

# Inquiring Minds Topic – 20 February 2015

**Claudia Upper, Moderator**

## **Was Brian Williams a Victim of False Memory?**

*By Tara Parker-Pope – The New York Times - February 9, 2015*

Brian Williams, anchor of “NBC Nightly News,” with American troops at Camp Liberty in Baghdad, Iraq, in March 2007. He has temporarily stepped down from his newscast responsibilities.

How reliable is human memory? Most of us believe that our memory is like a video camera, capturing an accurate record that can be reviewed at a later date.

But the truth is our memories can deceive us — and they often do.

Numerous scientific studies show that memories can fade, shift and distort over time. Not only can our real memories become unwittingly altered and embellished, but entirely new false memories can be incorporated into our memory bank, embedded so deeply that we become convinced they are real and actually happened.

The fallibility and the malleability of the human memory is at the center of a national controversy involving Brian Williams, the “NBC Nightly News” anchor. In 2003, Mr. Williams was apparently flying behind a helicopter that had been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. But over time the story changed, to the point that Mr. Williams recounted that he was the one riding in the helicopter that came under fire.

Mr. Williams has been branded a liar for embellishing his role in the event, with critics saying that as a newscaster he should be held to a higher standard. After apologizing, he temporarily stepped away from the nightly news. But memory experts see the issue differently, noting that the well-documented story, told differently many times by Mr. Williams, actually offers a compelling case study in how memories can change and shift dramatically over time.

“You’ve got all these people saying the guy’s a liar and convicting him of deliberate deception without considering an alternative hypothesis — that he developed a false memory,” said Elizabeth Loftus, a leading memory researcher and a professor of law and cognitive science at the University of California, Irvine. “It’s a teaching moment, and a chance to really try to get information out there about the malleable nature of memory.”

There are numerous examples of people in the public eye “misremembering events.” Hillary Rodham Clinton once claimed to have been under sniper fire in Bosnia, only to later admit she

had her facts wrong. Mitt Romney said he remembered a Detroit jubilee that took place nine months before he was born.

“Other famous people have said things that couldn’t be true, and it seems like they just were remembering it wrong,” said Christopher Chabris, co-author of “The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us,” and an associate professor of psychology at Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. “I think a lot of people don’t appreciate the extent to which false memories can happen even when we are extremely confident in the memory.”

Memories don’t live as single, complete events in one spot in the brain. Instead they exist as fragments of information, stored in different parts of our mind. Over time, as the memories are retrieved, or we see news footage about the event or have conversations with others, the story can change as the mind recombines these bits of information and mistakenly stores them as memories. This process essentially creates a new version of the event that, to the storyteller, feels like the truth.

“It’s as though you’re playing the telephone game,” said Dr. Chabris. “You whisper a message and by the time it gets to the last kid it’s a completely different story than when it started.”

The scientific literature is filled with fascinating studies of researchers planting fabricated memories from the simple to the bizarre — of being attacked by a vicious animal, for example, or even witnessing demonic possession. A seminal study by Dr. Loftus planted false memories of being a frightened child lost in a shopping mall. After reading a description of getting lost, about one in four study subjects came to believe the false memory as something that really happened to them.

Another study found that researchers could influence how an eyewitness remembered a car crash depending on what verb they used — smashed, collided, bumped, hit or contacted — to ask about it. Participants who were asked the speed of the cars when they “smashed” thought the cars were going faster than those who were asked the speed of the cars when they “hit.”

Steven J. Frenda, a postdoctoral research fellow at the New School for Social Research in New York, used a writing exercise to induce a false memory of rescuing a cat from a tree. Students were randomly assigned to different groups and asked to take part in a writing exercise. One group was prompted to make up a story about the cat rescue; the control group was given a mundane topic. Later both groups were asked whether they had ever rescued a cat. The students who had previously written a cat story were twice as likely to claim the event as a real memory as those in the control group.

“Memory is a reconstructive process, and we are drawing on multiple sources of information,” said Dr. Frenda. “A false memory can arise when we mistakenly attribute some other information as a memory. Whether you’ve exaggerated something in the past, or it’s something else you’ve seen or experienced, you can pull that into what you consider to be the truth.”

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# **Brian Williams Suspended From NBC for 6 Months Without Pay**

By EMILY STEEL and RAVI SOMAIYA – The New York Times -Feb. 10, 2015

A compilation of Brian Williams’s television appearances shows how his accounts of a 2003 episode on military helicopters in Iraq gradually became more perilous.

Brian Williams, the embattled NBC news anchor whose credibility plummeted after he acknowledged exaggerating his role in a helicopter episode in Iraq, has been suspended for six months without pay, the network said on Tuesday night.

“This was wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian’s position,” Deborah Turness, the president of NBC News, said in a memo. Lester Holt, who stepped in for Mr. Williams this week, will continue as the substitute, the network said.

The suspension culminated a rapid and startling fall for Mr. Williams, who at age 55 was not only the head of the No. 1 evening news show, but also one of NBC’s biggest stars, a frequent celebrity guest on “Saturday Night Live,” “30 Rock” and the late-night talk show circuit.

Mr. Williams has been drawing 9.3 million viewers a night, and his position seemed unassailable. Even as the stature of the nightly newscast faded in the face of real-time digital news, Mr. Williams was one of the most trusted names in America and commanded the respect accorded predecessors like Walter Cronkite, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings.

But his embellishment of his helicopter journey and questions about his other reporting undermined the trust viewers placed in him. In the six days since he admitted his mistake, he was pilloried relentlessly online, with Twitter feeds mocking him and amateur truth squads investigating his past reporting. Almost none of his peers in the news business came to his support.

Six months is a long time to disappear from the television landscape, and analysts said it would be difficult for him to re-establish himself as a viable nightly presence.

“I don’t know how he can ever read the news with a straight face, or how the public will respond if he does,” said Mark Feldstein, a broadcast journalism professor at the University of Maryland. On the other hand, he added, “Maybe they’re hoping that with a six-month cooling-off period, he’s got a loyal fan base.”

Mr. Williams was informed of his punishment Tuesday morning when he went to the Upper West Side apartment of Stephen P. Burke, the chief executive of NBCUniversal. Only the two

men were present, according to a person briefed on the meeting, and Mr. Burke informed Mr. Williams that NBC had decided to suspend him. The “Nightly News” staff learned about it in a meeting after the evening broadcast.

“By his actions, Brian has jeopardized the trust millions of Americans place in NBC News,” Mr. Burke said in a statement. “His actions are inexcusable and this suspension is severe and appropriate.”

Mr. Burke said that Mr. Williams “has shared his deep remorse with me, and he is committed to winning back everyone’s trust.” He added, “He deserves a second chance, and we are rooting for him.”

NBC did not make its top executives available for comment, and Mr. Williams did not respond to phone calls and an e-mail seeking comment. A friend who spoke to Mr. Williams on Tuesday described him as “shattered.”

For NBC, the suspension provides at least a temporary solution to the crisis that has engulfed the network since Mr. Williams admitted last week that he had misled the public with the helicopter story, and apologized. The episode has called into question not only the credibility of Mr. Williams but also the ethics and culture at NBC News. It is not clear whether other people at NBC were aware of Mr. Williams’s version of events.

Ms. Turness said in a memo to NBC News staff that executives decided to suspend Mr. Williams because he misrepresented the Iraq episode on the “Nightly News” broadcast. She said that executives also were concerned about the way he portrayed his reporting away from his newscasts. That includes his descriptions of reporting on Hurricane Katrina as well as other coverage.

“We have concerns about comments that occurred outside NBC News while Brian was talking about his experiences in the field,” she said.

On Saturday, three days after he apologized on his newscast, Mr. Williams announced that he was temporarily stepping aside from his show because he had become “too much a part of the news.” A day earlier, NBC started an investigation into Mr. Williams and his reporting. That investigation is continuing.

“This has been a painful period for all concerned, and we appreciate your patience while we gathered the available facts,” Mr. Burke said.

Mr. Williams’s departure further diminishes the vaunted standing of the nightly network news anchor; last year ABC News chose to keep its chief anchor, George Stephanopoulos, as the co-host of “Good Morning America,” and elevate David Muir to the evening anchor chair. And Mr. Holt, 55, while widely respected, is not as famous a figure at NBC as Matt Lauer, the co-host of the “Today” Show.

The scandal is also a stinging blow for the NBC news division under its new chief, Ms. Turness, and Pat Fili-Krushel, chairwoman of NBCUniversal News Group. When Comcast acquired NBC Universal in 2011, Brian Roberts, Comcast's chief executive, called the news division "the crown jewel" of his giant media group. At the time, "Nightly News," the "Today" show and "Meet the Press" all ranked at the top of the ratings charts. Since then, "Today" has fallen behind its ABC rival "Good Morning America," "Meet the Press" has suffered severe ratings declines, and now the network's evening newscast is in disarray.

Mr. Williams, who succeeded Mr. Brokaw in 2004, transcended the news division, and had ambitions beyond the anchor chair. About five years ago, as NBC was contemplating who would eventually replace Jay Leno as host of "The Tonight Show," he told top NBC executives that he was interested in becoming a late-night host, possibly succeeding Mr. Leno. They called the idea ridiculous, telling him that he was a journalist, not a comedian, and to stick to the news department, according to two industry executives with knowledge of the discussions.

That did not suppress his enthusiasm for the late-night circuit. It was an appearance on David Letterman's show in 2013 — during which he exaggerated the account of being on a helicopter that was shot down in Iraq — that helped put him at the precipice of losing his job.

If Mr. Williams does not return, finding a permanent successor will be a major problem for the network, which was not anticipating having to replace him. In December, Mr. Williams signed a new five-year contract reported to be worth \$10 million a year. Mr. Holt, who had been the weekend anchor for NBC, was not previously considered a likely replacement.

Mr. Williams's downfall began when he appeared at a New York Rangers game with an Iraq veteran in a tribute to a retiring command sergeant major. Mr. Williams subsequently suggested on his newscast that the sergeant had protected him from a dangerous situation in Iraq, when "the helicopter we were traveling in was forced down after being hit by an R.P.G.," referring to a rocket-propelled grenade. "Our traveling NBC News team was rescued, surrounded and kept alive by an armor mechanized platoon from the U.S. Army 3rd Infantry," he said.

The military publication Stars and Stripes was tipped off that the account was inaccurate and contacted Mr. Williams, who admitted that he was not on the helicopter that was forced down. "I would not have chosen to make this mistake," Mr. Williams told Stars and Stripes. "I don't know what screwed up in my mind that caused me to conflate one aircraft with another."

Travis J. Tritten, the Stars and Stripes reporter who broke the story about Mr. Williams's exaggeration, said he did not get any satisfaction from seeing Mr. Williams suspended. "Like the vets I spoke with," he wrote in a Twitter post after the suspension was announced, "I just wanted to set the record straight."

David Carr contributed reporting.

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# Brian Williams, Retreading Memories From a Perch Too Public

The New York Times - Feb. 8, 2015

For some time now, there have been two versions of Brian Williams. One is an Emmy-winning, sober, talented anchor on the “NBC Nightly News” and the other is a funny, urbane celebrity who hosts “Saturday Night Live,” slow-jams the news with Jimmy Fallon and crushes it in every speech and public appearance he makes.

Each of those personas benefited the other, and his fame and appeal grew accordingly, past the anchor chair he occupied every weeknight and into a realm of celebrity that reaches all demographics and platforms. Even young people who wouldn’t be caught dead watching the evening news know who Mr. Williams is.

Which is good until it isn’t.

It was Mr. Williams himself who brought those two worlds together at the end of his newscast over a week ago when he broadcast a segment in which he was shown at a Rangers game in a tribute to a retiring command sergeant major, who, Mr. Williams suggested, had evacuated him from a dangerous situation in Iraq.

“The story actually started with a terrible moment a dozen years back during the invasion of Iraq when the helicopter we were traveling in was forced down after being hit by an R.P.G.,” Mr. Williams said, introducing the segment, referring to a rocket-propelled grenade. “Our traveling NBC News team was rescued, surrounded and kept alive by an armor mechanized platoon from the U.S. Army 3rd Infantry.”

A compilation of Brian Williams’s television appearances shows how his accounts of a 2003 episode on military helicopters in Iraq gradually became more perilous.

But Stars and Stripes, the military publication, was tipped off that a thread popped up on NBC’s Facebook page about the segment from soldiers who were there that day in 2003, saying Mr. Williams was describing something that happened to another helicopter, not his, and that he arrived later.

Confronted with this, Mr. Williams acknowledged his mistake on his newscast last Wednesday, and offered up a muddled apology, saying he had conflated events in his memory. And then in a statement over the weekend, he said, “In the midst of a career spent covering and consuming news, it has become painfully apparent to me that I am presently too much a part of the news, due to my actions.” He added: “As managing editor of ‘NBC Nightly News,’ I have decided to take myself off of my daily broadcast for the next several days.”

The perceptions of the weak, confused apology, and suspending himself for as long as he chooses, are not good for Mr. Williams or his employer. A full-throated, unmodulated apology is the only thing that will satisfy a public who placed their trust in him. And his voluntary step back, however well intended, suggests he is answerable only to himself. Indeed, the investigation at NBC will be led internally, by the head of investigations, who depends on Mr. Williams to make room for his work on the newscast.

Deborah Turness, the embattled head of the news division, needed to demonstrate that someone was in charge of Mr. Williams and his fate. The American public won't abide someone putting himself into the naughty corner and setting the conditions for staying there.

Beyond those strategic failures, if you are going to tell a war story that sprints past the truth, it best not be about war. Those of us who worked the Hurricane Katrina coverage rolled our eyes at some of the stories Mr. Williams told of the mayhem there, but it was a dark, confusing place and a lot of bad stuff happened, so who were we to judge? But armed service and its perils are seen as sacred and must not be trifled with. The soldiers who ended up in harm's way and survived that day are calling him out because their moral code requires it.

In an email to my colleague Ravi Somaiya, Joe Summerlin, who was actually on the Chinook that came under fire, well ahead of Mr. Williams's helicopter, said he was not out for blood, but he finds Mr. Williams's response so far to be insufficient.

"Everyone tells lies," he wrote. "Every single one of us. The issue isn't whether or not you lie. It is how you deal with it once you are caught. I thank you for stepping down for a few nights, Mr. Williams. Now can you admit that you didn't 'misremember' and perform a real apology? I might even buy you a beer."

Mr. Summerlin is right. I wrote a book some years back about the nature of memory and the stories we tell ourselves and others. Stories tend to grow over time and, if they are told often enough, they harden into a kind of new truth for the teller. Mr. Williams has been on almost every talk show you can think of and that requires not only a different skill set — he is a gifted and funny performer — but stories in abundance.

It's useful to note that Mr. Williams initially reported the story fundamentally as it had happened — although the soldiers on hand say he exaggerated the danger to himself even then — and over time, as he retold it, he moved into the middle of it, so that the story became something that happened to him. All those 1 percent enhancements along the way add up and can leave the teller a long way from the truth.

The evolution of his account was evident in a 2013 appearance on the "Late Show With David Letterman."

"We were in some helicopters. What we didn't know is we were north of the invasion," he said. "Two of our four helicopters were hit by ground fire, including the one I was in, R.P.G. and AK-47."

I haven't reported from a war zone, but I know the fog of war requires an excess of caution. You can't toe-touch and tell tall tales later. His NBC colleague David Bloom died of a pulmonary embolism while covering the war in 2003. In 2006 in Iraq, Bob Woodruff of ABC suffered a traumatic brain injury. Many, many journalists have been maimed or died in pursuit of the truth, and those who survive don't generally speak about it much.

As the evening news anchor, Mr. Williams possesses a rare combination of fame and trust, with each feeding off the other. But fame is slippery, morphing into infamy very quickly, as Mr. Williams discovered in four days of sustained pounding. Everyone loves a story about seeing the mighty fall, even if they are as fundamentally likeable as Mr. Williams. (NBC confirmed that Mr. Williams would not be making a scheduled appearance on Mr. Letterman's show this week.)

As it turns out, his non-apology was not a safe haven, but a trap door, and his self-banishment was not a consequence, but a mistake.

I don't know if Mr. Williams will lose his job. I don't think he should — his transgressions were not a fundamental part of his primary responsibilities. But if the executives who run NBC come to believe that he can't credibly cover combat or hurricanes, or call a politician on a lie, they will dismiss him even though there is no plan in place for succession.

I watched him read the news on Friday night. Even playing hurt, he is very good at it. And I thought about how weird it would be to see him doing the job in a hair shirt for months or years to come. It's an image that clanks.

We want our anchors to be both good at reading the news and also pretending to be in the middle of it. That's why, when the forces of man or Mother Nature whip up chaos, both broadcast and cable news outlets are compelled to ship the whole heaving apparatus to far-flung parts of the globe, with an anchor as the flag bearer.

We want our anchors to be everywhere, to be impossibly famous, globe-trotting, hilarious, down-to-earth, and above all, trustworthy. It's a job description that no one can match.

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