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## Was Brian Williams a Victim of False Memory?



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.

PHOTO BY JEFF RIGGINS / NBC / NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA GETTY IMAGES

By TARA PARKER-POPE

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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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*Was Brian Williams a Victim of False Memory?*

1. How reliable is human memory?
2. Summarize the controversy with news anchor Brian Williams.
3. How do memories "exist" in our brains?
4. What does use of vocabulary have to do with recollection of a memory?
5. "Memory is a reconstructive process, and we are drawing on multiple sources of information." Describe what this quote means about human memory and how memory can be influenced / changed over time.