

# *Certainty and speculation in news reporting of the future: the execution of Timothy McVeigh*



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**ABSTRACT** This article explores the temporal organization and manipulation of time in the production and presentation of news reports. Time is often cited as one of the most central organizing concepts of news production; indeed one of the major features of news reporting is the breaking of stories and the reporting of events ‘as they happen’. However, whilst much emphasis is placed upon time within media production, much of this pertains to the reporting of past and present events rather than the reporting of the future. This article explores the future within news reporting through an examination of sequential events leading up to a main scheduled newsworthy event: the execution of Timothy McVeigh. It analyses how the production of ‘news’ utilizes the future by relying upon prediction and speculation about what will happen and examines: (i) how news can be seen to depend to a large degree on uncertainty for its value; (ii) the use of time frames within media reporting; and (iii) the way time is manipulated in the service of the recency and immediacy of news reporting.

**KEY WORDS:** *future, news, prediction, speculation, Timothy McVeigh*

## *Context*

On 19 April 1995, a bomb attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in the United States killed 168 people, and two days later, on 21 April, Timothy James McVeigh was charged with the bombing. McVeigh was convicted of the attack on 2 June 1997 and was formally sentenced to death on 14 August 1997. On 6 January 2001, McVeigh’s execution date was set for 16 May 2001. Five days before the execution, however, it came to light that the FBI had withheld an estimated 3100 documents related to McVeigh’s conviction from his defence team. Due to this discovery, McVeigh was granted a stay of execution until 11 June 2001 while his lawyers examined the documents. Lawyers for McVeigh attempted to secure a further stay of execution on Wednesday 6 June 2001, but were turned down by US District Judge Richard Matsch, who ruled

McVeigh's execution should go ahead on 11 June 2001. Lawyers then took the case to appeal at the 10th US Circuit Court, and were again refused a stay of execution. Timothy McVeigh was executed by lethal injection at 7 am (CST: Central Standard Time) at Terre Haute Penitentiary, Indiana, and was declared dead at 7.14 am (CST).

## *Introduction*

Time is one of the most central organizing aspects of news production (Schlesinger, 1978; Scannell, 1988) and news reporting (Bell, 1991, 1995, 1998). Indeed, some of the highest values of news reporting are associated with their temporality, most notably, *recency*, *immediacy*, *currency* or *breaking news* – the reporting of events as they happen (Roshco, 1999; Schlesinger, 1999). The latter quality has gained all the more relevance with the emergence of 24-hour news channels (Richardson and Meinhof, 1999; see also Jaworski et al., forthcoming). By the same token, the temporality of news reporting, or the chronology of the reported events is subservient to the newsworthiness of the story. As Bell (1991) states, the 'perceived news value [of a story] overturns temporal sequence and imposes an order completely at odds with linear narrative point. It moves backwards and forwards in time, picking out different actions on each cycle' (p. 153).

However, whilst much emphasis is placed upon the role of time in news broadcasts, only the reporting of past and present events has drawn the attention of the analysts, with little examination given to the reporting of the future in news (Richardson and Meinhof, 1999, being an exception). Of course, the idea of news anticipation and planning news is not new. Many authors have discussed such pre-scheduled or 'diary' events, 'which might be known of months in advance: news conferences, space shots, state occasions and visits, elections, budgets. All of these are predictable "future events" for which early arrangements can be made' (Schlesinger, 1999: 129).

Other examples of stories involving a high degree of sensitivity to the future are 'running stories' (Schlesinger, 1999), or 'developing' and 'continuing' events (Tuchman, 1978), which extend beyond a daily news cycle. Likewise, Golding and Elliott (1999) argue that *planning* is an indispensable aspect of newsmaking, which involves the aforementioned diary events as well as the 'editorial conference', the daily ritual of planning news (see also Fishman, 1980; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Miller, 1993, 1994; Becker, 1995; all quoted in Allan, 1999).

In this article, we focus on a news story, which combines the diary event and the running or continuing event. More specifically, we examine the discursive structure of news reporting of sequential events leading up to a main newsworthy event, namely, a week's news reports leading up to and including the execution of Timothy McVeigh. The article explores how the production of 'news' makes use of *prediction* and *speculation* about what is going to happen in the future, together with the temporal manipulation of unfolding events.

Three main analytic sections of this article explore how the newsworthiness of an ongoing and diary event is maximized with respect to the manipulation of the temporality of news reporting:

- reporting of uncertainty and prediction about future events;
- organization of cycles of time (time frames) as the story unfolds;
- manipulation of time in print and broadcast media in order to report on events which have not yet happened or are supposed to be happening 'now'.

The data for this research are taken from a corpus of recordings of scheduled BBC Radio 4 news programmes (*Today*, *The World at One*, *PM*, *The World Tonight*) over the course of approximately one month during Spring 2001 (21 May 2001–15 June 2001) and from a set of selected UK newspapers (*The Times*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, although only a selection of extracts from the *Daily Mail* are used in this article) collected over the same period of time. The coverage of the execution of Timothy McVeigh and the legal wrangling immediately prior to it were featured prominently in all our data sources between 6 June 2001 and 12 June 2001.

We approach our data within a broadly defined field of qualitative discourse analysis. In pursuing a close textual analysis, we begin by looking at how speculation about the future is 'hedged', identifying examples of hedges and their use in talk about the future. We then demonstrate the way increased certainty of a future event decreases the amount of hedging when it is being reported on, and in a related way, how once the event is certain to happen, the event becomes treated as 'old' information, becoming a secondary story. The relevance of calendar time, clock time and social time are then considered, exploring how and when they are used in talk about the future. Consideration is given to the treatment of incorrect predictions and we examine, in particular, how these incorrect predictions are dealt with when the future event is realized. Finally, the article explores how differences in time zones (between the US and UK) are used to make future events appear as part of the past or present, and introduce the concept of *journalist time* and *reader time*.

### *Uncertainty and prediction in reporting the future*

On Wednesday 6 June 2001, Timothy McVeigh's lawyers were in the middle of a series of appeals to secure a stay of execution. Although the latest appeal had been turned down, others were due to take place. Thus, during this series of appeals there was no certainty as to whether McVeigh would be executed on the planned date of the next Monday (11 June 2001):

**Extract 1** 6 June 2001 – *The World Tonight*, 10.00–10.45 pm<sup>1</sup>

NR: a judge in the American state of Colorado has ruled that the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh (.) should be executed as planned on Monday (.) he rejected calls by McVeigh's lawyers for a stay of execution because the FBI had withheld some evidence (.) from the court David Willis reports

DW: the judge said he'd been shocked to learn that the FBI withheld more than four thousand pages of documents including it's thought (.) evidence that suggested that Timothy McVeigh didn't act alone in planting the bomb which killed a hundred and sixty eight people at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City (.) but he said the possibility that others may have been involved didn't mitigate the charges of murder against McVeigh (.) dismissing defence claims that the FBI conspired to withhold documents about the bombing Judge Matsch said that it was clear Timothy McVeigh had been (.) as he put it (.) the instrument of death and destruction (.) McVeigh's lawyers are due to file an appeal here tomorrow (.) and could then take the matter to the United States Supreme Court

As mentioned earlier, the main 'diary' event of this story is the execution of Timothy McVeigh. However, although planned for a specific date (Monday, 11 June 2001), its certainty is undermined by the series of past and likely future appeals. Therefore, the date of the execution is stated with a considerable degree of hedging. First, it is framed as reported speech: 'a judge [...] has ruled that [...] Timothy McVeigh (.) should be executed as planned on Monday'. Second, as the judge is aware that his ruling is subject to another appeal, he can only refer (or is shown to refer) to the planned date of McVeigh's execution as expedient, but not certain (see modal verb 'should').

As can be seen, the date of the execution cannot be confirmed as it is contingent on the outcomes of the future appeals made on McVeigh's behalf by his lawyers. Neither is it possible to predict the future rulings. Therefore, the only 'safe' prediction is made about the nearest future event, i.e. the first appeal, which is reported as arranged or very likely to be made (see 'are due') for the next day: 'McVeigh's lawyers are due to file an appeal here tomorrow'. The second possible appeal, again, dependent on the outcome of the first, is signalled as a possibility expressed through the modal verb 'could': 'and could then take the matter to the United States Supreme Court'.

Extract 1 demonstrates, then, how the reporting of the story cannot progress towards a more assured accounting of its conclusion because the future events preceding it are not fixed or wholly predictable. In Extracts 2 and 3, taken from the *Today* programme aired the next morning, the predictions of the most closely anticipated events are made even more strongly and, as a consequence, the subsequent events also appear to be reported with greater certainty:

**Extract 2** 7 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

NR: lawyers for the man who carried out the Oklahoma bombing Timothy McVeigh will file an appeal later today against a judge's ruling yesterday that he should be executed on Monday (.) McVeigh is due to die of lethal injection for the bomb attack that killed one hundred and sixty eight people (.) his lawyers want extra time to examine FBI documents (.) which they claim show he was part of a wider conspiracy

Extract 2 comes from the 'summary of the news', which is read by a news reader before one of the anchors expands on the story and conducts an interview with a correspondent (see Extract 3). The read-out nature of news summary

makes it the most ‘factual’ aspect of the programme, which is probably why the prediction of the appeal is no longer couched in terms of an arranged event, but as straightforward futurity: ‘lawyers [...] will file an appeal later today’. In the ensuing interview between the anchor and the correspondent, the high epistemic modality of talking about the upcoming appeal is continued:

**Extract 3** 7 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

- SM: a federal judge in the United States has turned down the appeal to delay Timothy McVeigh’s execution (.) which is due to go ahead on Monday (.) but as we’ve been hearing his lawyers (.) are to appeal again (.) David Willis is on the line from Colorado (.) on what grounds David might they now appeal
- DW: well they said they were extremely disappointed by the District Court’s decision yesterday to er reject their request for a stay of execution (.) so today they’re taking it to another court (.) here in Denver (.) the Circuit Court of Appeals (.) uh they want more time they say to see if documents that the FBI has admitted withholding (.) er from McVeigh’s trial (.) bear up suggestions that he was part of a larger conspiracy (.) I think ultimately Sue they want to get his death sentence overturned and reduced to life imprisonment (.) so it’s down now to a panel of three appeals’ court judges er to write what will probably be the penultimate chapter in Timothy McVeigh’s long saga (.) the final chapter will probably be in the Supreme Court

In the anchor’s lead to the question for the correspondent, there is a strong presupposition of the appeal to have been already arranged: ‘his lawyers (.) are to appeal again’. Given the ‘inevitability’ of this event, the question concerns its further detail, i.e. the grounds for the appeal. The correspondent seems to endorse this view by talking about the appeal in the present tense, suggesting great certainty for it to take place: ‘today they’re taking it to another court’. After this, one more appeal is mentioned as likely: ‘the final chapter will probably be in the Supreme Court’. The explicit mention of the specific courts involved (the Circuit Court of Appeals, the Supreme Court), and the clearly stated goal of McVeigh’s lawyer’s appeal procedure ‘they want to get his death sentence overturned and reduced to life imprisonment’, add to the greater modality of reporting the appeals. This pattern persists in subsequent reports during the day. Notice how in the second hour of the *Today* programme (Extract 4), the scenario of the appeal is stated unequivocally and with a whole array of predictable implications:

**Extract 4** 7 June 2001 – *Today*, 7.00–8.00 am

- DW: they [McVeigh’s lawyers] will file an appeal at the Circuit Court in Denver later today (.) it’ll be heard by a panel of three judges who legal experts say will set great store by judge Matsch’s decision (.) they’re expected to rule promptly (.) possibly the same day but regardless of what they decide (.) the matter will probably then be referred to the highest court in the land (.) the United States Supreme Court (.) whose justices are on standby to consider it over the weekend

However, in the *Today* programme the next morning there is a change in the story. The prediction, for which no ‘evidence’ was quoted on the previous days turns out to be untrue:

**Extract 5** 8 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

NR: the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh has given up his legal battle to postpone his execution (.) which is scheduled for Monday (.) lawyers for McVeigh said he will not appeal to the Supreme Court (.) after a federal judge rejected his latest plea for a stay of execution

The corollary of the above decision (not to appeal) is that the only remaining obstacle to McVeigh's execution disappears. Thus, the execution itself gains in certainty, as evidenced by Extract 6:

**Extract 6** 8 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

NR: Timothy McVeigh looks set to die by lethal injection on Monday (.) after abandoning his legal battle for a stay of execution (.) the Oklahoma City bomber is waiving his right to the US Supreme Court after a federal court rejected his latest appeal

Extracts 5 and 6 contrast interestingly with the preceding extracts in attributing the agency for the intended appeal. In Extracts 1–4, these are McVeigh's lawyers who are to file the appeal. In Extracts 5 and 6, it is McVeigh himself who terminates the appeals process. Thus, it can be argued that it is not so much that the previous reports were wrong in their predictions, but that an unforeseen occurrence (McVeigh's 'abandoning his legal battle for a stay of execution') has intervened to disrupt the predicted actions of the lawyers. Moreover, there is a marked change in terminology when McVeigh gives up his legal battle. The use of 'schedule' in the discussion of the time frame for the execution now suggests a 'diary date' surety, and is a move away from the uncertainty about McVeigh's future implied by 'should' and 'due' in the previous days' reporting. Talk about the future now appears committed and hedging is no longer used. With the future of McVeigh's execution now regarded as certain, it is noticeable how it becomes relatively less newsworthy. Indeed, when the future becomes certain, it seems that it is treated as if it is 'past' or 'old' information. As Extract 7 demonstrates, once the idea of the appeal has disappeared and the date for the execution of Timothy McVeigh is regarded as certain, the execution itself becomes a secondary story and the videotaping of the execution becomes the primary story:

**Extract 7** 9 June 2001 – *Today*, 7.00–8.00 am

NR: Timothy McVeigh's execution on Monday will not be videotaped after all (.) barring that is further legal surprises (.) the taping had been requested by defence lawyers in an entirely unrelated murder case (.) they wanted the recording to back up their argument that death by lethal injection violates the American Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment (.) the judge in the case agreed a tape should be made (.) and ordered the government to record McVeigh's execution (.) but a higher court has now overruled the judge (.) pointing to federal regulations banning any photographs or recordings of executions (.) this wasn't the first request to record McVeigh's execution (.) it's also been asked for by media companies (.) and groups opposed to the death penalty (.) who believe its airing would be sure to help their campaign

In Extract 7, McVeigh's execution is presented as 'old' news: 'Timothy McVeigh's execution on Monday will not be videotaped after all'. It occupies the position of given information at the beginning of the sentence, and is strongly implied by the assertion that it will not be videotaped. It is then treated as something that the audience already knows about and therefore requires no further explanation. The issue of videotaping the execution, as 'new' information, is available for further elaboration, explanation and, of course, speculation. The certainty of the execution not to be videotaped is hedged by the phrase 'barring that is further legal surprises'. But, regardless of how small the likelihood of overturning the court's decision to allow the filming of the execution, the very issue of videotaping the execution becomes a major news item and point of discussion. However, as no new developments concerning the videotaping (or McVeigh's execution) appear to be surfacing during the next day (Sunday), there is a noticeable absence of the McVeigh story in the news bulletins until Monday, 11 June 2001, i.e. the day of the execution.

### *Calendar time, clock time and social time*

The events just described took place before and during the weekend before the scheduled execution of McVeigh. As has been suggested, during this time the reports move from uncertainty about the date of the execution to certainty about the date when McVeigh is reported as giving up his legal challenge (see Extract 6). With no changes to the plans for the execution reported, the news on Monday morning, the day of McVeigh's planned execution, picks up where it was left on Saturday, 9 June:

**Extract 8** 11 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

NR: the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh is spending his final hours alone in a prison cell in Indiana (.) where he is due to be extrigated executed by lethal injection at one o'clock British time

Interestingly, the phrase chosen to refer to McVeigh's execution is 'is due to be [...] executed', which, although expressing a moderate degree of probability, provides a margin of tolerance for possible but unlikely change of plans. The slight hedging can be attributed to the news item gaining in precision in reporting the actual time of the execution 'one o'clock British time'. On the day of the execution, the reports move from 'calendar time' (e.g. Monday, 11 June, etc.) to 'clock time' (e.g. one o'clock British time). This is seemingly caused by the narrowing of the time frame as the execution comes closer. When reporting the progress of the legal challenge in the days before the Monday of 11 June (see previous section), there is no mention of a specific time of day for the execution. It would seem that reference to the 'day' of the execution provides an adequate time frame for this item of news at that point. However, when the actual day of the execution arrives, a shift in time reference occurs moving from days of the week to hours of the day. In the first news bulletin of the day (Extract 8) the time

of the execution is reported as ‘one o’clock British time’. This is not surprising given that as the event gets closer then a more specific ‘clock’ time is relevant. What is interesting, however, is that, in the subsequent reports time reference used becomes less specific. Rather than give specific clock time the reports move to social time:

**Extract 9** 11 June 2001 – *Today*, 6.00–7.00 am

NR: the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh is due to be executed by lethal injection this lunchtime

Describing an upcoming execution as occurring at ‘lunchtime’ does not at first glance seem congruous with the event in that it is a way of measuring and referring to social time. It is a time to stop work, to chat, have something to eat, go for a walk, do some shopping, etc., but not, as we would expect, to describe the timing of an execution. However, the use of ‘lunchtime’ can be seen to serve at least two purposes in the interest of news value and credibility in the reporting of the execution. First, it references the time in the UK not the US where the execution will take place. In this way, the use of the word ‘lunchtime’ can be seen as drawing the listeners’ attention to a potentially ‘free’ stretch of time in the day, and the fact that McVeigh’s execution will overlap with Radio 4’s (lunchtime) show *The World at One*. In this way, the referent of time ‘lunchtime’ acts as an advertisement for the news programme promising to bring the latest on this morbid event.

Second, the use of ‘lunchtime’ can be seen as a less precise time referent, an ‘around about time’ as opposed to predicting a specific time (e.g. one o’clock), which may in fact turn out to be wrong. Thus, the credibility of the news organization is less likely to suffer when it is not tied down to specific time, which could be subject to delay.

In fact, the uncertainty about the specific time in which the events occur continues to the very last moments of and beyond the ‘live’ reporting of the execution. At the beginning of Radio 4’s programme *The World at One*, there is a report from outside the Terre Haute Penitentiary, Indiana, where the execution is about to take place. However, the reporting style abounds in uncertainty and speculation:

**Extract 10** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.00 pm)

NR: [. . .] the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh is being executed around now

**Extract 11** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

PR: [. . .] and we presume now that Timothy McVeigh is either dead or dying

The time reference ‘around now’ (Extract 12), the verb ‘presume’, and the alternative ‘either dead or dying’ (Extract 13), all point to a certain void in the news reporting. The prevalent feature of this reporting is the reporter’s lack of information. This is due to the fact that although it is ‘known’ that McVeigh is scheduled to be executed at 1 pm, there will be no news on the execution until

the Prison Warden officially announces McVeigh's death to the media (see Extract 12). At this point, reporters are in a temporal and information vacuum; they know that the event is due to happen at 1 pm, and should therefore be going ahead as they speak, but as they do not have confirmation of the event taking place, they cannot report it or its implications. Up until this point, all reports have been moving towards the execution of Timothy McVeigh; however, as the execution is taking place there is no information on what is actually happening and therefore the main newsworthy event cannot be reported. Ironically, this becomes reportable news as the lack of other information turns the reporter to a self-referential orientation in his broadcast:

**Extract 12** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

GH: er there was talk beforehand of a defiant statement at the last minute by er McVeigh  
(.) any news on that Paul

PR: we will not get any news from the final moments in the execution chamber until  
warden Harley Lappin makes his statement (,) er and we er expect that in due  
course (,) um maybe in ten twenty minutes we do not know (,) the execution has to  
take place first yes he was certainly making a final statement as is the right of all  
prisoners in in the execution chamber

Extract 12 provides an interesting instance of 'negative' reporting, which would not normally be expected in news broadcasts: 'we will not get any news', 'we do not know'. This reporting of non-news, or non-reporting of facts to come, is augmented by hesitation and hedging: 'er and we er', 'um maybe in ten twenty minutes'. The frequent repetition of 'we' in Extract 12 adds to the self-referentiality of this instance of the report as it concentrates on the news gathering information and the current state of (un-)knowing of what is going on by the media organization.

Although, in the build-up to the execution in the week preceding it, the reporting of what might or will happen in the future is a prominent feature of the news programmes, in this case it seems that the future cannot be reported upon until after McVeigh's death is confirmed. At this point of transition from news in the future to news in the past reporters can be seen as residing in a liminal 'no news zone'. They have little or no information on what is actually happening in the death chamber and cannot yet report the execution as having taken place, and, by the same token, on its future implications. However, the reporting must continue as the main news of the day on which it's happening while the programme is live on air.

As has been just stated, the demand to report on 'as it happens' news, despite the lack of reportable information, leads to the need to fill time with substitute reporting. This can be a self-referential declaration of the lack of information (see Extract 12). Additionally, reporters may employ a number of other strategies to fill time while they have no new newsworthy information to despatch. In Extracts 13–17, three strategies are employed: (i) the reporting of past events (Extract 13); (ii) reporting current events as conjecture based on previously reported

information on the scheduled event (Extracts 14 and 15); and, (iii) reporting of other events (current or future) related to the main event (Extracts 16 and 17).

In Extract 13, the reporter gives an account of past events preceding the execution:

**Extract 13** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

GH: the warden of the Terre Haute prison spent half an hour with the perpetrator of the worst terrorist crime on US soil (.) talking him through the grim procedures of his execution (.) Timothy McVeigh is said to have received the information cordially (.) and has spent his last few hours alive eating ice-cream watching television and sleeping

Although no time referent is given here, it is clear that ‘the grim procedures’ must have taken place on the previous day, as they were followed by McVeigh’s ‘eating ice-cream watching television and sleeping’, for which there would have been no time on the day of the execution. However, leaving out the exact temporal referent allows the report to gain the status of current/recent news reporting.

In Extracts 14 and 15, there is further reliance on past information. However, this is used to create conjecture about what is likely to be happening at the present moment:

**Extract 14** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

PR: [. . .] we presume Ghitou that (.) the timetable (.) has proceeded to its conclusion because it was proceeding according to plan

The reporter relies on known past decisions about the future in order to predict the present as a way of overcoming the lack of information. He speculates as to what is believed to be taking place inside the prison based on previously known details of the execution. In Extract 15, we see the reporter using previously released medical information about how the execution will be carried out to try and envision what is happening within the prison, despite the fact that he cannot know what is actually going on:

**Extract 15** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

GH: [. . .] the first injection was meant to render him unconscious the second to collapse his lungs and as we speak a third shot should stop the heart of the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh

Extract 15 vacillates between presumed past ‘was meant’ and presumed present ‘as we speak a third shot should stop the heart’. Although the reporter has no way of knowing what is going on in the death chamber, he makes claims as to what is happening (or is about to happen) based on previous knowledge of the schedule and procedure.

Finally, the reporter orients to what is happening around the prison at the time when the execution is (scheduled) to be taking place. In Extract 16, in response to the anchor’s question about ‘the scene outside the prison’, the

correspondent refers to the media presence (Zelizer, 1992) and the anti-capital punishment demonstrators:

**Extract 16** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.05 pm)

GH: what is the scene outside the prison

PR: well (.) it's one of some solemnity I think (.) we're about five hundred yards from the prison a large media encampment (.) about half a mile away from us a small number of demonstrators have just finished a period of silence (.) to mark the one hundred and sixty eight deaths (.) those people protesting against the death penalty but rather few of them (.) this is not a very popular cause (.) I think the main feeling I have here is one of inevitability (.) er there's some solemnity here too because what is being remembered is not er (.) just this death but the hundred and sixty eight deaths which proceeded it

Extract 16 demonstrates a rather typical strategy of filling time when no factual information is available during live reporting: describing the *scene* of the reported events (see Jaworski et al., 2002, on 'mood' reporting in the 9/11 TV news broadcasts). Not dissimilar to the other Extracts, Extract 16 is full of hesitations, false starts, repetitions and sudden changes of topic. All of this suggests the reporter is lacking a definitive script to report what is going on, or, more precisely, he is not yet allowed to use the script, which is available to him due to the lack of confirmation of the anticipated event. Indeed it is not until the 25th minute into the programme (at 1.25 pm) during further mood reporting including an interview with a survivor of the bombing (Betty Robbins), that the first mention of McVeigh's death is made:

**Extract 17** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.25 pm)

RW: that's right I am just a few yards from the memorial to those killed (.) it's on the site of where the Murrah Building once stood (.) several survivors and the relatives of those killed have gathered here for the execution (.) among them Betty Robbins who used to work in the building and survived (.) in fact Betty we are just now hearing that Timothy McVeigh is now dead (.) what does that mean to you as a survivor of that blast.

BR: it's a: chapter in my book that's been closed (.) an:: it's also a very sad time er:: (.) I do feel for his family (.) er and for him er:: he never repented and never said on:: my friends that I lost and the people that did survive

RW: so do you feel different now than when you got up this morning

BR: yes I do a bit (.) it's like a loss (.) even though he was the perpetrator of th-this horrendous crime it was a loss

During this pre-arranged interview with Robbins, the reporter moves out of mood reporting to announce the news that McVeigh is now dead. This is then followed by his request for Robbins's reaction to the fact of McVeigh's death, which shifts the orientation from the recent past (McVeigh's execution) to the implication of this event for her future life as a 'survivor': 'Betty we are just now hearing that Timothy McVeigh is now dead (.) what does that mean to you as a survivor of that blast'. Extract 17 may be then seen as a coda (in Labov's sense) to the news story of McVeigh's execution. According to Labov (1972), the coda has

. . . the property of bridging the gap between the moment of time at the end of the narrative proper and the present. They bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative . . . Codas close off the sequence of complicating actions and indicate that none of the events that followed were important to the narrative. (pp. 365–6)

Thus, Robinson's interview may be seen as making such a link between the past order of events and the present state of affairs, but we would also argue that it enables new, future stories to develop now that this one is finished. The reporter's next question: 'so do you feel different now than when you got up this morning' can be seen as making a link between the story which is now finished and Robbins's 'new' life, or the next 'chapter' of her story.

This kind of post-event reporting continues to the end of the programme, up until the closing headlines of the *The World at One* where confirmation of McVeigh's death is given again:

**Extract 18** 11 June 2001 – *The World at One*, 1.00–1.30 pm (start of the report 1.30 pm)

GH: the execution has been taking place of the Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh (.) this was the official announcement [rushed voice] it's been confirmed

Interestingly, due to the closing time of the programme fast approaching, this announcement is made very briefly and in a rushed manner without specific reference to its source. The confirmation of his death is briefly repeated in subsequent news bulletins throughout the afternoon and only minimal elaboration of the detail of the execution is offered:

**Extract 19** 11 June 2001 – *PM*, 5.00–6.00 pm

NR: it took seven minutes for Timothy McVeigh to die at a prison in Terre Haute in Indiana this lunchtime

With this announcement McVeigh's death ceases to be a newsworthy event and is relegated to history.

### *Reporting scheduled events in the press: journalist time and reader time*

In this section, we examine some ways of reporting the future in newspaper reports of the execution in the days preceding it. In the case of radio reporting, scheduled events are generally reported as future events, whereby an event posited as happening at a future juncture in time is reported as such. However, this may differ in some newspapers, as a future event may be depicted as a past or present event. An example of this can be found in the *Daily Mail's* report on McVeigh's execution, published on the day of the execution.

**Extract 20** 11 June 2001 – *Daily Mail*, p. 11

At midnight last night (6 am in Britain) demonstrators *were due* to be bussed onto separate sites within the prison grounds. [emphasis added]

The reporting of this event must have taken place prior to 6 am GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), midnight CST (US, thus 6 hours behind GMT), due to production constraints. However, the event is referred to as happening *last night* although it is yet to happen when the journalist is writing. By writing the future as a past event, the journalist can be seen to be orienting to the reader's perspective, in that the newspaper is to be read after 6 am (GMT) on 11 June 2001.

This is not to say that newspapers are not read at other times, but that the report is prepared for the morning edition. Thus, if the newspaper is being read after 6 am (GMT) the event for the reader is now in the past. We refer to these time frames as 'journalist time' and 'reader time'. By using the construction 'were due', the journalist invokes reader time writing about the event from the temporal viewpoint of the reader, i.e. as if it has already happened, although 'are due' would seem more appropriate in expressing the writer's temporal perspective. The use of 'due' also acts as mitigation for the journalist; it follows that if the event does not for any reason take place, the journalist is not incorrect, but instead that the event has simply not gone ahead as planned.

Also in the same report, we can see another example of the journalist appearing to orient to reader time:

**Extract 21** 11 June 2001 – *Daily Mail*, p. 11

McVeigh was to be woken at 5 am, dressed, searched, and if necessary restrained, before being escorted to the death chamber at 6.30. Among the witnesses will be ten men and women selected from the survivors and relatives of those killed in the blast and ten representatives of the media.

In Extract 21, there is an apparent shift between reporting in 'reader time' to reporting the future. Initially the journalist orientates to 'reader time' using the term 'was to be', whereas at the time of writing (journalist time) the more appropriate construction would be 'is to be' as the event is in the future. The journalist then switches to writing about the future, (who will be present at the execution). At this point there is an orientation to the readership (reader time) temporally placed by the journalist at a point after McVeigh has been taken to the death chamber *but before* the execution has taken place. The reader is temporally placed by the journalist between 12.30 pm GMT (6.30 am CST) when McVeigh is taken to the death chamber and 1.00 pm GMT (7.00 am CST) when the execution is scheduled to take place. This means that for those reading the newspaper before 12.30 pm GMT (as many readers will do) the events written as past events in 'reader time' by the journalist are in fact still future events.

This temporal shift is achieved through the exploitation of differing time zones. The events surrounding McVeigh's execution are taking place in Terre Haute, Indiana, in the United States, the time zone for this area is CST, which runs 6 hours behind GMT, the time zone in which the *Daily Mail* is produced and read. This means that the time difference between the two areas can be used to make what is actually the future the past for 'morning readers', while still allowing the journalist to temporally place the reader in the 12.30–1.00 pm GMT time

slot. In Extract 22, there is a blurring of the time references between the US and the UK:

**Extract 22** 11 June 2001 – *Daily Mail*, p. 11

At midnight last night (6 am in Britain) demonstrators were due to be bussed onto separate sites within the prison grounds. McVeigh was to be woken at 5 am, dressed, searched, and if necessary restrained, before being escorted to the death chamber at 6.30.

In Extract 22, a number of times are referenced which relate to both US time and British time. The orientation of these times can be seen within the context of journalist time and reader time. When talking about the bussing of demonstrators to the prison, the report places a reference to the time difference between the two areas, 'At midnight last night (6 am in Britain)'; US time is referred to as 'midnight last night' and British time is referred to numerically '(6 am in Britain)'. The reference to '6 am in Britain' places the event in the past for the reader in the sense that most British newspapers are routinely oriented to and published for a morning readership. In this way, reference to the bussing of the demonstrators is described as an event which was *due to have happened* by the time of reading, although at the time of writing it was still *due to happen*. In this manner, the temporal position of the readership is projected by the journalist, from a temporal position where an action is *due to happen*, to a position where the action *should already have happened*. This is reinforced in the next sentence where the report goes on to describe how *McVeigh has been* prepared for the execution. The timing of events is referred to numerically (e.g. '5 am', '6.30'), echoing the previous British time zone reference, though without explicit reference to it. By using numerical forms in the following sentence, this invokes consistency between the types of time reference used. Therefore, reference to 6 am, 5 am and 6.30 am could appeal to collective consistency, i.e. as being from the *same* time zone. Moreover, through similar temporal reference to that of the bussing of the demonstrators, the events are referred to as past events, 'was to be woken . . . dressed, searched and if necessary restrained . . .' The combination of these factors places the 'morning reader' in the position to view these future events (which were due to happen at 11.00 am GMT) as past events. The events therefore are viewed as if they have happened in the early morning before the reader has begun reading, while still allowing them to view the execution as a future event.

### *Summary and conclusion*

In this article, we have sought to demonstrate the importance of temporality within news reporting through the examination of news broadcasts and newspaper reports of the week leading up to and including coverage of the execution of Timothy McVeigh. By using extracts of news reports, we have been able to explore the build-up to a scheduled, newsworthy event as well as reports during the event, with particular focus upon the speculation, prediction and discursive

manipulation of time. We have shown how the production of news makes use of the future by relying upon prediction and speculation about what will happen and that, when there is uncertainty about the future, the projected outcomes are utilized in order to create ongoing news. However, when uncertainty becomes certain, the scope for speculation ceases and the news value diminishes. In this way, we can see a tension between certainty and uncertainty, in which uncertainty has news value whereas certainty becomes secondary.

Moreover, it is apparent that the drive for immediacy can lead to the manipulation of time frames in order to present the news as current. In newspaper reporting, the manipulation of time is utilized in order to give immediacy to prior printed news while, in radio broadcasting, time is manipulated to give immediacy to events which, although current, are still unknown. In news reports on the actual day of McVeigh's death, there is a noticeable shift in time reference from one of certainty to one of uncertainty. Within this new time frame of hours, it was shown that the uncertainty about the actual time and actual occurrence of death results in speculative practices. This involves both the use of social time and chronological time to state the time of death as well as reports containing speculation and utilization of past knowledge to 'fill up' a live 'as it happens' broadcast, where there is nothing *new* to report.

#### NOTE

1. See the Appendix for speaker identification and transcription notation.

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#### APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

The transcript headings relate to date, programme and time of broadcast. All recordings are from BBC Radio 4 news programmes.

BR	Betty Robbins (bombing survivor)
DW	David Willis (reporter)
GH	Ghitou Harry (reporter)
NR	news reader
PR	Paul Reynolds (reporter)
RW	Rob Watson (reporter)
SM	Sue McGregor (anchor)

The transcription notation draws upon and is developed from the transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson as detailed in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

(1.0)	timed pause
()	untimed pause
(.)	slightly longer untimed pause
= =	no gap between speaker transition
arh::( )well	colons indicate prolonged sound
perceived	underscore indicates emphasis of this part of the word
.hhh	full stop before sequence of 'h's indicates hearable outward breath. The more h's the longer the breath
hhh.	indicates hearable inward breath

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