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### Reading between the lines

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# READING BETWEEN THE LINES

To uncover news agendas, get behind the subtle manipulation of words

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WHEN it comes to news, things are seldom what they seem. The media can colour news events while remaining technically objective and strictly factual. Faced with such insidiously accurate reporting, we have little choice but to read between the lines.

It is a tricky art. First, we develop a healthy attitude of scepticism. Armed with this “trust-nobody” attitude, we examine the piece to get to the writer’s intentions. Mind you, the idea is not always to disapprove of the hidden agenda, but to be aware that there is one – always.

Writers use a variety of techniques to push their agenda. First and foremost in their arsenal, is the choice of words.

Words have meanings, but they also have connotations. As a case in point, look at my choice of the word “arsenal” in the last sentence, which in this context merely means collection. But because of its negative connotation, I have portrayed writers as your adversaries. I could have used “collection” or “repertoire” (or nothing at all) to take away the negativity.

Using “gimmickry” would imply that the writers usually fail in their efforts. Choosing “goodie bag” would give you a warm feeling about it because of its association with childhood memories. Unless you know of my bag of tricks (which has a good connotation), you are at my mercy.

When connotation is employed to drive geo-political agendas, we have to scrutinise the word choices with more serious care. In an Indian newspaper, I once noticed that they consistently used the words “militant” or “militancy” to re-



port a certain movement, while describing another similar movement with words like “terrorist” or “terrorism”. Both usages may be accurate, but unless we are careful, we may get easily swayed into thinking that one movement is legitimate while the other is not.

Americans are masters in this game. Every word spoken by the State Department spokesperson is so carefully chosen that it would be naïve to overlook the associated connotations. Look at Hillary Clinton’s choice of the word “misspeak” – books can be written on

that choice!

What is left unsaid is as important as what is not, which makes for another potent tactic in shaping public opinion. Imagine a TV report that runs like this: “The Pentagon has reported a surgical strike with a laser-guided missile fired from an unmanned predator aircraft killing five terrorists in the US most wanted list. However, civilians claim that the bomb fell on a wedding party killing 35 people including 15 children and 10 women. We haven’t independently verified this claim.”

While staying factually accurate, this report has managed to discredit the civilian deaths by playing with the connotations of “report” and “claim”, as well as by not saying that the Pentagon report also was unverified. Besides, how can super-duper unmanned aircraft and laser-guided munitions miss their targets?

We, of course, have no means of knowing what actually went on there. But we have to discern the process of colouring the report and develop an ability (or at least a desire) to seek the truth and intentions behind the words.

This ability is especially crucial now due to a worrying trend in the global media – the genesis of media conglomerates. When most of the world gets their information from a limited number of conglomerates, they wield an inordinate amount of power and sway over us and our opinions.

Unless we jealously guard our ability to read between the lines, we may be marching quietly into a troubling brave new world.

*The writer is a scientist from the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). He currently works as a Senior Quantitative Developer at Standard Chartered Bank, Singapore. His book, *The Unreal Universe*, is available in local bookstores and at [www.TheUnrealUniverse.com](http://www.TheUnrealUniverse.com).*