Confabulation and the Re-Invention of Self-Knowledge

If I told you former anchor for *NBC Nightly News* Brian Williams confirmed my whereabouts on any given day, it is likely you would not believe me. In early 2015, it was discovered that Williams “misrepresented” his involvement with reports on which he presented to the viewing public. He falsely claimed to be with a convoy under fire when he was actually never in the vicinity. Numerous other investigations of his were revisited and similar findings of misrepresentation occurred. Although he has since admitted to misrepresenting his whereabouts, Williams has now become a punchline for late-night opening monologues and the subject of many memes (see images below: misremember RPG, Boston Tea Party, and declaration). The press, referring to Williams’ acts as intentional lying and pandering to viewers for ratings, has essentially destroyed his credibility. The problem with such claims, however, is that we cannot know whether these presentations were indeed lies. The whole Brian Williams fiasco got me thinking—how can we ever be sure we can trust our own recollections? Numerous studies have shown just how ineffective our own memories are; but what is even more startling is how ineffective we are at knowing just when our memories fail us. In response to these qualms, I wonder, can we trust ourselves? And if we cannot be sure of our own response to that question, how can we sincerely begin to trust and/or persuade others to believe us?

From a rhetorical perspective, considering the sincerity of these self-deceptive events is critical. In a sense, one could argue he “re-invented” personal truth. This presentation thus analyzes the importance for rhetoric to consider self-delusion especially when we do not realize we are deceiving ourselves. Further, if we, as a field, are to factor self-delusion into persuasion, and if such self-delusion happens on a case-by-case basis, how can any rhetorical acts be effective? Numerous studies have shown just how ineffective our own recollections strictly because of the re-invention of personal memories (Schacter, 2002; Loftus, 1992; Wade, et al 2002), but what is even more startling is how ineffective we are at knowing just when our memories fail us because *we* change them. If rhetoric relies on sincerity, claims addressed by the likes of Michel Foucault and more recently Bradford Vivian, how can we sincerely begin to trust and/or persuade others to believe us? These questions are personal—and largely unanswerable due to the individuality of responses. This presentation explores the role of confabulation, specifically the ways we re-invent our own experiences without realizing it or explanation. Drawing on recent research on confabulation (Hirstein, 2009; Carruthers, 2013), this presentation addresses the ways individuals change, or re-invent, the content of personal experiences, the ways these same individuals believe their inaccurate memories by presenting them as truth, and whether rhetoric stands a chance in the face of confabulation.

I have two questions that guide this research. First, how can we trust ourselves to make sincere/honest rhetorical moves when scientific research shows how easily and often we are manipulated? And second, often that manipulation happens *by* us, not *to* us. So…how can rhetoric function without full knowledge if we’re presenting anything sincerely, honestly, or correctly?

These questions are personal—and largely unanswerable due to the individuality of responses. To ever gain the correct information to prove these questions, people would likely have to travel in pairs, have the exact same experiences, process these experiences identically, and have no possibility of different brain wiring, including any afflictions. The impossibility of such a circumstance leads us back to the questions themselves—since we are the only ones who can experience events for ourselves, we are the only ones who can access these experiences. Even though we’re the only ones with access to our personal thought processes and experiences, there is very little we can do to verify their validity. For myself, I have always been pretty lucky to have a decent autobiographical memory, yet there are many times when I am proven wrong through family photographs. These moments are infuriating, mostly because of how convinced I am of the strength of my memory. When these glitches occur, it startles me—they shouldn’t happen, I think. These are small errors (e.g., what I was wearing on a certain day or the day of the week on which a certain day falls), but the fact that I am entirely convinced by my personal recollection *even though* it is incorrect is the moment of disconnect with which I’m concerned in this presentation.

Before continuing, however, let’s talk briefly about confabulation. Confabulation is a condition when someone believes something that actually didn’t happen. This is different from “getting facts wrong.” Confabulation happens without the person’s knowledge. It’s a memory disruption. For instance, one of the easier ways to discuss confabulation is through a specific example. Often, patients with Alzheimer’s confuse events. They might believe, for example, yesterday they went apple picking, but care takers, who knowingly watched over that patient all day are fully aware the patient did not leave the premises (and further, there are no apple trees on the premises). The patient is so convinced they went apple picking, they believe it, and try to convince others to believe it, too. While this example is coupled with other memory afflictions, the suggestions of being able to convince ourselves that something is that way we say it is, is clear. That’s the point of contention I’m interested in investigating. How can we, as responsible rhetoricians, be fully conscious of our abilities to convince someone else when we are re-inventing false moments of which we are entirely convinced?

One theory to explain this idea comes from philosopher Peter Carruthers as he forwards a theory about the inability to fully understand our own inner-thoughts. This theory, named “interpretative sensory-access,” suggests that we cannot understand what occurs in our own minds similarly to the ways we cannot understand what is happening in someone else’s. Carruthers suggests that “self-knowledge” (the ability to understand ourselves) and “other-knowledge” (the ability to understand someone else) are usually thought of as dichotomous—of course, I know what’s going on in my head (it’s me, right?), but how in the world could I even begin to understand how someone else thinks? The theory of interpretative sensory-access suggests that there is no difference between self-knowledge and other-knowledge because all *sensory* knowledge in interpretative. Sensory knowledge is incredibly inclusive—memory, affect, unconscious reactions, interpreting action. Whether or not we consciously recognize we’re doing it, interpretative sensory-access argues that we perform the same interpretative acts of sensory knowledge on ourselves as we do on others. With interpretative sensory-access, consistent interpretation and access is problematic, if not impossible, effecting the rhetorical capacity to create spaces in which persuasion can occur.

Since, as Carruthers argues, we cannot understand our own minds yet alone someone else’s, it becomes somewhat of a guessing game about what is “real.” Now, without wading into existential territory or even mind-altering experiences, it is important to discuss some of the memory missteps caused attributed to confabulation. I first want to discuss one of my favorite studies done some time ago, one conducted by Kimberley Wade and her team using Photoshop to implant memories. This study has been continuously important for understanding of the ways we convince ourselves of personal experiences—and especially false ones. The second is more recent, or at least has been named more recently: The Mandela Effect.

Studies have proved that memories can actually be implanted in our own minds with the aid of tools such as Photoshop. In the article “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Lies,” Kimberley Wade et al exposed twenty subjects to manipulated photos in which the subjects themselves were placed. Wade and the other researchers asked the subjects to provide several childhood photos from “moderately significant events” like birthday parties or family holidays (598). The research team then scanned, cropped, and digitally inserted one of the photos into another image, creating a composite image of the subject on a hot air balloon ride as a child (Wade et al 598). After creating the composite photographs, the research team interviewed the subjects three times over a span of several weeks (Wade et al 597). During each interview, “subjects thought about a photograph showing them on a hot air balloon ride and tried to recall the event by using guided-imagery exercises” (Wade et al 597).

Interestingly, even though the photo was doctored and the subject never participated in a hot air balloon ride, “the subjects often said something like, ‘Well, it’s a photograph, so it must have happened’ when looking at the hot air balloon photo” (Wade et al 602). Wade and her research team proved that we tend to believe that photographs represent something that happened in our lives *even if the event was a fake*!Because of this conclusion, the research team identified three new possibilities for the creation of memories. First, the photo is largely accepted as “authoritative evidence,” noted in common “it’s a photo, so it must be true” responses. Second, the doctored photograph “planted the seed” of a false memory, and over the course of the three interviews, each subject searched their memories in order to create a false memory of the event they realized they had ‘forgotten’ (Wade et al 602). In other words, they made themselves believe the hot air balloon ride actually occurred. Finally, the researchers argue that “photographs do not require less constructive processing, so much as subjects are less likely to resist the accuracy of the photograph” (Wade et al 602).

In a process that Giuliana Mazzoni calls “imagination inflation,” the human brain combines and reconstructs “experiences from pieces of retained information combined with knowledge, beliefs, suggestions, and the information provided by situational cues” (25-27). The result of imagination inflation is an increase in created memory—the brain actually “remembers” more that it stores because it is constantly making new memories depending on the situation (Mazzoni 25). With the hot air balloon experiment, the subjects created the memory of being in the balloon because the photograph was “evidence” that they had been there but merely “forgotten” the experience. Over the three interviews, the subjects likely created connections from other related memories to the main ‘bone chip’ in order to excavate a recollection of the fake event.

My second example is more recent, and related to sharing (and learning) information online. With the permeation of digital spaces, users have participated in and witnessed the ways technologies influence knowledge creation, for good and for ill. One such example is rise of “The Mandela Effect,” a process whereby individuals misremember ideas from misinformation circulated online. The name comes from a commonly held, although incorrect, belief that Nelson Mandela died in the 1980s, when in fact he lived until 2013. To interrogate The Mandela Effect, there are two related trajectories arguably related to rhetorical knowledge making: metamemory and adaptive unconsciousness. The former is the knowledge of one’s own memory making abilities (Dunlosky and Tauber et al, 2016), while the latter is a concept suggesting individuals are often unaware of their own decision-making processes (Wilson and Barrett, 2002). Online spaces encourage engagement with various types of personal knowledge making, truthful or otherwise. Some instances of the Mandela Effect are less significant, like how we spell “Oscar Meyer” (you can sing the song, right?). Others, according to a completely scientific and academically rigorous Buzzfeed quiz, are just silly (Hannibal Lecter never says, “Hello, Clarice” when they first meet, but instead says “Good morning”). While these are fun for trivia, they do illustrate the ubiquity of confabulation. We often confabulate, we do it all the time.

Such moments occur without realization—that’s the point. For rhetoric, I’m interested in these moments when we don’t know we’re trying to convince someone of false information. As seen with these few small examples, we can easily re-invent knowledge and pass it on so confidently, we don’t know we’re doing harm. (Think here about Elizabeth Loftus’ experiments in the mid-1980s about eye-witness reporting and how their confidence actually freed certain criminals.) As a field, this re-invention of personal knowledge is problematic, but as psychology and neuro research has demonstrated, there’s little we can do to validate everything. We’re all subject to confabulated information—that’s the fallibly of the human brain. But how do we solve this problem? Can we? Are digital technologies enough to validate information? Sure, in some cases (like with the Mandela Effect), but with others, I’m not so sure it’s possible (as with ideas related to Carruthers’ interpretative sensory access). Maybe Brian Williams just had a bad day…or not. Thanks!