

Brian Williams and the Perils of the Use of Autobiographical Memory in Research

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Abstract

Brian Williams, an American journalist who had for ten years served as anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News was recently suspended for six months for "misrepresent[ing]" events which he claimed occurred during his coverage of the Iraq War in 2003. While many have questioned why Williams, a well-known and widely respected broadcast journalist, would have fabricated the degree of risk he faced in his war coverage, few have considered that he might have unwittingly, rather than deliberately, misrepresented events in the past. Autobiographical memory, however, is highly susceptible to a variety of influences which can create false memories. While researchers have, for obvious reasons, created benign memories, cases exist in which individuals have been tried for crimes which in retrospect seem ludicrous. I argue that, whatever the reason for Brian Williams' exaggeration of the level of threat which he faced in Iraq in 2003, the implications of such exaggerations for communication research are sobering.

Keywords: Autobiographical; Brain; Memory

Brian Williams and the Inflation of Memory

Brian Williams, an American journalist who has for ten years served as anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News, was recently suspended for six months for "misrepresent[ing]" events which he claimed occurred during his coverage of the Iraq War in 2003. While many have questioned why Williams, a well-known and widely respected broadcast journalist, would have fabricated the degree of risk he faced in his war coverage, few have considered that he might have unwittingly, rather than deliberately, misrepresented events in the past. Williams' original March 26, 2003 report from Iraq indicated that the helicopter in front of his as they approach a landing point was hit, something that Williams learned once he and his crew landed. But the book published that September under the imprimatur of NBC implied that the helicopter in which the NBC team flew was flying was hit by enemy fire. The book, entitled *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Twenty-two historic days in words and pictures* and authored by William Arkin, says that Williams ended up on the receiving end of an ambush directed at the 3rd Infantry Division. An army helicopter armada was delivering 17,000-lb. sections of a platoon bridge to Najaf, about 100 miles south of Baghdad. The NBC team went along for the ride, occupying the third of four Chinook choppers . . . The grenade entered the helicopter's open tail, tore a hole in the fuselage, and grazed a crewman's face, but did not detonate [1]. It was not until 2008 that Williams himself said that he himself was in the helicopter which was struck, which he said in a blog posting; which he said once again in a 2013 interview with David Letterman. On Jan. 30, 2015, Williams retold the story in the process of praising the bravery of the troops in combat; during this conversation, he described his helicopter as having been shot down by RPG fire. The pilot of the helicopter upon which Williams flew posted on Williams' NBC Facebook page on January 31, contradicting his story, and on Feb. 4, 2014, Williams apologized for his exaggeration:

I want to apologize. I said I was traveling in an aircraft that was hit by RPG fire. I was instead in a following aircraft. We all landed after the ground fire incident and spent two harrowing nights in a sandstorm in the Iraqi desert. This was a bungled attempt by me to thank one special veteran and by extension our brave military men and women, veterans everywhere, those who have served while I did not. I hope they know they have my greatest respect, and also now my apology. The exaggeration raised considerable controversy about Williams'

credibility, and NBC soon informed staffers that Williams would be removed from the Nightly News for a time on Feb. 10 [2].

Williams later, in an interview with *Stars and Stripes*, spoke of the fear which he felt when the helicopter he was riding landed abruptly. No, I think I correctly reported as I did in my blog in '08 that I was on the aircraft behind the one that was hit. It was not . . . Because I knew we had all come under fire, I guess I had assumed that all of the airframes took some damage because we all went down. Also, remember, adding to the fear of the moment was the fact that we unhooked, our load master let loose a huge, our cargo, so you go through this over-torque where you rise in the air before you settle, despite what was some dandy piloting by the crews of all three aircraft. It was like landing on the surface of the moon. And I'm going to have a far different recollection than the professionals. These are the guys, and I think maybe you know more than I do — Was it a mixture of Big Windy [Company] out of Germany and Air National Guard from the States? Because that is what I recall [3].

The interviewer then tells Williams that his helicopter was in a second grouping of helicopters, distinct from the first group, which contained the helicopter which was struck by an RPG. To this, Williams responds: And that's the first I've heard of that. I did not think we were in trail by that far. I think that's probably a good question for Tim, who I now learn witnessed the overflight. But I could not see in front of us and I thought we were just in one flotilla, for lack of a better word. That's the first time I've heard that [3].

To hear Williams tell his side of the story, he appears to be confused about the position of his helicopter in the flight and to have been frightened by the maneuvers of the craft. Commentators, however,

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have been merciless, generally following the lead of Dave Helling at the *Kansas City Star*:

Public figures, it turns out, are rarely challenged in public. That can leave them believing their own myths at the expense of reality.

"People who are in the public eye . . . think they're above it," said Jeffrey Walczyk, a psychology professor at Louisiana Tech University and a student of human deception for more than a decade.

"It's possible (Williams) didn't lie, in the sense that he came to believe what he had said," Walczyk said. "But he probably thought no one would fact-check, or he believed he could get away with it" [4].

False Memories

As suggested in the above quotation, the Williams case has been widely accepted as one in which Williams inflated the danger he faced for personal reasons (to inflate his reputation) or economic reasons (to inflate the ratings of NBC's *Nightly News*) [5]. Little attention has been paid to the alternative possibility that Walczyk raised in Helling's column — that Williams "came to believe what he had said."

Research suggests, however, that autobiographical memory is highly susceptible to a variety of influences which can create false memories. While researchers have, for obvious reasons, created only benign memories, numerous cases exist in which individuals have been tried for crimes based on false memories which were created through the interviewing techniques employed by parents and police.

In many cases, the events which are described by accusers in retrospect seem ludicrous. In the accusations in the McMartin Preschool case in California in 1983, the case began when Judy Johnson accused Ray Buckey, an aide at the school, of flying through the air and bizarre forms of physical abuse; her young son confirmed those allegations [6,7]. She then accused Peggy Buckey, Ray's mother, of various 'satanic' practices. Her son was said to have seen a rabbit being chopped up and a baby being beheaded; the boy was forced to drink the blood of the baby, which the boy confirmed in interviewing [8].

In the McMartin Preschool case, the striking event is not that the accusations of Johnson, who was later confined as a paranoid schizophrenic, were investigated; it was that the young witnesses confirmed them and added details [9]. After the case was closed with no convictions, the interviewing techniques used on the children were found to generate false memories in children with no relation to the McMartin case [10].

Such interviewing techniques have been found in empirical research to have the potential to cause false memories in both children and adults. College students were interviewed about an accident that purportedly occurred at a family wedding, which they later 'recalled' as having occurred; and preschoolers were asked to think about having had their hand trapped in a mousetrap and having to go to the hospital to have it removed; they later recollected that event as having actually happened [11,12]. One-quarter of respondents were convinced that, as children, they had been lost in a shopping mall when such an event had never occurred [13]. As Loftus suggests, if family members suggest to subjects that they saw the event being suggested, it is possible to convince even adult subjects that they in the past had extended experiences including hospitalizations, being lost, or of undergoing embarrassing experiences at familial events [14].

Sometimes the false memories can be elaborate, as in the case of a story related by Loftus and Ketcham [15]:

One of my first memories would date, if it were true, from my second year. I can still see the following scene, in which I believed until I was about fifteen. I was sitting in my pram, which my nurse was pushing in the Champs Elysees, when a man tried to kidnap me. I was held in the strap fastened about me while my nurse bravely tried to stand between me and the thief. She received various scratches, and I can still see vaguely those on her face. Then a crowd gathered, a policeman with a short cloak and a white baton came up, and the man took to his heels. I can still see the whole scene, and can even place it near the tube station. When I was about fifteen, my parents received a letter from my former nurse saying she had been converted to the Salvation Army. She wanted to confess her past faults, and in particular to return the watch she had been given as a reward on this occasion. She had made up the whole story, faking the scratches. I, therefore, must have heard, as a child, the account of the story, which my parents believed, and projected into the past in the form of a visual memory.

Research has suggested that the relative ease of introducing false memories is due to the misinformation effect, when the recall of memories becomes less accurate because of information introduced post-event information. More recent information, in general, is easier to access than more distant, and this general effect, combined with suggestibility and with misattribution (the tendency to define the source of a memory as the self rather than some other entity) combine to create the phenomenon of false memories [16].

Memory as Constructed and Naïve Realism

From research such as the above, researchers have drawn the conclusion that memories are constructed rather than drawn from some sort of 'memory bank' in the brain. Individuals construct their past on the basis of some few images they retain, plus general knowledge they possess and the social demands which are made upon them at the moment of the situation in which they have to create their memories [17].

Amongst other things, beliefs about how memories are made, narratives and stories, and individual levels of suggestibility play a role in how memories are constructed, as well as the social demands present at the moment when the autobiographical memories are demanded [18-21].

Unfortunately for Brian Williams, most viewers of NBC's *Nightly News* are naïve realists. Naïve realism is the belief that we see reality as it really is, without bias and as others see it unless they have some sort of bias or irrational approach. Others who disagree with us are uninformed or malicious, and, when presented with the simple objective evidence that is manifest to all objective observers (such as ourselves), will agree unless biased, irrational or lazy [22]. Such a viewpoint, of course, means that individuals whose understanding of the world differs from that held by one's self can only be viewed as 'biased, irrational or lazy,' and serves as a significant impediment to tolerant behaviors of many sorts, leading to substantive misunderstandings in human relations, and significant (and often negative) outcomes in everyday life [23-25]. In particular, naïve realists have a peculiar relation to memory; an individual is morally responsible for their memory, since memories are attestation of past facts, relating a memory which turns out to be inaccurate is to tell a *lie* — and hence to commit a blameworthy act.

Things would be bad enough if it were only the case if naïve realism led to the disruption of human relations and a variety of intolerant behaviors; but the judicial system of the United States relies upon eyewitness testimony. Our judicial system, in turn, is itself dependent upon a sort of naïve realism; its reliance upon testimonies based upon

memory is a major problem [15,26,27]. Eyewitness testimony, far from being reliable, is the primary source of wrongful convictions in the United States [28]. As seen in the aftermath of the McMartin Preschool trial, there is a general acceptance by psychiatric professionals of the unreliability of many types of eyewitness testimony, of the effects of question repetition in the formation of false memories, and of questions concerning even the most direct sorts of eyewitness testimony — yet, as Loftus suggests, eyewitness testimony is often taken as the gold standard for testimony in a world in which naïve realism is the baseline for folk epistemology [29-31]. Such naïve realism might be seen as a sort of a 'folk epistemology' à la Kitchener, where an individual's view of what we can know and how we come to know it is shaped by social forces [32,33]. The act of perception and memory, conceptualized as unproblematic, as Hardy-Vallée and Dubreuil suggest, is the basis for 'normative social cognition,' and, as such, is the foundation for what serves as a normal, social understanding of the 'way things are' which is fully supported by the entire legal apparatus of the state [34,35].

Communication Research and Elicited Memories

For the communication researcher, Brian Williams' hasty departure from NBC's *Nightly News* is, thus, more than a reminder that the American public expects their newscasters to be more than reliable readers of prepared news copy. Much of communication research depends upon respondents who reliably relate past experiences upon survey instruments to researchers, and such information is often available in no other manner [36]. Much research, for example, comes down to comparing media effects to respondent descriptions of their own media exposure, with such self-reports playing a particularly crucial role in cultivation research [37-40]. Cultivation research, which seeks to link television viewing to perceptions of risk, has proven to be a durable and popular area of research both in the U.S. and other nations, yet its reliance upon historical reports from respondents might give researchers pause [41]. Survey researchers have found that parents, questioned shortly after their children have received vaccines, give responses concerning which diseases for which their children were vaccinated that were little better than chance [42]. As a result of these and other concerns regarding autobiographical memories, survey researchers have offered cautions concerning the use of self-reports in survey research where those reports cannot be confirmed via other means, and, in particular, without the authentication of autobiographical reports [43-45]. But such recommendations have made little headway in the discipline of communication research.

To be clear, cultivation researchers often ask respondents to self-report television viewing habits; risk researchers often ask respondents to self-report whether or not respondents have faced certain risks in the past. Such queries are precisely requests for autobiographical memories of the sort discussed above, and, as the research presented above suggests, are inherently unreliable unless confirmed via external means.

Conclusions

We will never know why Brian Williams inflated the danger which he faced in Iraq in 2003. But we might posit an alternative scenario to the image of Williams as engaging in puffery. Williams, who is rumored to have always felt intimidated by his predecessor Tom Brokaw, was faced with a retelling of the 2003 [46]. Iraq story in NBC's own book on the subject, complete with photographs and a narration by Brokaw. His own memories of the emotionally-jarring incident were incoherent, and he adopted the complete and coherent tale of what happened as narrated by his intimidating predecessor, in much

the same manner that the young Piaget came to believe that he had almost been kidnapped. With retelling, the false memory became clear in Williams' mind — until it was contradicted in 2015, and Williams found himself the target of both sanction and ridicule. Whether or not this alternative scenario is true or not is unclear. But what *is* clear is that communication research, particularly cultivation research, has a long history of dependence on respondent autobiographical reports as a primary aspect of its research projects. We should, in the future, make significant efforts to attempt to consider the unreliability of such data before using it as the keystone of statistical models which, in turn, serve as the linchpin of grand theoretical ventures — particularly in light of the fact that ventures such as cultivation theory and research are one of the inputs into the policy-making aspect of the regulation of television programming in the U.S [47].

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