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CHARACTER ASSASSINATION (CA)

Character assassination is a deliberate and sustained effort to damage the reputation or credibility of an individual. The term could also be selectively applied to social groups, institutions, and corporations, which could all experience loss of reputation due to character assassination. Character attack is an inclusive concept that can be addressed from various academic perspectives, such as rhetoric, political science, propaganda studies, and others. This entry first examines the history of the study of character assassination and then highlights the fundamentals and typologies of character attacks. It concludes by discussing application areas of character assassination.

Character assassination practices stem back to ancient times, but there had been little academic interest until the 1950s to conceptualize many well-known cases. As a subject of scholarly study, character attack was originally introduced by Jerome Davis in 1950 in his collection of essays revealing the dangers of political smear campaigns. Six decades later, Martijn Icks and Eric Shiraev rejuvenated the concept and revived academic interest by examining a variety of historical events through the lens of political psychology.

The mechanics of character attacks are best understood by examining the abusive ad hominem techniques as suggested by the philosophy of logic and argumentation studies. This fallacy, used in an adversarial context, involves irrelevant responses that attack the opponent instead of the opponent's arguments. Such personal attacks steer attention away from the debated issue to the opponent's "human or personal side," like traits or reputation. In practice, the character assassination's agency may involve doublespeak, raising false accusations, fostering rumors, spreading innuendo, or deliberately misinforming others about the opponent's morals, integrity, and public image. It may also involve manipulating and spinning technically true

information, presenting it in a misleading manner or devoid of necessary context.

As a result of character attacks, individuals may be rejected by their professional community or members of their social or cultural environment. The process of character attacking may resemble an annihilation of a human life, as the damage sustained can last a lifetime. For some historical figures, that damage endures for centuries.

Fundamentals of Character Attacks

As suggested by Icks and Shiraev in 2014, there are several political science models that explain the reason for character attacks from the attacker's point of view. They believe that the attacker's motivation is often based on the intent to destroy the victim psychologically or reduce his or her public support and/or chances of succeeding in a political competition. For example, during elections, attacks are often used to sway undecided voters, create uncertainty among tentative voters, or prevent defections by supporters. These attacks, therefore, become an effective means of manipulating voters toward a desirable action. They also facilitate the repositioning of originally favorable supporters to the ranks of the "undecided" or "uncommitted" voters.

Fundamentally, an attack on one's image, reputation, or brand depends on relevant audiences' perceptions. For instance, studies in the field of motivated reasoning show that consumers are highly selective of what they deem to be "believable" information, preferring to accept what is most congruent with existing attitudes, expectations, or actions, such as a candidate's voting record. The "hybrid" processing model suggests that voters structure their candidate impressions or respond to the candidate's character attacks using two types of information: (1) updated or (2) ad hoc. Anxiety, or an emotional state of uncertainty and tension, can influence a consumer's attitudinal shift.

Character attacks should also be addressed in relation to image studies. When organizations and leaders find themselves in a crisis, they are particularly vulnerable to attack via scrutiny and criticism that challenge their legitimacy or social responsibility. Their reputation is then judged in the "court of public opinion," which focuses on a mix of

Smear Campaign

intentionally specific

whistleblower

'ad hominem'

publicly positioned principles, including ethics, social and political values, or cultural or religious beliefs. Acceptance or rejection of a candidate requires the candidate to be compatible with existing image components. Situational crisis communication theory is particularly applicable here in both organizational and political contexts. The theory suggests that the level of reputation threat is determined by whether the public believes that the organization caused the crisis, by the organization's crisis history, and by the organization's prior relational reputation with the public (e.g., voters or stakeholders).

Character Attack Typology

In 2014, Icks and Shiraev introduced a classificatory study of character attack types based on their historical case study research. They argued that character attack cases can be categorized in terms of their scope (individual/collective), timing (live/postmortem), and momentum (planned/spontaneous).

For example, collective character assassination, as a form of summary punishment, was practiced by the Nazi regime to discredit the Jewish population. Also, in the 1930s Soviet Union, the 1940s China, and the 1950s Vietnam, the ruling communist parties conducted unprecedented campaigns of accusations, lies, and distortions targeting the so-called rich peasants. In addition, postmortem poisoning is often conducted to discredit a cause, an idea, a theory, or an ideology of the deceased.

The biographies of Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin, U.S. presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, or Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi are continually scrutinized for the purpose of discrediting their legacy. During a political campaign, instantaneous or "drive-by" character assassinations usually occur, and quick character attacks are usually opportunistic. On the other hand, the slow pace of character poisoning is based on a long-term plan. Since the 1960s, the famous Russian author and dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn was accused of being a Jew, a traitor, a Nazi collaborator, a prison snitch, and a paid foreign intelligence agent.

A classification of seven character attack methods is as follows:

1. *Anonymous lies*: The authors identify Wikipedia as a convenient place for this character attack method. It may include falsifications of a

person's early biography, alleging inappropriate sexual behavior or sexual deviances, or forged evidence about an individual's inappropriate social ties or political associations.

2. *Misquoting*: This method consists of a combination of two practices: (1) omitting significant details from a quote and (2) quoting out of context. This method can also refer to manipulatively selecting unfortunate or poor photographs taken in awkward situations, which then promulgate ridicule.

3. *Silencing*: This long-term character attack method often occurs postmortem. One of the goals of silencing is memory erasing. By avoiding any references to individuals and their work, the attacker attempts to erase their public record from the collective memory. This form of character attack was most effective in the past when attempted by a government, especially in totalitarian states with complete media control, such as Stalinist Russia. The Romans had a somewhat similar practice, for *damnatio memoriae* purposes ("damnation of memory"), but lacked the means to erase all references to disgraced emperors. The concept is close to the concept of a memory hole, or the alteration or disappearance of inconvenient or embarrassing documents, photographs, or other records. The concept was first popularized in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, where the Party's Ministry of Truth systematically re-created all potential historical documents and, in effect, rewrote history to match the often changing state propaganda.

4. *Acts of vandalism*: Symbols representing an individual or a group frequently become targets of violent acts by individuals motivated by a combination of jealousy, prejudice, and a desire for retribution. Historically, acts of vandalism were expressed as a form of dishonor that could be passed by the Roman Senate on traitors or others who brought discredit to the Roman State. The intent was to declare that the person had fallen into disgrace and was disqualified from being a true Roman. At that time, it served as a form of severe punishment for the condemned individual, who was remembered in negative terms, harvesting eternal shame.

5. *Name-calling*: This character attack method usually appears in the form of a quick, short insult; ridicule; or application of specific, demonizing

labels. In politics, ideological labels such as “communist,” “fascist,” “Nazi,” “capitalist,” “imperialist,” “terrorist,” and so on are quickly attached to political leaders and officials. Ridicule is a purposeful and contemptuous exaggeration or distortion in a comical context. Its humorous nature helps attackers portray their victims as weak, lightweight, dumb, unbalanced, irrational, or hypocritical. The result is to slant candidates and their policies so that they appear less meaningful or important than they actually are. Incompetence and ignorance are favorite themes of ridiculing.

6. *Mental illness*: Allegations of an individual having in the past experienced or currently experiencing mental illness is a common character attack method due to a strong social stigma attached to psychological disorders. This label is frequently associated with notions of insanity, madness, lack of rationality, instability, and irrationality.

7. *Sexual deviance*: With the growing influence of public opinion, moral behavior has emerged as a desirable standard; any deviation, especially with regard to sexual conduct, could open an individual to character attacks.

Character Assassination Application Areas

In politics, character attack is usually a part of a political “smear campaign” that involves intentional, premeditated efforts to undermine an individual’s or group’s reputation and credibility. The purpose of such campaigns is to discourage or weaken the support base of the victim. Another purpose is to force the victim to respond in terms of time, energy, and resources.

Smears often consist of ad hominem attacks in the form of unverifiable rumors and distortions, half-truths, or even outright lies; smear campaigns are often propagated by gossip magazines and websites. Even when the facts behind smears and campaigns have been demonstrated to lack proper foundation, the tactic is often effective because the target’s reputation remains tarnished regardless of the truth. Smears are also effective in diverting attention away from the matter in question. The target of the smear has to address the problem of correcting the false information in addition to responding to the original issue.

Common negative campaign techniques include painting an opponent as soft on criminals,

dishonest, corrupt, or a danger to the nation. One tactic is attacking the other side for running a negative campaign. Negative campaigning, also known more colloquially as “mudslinging,” is trying to win an advantage by referring to the negative aspects of an opponent or policy rather than emphasizing one’s own positive attributes or preferred policies.

Character attack can also be manifested in the form of other dirty campaign tricks. These generally involve secretly leaking damaging information to the media. Other dirty tricks include trying to feed an opponent’s team false information in the hope that it will use it and subsequently embarrass itself. Character attack can be used in a variety of smear campaigns in various forms. For instance, *borking* is named after Robert Heron Bork, American jurist and legal scholar, known for his tendency to decide cases according to his ideology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *borking* as “to defame or vilify (a person) systematically, esp. in the mass media, usually with the aim of preventing his or her appointment to public office.” The charges against John Kerry by the Swift Vets and the POWs for Truth during his 2004 presidential bid gave rise to the term *swiftboating* as a synonym for an unsubstantiated political attack or “the political trick of claiming to expose truth while in fact lying” (Gibson, 2009) and “undermining character and credibility, no matter whether the charges are accurate” (p. viii). Other tricks include attacking “push” polls disguised as “telephone” polls. Manipulative questions like “How would you react if Candidate A was revealed to beat his wife?” plant seeds of doubt in the listener. Attack ads usually identify the risks associated with the opponent, often exploiting people’s fears to negatively manipulate opinions. Contrast ads contain selective information about both the candidate and the opponent: positive information about the candidate and negative information about the opponent.

Shooting the messenger refers to destroying the reputation and credibility of a whistleblower. Killing the messenger is a practice that goes back to antiquity, a known extreme but effective tactic that helped prevent the spread of messages and silenced dissenting voices. It is now part of active corporate business conduct. A corporation subject to negative attacks may elect to eliminate the messengers or discredit their messages. Many whistleblowers

lose careers and families due to subsequent, relentless corporate attacks. For example, Jeffrey Wigand became famous in the 1990s when he made public his knowledge that cigarette companies had tried to conceal the dangers of smoking by engaging in extensive campaigns that hid from the public their knowledge that cigarette smoking was highly addictive and caused lung cancer. Wigand's decision to become a whistleblower and reveal information via the media (e.g., *60 Minutes*) as well as the American legal system came at great cost to his personal life and safety. Cigarette maker Brown & Williamson retaliated with a ruthless smear campaign against Wigand that publicly exaggerated claims of him being a raging alcoholic, a wife beater, and a pathological liar. Wigand's home and his lawyers' offices were burglarized, and he received several death threats, which forced him to abandon his home and live secretly in various hotels with a full-time bodyguard.

Character assassination strategies can be a part of information warfare efforts, which involve the management and the use of information in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent. This approach may involve dissemination of propaganda or disinformation to demoralize the enemy or manipulate the public, thus undermining the quality of the responding information and denying opportunities for information collection by the opponent. In propaganda, disinformation is designed to manipulate the audience at the rational level by either discrediting conflicting information or supporting false conclusions. A common disinformation tactic is to mix some truth and observation with false conclusions and lies. It can be used through falsifications that involve exaggeration, misleading half-truths, or factual manipulation to present an untrue picture of the opponent.

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See also Ad Hominem Argument; Organizational Character; Political Positioning; Reputation Crisis; Rumor and Gossip; Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Slander; Stigma; Storytelling; Word of Mouth

Further Readings

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CO-CREATION THEORY

Organizational reputations are socially constructed, and many different factors influence an organization's reputation. The types and quality of a firm's products and services will influence its reputation, as will the words and actions of its employees, consumers, stockholders, and other stakeholders. There are many types of reputations (actual, conceived, ideal, desired), but they all involve some kind of communication in their creation, maintenance, and sustainment. This entry covers the co-creation of value, the evolution of value creation, the chance of devaluation, and implications for reputation management.

An organization's reputation is an important resource because it shapes its relationships with publics. Organizations devote extensive resources that either directly or indirectly promote their reputation through marketing, public relations, corporate social responsibility programs, community outreach, social media, risk and crisis management, and good, old-fashioned media relations.

Many organizations attempt to control their reputation through activities that emanate from within the organization—public relations, corporate social responsibility, and CEO leadership. This perspective has its roots in the rationale or logic-based systems of the firm. In the past, firms sought control over the business cycle. Firms managed internal processes, ranging from research and development to product design, supply chain, product development, production, and packaging

Impact on the Trust barometer ✓