

Syracuse University

## SURFACE at Syracuse University

---

Libraries' and Librarians' Publications

Libraries

---

3-17-2022

### Beyond Misinformation: Educating Graduate Students about the Mischaracterization and Misappropriation of Research

Winn W. Wasson  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/sul>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Wasson, Winn W., "Beyond Misinformation: Educating Graduate Students about the Mischaracterization and Misappropriation of Research" (2022). *Libraries' and Librarians' Publications*. 206.  
<https://surface.syr.edu/sul/206>

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Libraries' and Librarians' Publications by an authorized administrator of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).



# Beyond Misinformation:

Educating Graduate Students  
about the Mischaracterization  
and Misappropriation of Research

Winn W. Wasson  
Social Science Librarian  
Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students Conference  
March 17, 2022



# 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](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](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](mailto:wwwasson@syr.edu)