



Beyond Misinformation:

Educating Graduate Students
about the Mischaracterization
and Misappropriation of Research

Winn W. Wasson
Social Science Librarian
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Land Acknowledgement

I acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee, the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands.

Misinformation vs. Disinformation

- Misinformation
 - False information that an individual or group may consume or share that the individual or group does not know is false
- Disinformation
 - False information that is created for the purpose of misleading others by an individual or group who know the information is false
- Effects/Goals
 - Increased distrust in or hostility toward authority and fellow citizens, possibly leading to social breakdown
 - Suppression of active citizenship by encouraging defensive inaction

The Roots of Misunderstanding Research

- Misunderstanding research
 - Individual comes to faulty conclusions about research on their own or adopts the faulty conclusions of an indirect source of information
 - The misinformed individual can share faulty conclusions with others
- Mischaracterizing research
 - Misrepresentation or misleading selective representation of the conclusions of research, usually to support an ideological agenda or political actions
 - Example: Scale of unauthorized immigration
 - <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/22/970074431/illegal-border-crossings-rise-as-some-people-try-multiple-times>
- Misappropriating research
 - Reasonably accurate representation of research to support an ideological agenda or political actions that the researcher does not advocate for
 - Example: Detailed 2020 Census data and race and ethnicity
 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/08/10/census-race-population-changes-redistricting/>

Researchers Under Threat

- Hostility toward researchers
 - Example: Indian Historian Romila Thapar and Hindu Nationalists in India
 - https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-romila-thapar-dissent/2021/01/02/1a79ca54-4070-11eb-b58b-1623f6267960_story.html
 - Example: Medieval Historian Dorothy Kim and the Alt-Right in the United States
 - <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/08/30/scholar-describes-being-conditionally-accepted-medieval-studies-opinion>

Graduate Student Workshop: Background

- Part of Syracuse University Libraries Learn@SUL! Workshop Series
- Three iterations so far: Spring 2021, Fall 2021, and Spring 2022
 - First two iterations were entitled “The Public and Your Publications: Strategies for Handling the Misappropriation or Misrepresentation of Your Research”
 - Most recent iteration was entitled “The Misappropriation and Misrepresentation of Research: Strategies for Facing a Growing and Problematic Trend”
- Approximately 50-60 minutes in length
- Geared toward faculty and graduate students
 - Participants have all been graduate students, with exception of one undergraduate student

Workshop Content: Lead-In

- Content advisory
- Disclaimer
- Opening questions
 - What are some common misconceptions about your field of research?
 - What are some specific examples of research in your field getting misunderstood?
- The “Why” of the workshop
- Video and discussion of exchange between Dr. Anthony Fauci and Sen. Rand Paul during a March 2021 Senate committee hearing
 - Video: <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2021/03/18/coronavirus-response-hearing-fauci-rand-paul-masks-sot-vpx.cnn>
 - Discussion question: What were some techniques that Dr. Fauci used?

Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: The Classroom

- Use the classroom as a trial run
 - Based on my own experience teaching political science at community colleges for six years
 - Based on the assumption that most people in the general public will probably have, at most, the understanding of an undergraduate when it comes to research
 - Take time to ask students in courses or sections one teaches about “what they have heard” about topics related to one’s research

Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Keeping Current With One's Field

- Keeping current with research in one's field
 - Using bibliometrics and alert features in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar
- Monitoring one's own research
 - Using tools available through databases, institutional repositories, and individual research profiles
- Keeping current with public discussions of research in one's field
 - Following individuals and discussion threads on social media or through news alerts on platforms like Google News

Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Recommendations for Handling Situations

- Find a grain of truth in the falsehood and correcting the misunderstanding
 - Examples:
 - Vaccine hesitancy based on misunderstanding of information
 - https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nursing-home-skip-vaccine/2021/02/12/4d31d17a-6bfa-11eb-9f80-3d7646ce1bc0_story.html
 - Mischaracterization of statistics on contraception effectiveness
 - <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/contraceptive-effectiveness-united-states>
- If possible, show an original source of accurate information that also has objective research that has been accurately used to support their views
- Recognize what the debate is really about at the social/political level
 - Familiarize oneself with the belief system in which the misunderstanding or mischaracterization arises
 - Respectfully articulate an understanding of the social/political context that informs their beliefs
- Put the larger debate in a historical or comparative cultural context

Workshop Content: Closing Caveats

- I emphasized to students that if they are being harassed or feel unsafe, they should let their supervisor or someone else in authority at their current or future institution know
- I underscored that the success of any strategy is dependent on the interplay between the identity characteristics of the researcher and the audience in the situation

Sample Workshop Participant Feedback

- What participants learned that they identified as most valuable
 - Citation tracking
 - Familiarization with cultural and social context of people's misconceptions
- What participants learned that they indicated will change how they do research
 - Incorporating consideration of public communications into how they do research
 - Utilizing the undergraduate classroom for trial runs of explaining their research in accessible terms

Takeaways and Future Directions

- Students want to have in-depth conversations about this topic in addition to having a workshop about strategies for preparing for and handling potential situations
 - Spring 2022 iteration of the workshop ended up going 20 minutes over because students wanted to talk more about the topic
- Addressing this issue will require dialog and collaboration that includes a diverse array of perspectives and lived experiences
 - I continue to be cognizant of the limitations of my perspective and lived experience
 - I am looking for potential collaborators both at Syracuse University and at other institutions who are also interested in defending research from misappropriation and mischaracterization and defending researchers from bullying and harassment
- Plan is to teach workshops again in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023

Thank You.

Winn W. Wasson
Social Science Librarian
wwwasson@syr.edu