

*This case was prepared by University of Georgia journalism student Wallace Morgan for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, based on sources cited below.*

## **Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility**

### Part A: Introduction

Journalistic courage has been a topic of national conversation as of late with one of the media's shining stars at the center of its scrutiny. Brian Williams, *NBC Nightly News* anchor and managing editor, was suspended for six months without pay in February of 2015 following his admission to lying about having been on a helicopter that went under fire during the Iraq invasion in 2003. In the twelve years since the event occurred, Williams has recounted the experience several times in varying detail. The most recent account aired on *NBC Nightly News* on January 30 as part of a segment done in tribute to war veterans, specifically honoring U.S. Army Command Sgt. Major Tim Terpak, who Williams claimed helped save his life following the attack.

During the broadcast, Williams said, "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 RPG." That is, a rocket-propelled grenade. Williams continued, "Our traveling NBC News team was rescued, surrounded and kept alive by an armor mechanized platoon from the U.S. Army 3rd Infantry."

Following the broadcast, the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* reported that Williams was not on the helicopter that took fire. The paper reported, "The NBC anchor was nowhere near that aircraft or two other Chinooks flying in the formation that took fire. Williams arrived in the area about an hour later on another helicopter after the other three had made an emergency landing, the crew members said." Poynter Institute's Al Tompkins added that Williams reported the following on *NBC Dateline* in 2003: "The incident was so fresh when the helicopters landed that the crew from the helicopter that was hit by the RPG was too shaken to talk on camera." Later, in 2008, Williams wrote that the helicopter directly in front of the one he traveled in was hit. In the wake of the criticism regarding his accounts, Williams publicly apologized for his mistake. He has since stepped down voluntarily after NBC announced his six-month suspension.

### Discussion Question:

1. What fundamental aspects of journalistic courage appear to have been compromised based on the preliminary facts of the case?

## Part B: Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility

Williams admitted to his mistake, blaming his false statements on a conflated memory. Williams told *Stars and Stripes*, "I would not have chosen to make this mistake. I don't know what screwed up in my mind that caused me to conflate one aircraft with another." He also posted an apology on Facebook in which he wrote:

"I feel terrible about making this mistake, especially since I found my OWN WRITING about the incident from back in '08, and I was indeed on the Chinook behind the bird that took the RPG in the tail housing just above the ramp. Because I have no desire to fictionalize my experience (we all saw it happened the first time) and no need to dramatize events as they actually happened, I think the constant viewing of the video showing us inspecting the impact area — and the fog of memory over 12 years — made me conflate the two, and I apologize."

Williams takes a contrite tone in his apology. However, his admissions leaves much detail unclear blaming his error on mixing up two experiences. According to NPR, Harvard University scholars and others have made the case that the human memory is "fundamentally undependable."

### Discussion Questions:

1. As a journalist, is Brian Williams held at a higher standard for the credibility of even his own memories?
2. Is blaming his false accounts on a conflation of memory a plausible defense?

## Part C: Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility

Williams began working for NBC as a reporter in 1993. His time in Iraq was his final story as a correspondent before he inherited the anchor desk on *Nightly News* from Tom Brokaw. He has held the position for the past ten years, served as managing editor and earned a reported \$10 million annually, before his suspension. Over the course of his career he has become more than a reporter. He is a celebrity. Williams has hosted *Saturday Night Live*, has appeared on *30 Rock*, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. During his appearance on Letterman in 2013, Williams dramatically recounted his alleged experience on the helicopter that was hit by the RPG, the story he has since retracted.

Though Williams clearly has a deep appreciation for U.S. troops, his celebrity status and flare for the dramatic calls into question the nature of his error. NBC has been in a constant ratings battle with chief competitor ABC. It is plausible that the network has projected him as a star and a brave patriot in order to boost ratings. NPR's media critic David Folkenflik said, "It is not an accident that the continuing celebration of Williams' decade mark as NBC's chief anchor plays up his time covering combat with images of him in flak jackets."

### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the nature of his error: A slip of the tongue? An exaggeration for the sake of a better story? Or a predetermined decision with ill intention?
2. Does the nature of his error affect the extent of journalism courage compromised?
3. How does Williams' celebrity affect his role as a reporter? Is he accountable as a reporter when speaking in a more celebrity role like during his appearance on Letterman?

## Part D: Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility

Naturally, Williams' admission to mistaking the details of his experience in Iraq calls into questions his credibility on all his work. Speculations about his dramatization on a few specific stories have been raised since. *The Huffington Post* questioned Williams' claim to have flown into Baghdad in 2003 with the Navy's SEAL team six, the unit that carried out the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Williams also allegedly claimed to have received a piece of the helicopter and a SEAL's knife from the raid as gifts. *The Huffington Post* reported that he seems to have only started telling this part of the story in 2011, the year of bin Laden's death. US Special Operations Command spokesman Ken McGraw told *The Huffington Post* that the organization did not "embed journalists with this or any other unit that conducts counter-terrorism missions." *Business Insider* reported that NBC has yet to confirm that Williams' stories regarding the SEAL Team Six are accurate.

CNN has reported that Williams' claim to have been in Berlin the day the wall fell was likely an exaggeration. In 2008, Williams said that he "was at the Brandenburg Gate the night the wall came down." Williams was in fact in Berlin in 1989 reporting for WCBS-TV in New York; however, CNN notes that Tom Brokaw was the only American anchorman to report from the scene live on November 9, 1989, the night the wall fell. Williams recently said that he came onto the scene 12 hours after Brokaw, but his retellings of the story have shown inconsistency on his time of arrival.

Additionally, there have been doubts regarding his reporting of Hurricane Katrina, coverage for which he and his team won a Peabody Award in 2005. *The New Orleans Advocate* newspaper recently called into question Williams' statement that he witnessed a dead body float by in the French Quarter, an area of the city that had little flooding during the hurricane. Williams said the following about what he saw during the storm in a 2006 interview: "When you look out of your hotel window in the French Quarter and watch a man float by face down, when you see bodies that you last saw in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, and swore to yourself that you would never see in your country..." In contradiction, *The New Orleans Advocate* said, "the French Quarter, the original high ground of New Orleans, was not impacted by the floodwaters that overwhelmed the vast majority of the city." In Williams' defense, other accounts support his claim with at least one photograph depicting floodwater in the area. Williams also said he accidentally ingested floodwater and in turn contracted dysentery. This claim is also under question. Dr. Brobson Lutz, New Orleans' former health director, told the paper that while he was a fan of Williams', he was uncertain about Williams' claims of contracting the disease. Lutz said, "I saw a lot of people with cuts and bruises and such, but I don't recall a single, solitary case of gastroenteritis during Katrina or in the whole month afterward." The Center for Disease Control, however, did report some "clusters of diarrheal disease" during the aftermath of Katrina.

Discussion Questions:

1. Should Williams' credibility be called into question in full as a result of his recent "mistake?"
2. Do these accusations regarding his past reporting call his work into even further question and scrutiny, or do the accusations appear unfairly critical?

## Part E: Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility

NBC began an internal investigation on the case on February 6, 2015. NBC News President Deborah Turness wrote in a memo to staff the following:

Brian apologized once again, and specifically expressed how sorry he is for the impact this has had on all of you and on this proud organization. As you would expect, we have a team dedicated to gathering the facts to help us make sense of all that has transpired. We're working on what the best next steps are — and when we have something to communicate we will of course share it with you.

According to *The Associated Press*, NBC's Richard Esposito, a former editor at the *New York Daily News*, is heading the investigation. The following day, Williams released a statement announcing his temporary leave from the anchor chair with Lester Holt as his replacement. Williams said, "It has become painfully apparent to me that I am presently too much a part of the news, due to my actions. I have decided to take myself off of my daily broadcast for the next several days ... Upon my return, I will continue my career-long effort to be worthy of the trust of those who place their trust in us."

Three days later, on February 10, NBC News suspended Williams for six months without pay. Turness wrote in a follow-up memo to staff that Williams' actions were "wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian's position... As I'm sure you understand, this was a very hard decision," Turness said. "Certainly there will be those who disagree. But we believe this suspension is the appropriate and proportionate action." CEO of NBC Universal, Steve Burke, wrote in the same memo that Williams had "jeopardized the trust millions of Americans place in NBC News," but "he deserves a second chance... Brian has shared his deep remorse with me and he is committed to winning back everyone's trust," Burke said. Following the announcement, NPR's David Folkenflik wrote that the actions were the "first time in 10 days since Williams' offending Jan 30 newscast that network's leadership registered [a] presence publicly in any meaningful way." The internal investigation is currently ongoing as of March 2015.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Should NBC have reacted more quickly to the situation?
2. Was the suspension the appropriate decision based on the journalistic courage called into question?
3. Does Brian Williams deserve a second chance?
4. How does a journalist who has lost credibility regain trust?

## Conclusion: Brian Williams' Conflated Memory – America's Anchorman Loses the Fight for Credibility

NPR's David Folkenflik poignantly summarizes the unfortunate outcome of William's actions. Folkenflik writes, "You could always rely on NBC anchor Brian Williams for the smooth handling of a tricky issue on the *NBC Nightly News*, or a slicing punch line in any of his many appearances on the late night humor shows. Yet now his dependability — the trust built up over years with millions of viewers — has been cast in doubt because of a *self-inflicted journalistic war wound* over a story nearly a dozen years old."

Williams' credibility has been severely tarnished. His journalist courage has been called into question by his critics and fans alike. According to *Business Insider*, Williams dropped from being the 23<sup>rd</sup>-most-trusted person in America to the 835<sup>th</sup> in just over a week. Viewership of *NBC Nightly News* dropped from an average of 10.1 million viewers the week of February 2 to 9.4 million the week of February 9 when Holt took over for Williams. For comparison, the 6:30 pm broadcast, with Williams as the anchor, averaged 11 million viewers and 11.6 million viewers, respectively, for the same two weeks in 2014, according to *The New York Post*.

Following his suspension from NBC, Williams also resigned as a member of the board of directors for the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation, a foundation that promotes the nation's "highest honor for valor on the battlefield." Williams' had been a member since 2006.

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