjects, the editorials somehow need not use cautionary language.

Below are some excerpts from the editorials in the *Manila Bulletin* revealing the use of standard parting words, positive commentaries, and nonpolitical or nonsocial contents.

- (12) The Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) is celebrating its 27<sup>th</sup> National Coconut Week on August 28-31, 2013, with the theme "Biyaya ng Niyugan, Kaunlaran ng Bayan." Highlight of the celebration is the 12<sup>th</sup> National Coconut Festival Trade Fair, with activities that include a Farmers' Day, a coconut taste test, a feeding program, a product launch, a book launching, and a coconut sugar standards and safety seminar. (MB, August 28, 2014)

- (13) We congratulate the Department of Agriculture headed by Secretary Proceso J. Alcala and Philippine Coconut Administration Administrator Euclides G. Forbes, in their joint undertakings to place the coconut sector as priority industry cluster for productivity enhancement in the Republic of the Philippines. CONGRATULATIONS AND MABUHAY! (MB, August 28, 2014)
- (14) The Manila Bulletin, led by its Chairman of the Board of Directors Dr. Emilio T. Yap, President and Publisher Atty. Hermogenes P. Pobre, Executive Vice President Dr. Emilio C. Yap III, Editor-in-Chief Dr. Cris J. Icban Jr., Business Editor Loreto D. Cabañes, Officers and Employees, Congratulate Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas Governor Amando M. Tetangco Jr. for being cited, for the fifth time, by Global Finance as one of the world's top central bankers. We wish him and all other Central Bank officials and employees the best and success in all endeavors. CONGRATULATIONS AND MABUHAY! (MB, August 29, 2013)

Excerpt 12 shows a topic that is not a political or a social concern. It hardly manifests the usual editorial leads that reveal patterns of argumentative writing. The topic deals with a celebration and not the usual persuasive rhetoric of editorials. Excerpts 13 and 14 taken from different dates also show how similar the two editorials end. The way the generic parting words are capitalized is also similar with other MB editorials.

The *Philippine Star* utilizing less than 15 percent usage of hedging devices is the third leading newspaper in the Philippines. Its editorials are somehow similar to those of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, for the topics involve political, economic, and social concerns.

In general, in terms of the type of hedging devices used, all the editorials from the three Philippine newspapers similarly use reference to reports, authorities, and any other sources to possibly avoid direct responsibility in forceful and precarious commentaries. To temper tone in addressing or mentioning prominent officials and provide possibilities for other courses of action, modals are commonly utilized in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and the *Philippine Star*. The two newspapers also employ common adverbs or approximators to provide more latitude in citing figures and describing actions.

#### 4. Conclusion

That editorial writing involves the need to temper one's tone in expressing forceful convictions, that it employs shields by referring to other sources for apparent claims, and that it needs to use approximations in lieu of definite quantifiers make the use of hedging devices important.

With the use of hedging, the Filipino editorial writers somewhat tend to exhibit respect to persons in authority. In discussing sensitive issues in their editorial, the use of hedging devices somehow show that some Filipinos' manner of conversing is cautious and indirect.

The correct use of hedging devices in editorials and in various academic and scientific research articles can help writers soften their personal convictions or claims. This need to temper convictions in claims be it for the purposes of showing respect or humility and this necessity of concealing personal responsibilities in assertions devoid of or lacking in substantive evidence, however, should not underscore the importance of establishing credibility, conciseness, and correctness of information and assertions. One must remember that an effective discourse calls for a balance of expression. While careful consideration may be given in explaining ideas and convictions through research and study, cautioning the impact of claims or assertions in the absence of substantive support references or data is made possible through the use of hedging devices.

Other researchers interested in the study of hedging devices may want to cover a comparison of hedging devices across cultures and gender. A contrastive study comparing the use of hedges in two different cultures can give significant insights about the way different races communicate while a study on hedging by gender can also give an insight on how similar or different males and females are in using cautionary language. Hedging devices across disciplines, like health and sciences, law, business, and psychology, can also be undertaken so as to reveal the distinct hedging devices used in particular fields.

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