

# Brian Williams: Issues and Perceptions

By Rhoda Tillman



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*Now You See Him, Now You Don't* is a Walt Disney Productions film about a chemistry student who discovers how to make himself invisible. It also describes Brian Williams, former anchor of NBC Nightly News, who in February 2015 was suddenly placed on a six month leave.

Since Williams was a regular after dinner presence in our household, the announcement surprised and puzzled me. As he smoothly read the news in his conservative suit, trimmed hair, and endless supply of ties, nightly repeating the phrase, "Thank you, as always," he appeared competent. What had he done? Was it rape? Murder? Had he uttered one of George Carlin's "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television?"

A passage from Jane Green's novel *Saving Grace* applies: "the village is buzzing with gossip, with people wanting to know, indulging in a spot of *schadenfreude*, for who does not enjoy seeing the mighty fall from grace, or indeed grace fall from the mighty" (281).

So, who is Brian Williams, personally and professionally? Born in Ridgewood, New Jersey, Williams is in his late fifties, is six feet and one inch tall, and lives in Connecticut. He attended Brookdale Community College, transferred first to the Catholic University of America and then George Washington University. Surprisingly, he didn't graduate, instead leaving to intern in the administration of President Jimmy Carter. Married for thirty years, he has two children; his daughter Allison has a key role in the sitcom *Girls*. He has won

Emmys for anchoring the NBC Nightly News, a position he held for eleven years. He remains a NY Giants fan. He had knee replacement surgery in 2013; in 2014 he was inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame in the Arts and Letters Category.

"With his rectilinear jaw and immovable hair," journalist John Swansburg has written, "Williams could hardly be more anchorish—he looks as if he were genetically engineered to sit behind a large desk and intone." Even when well into his career as a news anchor, however, he was attracted to comedy, making appearances on late night shows and acquiring a reputation as a "semi-pro wiseacre." Walter Cronkite was a childhood idol, yet Williams also watched Johnny Carson.

Despite all those accomplishments and attributes, however, the first thing we now think of in connection with Brian Williams is his fall from grace—a fall involving many issues beyond his leave of absence and possible firing, having to do with public image, journalistic responsibility, and the nature of the truth.

So what did he do? According to the suspension memo, "While on Nightly News on Friday, Jan. 30, 2015, Brian misrepresented events which occurred while he was covering the Iraq War in 2003. It then became clear that on other occasions Brian had done the same while telling that story in other venues. This was wrong and completely inappropriate for someone in Brian's position" (quoted in Gay).

Specifically, Williams reported that during the invasion of Iraq, he had been traveling in a helicopter that was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and forced down. He told the story on late night television as well as on NBC Nightly News. When he subsequently retold the story, he said that he was actually *following* the aircraft that was struck. Not quite as heroic.

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And why does this matter? A talent for “improving” stories can be a gift—one of my favorite comic page characters is Leroy Lockhorn, whose wife Loretta says, “Leroy has an amazing memory... He can recall things that never actually happened” (Hoest and Reiner). Williams, though, was an anchorman—by definition, according to Merriam-Webster, “a man who reads the news and introduces the reports of other broadcasters on a television news program.” When an anchorman goes beyond reading and inserts himself into the story, confusion and worse can occur.

A U.S. Army captain serving in Afghanistan had an explanation of how this “mis-recollection” developed into the Williams scandal, describing a predominant way of thinking in which Americans wish to align themselves with the military by buying clothing and trying to appear as if they were, in

fact, involved in the dangers of combat. Brian Williams may have related this less-than-factual account of his involvement out of just such a wish to associate himself with military heroism. The problem was that it was very offensive to those who have indeed risked their lives in efforts to destroy enemies of the United States.

Besides offending the military, Williams infuriated NBC by tarnishing its reputation and that of its employees. In response to what was being called the “copter whopper story” (Gay), NBC announced its intention to gather the facts. The network assured viewers that the anchor was sorry about his actions and would work toward restoring audience trust.

In judging Williams’ role and that of his managers, some have inclined to compassion. Journalists’ transgressions are not new. Insulting comments and racial epithets are not tolerated, typically punished publicly by an apology and a few days off the air. Some felt that Williams’s career should not be destroyed, given his positive contributions to NBC in the past, and he was a likable man. While his actions aren’t to be condoned, as a human being, he should be forgiven. And... the days of the Walter Cronkite unbiased reporting may be history.

David Bedrick, counselor and author, suggests that embellishing or lying is widespread: “We are complicit in creating an atmosphere that condones dishonesty. [...] Perhaps we could all hold up placards that read ‘Je suis Brian Williams—I am Brian Williams’” (Bedrick). As an *N.Y. Daily News* headline put it, “Brian Williams Suspended for It, but Everybody Embellishes.”

Some believe that Williams was trying to sound less “boring.” Some believe that there is an element of invention in any kind of reporting, which creates some fine lines.

The writer’s job is to pull out the most interesting, key piece of information. The writer does what writers do, which is punch up the language. [...] That is how we go from an inaccuracy to a lie. [...] In the end, it is an error of process, lacking intent to deceive, what we commonly refer to as a mistake. (Daly)

While there may be something called the Fog of War, or a confusion of recall in military operations, there also seemed to be “some attempt by Williams to hijack the glory” (Daly).

The temptation to enhance one’s public image is easy to understand, and all the more so in the instance of a celebrity like Williams, whose public image is tied to multi-millions of dollars in ad revenue, the result of a healthy viewing audience and high ratings. Greed could explain why Williams’ “exaggerations,” made previously, were not questioned and punished, as it seems unlikely that no one on the news team picked up on these earlier.

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It is as though all the old proverbs about reckless pursuit were forgotten: “What is Fame? It’s nothing but a hot-air balloon. It can be manipulated but eventually it has to come down” (“What is Fame”).

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The arguments against having Williams return included his lack of concern for telling the truth about experiences in Iraq and his trying to put himself on the same level as correspondents who, in fact, were in great danger. There was the suggestion that Williams might be dissatisfied with his current role, and wanted to move on to something greater.

During his absence, there was speculation about the negotiations between the anchor and the network. Williams had the previous year signed a five-year contract at \$10 million a year. During this leave he was “instructed not to speak publicly” (“NBC Trying to Keep Brian Williams”). Lester Holt filled in as anchor in Williams’ place and was maintaining a healthy number of viewers of Nightly News.

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Williams’ sin was his disregard for his role as a journalist. Given his responsibility to the public to tell the truth, his so-called embellishments made many unable to trust what he was telling them afterwards. His motive has been described as a way to build up himself and his resume, a sign of professional insecurity in a competitive work climate. His example became a heads-up to news divisions of other networks.

Lying is not new in the media. Dan Rather, formerly with CBS, called fake memos “authentic evidence” related to George W. Bush’s National Guard record. When caught, celebrities don’t talk about lying, instead it was “misremembering, misstating, or misconstruing” (Hanson).

The Greek word for truth was *aletheia*—literally ‘not forgetting.’ Yet that ancient idea of eternal differences between truth and myth is now lost in the modern age.

Our lies become accepted as true, but only depending on how powerful and influential we are- or how supposedly noble the cause for which we lie. (Hanson)

Williams is certainly not alone. Vice President Joseph Biden reported that in 2008 his helicopter was forced to land by al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Actually, a snowstorm caused the speedy landing. In politics we are well aware of lies about the future in the form of campaign promises.

Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly claimed to have risked his life reporting from the Falkland Islands during a war, while he had actually been in Buenos Aires. O’Reilly and Williams were similar in their telling of war stories in which they assumed the role of hero, but Fox did not take the kind of steps NBC took; as one reporter put it, “Fox News has been unwavering in its support of O’Reilly, the top-rated host on cable news” (Kludt). Chuck Todd, moderator of NBC’s “Meet the Press” points to the difference between NBC News and Fox News: “They treat it like a campaign, we treated it like a news organization” (Kludt).

Jon Stewart, who retired from *The Daily Show* in August 2015, and whose job was very different from that of Nightly News anchor, can certainly be described as a performer as well as a comedian. Stewart routinely satirized

TV news “talking heads” posing as “objective journalists.” On his late night Comedy Central show, hours after the Williams’ exit announcement, Stewart labeled the NBC anchor’s problem as “infotainment confusion syndrome”: “Self-love can be a bad habit. [...] You probably shouldn’t do it at your work desk. [...] Finally! [...] Someone is being held to account for misleading America about the Iraq War” (Stewart).

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Bob Simon, former CBS News correspondent, has been called “a reporter’s reporter.” He was tragically killed in a car crash in February 2015. During his career, he had been tortured in a Baghdad jail and beaten by Northern Ireland extremists. Dick Polman, columnist, wrote, “for every Brian Williams [...], there are unsung scads of journalists who play the game right. Let Bob Simon’s extraordinary life and career serve as a reminder” (Polman).

Williams is an example of how emotionally attached we become to our TV news anchors, as they maintain eye contact with us, speak in calm voices with carefully prepared words and the appropriate amount of expression. With a click of the remote, we invite our personal favorites into our homes to inform and perhaps entertain

us each evening. After Lester Holt filled in successfully during the months of Williams' leave, he was appointed the news anchor's successor. Holt is a familiar figure, trusted by viewers to be focused on delivering the news with appropriate enthusiasm, humility and clarity.

Williams has apologized for disappointing his colleagues and viewers. He has said he would support Holt and work toward earning back the trust of his previous supporters. NBC News chairman Andrew Lack acknowledged that Williams' fine record with NBC previously earns him the right to return to the network.

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Williams returned to NBC, demoted to covering breaking news on cable network MSNBC. His first assignment on September 22, 2015, was the Pope's arrival in the United States. His second major assignment was as anchor of the cable-news network's coverage of the Umpqua Community College shootings.

A review of these events and the debate surrounding the Brian Williams'

misremembering leads me to the following conclusions:

- A prestigious job with a lengthy, lucrative contract can be lost in the snap of a finger, given a mistake, which damages the organizational brand.
- Because Williams' role was one of reporting events that others did not have access to, he had a responsibility to avoid embellishment.
- Humans have exaggerated their experiences for many years under the headings of fish story, tall tale, political speech, perhaps now more than previously, given our competitive social climate and sometimes relaxed standards. These "exaggerations" may, in fact, be moving towards epidemic proportions.

And these questions:

- Did NBC deal appropriately with the Brian Williams' situation?
- Does our 24 hr. media-saturated climate encourage embellishment, blurring the line between fact and fiction?
- At a time when news and entertainment are merging, and ratings have an enormous influence on sponsors, is there an overwhelming pressure to be provocative or more compelling than the competition?
- Has lying truly become an "epidemic" among those who report the news?

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