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

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

Winn W. Wasson
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Transforming Libraries for Graduate Students Conference
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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
  – 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
• 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.

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