



Radio leaks

Presenting and contesting leaks in radio news broadcasts

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the discursive construction and contestation of 'leaked' stories in news broadcast programmes. Drawing on a sample of BBC Radio 4 news programmes recorded between May and June 2000, we analyze four items of news presented as leaks about upcoming events. We suggest that these examples highlight the leaking of information as a valuable newsworthy commodity in that it not only allows news organizations to report what is going to be news before it happens but also enables speculative discourse as to the meaning of the event yet to happen. However, in order for a story to be accepted as a leak it must be seen to fulfil a number of criteria. With this in mind, we identify four features accompanying the introduction of the news items as leaks in the process of authentication: secrecy, authorship/ownership and future orientation. The article then discusses how these features are used when contesting the status of a news story as a leak, and how temporal play contributes to downgrading the content of the leak and, hence, its relevance, immediacy and newsworthiness.

KEY WORDS ■ discourse ■ leaks ■ radio news broadcasts ■ temporality

Introduction

Within media research, the emphasis on 'as it happens' news reporting, or being the first on the scene of any event, makes *immediacy* a well-recognized aspect of newsworthiness of the report (Roshco, 1975; Schlesinger, 1978; Allan, 1999; Richardson and Meinhof, 1999) and creates the image of news producers

as dedicated professionals (Zelizer, 1992). However, the constraints of the temporal organization of events mean that, in the majority of cases, single events or events in an on-going story have to have occurred before they can be reported on as 'news'. Therefore, news organizations commonly orient to the future to increase the news value of their stories by relying on prediction, speculation and discussion of future implications of past and current events (Jaworski et al., 2003a, 2003b). Another way news organizations can be ahead of events that occur in the past or present time is through the reporting of events that are going to or are planned to happen. Whilst there is a rich seam of overt future news events, such as coronations, inaugurations, presidential visits, covert future news may also be obtained through 'unnamed sources', 'off the record briefings' and 'leaks' (Tiffin, 1989). Covert information about future events allows those in possession of such knowledge a kind of crystal ball by which to transcend the temporal 'now' toward an occurrence in the future. A factual future then provides a future from which it is possible to have some control or influence over outcomes which are yet to occur and a platform for further newsworthy prediction and speculation about those events. In this article, we examine one area of covert information – media leaks – and identify some organizational features associated with the presentation of leaks by and on the media and the discursive negotiation and contestation of this type of covert information. Through this we highlight not only some of the features associated with leaked information but also the flow and temporal play entered into during the process of advancing and contesting media leaks.¹

The reported leaking of information to the media and by the media has both a long history and a high news value within news production (Molotch and Lester, 1974; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). Boorstin (2002[1961]: 30) suggests that a leak is 'one of the most elaborately planned ways of emitting information' used by governments and other organizations to pre-announce information and possibly diminish or deflect criticism when the information or policy is officially released. Molotch and Lester (1974) highlight the role of leaks in generating a type of news, 'scandal', as well as indicating that the legitimate source for such a leak is bound up with institutional position and credible witness. In today's political media environment, leaks have extended their range of functions, from scandals and policy manoeuvres, and have become a major weapon in the political armoury of various organizations against one another (e.g. opposition parties versus the government) as well as a tool of infighting within political parties, ministries, etc. (Walker, 2000). Some of the well-recognized functions of leaks are disclosing social and political problems, mobilizing reaction in support of a common cause, discrediting political opponents, shaping interpretations of public events, enhancing media relations, shaping expectations and being ahead of temporally

bound news, and so on (Tiffin, 1989; see also Summers, 1981; Morgan, 1991; Gaber, 2000; Williams and Carpini, 2000).

It is interesting to note that despite some leaks being planned and some unplanned, they all depend on 'secrecy' as their main value of newsworthiness. As Palmer (2000: 9) observes: 'the value of a leak is that it supposedly guarantees that the information is sufficiently significant that someone does not want it published, and that it cannot be made available'.

As a news genre, leaks are usually linked in the literature, directly or indirectly, to the issue of sourcing of news, as leaks are one of the means of providing *access* to the authors (e.g. Tuchman 1978; Gans, 1979; Herman and Chomsky, 1994). There the relationship between the 'sources' (i.e. powerful individuals in strategic institutions) and journalists is based on a delicate balance of power, trust and mutual benefits. 'Political aides have for decades leaked information about pending decisions to newspaper reports, as a way of enhancing their own reputation and improving the chances that a decision will turn out the way they want' (Fellows, 1996: 193–4). Thus, leaking information benefits news organizations in providing them with newsworthy 'facts', while the sources appear to be informative and non-secretive. In addition, leaks offer a chance of dialogue on developing new policies or, in the case of leaking the proposed new policies of one's opponents, may stop them from being implemented (Fellows, 1996).

Despite the recognition of the importance of leaks within media and political circles (Tiffin, 1989), an analysis of the discourse of media and political leaks has been largely neglected. In beginning to address this gap, this article explores some of the discursive features employed when introducing, establishing and legitimating news stories as leaks. Focusing on leaks that involve events *yet to happen*, the analysis explores how these techniques are bound with temporal features that are used to contest the validity or relevance of some of the leaks in question.

Data and method

The data for this analysis are drawn from a corpus of recordings of all scheduled BBC Radio 4 news programmes collected over a period of approximately four weeks from 21 May 2001 to 15 June 2001: *Today* broadcast on weekdays between 6–9 a.m.; *World at One* broadcast between 1–2 p.m.,² *PM*, broadcast between 5–6 p.m. and *The World Tonight* broadcast between 10–10:45 p.m.

As previously suggested, leaks are a relatively common news type, although we know of no accurate statistics. *The Guardian* newspaper comments

on the changing numbers of leaks in recent decades by examining the number of 'official inquiries' provoked by leaks:

Formal leak inquiries averaged about 20 a year in the early 1980s but shot up to more than 35 in the year of Thatcherite triumphalism, 1988. John Major enjoyed a couple of honeymoon years after he took over as leaks fell into the teens but from 1992, his average was up to nearly 30 a year. My colleague David Hencke secured figures from May 1997 to the end of last year, which suggested Labour's yearly figure is about 25. But these figures for Labour put paid to the argument developed by Tory Euro MP and think-tanker Graham Mather who said more leaks meant the civil service was biased against the Tories. Departments most heavily leaked against (or which themselves do the leaking) are the Home Office, followed by Health, Northern Ireland, Social Security, Defence and the Cabinet Office. The Foreign Office, Education and Scotland are virtually leak free. These figures may simply reflect policy salience, perhaps also the degree to which some departments (notably the Home Office) have to engage with permeable external bodies, such as the prison and immigration services. (Walker, 2000)

The earlier quote suggests, then, that the occurrence of leaks is variable and depends on the political period, political culture of the moment and geography.

Within the collected data (spanning approximately one month), we identified four stories presented as leaks. As only two of these were politically oriented, this corresponds, as previously mentioned, to the average of 25 per year for the Labour Government at the time.

The four news items presented as leaks in our data were:

- 1 'The Mitchell Report', first broadcast on 21 May 2001 between 7–8 a.m. on the *Today* programme – this item concerned the possibility of continuing the Middle East peace process;
- 2 'The Condon Report', first broadcast on 22 May 2001 between 6–7 a.m. on the *Today* programme – this item concerned a report into match fixing in cricket that was due out soon;
- 3 'The Navy Report', first broadcast on 11 June 2001 between 6–7 a.m. on the *Today* programme – this item concerned a document obtained by the *Today* programme warning about shortages in the Royal Navy that would affect its combat readiness;
- 4 'Tax Harmonization', first broadcast on 23 May 2001 between 6–7 a.m. on the *Today* programme – this item concerned a document obtained by the Conservative Party that they said showed the European Commission wishing to harmonize taxes across Europe.

Through discussion of these cases, we wish to highlight the importance of this type of leak (about upcoming events) as a particular genre that derives its value through possession of undisclosed knowledge of the future that, in turn, allows predictions to be made from a basis of *those future events*. In other words, the 'owner' of the leak has news of the future *now*. Bringing future information to the present lends itself well to the notion of discursive construction of

ideology (Van Dijk, 1988; Billig, 1991; Fairclough, 1992) as media stories do not just appear but are shaped as deliberate representations of beliefs, attitudes and purportedly shared knowledge about the world (cf. Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Schlesinger, 1978; Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995b).

Our analysis is broadly informed by the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1995a, b), and especially its emphasis on the underlying patterns of power and their enactment within the fabric of everyday discourse. Consequently, we suggest that being in possession of leaked information may provide institutional and/or political power through the ability to claim insight into the future and thus control the present agenda for what is to come. The analysis here focuses on several textual features or analytic categories as identified by Van Dijk (2001) in relation to political/media discourse: topics (or semantic macrostructures), local meaning (e.g. afforded by lexical choices), formal structures (e.g. the active/passive voice; hedging) and context models: domains, social roles and overall action.

Following this framework, we examine how the semantic macrostructures of news reports' topics (or contents) are manipulated with regard to their local meanings, specifically the lexical choices and cohesion of the events' temporal relations. We also discuss participants' patterns of alignment (identifying with or distancing from the leak) and how the representation of the events is shaped in the overall domain of politics, the rights and responsibilities of the social members (journalists and politicians) and the genre characteristics of radio news broadcasts.

Establishing a news item as a 'leak': secrecy, authorship/ownership, future orientation

In our data the items of news presented as leaks do not just appear: they are brought onto the news programme and discursively situated as a 'leak'. This situating of the leak on air provides a frame for its reporting and for its own newsworthiness (Lester, 1980). Whilst in the next section we examine the way two of the leaks are contested, we begin our discussion by examining the discursive features for introducing leaks into news.

Extract 1: (Mitchell Report):³ *Today*, 7–8 a.m., 21 May 2001

1GE: I th-think er:: the Mitchell Report the American er:: report is due out today (.) I think will
2 (.) add some impetus [for wit]
3SM: [but we] we do know I mean it's been heavily leaked in advance (.)
4 h-h- hasn't it (.) we do know that um that part that says settlements (.) further settlements
5 by Israelis in Arab territory (.) what they consider to be Arab territory must stop has been
6 rejected by the Sharon government

Extract 2: (Condon Report): *Today*, 7–8 a.m., 22 May 2001

1SR: this time tomorrow Lord Paul Condon's report into match fixing in cricket will just have
 2 been published (.) the *Daily Telegraph* though says it has seen a copy of the report this
 3 morning and it contains allegations of murder kidnap and threats to key witnesses (.) the
 4 *Telegraph* says that Lord Condon believes that the seeds of the corruption problem may
 5 have been sown in England in the 1970s (.) that while the most blatant form of
 6 match fixing has stopped since his unit began its work (.) there are indications that some
 7 players and others are still acting dishonestly

Extract 3 (Navy Report): *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 11 June 2001

1NR: a classified report by the Royal Navy's most senior officers has been leaked to this
 2 programme (.) and warns that the force may be unfit to fight or fulfil its commitments to
 3 NATO (.) but the ministry of defence said the document was a worst case assessment (.)
 4 we'll have more on this in a moment
 5 [. . .]
 6 now and more on that leaked document which says that cuts in the Royal Navy mean that it
 7 can't play a full role in NATO's joint rapid reaction force among other things (.) well our
 8 defence reporter Andrew Gilligan has seen the report (.) he's on the line (.) Andrew this
 9 document apparently written by the man who's now the First Sealord
 10AG: yes indeed Admiral Nigel Eiesenhigh who was Commander in Chief Fleet at the time
 11 he wrote it I think (.) probably a joint effort of him and his staff what it is a thing called
 12 the Fleet Risk Register (.) and it's mapped out under several headings the risks that the
 13 Royal Navy won't be able to meet its duty and combat obligations (.)

Extract 4 (Tax Harmonization): *Today*, 8–9 a.m., 23 May 2001

1JH: and Labour has its own problems (.) the Conservatives have got hold of a
 2 confidential document (.) apparently from the European Commission that
 3 recommends it seems moving towards greater harmonization of taxes

In these extracts, the frame of authenticity for the leaks is introduced through a number of predicated features:

- secrecy – that the document was hitherto not publicly available;
- authorship – that the document is attributable to a credible source;
- ownership – that the document is now in the possession of someone (who may or may not be the same as its author); and
- future orientation – that the document has temporal relevance for the present and future.

Secrecy

In the first two extracts, the secrecy or public unavailability of the documents at the moment of broadcast is implied rather than highlighted overtly as in Extract 1, line 1, and Extract 2, lines 1–2. Naturally, what has not been published yet or is about to be published cannot officially exist in the public domain. Technically then, the programme discloses the contents of previously unavailable documents, with their 'secrecy' residing in the current official unavailability of the documents although it is also clear that the authors of the

two documents do not intend them to be kept secret for any considerable amount of time. In fact, each document has a clearly stated release date: later ‘today’ (Extract 1, line 1) and ‘this time tomorrow’ (Extract 2, line 1). Thus, by releasing the contents of the documents to be published in the (near) future, the news organization increases the news value of its reports without the risk of facing contestation of the relevance or accuracy of its information. In fact, much is made of one of these documents being in the public domain already, although not officially (see Extract 1, line 3).

In contrast to the Mitchell and Condon Reports, for which secrecy (defined here as public unavailability at the time of disclosure) is a necessary feature for the item to be defined as ‘leak’, the other two stories (Navy Report and Tax Harmonization) introduced in Extracts 3 and 4, respectively, heavily rely for their newsworthiness on the explicit claims to their existence *and* their authors’ alleged intention to keep them away from the public (Palmer, 2000). They are referred to as ‘a classified report’ (Extract 3, line 1), ‘that leaked document’ (Extract 3, line 6) and ‘a confidential document’ (Extract 4, lines 1–2).

Authorship/ownership

In each of the leaks discussed here, there is special prominence given to the authorship and ownership of the document and leaked story, respectively. Other things being equal, any document written by or on the authority of a prominent public figure or organization will be more newsworthy than an anonymous one, not least because, as such, it has a named author (or authors) who can be held responsible and accountable for the views expressed therein. In the case of our data, the authors of the documents are given prominence as (in the first two stories, respectively): the US Senator George Mitchell (Mitchell Report) and the former (UK) Chief of the Metropolitan Police Force Lord Paul Condon (Condon Report). Whilst in these two stories the authorship is attributed in a relatively straightforward manner, the authorship of the Tax Harmonization and Navy Report leaks/documents is presented more elaborately.

The document in the Tax Harmonization story is introduced by the presenter (JH) of *Today* with a degree of hedging through the use of ‘apparently’ (Extract 4, line 2). In the Navy Report story, even more work is entered into establishing the authorship of the document in the possession of the programme. First, it is ‘the Royal Navy’s most senior officers’ (Extract 3, line 1). Then, the authorship is attributed to an individual holding a specific office: ‘this document written by the man who’s now the First Sealord’ (Extract 3, lines 8–9), which is confirmed by the reporter, who actually names the author

and his office at the time of writing the document (Extract 3, line 10), and further suggests that this is not just the voice of a lone man but more of a received institutional view of other senior officers (Extract 3, lines 11–12). In each of these examples, although it seems difficult to pinpoint the named author(s) of the documents, working towards the agreed and clearly identified authorship of the documents can be seen as an important aspect of authenticating or legitimating (Molotch and Lester, 1974) the frame for the leak.

What is also bound up with authentication is *ownership* of the document. As we have suggested, one of the features of the leaks in our data is that they are based on documents that physically exist and are in the sanctioned or not sanctioned possession of someone who promotes them as newsworthy. Accordingly, in three of our examples (Condon Report, Navy Report, Tax Harmonization), the ownership of the leaked document (whose possession it is in and who has seen it) is a relevant feature. The document at the heart of the Navy Report story is in the possession of the BBC *Today* programme (cf. ‘our defence reporter . . . has seen the report’; Extract 3, line 8). The *Today* programme attributes the ownership of the leaked Condon Report to *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper (Extract 2, line 2) and the leaked Tax Harmonization document is said to be in the hands of the Conservative Party (Extract 4, lines 1–3).

In the Mitchell Report story, however, ownership is not made an issue. As has been noted already, the document is reported as having been ‘heavily leaked in advance’ (Extract 1, line 3). Thus whilst situating the information as coming from a leaked document, that it was ‘heavily leaked in advance’ removes the agent of leaking and places the document in the hands of *anybody*. Interestingly, authorship and ownership are not synonymous with the identity of the leaker, which usually remains undisclosed.

Future orientation

Not unlike other news stories (see earlier), the four leaks discussed in this paper display a future relevance of the information contained in the documents. When discussing the ‘heavily leaked’ Mitchell Report, the emphasis is placed upon its publication later on that same day even though one of the main recommendations has already been rejected by one of the key addressees, the ‘Sharon Government’ (Extract 1, lines 4–6). With respect to the Condon Report, the current and future orientation is highlighted by contrasting the newsworthy past with its continuation into the present and implied future (Extract 2, lines 5–7). In the Navy Report story, the content of the leaked report is talked of as having a direct bearing on the national safety of the country in the immediate future (Extract 3, line 2). Finally, the Tax Harmonization

story contains an orientation to the present and immediate future (Extract 4, line 3).

Negotiating and contesting leaks

So far, we have set out the way the introduction of these items of news as leaks is routinely surrounded with contextual information which works to establish an appropriate, authentic frame for them: secrecy, authorship/ownership and future orientation. However, while arguing that these features are regularly present and provide the contextual surround in which the leak stories are introduced, we are not suggesting that these features have equal weighting. For example, as is evident in the Condon Report and Mitchell Report stories, the fact that the documents are made available before their intended publication date is given less prominence than their contents. Indeed their status as leaks remains uncontested throughout further discussions, which to us suggests that the information appears accurate to all the parties concerned. However, as we demonstrate later, in the discussion of the Navy Report and Tax Harmonization stories, the alleged confidentiality of the documents may play a large part in the later discussion and *contestation* of the story.

It is not surprising that, in our data, much prominence is given to the secrecy, authorship and ownership of the two documents that are not due for public release (Navy Report and Tax Harmonization). Both these stories have domestic political angles and both, as we shall see, are highly contested. Reasons why they become contested are not hard to find. Both have high political currency as each is potentially damaging to the Government. This is especially true in the case of the Tax Harmonization document coming as it does during, and indeed as part of, the 2001 British General Election campaign in which Britain's relationship with the European Commission is seen by many as one of the main election issues. What is also evident and highly contested in our examples relates to the notion of future orientation. As has been suggested already, part of the value of a leak can be seen to reside in the ability of the owner to 'know' what will happen in the future and thus be in a position to impose meaning on that future and attain political (or other) currency from this. Thus, in the next two sections of the article we examine how the two leaks (Navy Report and Tax Harmonization) are contested over the course of their career.

The Navy Report: the future of the past is not newsworthy

In the Navy Report story discussed later, great play is made of the content of the leaked document describing an existing state of affairs about the Navy's

readiness to fight at the present time and their ability to fight if called upon to do so in the future. Consider the following extract, which carries on from the initial introduction of the story in Extract 3:

Extract 5: *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 11 June 2001

10AG: yes indeed Admiral Nigel Eiesenhigh who was Commander in Chief Fleet at the time
 11 he wrote it I think (.) probably a joint effort of him and his staff what it is a thing called
 12 the Fleet Risk Register (.) and it's mapped out under several headings the risks that the
 13 Royal Navy won't be able to meet its duty and combat obligations (.) it's very damning
 14 stuff (.) it says for instance (.) that shortages of ammunition are having a quotes very serious
 15 impact on the Navy's ability to fight (.) it says that um (.) it's got so severe shortage of Sea
 16 Harrier pilots that it might have to um send one of its aircraft carriers to sea without any
 17 aircraft on it

Although the report places the writing of the document in the past, through reference to the office of the author having changed, the contents of the report are talked of in the present. The report is infused with descriptions located in the present and this is entwined with predictions of the future: 'can't play a full role' (line 7), 'won't be able to meet its duty and combat obligations' (line 13), 'shortages of ammunition are having . . . very serious impact on the Navy's ability to fight' (lines 14–15), 'it [the Navy] might have to um send one of its aircraft carriers to sea without any aircraft on it' (lines 16–17) are all used in such a way as to present the document as an up-to-the-minute assessment of the state of the Navy and, on the basis of this, entwine this assessment with consequences for the future. As the *Today* programme progresses, the story is repeatedly returned to as the main 'news of the day' with further reports on the document including the defence correspondent's comments. In the final hour, the programme plays a pre-recorded interview⁴ with the Defence Secretary (Geoff Hoon) in which he attempts to undermine the leaked report by characterizing the information contained in the leak not as news relevant to the present and future but as news from the past.

What becomes noticeable during the course of the interview is the use of temporal organization and shifts in the discourse of prediction made so far. In the run up to the interview, the programme has been emphasizing the relevance of the leaked document for the current and future state of affairs (see Extract 5). However, during the 'main' interview, Geoff Hoon attempts to play down the immediacy of the information. Although accepting that it is a leak and the information accurate, he attempts to shift the relevance to the past by claiming that 'this document seems to me to be an out of date assessment of those risks'. The presenter (SM) attempts to counter this temporal shift by offering that the document was written at the 'end of last year, not many months ago'.

For the Defence Secretary, then, the document refers to the past, even though the presenter attempts to downgrade the time gap by suggesting that a few months is not sufficiently long for the document to be completely out of date. However, through this temporal shift by Geoff Hoon, the predictive (or newsworthy) opportunities of the document become increasingly undermined. This is noticeable from both the presenter's discourse and the Defence Secretary's. The presenter begins to restrict her questions to the present state of affairs (not the future) and about general implications for defence concerning availability of equipment strength and retention of pilots and of international perceptions and reputations.

In response to these attempts to situate the document back in the present time, the Defence Secretary repeatedly highlights that the document is from the past and utilizes this time space (from when the document was produced to 'now') to describe what has happened *since* the report was written in terms of the issues already having been addressed and reiterating his unwillingness to discuss a temporally irrelevant issue, GH: 'I'm not again going to comment on what appears to me to be an outdated picture based on a leaked document'. That is, Geoff Hoon moves to undermine the temporal immediacy of the information by claiming that 'now' was actually six months ago and, consequently, the 'future', from the time the document was written, has already happened.

Furthermore, although the document is 'secret' and has been successfully described as a leak, the Defence Secretary is able to undermine the relevance of the document further by stating that some of it is 'now' public knowledge. With a shift in temporality, from the presenter's orientation upon *present and future* to the Defence Secretary's orientation upon *past and present*, and with focus, from specifics to generality, the Defence Secretary is able to refer to a 'public response' to the issues contained within the document as already in the public domain. Moreover, within this time space he is able to address questions as to the readiness of the Navy as evidenced in the recent past and the near future.

In this way, Geoff Hoon's discrediting of the leaked story is carried out by offering a new set of predictions based upon what has happened since the document was written, i.e. by shifting the temporal 'nowness' of the story from the time of writing of the document to the time of its leaking. By arguing that the document is old or out of date is not to claim that the document is not a leak or that it is (or was) untrue, rather it is used to undermine the relevance of the information and the newsworthiness of the leak. Indeed, after this interview, the item ceased to be the 'main news of the day' and was not part of the lunchtime bulletin.

Tax harmonization: contesting the frame and the content

Whilst in the previous discussion it is the BBC who has possession and defends the temporal relevance of the information, in the next example it is a political party who 'owns' and promotes this as a newsworthy issue. Here our discussion focuses on the way the Conservative Party attempts to legitimize their story as a leak for the media and the temporal agenda setting the leak affords, through predicting a future outcome (raising taxes in Britain) from the outcome of the upcoming event (to impose tax harmonization across the EU). We also examine the media discourse surrounding the presentation of the leak, the progress of the story and the eventual undermining of the story reported through the media.

The basis of the Conservative Party's claim is that they have obtained a secret document (see Extract 4) which outlines proposals for the harmonization of some taxes across Europe and that the outcome of this document, to be discussed later that same day, will mean that a (Labour) Government in the future will be powerless to stop this and will be forced to raise taxes in line with European levels.

Extract 6: *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 23 May 2001

1JS: Europe has finally become an issue in the election campaign (.) the issue
 2 perhaps well our political correspondent here is Tim Franks (.) and in Brussels
 3 Angus Roxburgh (.) er Tim the big one now you think for the foreseeable
 4 future
 5TF: it er certainly will be as far as the Tories are concerned (.) they want (.) to er er
 6 ride out on a storm of applause about what they're saying about Europe and of
 7 course about the Euro (.) although today (.) what they're trying to bring in
 8 front of everyone's eyes is what they describe as a secret European
 9 Commission document which shows the Commission fully intends to
 10 harmonize its rates of VAT on even things such as zero-rated goods that we
 11 have at the moment (.) children's clothes, newspapers, food as well as income
 12 tax (.) and er the Labour government if re-elected would just roll over and play
 13 dead in the face of the Commission's plans

The report on the Conservative Party's claim by the correspondent contains two predictions (three, if one considers that this is in the run up to the election): that the EU Commission 'fully intends' (line 9) to harmonize taxes across Europe and that the Labour Government, if re-elected, would 'just roll over and play dead' (lines 12–13). Although in this example, the status of the item as a 'leak' is allowed some credence the issue of its relevance or secrecy is indeed aired by the BBC's own correspondent in Brussels who, early in the day, reports that there is past knowledge of the document and that the issue to which the document refers has already been dealt with.

Extract 7: *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 23 May 2001

1JH: er what's the truth of all that Angus

2AR: well when I put that version of it to er er a Commission insider last night he
 3 described it as complete and utter tosh (.) those were his words (.) another erm
 4 source in the Commission said that what we're actually gonna see from the
 5 Commission represents an historic departure for the Commission as regards the
 6 question of tax harmonization (.) his view was that in fact the British view is er
 7 prevailing within the Commission and the paper er that we were discussed
 8 today (.) an it is a general policy paper on where the European Commission
 9 should go taxation will er (.) for the first time will say that tax competition is a
 10 good thing

Revealing that the document had been discussed the night before (see lines 2–3), AR reports that, according to his 'insider' sources, there is not a move towards greater tax harmonization, rather the move is in the opposite direction, and that tax competition is considered by the EU as an advantage. This then places the information in the document or, to be more precise, the Conservatives' claim about the document as 'old news' and, as such, the predictive quality of that news is diminished as the claimed futurity predicated on the present moment has already been cancelled.

Furthermore, during the course of the three-hour programme, the presenters begin to add more 'hedging' to their reporting of the Conservatives' claim that the document is leaked. This hedging distances the news programme's acceptance of the Conservative Party claim and makes it possible for the former to distance itself from the story being authenticated as a leak. In the following three extracts, this is already the case, despite the short time that has elapsed since the introduction of the story as newsworthy:

Extract 8: *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 23 May 2001

1NR: the Conservatives have claimed that a document on European tax harmonization being
 2 discussed in Brussels today (.) could force the government to put up taxes (.)

Extract 9: *Today*, 6–7 a.m., 23 May 2001

1TS: what they're trying to bring in front of everyone's eyes is what they describe as a secret
 2 European Commission document which shows the Commission fully intends to harmonize
 3 its rates of VAT

Extract 10: *Today*, 8–9 a.m., 23 May 2001

1JH: and Labour has its own problems (.) the Conservatives have got hold of a confidential
 2 document (.) apparently from the European Commission that recommends it seems moving
 3 towards greater harmonization of taxes

Thus, notwithstanding the claims made by the Conservative Party about the secrecy or confidentiality of the Tax Harmonization document, which reinforces the newsworthiness of the news item, the presenters can be seen to distance their reporting and, hence, the 'programme' from the document by

attributing the leak to the Conservatives and emphasizing their failure to succeed. Note the use of active voice hedging and other word choice expressing tentativeness, for example, ‘the Conservatives *have claimed*’ (Extract 8, line 1); ‘what they’re *trying* [and] what *they describe*’ (Extract 9, line1); ‘a confidential document (.) *apparently* from the’ (Extract 10, lines 1–2) (emphasis added).

Thus, as the day progresses, the angle of the story begins to shift from one in which the claim by the Conservative Party to have a leaked document is given some credence and discussion, albeit hedged, to a position later in the day (reported on the *PM* programme at 5 p.m.) where the status of the document is explicitly doubted and the news angle shifts to the Conservative Party’s embarrassment.

Extract 11: *PM*, 23 May 2001

1CE: today the Tories sought to divert attention away from this apparent contradiction by aiming
 2 their fire at Labour (.) and by trying to link the twin issues of tax rises and Europe (.) they
 3 produced a supposedly secret and confidential EU report which they claimed showed Tony
 4 Blair’s government was intent on moving closer to European tax harmonization (.) and that
 5 they said would inevitably push up the tax burden for the British citizen
 6WH: what it contains removes any remaining doubt that the EU plans to take away Britain’s
 7 powers to decide its own tax rates (.) the document spells out steps to be taken (.) to
 8 harmonize income tax and VAT across Europe (.) and of course for Brussels harmonious
 9 taxation is higher taxation (.) the document talks of the necessity of co-ordinating national
 10 income tax systems (.) it says that on indirect taxes like VAT a high degree of
 11 harmonization is necessary (.) that could mean extending VAT to items like food books
 12 children’s clothes that are zero rated in Britain (.) and it confirms the EU intends to
 13 standardize tax on petrol and diesel (.) and again you can be sure that petrol tax wouldn’t be
 14 coming down under those plans
 15CE: but certain things emerged during the day it was an old document (.) it was already in the
 16 public domain (.) and according to Frits Bolkestein the EU commissioner for the internal
 17 market (.) it wasn’t going to happen anyway

In this extract, taken from the evening news broadcast at 5 p.m., the document is now referred to as ‘supposedly secret and confidential’ (line 3) replacing the hedged neutrality displayed in earlier news programmes. There is also a marked shift in the use of tenses in Extract 11 (past) in contrast to Extracts 6–10 (present). Whereas, in Extract 6, TF’s report is in the present tense – ‘what they’re [the Tories] trying to bring in front of everyone’s eyes is what they describe as a secret European Commission document’ (lines 7–9) – in Extract 11, CE formulates the story in the past tense: ‘they [the Tories] *produced* a supposedly secret and confidential EU report which they *claimed showed* Tony Blair’s government *was* intent on moving closer to European tax harmonization (.) and that they *said would* inevitably push up the tax burden . . .’ (lines 2–5; emphasis added). This temporal shift in reporting the story not

only indicates the cycle of the news day but also has two important consequences coming as it does at the beginning of the report on this story. First, other things being equal, in narratives, the use of the past tense as opposed to the present allows the speaker to distance him/herself from the narrated events. Second, by placing the story's events in the past, so are its possible consequences in the future (cf. 'they said [it] would . . . push up the tax burden', line 5), which renders the story far less newsworthy.

These shifts in the style and (grammatical) structure at the beginning of Extract 11 provide an indication of the story's outcome before it has been fully reported. The outcome is reported in the segment after the sound bite of the Conservative Leader William Hague claiming the veracity of the document (lines 8–14). Interestingly, even though the accuracy of the claims made by the Tories about the document, its contents and implications are questioned and denied with the authority of and a sound bite from a high-ranking EU commissioner, what the BBC invalidate first is the frame of the news item as a leak, questioning its secrecy and ownership ('it was an old document (. . .) it was already in the public domain', lines 15–17). To us, this suggests that apart from all news items needing to be *accurate*, there is also high value attached to the frame of leaked news items.⁵

Indeed after this initial reporting through the temporal unfolding of events, any further discussion presents the whole story, not just the unfolding of the events, as a past event. This changes the status of the news item from reporting a leak to reporting the Conservative Party's attempt to discredit Labour. And by the last news programme of the day (*The World Tonight*, broadcast at 10 p.m.), no mention of the document is made by either news presenters or politicians.

In examining how the rise and fall of this news item is presented over the course of the day, it is clear that a pivotal issue at the outset is the status of the document as leaked as well as the accuracy of the information. The issues the Conservative Party wishes to highlight are presented as partly newsworthy by the media *because* they are drawn from a leaked (i.e. secret) document that is due to be discussed that very day (immediacy). However, as the day's news continues, the status of the item as a leak becomes contested on the grounds that it was not secret and that the issue had been addressed previously and so was not accurate or relevant to now and/or to the immediate or distant future. However, by packaging their story as a leak, the Conservative Party did manage to promote their news and set the news agenda for much of the media's election coverage that day. The risk of such a strategy is highlighted as the media shift the news agenda onto the failure and embarrassment of the Conservative Party.

Summary and conclusion

The aim of this article has been to explore the discursive practices employed in the presentation and negotiation of news items as leaks about future events. The initial focus highlighted the appearance of contextual features alongside the introduction of news items about the leaks. In our analysis of the four case studies, we suggested that the features of secrecy, authorship/ownership and orientation to the future accompanied the presentation of the leaks in order to establish their status as such. We suggested further that although these features were present in all the examples, they were not always equally newsworthy. Rather, the work the leak was intended to do, together with the type of leak it was (whether it was supposed to be secret or was about to be published), had a bearing on the prominence the leak aspect was given in the story. In the second part of the paper, focusing on the Navy Report and Tax Harmonization stories, it was shown how these features were subject to scrutiny and contestation. Although based on four case studies, what seems clear from this discussion is that the mechanism for establishing leaks as authentic is a resource that can be used to provide news value. But what is equally apparent, however, is that this may prove a risky strategy, as for something to be shown not to be a leak may serve to undermine the news value of the story and the owner. In one of our examples, the Conservative Party was seen to use the *features* of a leak in order to present *their* news and be given air time to promote their concerns. The result of this, however, was that once these features were not applicable and the accuracy of the story questioned, it was downgraded in favour of reporting how it was not a leak *before then* reporting on its (in)accuracy.

The importance of leaks and the news value accorded them would seem to be linked to the news organization's drive to be the first to break news and the immediacy of news. If successful, the leak story would seem to offer a highly valuable strategy for news organizations and other 'owners' of newsworthy leaks in gaining symbolic capital through the control and manipulation of 'exclusive' information. Indeed, whilst not explicitly referred to as a 'leak', the recent difficulties between the BBC and the Labour Government over the readiness of Iraq to deploy chemical and biological weapons began with the BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan (reporting on the Navy Leak in our previous example) sourcing secret information from the disgruntled 'insider' Dr David Kelly which was an 'exclusive' for the BBC's *Today* programme. Leaks about an up-coming event, however, go further than revealing past secrets and offering an exclusive: they also enable a position by which manipulation of public and political opponents is possible through possession of knowledge about how things will be in the future. That is to say control of knowledge through leaked information about an upcoming event provides the valuable

opportunity of creating preferred representations of reality, and, ultimately, establishing positions of power.

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Notes

- 1 In this article we are explicitly concerned with the presentation of news items as 'leak' stories on Radio 4 news programmes and the way these stories are discursively situated and contested on air by presenters and spokespersons. Because of this the behind-the-scenes media production, the relationship between government and journalists and the reception and perception of leaks by the listening audience provides an interesting yet at this point separate area for further research.
- 2 Usually this programme is broadcast between 1–1:30 p.m. During the 2001 British General Election campaign it was extended by 30 minutes to finish at 2 p.m.
- 3 Transcription notation draws upon from the model developed by Gail Jefferson as detailed in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

impetus [for wit]

[but we] we brackets indicate overlapping talk

(1.0) timed pause

(.) short untimed pause

= = no gap between speaker transition

er:: colons indicate relative prolonged sound

perceived underscore indicates emphasis of this part of the word

it.hhh hearable outward breath

hhh. hearable inward breath

Media characters: AG, Andrew Gilligan; AR, Angus Roxborough; CE, Clare English; CG, Clare Grogan; GE, Gavin Esler; JH, John Humphries; NR, Unidentified Newsreader; SM, Sue McGregor; SR, Steve Ryder; TS, Tom Simmons; TF, Tim Franks. Political Characters: FB, Frits Bolkestein (EU Commissioner); FM, Francis

Maude (Conservative MP); GH, Geoff Hoon (Defence Secretary); RC, Robin Cook (Foreign Secretary); WH, William Hague (Leader of the Conservative Party in opposition).

- 4 Full audio file can be found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1382160.stm
- 5 What is also interesting in the overall development of the story from the morning to the evening is the fact that early on in the introduction of the story on the *Today* programme in the morning the main allegations by the Conservative Party regarding the document are dismissed by a 'Commission insider'. At the end of the day's reporting, the *PM* programme takes the listener back to that point and the document is dismissed. The use of hedges in the early development of the story may be seen to be a response to the knowledge that the document is problematic at this early stage but that as it is the main election news of the day it has to be covered to a point where it can be dropped, i.e. at the end of the day's campaigning as reported on *PM*.

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