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The vast majority of our memories are actually heavily edited. 123RF

Total recall?

Language Matters

People often proclaim that they have a great memory, but the truth is the vast majority of our memories are heavily edited. In fact, forensic linguistics has shown that the accuracy of our memories involving who said what often sits around 30 per cent to 70 per cent, depending on the person and the events.

What we are "remembering" is often our retelling of our experiences. Each time we talk about an event, we are solidifying that retelling as the memory itself. If I go to a holiday party and tell my neighbour about it when I get home, I've already mentally rewritten most of the events without realising it. This subconscious editing occurs while on my way home from the event, replaying everything in my mind.

Such memory editing has major implications for things such as witness statements. A well-known study by Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer found that the words used while questioning people about what they remember can have a huge impact on what they believe they saw or heard.

They showed people a video of cars crashing and later asked what people remembered, using words such as smashed, collided or hit. People who heard the words smashed and hit remembered glass on the road, but in fact there never was any. Not only do we rewrite our own memories, but other people can influence this process as well.

Interestingly, people are actually quite good at remembering a memory retelling, often achieving around 80 per cent or 90 per cent accuracy. But what is getting retold is already an altered memory. So if the next day I tell my colleagues about the party I had described to my neighbour the day before, my retelling to my colleagues will highly match what I told my neighbour, but neither will be very accurate when it comes to what actually happened.

What then is influencing our memories? We live our lives in a constant state of coming into contact with new information and new experiences. We also mentally revisit this information and these experiences time and again to make sense of them, to sort the pieces in ways that make sense for us within the context of what we already know.

In this way, we are "talking through" it with ourselves. We talk through it internally by thinking about it and having internal conversations, as well as by sharing our thoughts and experiences with others and having external conversations. Each time we have these conversations (be it internally or externally), we process the information by adding in additional information from past experiences.

For example, if while I was talking to my colleague Tomi during the holiday party, my friend Rewi said something that was out of character for him but that reminded me a lot of my friend Sofia (who was also there), there is actually quite a good chance that I will later remember it being said by Sofia. This is because I was engaged in another primary conversation at the time, and what Rewi said did not fit with what I already know about him.

We also subconsciously rewrite our memories as we encounter new information, adding that to the old. As we continue to experience the world around us and learn, we use that information to continue to process our memories. The result is that two (or more) people who experience the same event will remember it in different ways. While I remember the holiday party one way, Tomi will remember it differently, as will Sofia and Rewi.

Who then is right when we argue over whose memory is correct?

Got a question?

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THE IRISH TIMES

The world is getting vaccine rollout wrong

Viewpoint

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

From the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been irrefutable reasons for designing a global vaccination programme that put need ahead of geography. The strongest argument was of course a moral one. There is no good reason for vaccinating a healthy 25-year-old in Europe ahead of an intensive-care nurse in Africa. But the argument is also a practical one. With a disease as deadly and transmissible as Covid-19, nobody is protected until everybody is.

At an intellectual level, this is widely understood. Admirable efforts have been made to mitigate the effect of vaccine nationalism, notably through Covax – a global public/private effort to incentivise more rational distribution. However, the evidence so far suggests we are sleepwalking into what the head of the WHO warned would be a "catastrophic moral failure".

By late January, 39 million doses had been administered in wealthy countries. Across the lowest-income states, the figure was 25. The world is getting this very wrong, and the cost of that error is becoming clearer. With the rapid spread of the disease, significant mutations are occurring that could render vaccines less effective. By hoarding supplies and leaving the poorest countries trying to source their own, the world's wealthiest countries are actively prolonging the pandemic.