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# Beyond Misinformation: Strategies and Tactics for Addressing the Growing and Pernicious Problem of the Misrepresentation and Misappropriation of Research

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# Beyond Misinformation:

Strategies and Tactics for  
Addressing the Growing and  
Pernicious Problem of the  
Misrepresentation and  
Misappropriation of Research

Winn W. Wasson  
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LOEX 2024  
May 4, 2024



# Breakout Session Outline

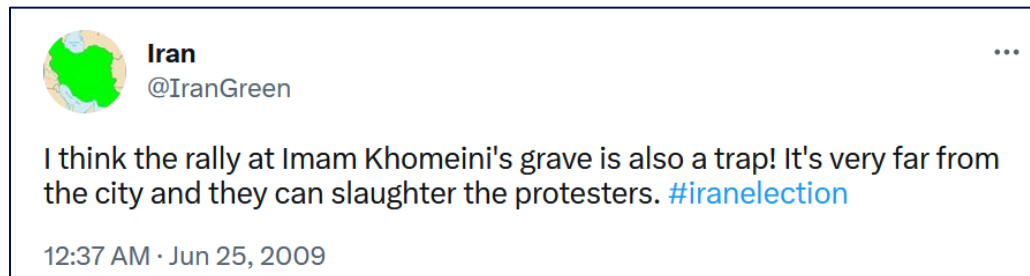
- Inspirations for Creating the Workshop
- What Is the Misrepresentation and Misunderstanding of Research?
- Workshop Content
  - Strategies for Preparation
  - Tactics for Dealing with Situations
  - Opportunities for Practicing Responses
- Observations on How the Workshop Has Gone
- Current and Future Directions

# Inspirations for Creating the Workshop

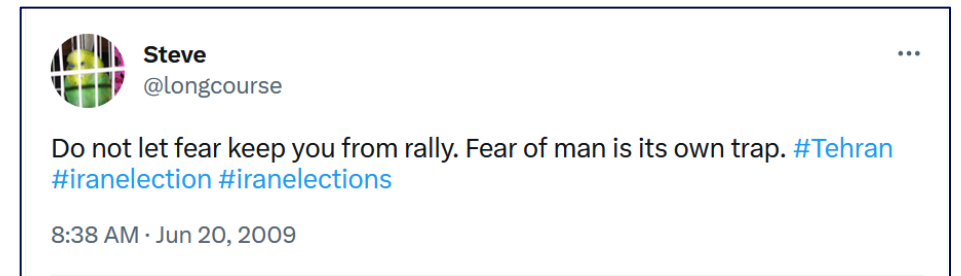
# My Interest in Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation

- 2009 Iranian Election Protests

- Protests against a perceived fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
- Violent crackdown on protesters
- Muddied information about whether protests were legitimate or were traps



<https://twitter.com/IranGreen/status/2321827297>



<https://twitter.com/longcourse/status/2252174539>

# Effects/Goals of Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation

- Increased distrust in or hostility toward authority and fellow citizens, possibly leading to social breakdown
- Suppression of active citizenship by encouraging defensive inaction and self-censorship

# Some Relevant Biographical Points

- Taught political science at community colleges in the Midwest for six years before pursuing my career as a librarian
- Position before coming to Syracuse University in February 2020 was at New College of Florida

# Not Happening in a Vacuum

- Larger context of decline in trust in authorities and institutions (Ellis et al. 2022)
  - Aided by modern information and communications technology, though not exclusively because of it
  - Also social/cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts



# What Is the Misrepresentation and Misunderstanding of Research?

# Misunderstanding Research

- Akin to misinformation
- 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

# Misrepresenting Research: Definition

- Misrepresentation or misleading selective representation of the conclusions of research, usually to support an ideological agenda or political actions
- Akin to disinformation

# Misrepresenting Research: Examples

- Scale of unauthorized immigration (Kahn 2021)
  - Omitting the fact that statistics on U.S. Customs and Border Patrol apprehensions of individuals do not account for whether the same individuals are apprehended multiple times
- Convalescent plasma and COVID-19 (McDonald 2020)
  - Overstating the benefits of convalescent plasma as a treatment for COVID-19

# Misappropriating Research: Definition

- Reasonably accurate representation of research to support an ideological agenda or political actions that the researcher does not advocate for
- Akin to the first half of Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) definition of malinformation:
  - “When genuine information is shared to cause harm...”

# Misappropriating Research: Examples of Potential

- Detailed 2020 Census data and race and ethnicity (Bahrapour and Mellnik 2021)
  - 2020 Census showed a decrease in the number of people identifying as White Non-Hispanic from the 2010 Census
- Immunocompromised individuals and COVID-19 variants (Mandavilli 2021)
  - Research showing that mutations that generate new COVID-19 variants often occur in immunocompromised individuals
- High LGBTQ+ identification among Gen Z (Jones 2023)
  - Gallup survey showing that 19.7% of Gen Z adults identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community

# Researchers Under Threat

- Bullying, harassment, and violence or threats of violence against researchers
- Akin to malinformation
  - “When genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017)
  - “False information that is shared with a distinct intent to cause harm, and in the case of racism, to maintain the status quo” (Cooke 2021)

# Researchers Under Threat: Examples

- Indian Historian Romila Thapar (Masih 2021)
  - Historian of ancient India targeted by Hindu Nationalists in India
- Medieval Historian Dorothy Kim
  - Medieval historian in the United States targeted and doxed by the Alt-Right (Kim 2018)
- Multiple examples of public health professionals since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic



# Workshop Contents

# 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

# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Keeping Current with Scholarly Communication

## Monitoring One's Field

- A plug for the library
- Using bibliometrics and alert features of different databases
  - Examples:
    - Scopus
    - Web of Science
    - Google Scholar

## Monitoring One's Own Work

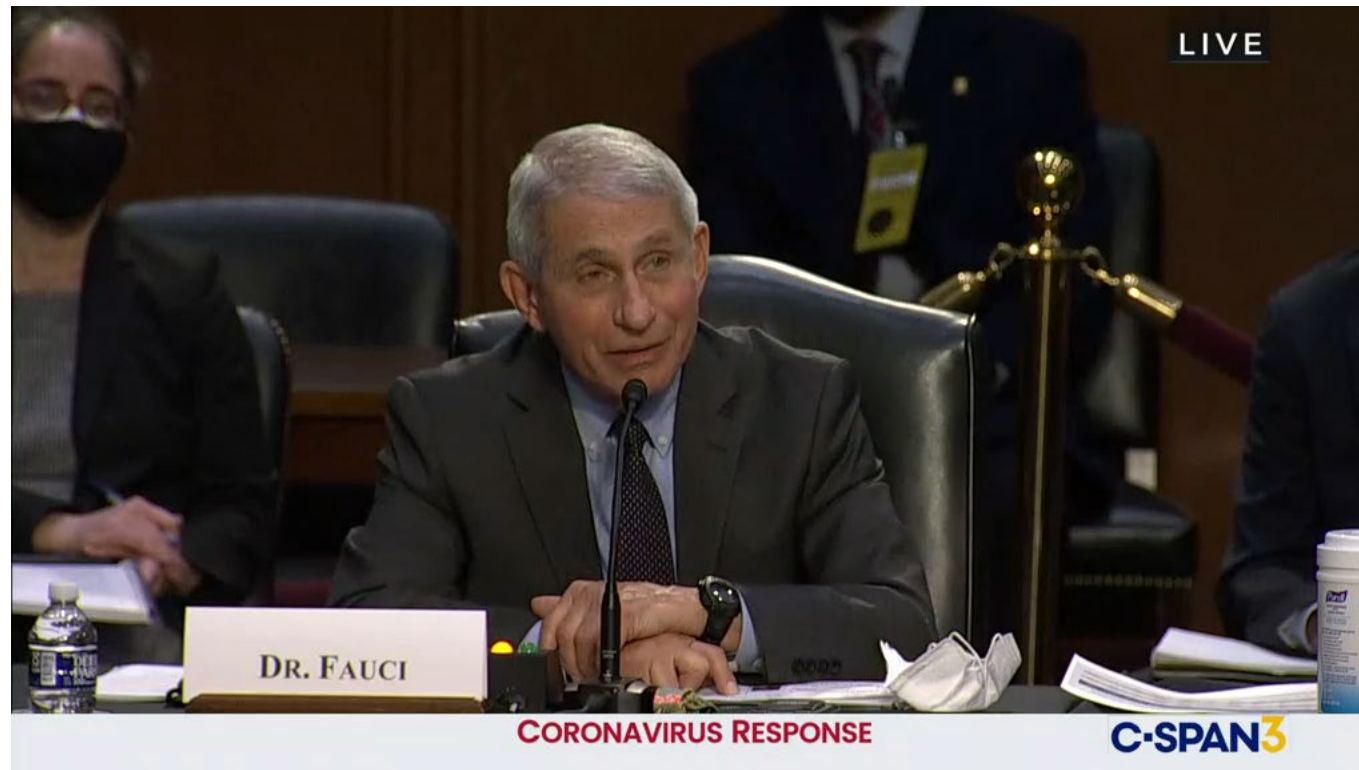
- Using the bibliometrics and alert features of different databases
- Using institutional repositories track citations and downloads
- Using individual research profiles to track citations and downloads
  - Available on some database platforms and through some institutions

# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Keeping Current With Public Discussions of One's Field and One's Research

- Following individuals and discussion threads on social media
  - Also can be done through PlumX Metrics and Altmetrics
- Setting up news alerts on platforms like Google News

## Workshop Content: Evaluating Dr. Fauci's Congressional Testimony: Video

- Video of and discussion about exchange between Dr. Anthony Fauci and Sen. Rand Paul during a March 2021 Senate committee hearing (C-SPAN 2021)



Source: C-SPAN (2021).

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5065226/user-clip-exchange-dr-anthony-fauci-sen-rand-paul-march-18-2021>

# Workshop Content: Evaluating Dr. Fauci's Congressional Testimony: Discussion

- Discussion questions:
  - What were some techniques that Dr. Fauci used?
  - In what ways could Dr. Fauci have improved his messaging?
- Participant responses:
  - Participants generally identify the techniques I cover later in the workshop (and discuss later in this presentation)
  - Participants note that Dr. Fauci's responses are heavy on jargon at times

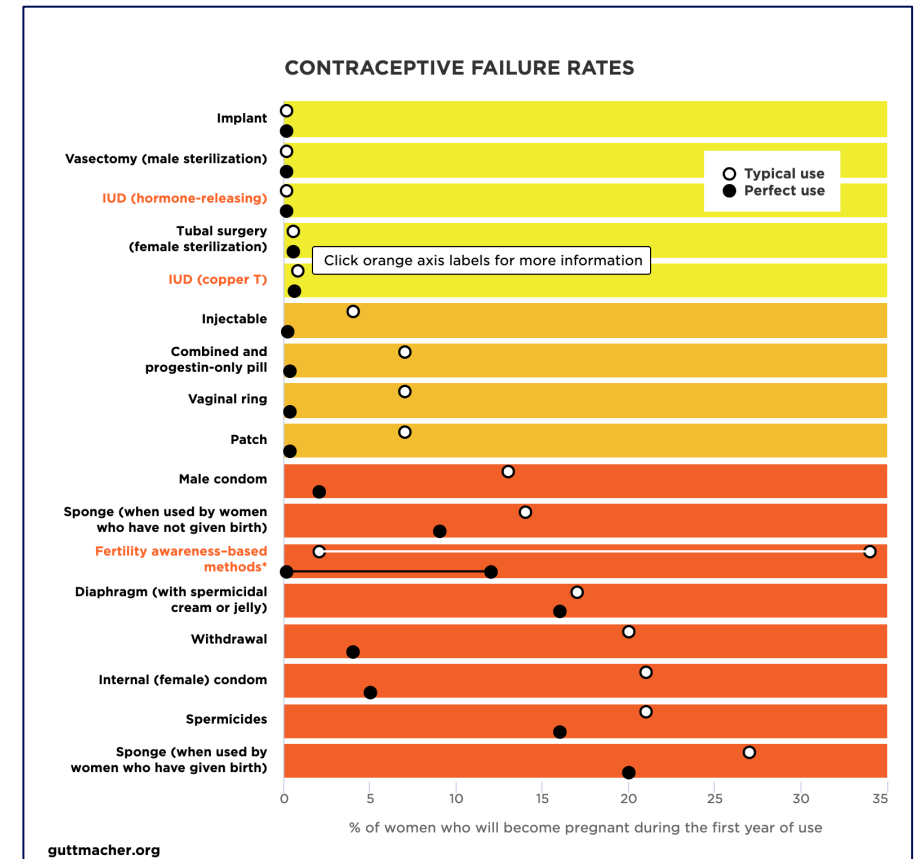
# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Recommendations for Handling Situations

- Find a grain of truth in the falsehood and correcting the misunderstanding
- Example:
  - Vaccine hesitancy based on misunderstanding of information (Merchant 2021)
    - mRNA vaccines
    - Vaccine packaging tracking

# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Recommendations for Handling Situations

- If possible, show an original source of accurate information that also has objective research that has been accurately used to support their views
- Example:
  - Misrepresentation of statistics on contraception effectiveness
    - Facilitating trust of Guttmacher Institute data by showing how anti-abortion have used (misappropriated?) their data

Graph of Contraceptive Failure Rates



Source: Guttmacher Institute (2020)



# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Recommendations for Handling Situations

- Recognize what the debate is really about at the social/political level
  - Self-Education: Familiarize oneself with the belief system in which the misunderstanding or misrepresentation arises
  - Empathy: Respectfully articulate an understanding of the social/political context that informs their beliefs
- Examples:
  - What is really going on when incorrect statistics about contraception are used?
  - The debate over masks and vaccines for COVID-19 isn't really about the masks or the vaccines

# Workshop Content: Suggested Strategies: Recommendations for Handling Situations

- Put the larger debate in a historical or comparative cultural context
- Examples:
  - The historical analogy between the printing press and the internet
  - Comparisons of different countries' mechanisms and policies for reviewing drug safety and efficacy

# Practice Strategies: 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
- Can also serve as prebunking students in class

# Practice Strategies: Chat GPT

- First discussed this suggestion at the most recent workshop iteration (March 22, 2023)
- A potential stand-in for the undergraduate classroom
- Asked Chat GPT to explain participants' research and then modify explanation to for high school audience
- Drawing on the freely available content on the internet that the general public is drawing on

# Workshop Content: Closing Caveats

- I emphasize to participants:
  - 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 underscore:
  - The success of any strategy is dependent on the interplay between the identity characteristics of the researcher and the audience in the situation

# Observations on How the Workshop Has Gone

# Iterations

- Seven iterations so far: One in Spring 2021, one in Fall 2021, two in Spring 2022, three in Spring 2023
  - Teaching it again mid-May at a retreat for graduate students
- Content is approximately 50-60 minutes in length
- Extra 15 minutes at the end for discussion
- Geared toward faculty and graduate students, though undergraduates have attended

# Summary of Responses to Post-Instruction Operational Classroom Assessment (Composite: Spring 2021-Spring 2023)

Question	Response Summary
<b>What is the most valuable thing you learned in class today?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citation tracking methods and tools</li> <li>• Importance of tracking public opinions in scientific fields</li> <li>• Tactics used by professional science communicators to combat misinformation</li> <li>• Discussion on how misconceptions and misrepresentations can surround a specific topic</li> <li>• Suggestions for familiarizing oneself with belief systems and engaging in the cultural/social context</li> </ul>
<b>Is there anything about the way you do research that you will change as a result of this class?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will adapt how present research to a general audience</li> <li>• Will use citation-tracking tools</li> <li>• Will monitor social media for public misconceptions about field of research</li> <li>• Will adapt teaching practice as well as research practices</li> <li>• Will keep public communication in mind when conducting research</li> <li>• Will utilize undergraduate classroom as a space for trial runs in gauging understanding of research and for testing responses to misconceptions about research</li> </ul>
<b>What questions remain unanswered? What did you find confusing?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better coverage of recent changes in the information landscape (e.g. Twitter's new ownership and TikTok's possible ban)</li> <li>• More strategies to track public conversations</li> <li>• More information about library resources</li> <li>• Research communication information more tailored toward the needs of civil service members</li> <li>• More focus on the actors creating disinformation about research rather than those who are misinformed</li> </ul>



# Other Takeaways

- Many of the participants have had a prior experience with family members who misunderstand their research
- Students who attended want to have in-depth conversations about this topic in addition to having a workshop about strategies for preparing for and handling potential situations

# Challenges

- Attendance
- Getting the feedback I need from participants
- Limitations of my own perspective and lived experience

# Current and Future Directions

“You don’t realize this is a thing until it happens to you or someone you know.”

—Recent conversation with a recently minted PhD who specializes in an area of ethnic studies

# Current Directions and Future Directions

- Developing a LibGuide and series of videos to deliver the content asynchronously
  - [https://researchguides.library.syr.edu/misframed\\_research](https://researchguides.library.syr.edu/misframed_research)



# Parting Question

With the idea that this is a larger issue that interests people in disparate places but that does not necessarily have intense interest in one place,

Would we benefit from having a community of practice surrounding the misrepresentation and misappropriation of research?

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# Thank You.

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