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## Embedding, Embellishing and Embarrassing: Brian Williams 'Misremembers' but Social Media Reminds Him

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## Embedding, embellishing and embarrassing: Brian Williams 'misremembers' but social media reminds him

*Brian Williams enjoyed the trust of his organisation and audience for 10 years as NBC's Nightly News anchor and managing editor. But on the night of 30 January 2015 during a broadcast, his high profile status began to unravel. Venerated as a reliable news source, Williams was forced to explain his legendary story of survival one day in the skies above the Iraq War of 2003. His version of an attack on a Chinook helicopter he was travelling in was circulated and valorised by his own corporation for 12 years. But when American soldier Lance Reynolds and other military personnel challenged the veracity of his version, the corporation was forced to suspend him. Williams equates his rewriting and false reporting of this historical event as an act of 'misremembering'. This assertion is a clear breach of the Society of Professional Journalists' code: 'Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity'.<sup>1</sup> However, the focus of this paper is on the viral audience social media response and the ways in which the production of mocking online tweets and posts served to critique and ridicule Williams's claim of 'misremembering', thus holding him to account. And as such, the ongoing circulation and preservation of memes satirically re-appropriating historical moments, continue to shame Williams and his journalism practice.*

**Keywords:** Brian Williams, 'misremembering', ethics, NBC, rewriting historical events, memes, social media

'It felt like a personal experience that someone else wanted to participate in and didn't deserve to participate in.'<sup>2</sup>

### Here is the news

In the opening chapter from *What is happening to news: The information explosion and the crisis in journalism*, titled 'The collapse of the old order', Jack Fuller begins with a well-known quotation from Walter Lippmann who, in 1921, compared the press to 'the beam of a searchlight that relentlessly moves about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision' (Fuller 2013: 1). Underpinning Lippmann's sentiments is an optimism about the capacity of the press to function beyond the reaches of institutions and media personalities to produce clear and reliable news. More recently, in working towards a cogent definition of journalism practice, Michael Schudson argues: 'Journalism is the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs or general public interest and importance' (Schudson 2001: 11). Here, Schudson points to the sociological and commercial underpinnings relating to the production and circulation of news. Usefully, too, Jay Rosen comments: 'News is something that news people make, but that does not mean they make it up. It simply means that stories about what happened today are not "what happened today"' (Rosen 2001: 3). But more importantly, Rosen continues:

How do we know when this art is serving a public purpose? 'When it is accurate, fair, balanced, comprehensive and compelling' is the sort of answer most in the press would give. It is a good answer. But it does not say much about the imaginative work journalists do (ibid: 3).

In thinking about the 'imaginative work' journalists perform it is important to acknowledge the significant and creative roles of investigative and literary journalists who, with moral imagination and a steadfast commitment to facts, render a story in ways that can both enlighten and, at times, entertain. However, this notion of the 'imaginative work of the journalist' cannot ethically encompass a re-rendering of historical detail so that once incontrovertible facts are morphed into a new and more exciting tale; the very kind of narrative conflation that became Brian Williams's professional undoing. There have been several transgressive forays into 'story' within the media,<sup>3</sup> world-wide. And indeed, some may argue that corporate media transgresses with the truth every day; Brian Williams' seemingly is yet another example.

### Brian Williams 'misremembers'

Brian Williams is attending a Rangers-Canadiens ice hockey game at Madison Square Gardens in New York on the night of 30 January 2015. He invites Sergeant Major Tim Terpak to accompany him as a way of thanking him for protecting him and his crew on that night in the desert in 2003 when they were embedded on an air mission in Iraq, a fact the announcer at Madison Square Gardens shares with the huge sporting audience in a public tribute. The announcer says across the loudspeakers:

Ladies and gentlemen, during the Iraq invasion US Army Command Sergeant Major Tim Terpak was responsible for the safety of Brian Williams and his NBC News team after their Chinook helicopter was hit and crippled by enemy fire. Command Sergeant Major Terpak was awarded three Bronze Stars for combat valor in Iraq, and recently retired after twenty-three years in the US Army. Both men, both Rangers fans have been reunited for the first time in 12 years for tonight's game. Please welcome Command Sergeant Major Tim Terpak and Brian Williams (Wemple 2015).

Head of NBC News, 47-year-old Deborah Turness, sees the story reproduced on Facebook and 'likes' it, adding she thinks it is 'very sweet'. What she likes even more is its performance once it was posted to Facebook, which she calls 'extremely good' (Burrough 2015). But the loudspeaker announcement and follow-up news story proves too much for a band of soldiers, home from war. When members of the 159th Aviation Regiment's Chinook under fire on 26 March 2003, hear and then read the story on Facebook, they speak up. Lance Reynolds was flight engineer on the Chinook hit by two rocket-propelled grenades. The night he reads the report from the ice hockey match, he writes to Williams on Facebook: 'Sorry dude, I don't remember you being on my aircraft. I do remember you walking up about an hour after we had landed to ask me what had happened.' Christopher Simeone, the pilot of the helicopter Williams was travelling in, responds on Facebook: 'Such a liar! He was on my aircraft and we were NOT shot down. That was a sister ship and a friend of mine. Brian Williams has been knowingly lying since that mission to boost his credentials' (in Golgowski 2015). And according to Sergeant 1st Class Joseph Miller, who was the flight engineer on the aircraft Williams and his crew were on: 'No, we never came under direct enemy fire to the aircraft.' Miller, Reynolds and Mike O'Keeffe, who was

a door-gunner on the damaged Chinook, say they all recall NBC reporting that Williams was aboard the aircraft that was attacked, despite it being false. O'Keeffe says the incident has bothered him since he and others first saw the original report after returning to Kuwait. 'Over the years it faded,' he says, 'and then to see it last week it was – I can't believe he is still telling this false narrative' (Tritten 2015a). Travis Tritten tells the *Washingtonian*:

These veterans, they told me they've been mad for a long time. Their perception was that it has been misreported from the first time Brian Williams said it. Over the years you can find mentions of it, but this last time I think pushed some of them over the edge (Freed 2015).

Williams posts the following apology to the soldiers on Facebook:

To Joseph, Lance, Jonathan, Pate, Michael and all those who have posted: You are absolutely right and I was wrong. In fact, I spent much of the weekend thinking I'd gone crazy. 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. I certainly remember the armored mech platoon, meeting Capt. Eric Nye and, of course, Tim Terpak. Shortly after they arrived, so did the Orange Crush sandstorm, making virtually all outdoor functions impossible. I honestly don't remember which of the three choppers Gen. Downing and I slept in, but we spent two nights on the stowable web bench seats in one of the three birds. Later in the invasion when Gen. Downing and I reached Baghdad, I remember searching the parade grounds for Tim's Bradley to no avail. My attempt to pay tribute to CSM Terpak was to honor his 23+ years in service to our nation, and it had been 12 years since I saw him. The ultimate irony is: In writing up the synopsis of the 2 nights and 3 days I spent with him in the desert, I managed to switch aircraft. Nobody's trying to steal anyone's valor. Quite the contrary: I was and

remain a civilian journalist covering the stories of those who volunteered for duty. This was simply an attempt to thank Tim, our military and Veterans everywhere – those who have served while I did not (Wemple 2015).

Travis Tritten, from *Stars and Stripes*, is tipped off about the Facebook posts and begins tracking down five of the soldiers, all of whom tell him Williams's chopper was not hit. Reynolds tells Tritten: 'It was something personal for us that was kind of life-changing for me. I know how lucky I was to survive it. It felt like a personal experience that someone else wanted to participate in and didn't deserve to participate in' (in Tritten 2015a). Reynolds tells Tritten that Williams and his crew arrived in a helicopter '...30 to 60 minutes after his damaged Chinook made a rolling landing at an Iraqi airfield and skidded off the runway into the desert'. Reynolds says when Williams and his crew approached and took photographs of the damaged helicopter, he dismissed them because he did not want his wife, stationed at their home in Germany at the time, to worry. He says: 'I wanted to tell her myself everything was all right before she got news of this happening' (ibid).

Williams and his crew were at the crash site for ten minutes only before going to the army armoured unit guarding the Forward Operating Base Rams. These units came and formed a 'security perimeter' around the fallen Chinook. Here, Williams met Tim Terpak, one of the soldiers who formed the security (ibid). They stayed there for two or three days because of a sandstorm.

*Stars and Stripes* ran the story on 4 February, and by the next day, every major newspaper and broadcasting house was following-up. In the 4 February article, 'NBC's Brian Williams recants Iraq story after soldiers protest', Williams says he has: '... misremembered the events and was sorry ... 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' (ibid).

But it is not the first incident Williams 'misremembers'. One of the most famous and most broadcast examples of how his story morphs from fact to specific fiction based on past events is a transcript from the *Late show with David Letterman*, on CBS in 2013, the 10th anniversary of the attack on the helicopters in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Williams tells Letterman:

'Two of our four helicopters were hit by ground fire, including the one I was in.'

'No kidding!' Letterman exclaimed.

'RPG and AK-47,' Williams elaborated.

'What altitude were you hit at?' Letterman asked.

'We were only at 100 feet doing 100 forward knots...'

'What happens the minute everybody realizes you've been hit?' Letterman asked.

'We figure out how to land safely – and we did,' Williams answered. 'We landed very quickly and hard...' (Grove 2015).

When critiquing Williams's conduct on the Letterman programme, Wemple notes:

What's so remarkable about this appearance, in light of today's revelations, is just how insistent Williams appears upon recounting this fictional event. 'I brought a photo which arrived in my email two mornings ago of where I was tonight a decade ago ... this very day,' he told Letterman, kicking off the helicopter discussion. 'I have to treat you now with renewed respect,' summed up Letterman (Wemple 2015).

Astoundingly, Williams writes his own apology to read on air on 4 February, without consultation with his NBC bosses. It was not until Travis Tritten rang NBC on the morning of the proposed bulletin that the station learnt what was about to explode all over the airwaves, in print – and on the internet, as more and more people reacted. A one-time NBC executive tells *Salon*: 'They found out about this from a reporter! Amazing!' (Burrough 2015).

Within a news organisation such as NBC, its public relations department might have been expected to react promptly to minimise and mitigate brand damage. NBC believes Williams has spoken to Tritten off-the-record – in fact, he has gone on-the-record and admits he has not told the truth over the past 12 years in several public appearances, and the *Nightly News* broadcast after the 30 January ice-hockey match (ibid). NBC executives who hear what is about to happen try to intervene. One NBC insider tells *Salon*'s Burrough:

... executives who had gotten involved quickly became frustrated, as they would remain for days, with Williams's inability to explain himself. 'He couldn't say the words

"I lied", recalls one NBC insider. "We could not force his mouth to form the words "I lied". He couldn't explain what had happened. [He said:] "Did something happen to [my] head? Maybe I had a brain tumor, or something in my head?" He just didn't know. We just didn't know. We had no clear sense what had happened. We got the best [apology] we could get" (ibid).

After the story breaks on 4 February, the next evening Williams reads his on-air apology in the second half of the NBC *Nightly News* broadcast:

On this broadcast last week, in an effort to honor a veteran who protected me and so many others after a ground fire incident in the desert during the Iraq War invasion, I made a mistake in recalling the events of 12 years ago. It did not take long to hear from some brave men and women in the air crews who were also in that desert. I want to apologise. I said I was 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 Iraq 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 have not. I hope they know they have my greatest respect and now my apology (Battaglio 2015).

Despite this admission, and Williams's attempts to venerate military personnel, it becomes increasingly clear given the growing public reaction that NBC will need to act. As Jonsson writes: 'With NBC launching an investigation, it's now clear that Williams's self-dramatized anecdote may get him fired, though, given his value as a brand, the bar for that outcome will likely be very high' (Jonsson 2015). Not quite fired but on 11 February, six days after the story breaks, Williams is suspended for six months without pay. In a network statement, NBC Universal chief executive Steve Burke says: 'By his actions, Brian has jeopardised the trust millions of Americans place in NBC News. His actions are inexcusable and this suspension is severe and appropriate' (in Reuters 2015). Returning to the guiding principles of ethical journalism, Jonsson observes: 'Credibility and trustworthiness are the cornerstones of the anchor business, which in the US is still patterned on the Walter Cronkite model of voice-of-God reporting' (Jonsson 2015).

But former soldier and flight engineer with the 159th Aviation Regiment David Luke, who was aboard a helicopter flying along with the one carrying Williams and his NBC crew, tells *Stars and Stripes* after the apology: 'I have a feeling that he didn't have a choice [but to apologize].' He adds that he believes Williams has only told the truth now because soldier witnesses challenged him publicly, otherwise 'he would have told that war story until he was on his dying bed' (Tritten 2015b). Tritten tells the *Washingtonian*:

I think the statement and apology he gave, he did correct the most glaring factual error in his story. The veterans I talked to in my story were happy to see that. But I think he could have done a better job of clearing the record and laying out the facts. Maybe they could have done some more reporting on this and done what we've done (Freed 2015).

#### The story that broke the anchor

Before Brian Williams takes the anchor chair at NBC in December 2004, he is a news journalist at local stations and MSNBC; never a foreign or war correspondent, he had worked as NBC's chief White House correspondent for two years. But as Burrough observes:

He was deeply insecure about this, some of his friends believe. These people suggest that his storied broadcasts from New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which proved a boon to his ratings, were, in part, an effort to overcome the perception that he was a journalistic lightweight (Burrough 2015).

Called 'the most important person at the network, the face of NBC News, its anchorman Brian Williams', it is reported that his most recent contract signed with NBC, before the story broke, is close to \$US10 million a year. 'The new contract was a vote of confidence in Williams' (ibid). In this respected role '...as a newscaster, Williams's credibility, along with that authoritative voice, is his livelihood' (Graham 2015). And that is what he is paid so highly for – to gain audience trust and loyalty; to spearhead the rise in ratings and to be regarded as an intrinsic part of the NBC brand. Employed by such a reputable organisation, there is an expectation his journalism would be inherently founded on all on the basic tenets of the Society of Ethical Journalists' (SPJ) code of ethics, as stated in its preamble:

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.<sup>5</sup>

And, of course, and at all times, the presentation and narration of news stories must serve the public interest. Television news analyst Andrew Tyndall is circumspect when assessing Williams's ethical standards to the *Daily Beast*:

The actual lie is a trivial one [noting that it has zero public policy or political implications]. But the motive for the lie is really damning. Telling fibs to make yourself seem braver than you are? Why would you do that? The actual consequences of the lie are minimal, but the moral problems the lie raises are massive (Grove 2015).

In contrast, O'Hehir's analysis of the downfall of the news anchor is more colourful: 'In the space of less than a week, NBC News anchor Brian Williams went from debonair multimedia superstar to celebrity roadkill, an instant has-been and laughingstock whose career in the "news business" is presumably over' (O'Hehir 2015).

#### #BrianWilliamsMisremembers

Central to Williams's rapid transition from 'debonair multimedia superstar to celebrity roadkill' is the role social media and the internet played in both exposing and ridiculing the truth transgressions of the high profile journalist. In an article entitled: 'Brian Williams, NBC, social media, PR and branding', Jeremy Harris Lipschultz signals the initial delay of NBC in publicly responding to the 'mismembering' incident and how in the digital economy such delays enable other narratives and representations to gain viral traction: 'It must have been a long weekend for NBC News executives. Their initial silence strategy failed to recognize that social media chatter would fill the void with #BrianWilliamsWarStories<sup>6</sup> and #BrianWilliamsMisremembers<sup>7</sup> memes' (Lipschultz 2015).

The sentiment of an outraged public was represented and reproduced through mocking tweets and satirical memes. As Sean Rintel points out '... memes are indicative of a change from last century's passive read-only culture to an active read-write or produsage-oriented culture, in which very few resources are needed to broadcast a message to the entire world...'

(Rintel 2014). And the memes functioned as scathing assessments of Williams's dereliction of his primary journalistic duty; to tell the truth. Instead of the NBC continuing to present a reliable and trusted news anchor, Williams's exaggeration and embellishments were now central to the mocking caricatures tirelessly circulating in cyber space. At one point, #BrianWilliamsMisremembers became 'the number one trending topic in the US' (Archer 2015), with this kind of trend evidencing Shifman's observation that '...sites like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia represent "express paths" for meme diffusion: content spread by individuals can scale up to mass levels within hours' (Shifman 2013: 365).

These mocking memes could then be quickly accessed in newspaper articles such as the *Washington Post's* 'Brian Williams faces fierce mockery after recanting Iraq war story'. Here, Dan Lamothe selects representative material from two hashtags #BrianWilliamsMisremembers and #BrianWilliamsWarStories to demonstrate the degree of ridicule relating to his accuracy in recalling and narrating historical events. A sampling of tweets highlight the credibility issue Williams was facing:

Tommy@FirstTeamTommy 'Hey folks, let's leave@BWilliams alone. I, too, have trouble remember (sic) details of places I've served. Like, Gettysburg...' 9.37 am, 5 Feb 2015.

Daniel Wright@DanSWright 'Brian Williams has announced that, despite his recollections, he was not on the Titanic. He saw the film and was confused.' cc@andynelson 10.51 am, 5 Feb 2015 (Lamothe 2015).

And, any contemporaneous search on the internet indexing Williams's 'misremembering' offers a suite of digitally altered pictures and farcical captions of embellished and embedded 'reporting' from events such as: the parting of the Red Sea, delivering the Ten Commandments on etched tablets, fighting in the trenches during World War 1, inventing Edison's light bulb, an inaugural moon landing, direct involvement in Martin Luther King's address, riding in President Kennedy's motorcade and claiming responsibility for the death of Osama Bin Laden. Some of the other popular cultural appropriations include: Williams as a member of the Beatles, winning Wimbledon and boxing matches, starring in movie roles and dressing as the iconic Marilyn Monroe.

With their main news anchor now largely regarded by many as a 'sham', and with a range of other memes referencing him as 'lyin' Williams', NBC had no other option than to remove him from his high profile role. As Poynter Institute's Kelly McBride notes: 'He's the front man of *Nightly News* and is seen as the primary arbiter of the facts. ... For him to get something wrong on something he was involved in casts doubt on his ability to get any facts right' (Bauder 2015). The preservation of the trusted NBC brand became paramount. Mike Daisey offers this analysis:

... if lying, obfuscating, double-talking, and stonewalling the truth were issues at Fox News, tomorrow's broadcast would be anchored by a lone confused janitor in the empty offices. NBC, on the other hand, raked Williams over the coals because they are a journalistic enterprise and their reputation demands it (Daisey 2015).

There were also numerous comparisons between former news anchors' unquestioned integrity and Brian Williams's misrepresentation of the truth gaining further currency on social media. One popular image was a cartoon juxtaposing the credibility of veteran anchor Walter Cronkite with the now dubious reputation of Williams.

### Conflategate

In popular parlance, Williams's penchant for 'misremembering' became increasingly known as 'conflategate', with Christopher Harper writing in the *Washington Times*: 'NBC ... didn't quite get it right by suspending anchorman Brian Williams for six months without pay. The network should have fired Mr Williams.' Harper further advances the case: 'Then that important ethical line would have become a solid wall for those who tried to get away with lies – not misremembering or "conflating"' (Harper 2015). The notion of Williams's conflating fact with self-aggrandising fiction also gained mileage on Jon Stewart's *Daily show*, with the satirist diagnosing the NBC journalist with 'infotainment confusion syndrome' (Mazza 2015). According to Stewart: 'We got us a case here of infotainment confusion syndrome. It occurs when the celebrity cortex gets its wires crossed with the medulla anchordala' (in Mazza 2015). And a blog post by Ann Brenoff on the *Huffington Post* further illustrates the problems facing the news anchor who lies: '... when misremembering is done by a trusted American news anchor in front of millions of people, the consequences are greater than when grandpa

spreads his hands wider each time he tells you about the big fish he caught back in 1958' (Brenoff 2015). While Brenoff employs the wry title of 'Thank you Brian Williams for making misremembering legit', the legitimacy of Brian Williams as trusted journalist was comprehensively undermined by multitudinous newspaper critiques and scathing parodies. It was an audience response that NBC's initial sluggish action had not fully anticipated as Lipschulz astutely observes: 'If anything, our social media age demands higher standards of transparency, authenticity and believability. Williams and NBC may have been listening to the uproar, but they have missed numerous chances for social media engagement with the public' (Lipschulz 2015). Reactively trying to make up lost ground conversing with or convincing the public, there was little official redress available to NBC or Williams after his credibility had been so publicly undermined. Harper's directive captured the growing and intransigent sentiment of news consumers: 'Mr Williams should never be restored to the anchor desk if NBC's news division wants to retain any credibility. Otherwise, he and the network will become prime examples of why the public can no longer trust journalists to tell the truth' (Harper 2015).

### A (surprising) return

Christopher Harper's conclusion aptly sums up the considered view of the time:

Every journalist makes mistakes. That is why journalism is called the first rough draft of history. Beyond that, all a journalist has is his or her credibility. Once that has been lost – as Mr Williams ... has lost his – it is time to find another line of work (Harper 2015).

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Leonard Pitts adds credence to the view that Brian Williams may have 'lost a newscaster's most precious asset', writing:

But every time that belief is betrayed – meaning not garden variety errors of fact, but catastrophic failures of journalistic integrity – the damage is exponentially greater precisely because the level of truth is exponentially higher. Such failures feed the disaffection and cynicism of a politically polarized nation where ... fact is an endangered species (Pitts 2015).

Arguing that while memes may not have the scope or depth of more conventional narratives, Tom Huang posits 'they offer a new

way of conveying ideas ... and like any good story, a meme can change the way you look at something or someone; a meme can prompt debate and discussion' (Huang 2014: 48). The debate generated from Williams's 'misremembering' memes constellated around the seemingly impossible task of restoring a tattered journalistic reputation. In an important article for the *New York Times* entitled 'Brian Williams scandal shows power of social media', Ravi Somaiya sources expert commentary from Ethan Zuckerman, who, working as a director of the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, points to a waning trust the public has 'in institutions of all kinds', noting it 'is at or near historic lows, a phenomenon that is well-matched with the rise of social media' (Somaiya 2015). In referencing the Brian Williams debacle Zuckerman notes:

We all want to be the first to know, and we're inclined to believe – with good reason – that our figures of authority are lying to us. ... It's an ideal moment to burn down the career of a highly visible public figure. What better example of the age of mistrust could there be than a lying anchorman? (ibid).

The notion of a 'lying anchorman' stands in direct contrast to views that many traditional journalists (and news consumers) hold believing quality journalism is produced from '... the veneration of witnessing, digging, finding, sources, and checking?' (Stephens 2014: xvii), all traditional practices Williams clearly breached.

It seems inconceivable that Williams would be able to return so quickly to an industry that has at its ethical centre the preservation and circulation of fact. Yet, months after the 'conflategate' scandal: 'The broadcaster announced on Thursday that Mr Williams, 56, would not return as the anchor of *NBC Nightly News*, but as an anchor of breaking news and special reports at the cable network MSNBC' (Koblin and Steele 2015). While Williams's return to work came with restrictions and a lower salary, NBC justify his continued employment on the following grounds:

... Mr Williams's embellishments happened 'for the most part' on late-night programs and in other public appearances, the network said, suggesting that since the inaccuracies mostly did not appear on NBC, there was leeway for Mr Williams to return. NBC Universal's chief executive, Stephen B. Burke, said the decision was 'extensively

analyzed and deliberated on by NBC' (Koblin and Steele 2015).

The network's rationale for Williams's reinstatement is based on evidence that most of his inaccurate recollections occurred on programmes and other public appearances not relating to his news anchoring role. However, James Poniewozik highlights the network's mixed ethical message:

But Williams's demotion/life preserver – a new job as breaking news anchor for MSNBC – sends an odd mixed message. He's not credible enough to anchor one NBC network, but he's just fine for the other? You could make a perfectly defensible argument that, look, anchors are newsreaders, and while Williams told a lie, he's no less suited for the job. And you can make a perfectly credible argument that anchors bear a public trust, which trust is shattered when they tell lies, on the newscast or off. This move, however, sort of says... both? (Poniewozik 2015).

While Poniewozik sees his appointment to a new role as NBC's '... effort to do something other than give Williams the professional death penalty' (ibid), there are others in the profession who interpret his ongoing employment as problematic. As James Warren highlights: 'Some colleagues said their collective credibility had been damaged and he should not be allowed to return to his old anchor chair' (Warren 2015).

And there is perhaps an ongoing reservation in the audience's mind whether Williams is ultimately capable of resisting egotistical embellishment, or the temptation of vivid re-creation. As Fuller observes in the digital economy: 'The increase in competition for people's attention has caused competitors to become more and more intense in their pursuit of the vivid. It's an emotional arms race out there' (Fuller 2013: 71). Indeed, in his pursuit of the vivid, the once-esteemed news anchor failed to understand the full consequences of unfaithful storytelling in the age of social media exposure. When reflecting on journalism practice in this economy John Pavlik makes a pertinent point:

Ethical concerns must be paramount in an age of lightning quick and powerful technological convergence. Otherwise, public trust in the news media will erode and whither (sic). Without credibility, the news has little or no value, in either a democratic or commercial sense (Pavlik 2008: 8).

In betraying public trust on more than one occasion, Williams has little chance of redemption while the internet infinitely stores a record of, and reaction to, his lies. One only has to Google '10 hilarious memes that prove Brian Williams can't escape the internet' to witness an example of ongoing reputational damage. As Rob Lefebvre concludes: 'He might have conflated his experience as a reporter with that of the actual soldiers who were fired upon, but the meme police are making sure this *faux pas* lives on forever...' (Lefebvre 2015). Without the strident sanction of social media and 'infinite memory of the internet' Miles contends that Brian Williams:

...might still be prattling off this story on various talk shows and making guest appearances on sitcoms, and the soldiers who were actually in danger that day in 2003 might still be shaking their fists at their TVs, their stories remaining unheard (Miles 2015).

But in a sobering rejoinder to institutional and individual practices there remains this professional caution: '... times have changed, and those who lead the news should get used to it' (Miles 2015).

### Social media (re)remembering

In writing about 'Social media's role in the downfall of Brian Williams', Aaron Miles highlights an inexorable shift from old-style journalism to one which can now be held to more scrupulous account:

[Williams's] brand of journalism and the news culture he came of age in was one where newspapers were thrown out the next day, and the evening news, after its initial broadcast, was only of interest to an archivist. And if a story changes over time or grows more exciting in the retelling, well, no one's going to notice. But that's not how it is now. The internet notices, and the internet remembers (Miles 2015).

This kind of public and wide-scale 'remembering' is perfectly exemplified by posts petrified in the twittersphere: 'Ryan Parker@TheRyanParker "Brian Williams misremembers – the internet won't let him forget it": lat.ms/1EHE5DD#BrianWilliamsMisremembers 10.05 am – 8 Feb 2015' (Parker 2015). Part of not wanting to let Williams forget, as Daryl Konynebelt emphasises, is inextricably bound to the public's sense of duty 'that we have the power and responsibility to source our own credible

information but also hold our public advocates of news content in the mainstream and in the digital sphere accountable, to get the story right' (Konynebelt 2015). With the prescient final line in Konynebelt's article 'The rise of social media was Brian Williams's downfall' imploring: 'Remember that. Now back to you' (Konynebelt 2015). Social media and the internet, in many ways, enable and ensure the public remain the final adjudicators of the Williams case.

### 'Now back to you'

While NBC may have posted a personal note from Brian Williams on its website his belated siren call to journalism ethics does little to offset the viral rapidity and ubiquity of messages trafficked by disillusioned news consumers, dismayed at the response and ideologies of corporate media. The NBC note reads:

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. ... Upon my return, I will continue my career-long effort to be worthy of the trust of those who place their trust in us (Williams 2015).

Such disillusionment about Williams's return to journalism is perhaps no more acutely felt than by Christopher Simeone, one of the soldiers associated with the Iraq chopper incident, who wrote in an email message: 'The reason that a lying newsman will make it back onto the TV sets of America ... is because we have become comfortable living in an empire of lies' (Somaiya 2015). However, presently empowered with digital technologies, instantaneous transfer and global audiences, in moments of profound discomfort one can strike back at – or more effective still – memetically shame such empires.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> SPJ Code of Ethics, available online at <http://www.spj.org/ethic-code.asp>, accessed on 12 June 2016

<sup>2</sup> Lance Reynolds, in Tritten, Travis (2015) *Stars and Stripes*, 4 February. Available online at <http://www.stripes.com/promotions/2.1066/us/nbc-s-brian-williams-recants-iraq-story-after-soldiers-protest1.327792>

<sup>3</sup> Three US examples: Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass and Jason Blair.

<sup>4</sup> 26 March

<sup>5</sup> SPJ Code of Ethics, available online at <http://www.spj.org/ethic-code.asp>, accessed on 12 June 2016

<sup>6</sup> <http://twitter.com/search?q=%23BrianWilliamsWarStories@src=tyah>

<sup>7</sup> <http://twitter.com/search?q=%23BrianWilliamsMisremembers@src=tyah>

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