

The differences with Williams and O'Reilly

By Jonathan Mahler and Emily Steel, *New York Times*

Hours after the news broke that Brian Williams had misrepresented his account of a helicopter trip in Iraq, he issued an on-air apology. NBC News started an investigation, and within days had suspended Williams, calling his actions "wrong and completely inappropriate."

When the magazine *Mother Jones* reported that Bill O'Reilly had engaged in self-aggrandizing rhetoric about his coverage of the Falklands war, he called one of the authors of the article "an irresponsible guttersnipe" and used his nightly show to fight back against his accusers. His bosses at Fox News, including the chief executive, Roger Ailes, rallied to his defense.

Fox's handling of the controversy says a lot about the network. It also says a lot about its most visible star, a man who perhaps more than any other has defined the parameters and tenor of Fox News, in the process ushering in a new era of no-holds-barred, intentionally divisive news coverage.

Since dethroning CNN's Larry King as the king of cable news almost 14 years ago, O'Reilly has helped transform a start-up news channel into a financial juggernaut, with estimated annual profits of more than \$1 billion. He and Fox News have risen not on the back of big interviews or high-impact investigations but on the pugnacious brand of conservatism personified by O'Reilly.

There are other differences between the two controversies. The incident at the center of O'Reilly's occurred more than 30 years ago; Mr. Williams's happened in 2003. And his accusers are journalists, not military veterans as they were in

Williams's case. But the most meaningful point of distinction – and the reason O'Reilly's job is almost certainly safe – is that he is not an anchorman, with all of the cultural weight that title carries. He's a professional provocateur.

The accusations against O'Reilly, which have since been substantiated by other journalists in Argentina at the time, have played neatly into the network's narrative of being the conservative outlier in an industry dominated by liberals.

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