Character assassination

Character assassination (CA) is a deliberate and sustained effort to damage the reputation or credibility of an individual[1] The term could also be selectively applied to social groups and institutions. Agents of character assassinations employ a mix of open and covert methods to achieve their goals, such as raising false accusations, planting and fostering rumors, and manipulating information.

Character assassination happens through character attacks. These can take many forms, such as spoken insults, speeches, pamphlets, campaign ads, cartoons, and internet memes. 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 CA may resemble an annihilation of human life as the damage sustained can last a lifetime. For some historical figures, that damage endures for centuries.

CA may involve exaggeration, misleading half-truths, or manipulation of facts to present an untrue picture of the targeted person. It is a form of defamation and can be a form of *ad hominem* argument.

The phrase "character assassination" became popular from around 1930.[2] This concept, as a subject of scholarly study, was originally introduced by Davis (1950)[3] in his collection of essays revealing the dangers of political smear campaigns. Six decades later Icks and Shiraev (2014)[4] rejuvenated the term and revived academic interest by addressing and comparing a variety of historical character assassination events.

Contents

CA Fundamentals

Character attacks are by definition intentional: they are launched to damage an individual's reputation in the eyes of others. If a person's reputation is damaged accidentally, for instance through a thoughtless remark, that does not constitute a character attack. Since character attacks are concerned with reputation, they are also by definition of a public nature. Insulting someone in private does not lead to character assassination.

Each character attack invariably involves five aspects or pillars: the attacker, the target, the medium or media, the audience and the context. This last category can refer to the political system in which the attacks occur, the cultural environment, the level of technology, or any other factors that shape and determine character attacks.

Many character attacks take place in the political sphere, for instance in election campaigns. However, prominent figures from other spheres can also become the targets of character attacks, such as religious leaders, scientists, athletes and movie stars.

Moreover, character assassination appears to be a near-universal, cross-cultural phenomenon that can be found in many, if not most, countries and historical periods.

Studying CA

Icks and Shiraev (2014)[4] address several political science models to explain CA reasons from the attacker's point of view. They believe that the attacker's motivation is often based on the intent to destroy the target psychologically or reduce his/her public support and/or chances to succeed in a political competition. For example, during elections, attacks are often used to sway undecided voters, create uncertainty with tentative voters, or prevent defections of 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 is dependent on relevant audiences' perceptions. For instance, studies in the field of motivated reasoning show that consumers are highly selective of what they deem is "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 candidate CA using two types of information: updated or ad-hoc. Anxiety, or an emotional state of uncertainty and tension, can influence consumer's attitudinal shifts.

CA should also be addressed in relation to image studies. When organizations and leaders find themselves in crises, 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 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 (SCCT)[5] 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 the organization caused the crisis, the organization's crisis history, and the organization's prior relational reputation with the public (such as voters, stakeholders, etc.)

Characterizing character attacks

Character attacks can be categorized according to various criteria. When we consider them in terms of hierarchy, we can distinguish between horizontal and vertical attacks. The former refer to a situation in which the attacker and the target have roughly the same amount of power and resources at their disposal (e.g. one presidential candidate smearing another), the latter to a situation in which there is a vast disparity in power and resources between attacker and target (e.g. political rebels smearing a dictator).

When we consider the timing of character attacks, we can distinguish between live and post-mortem attacks, depending on whether or not the target is still alive at the time of the attack. Post-mortem attacks are often conducted to discredit the cause or ideology of the deceased. For instance, the biographies of Stalin, Reagan and Gandhi are continually scrutinized for legacy-discrediting purposes.

During a political campaign, instantaneous or drive-by character attacks often occur. Such quick character attacks are usually opportunistic. On the other hand, the slow pace of character-poisoning is based on long-term hopes. 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.[6]

Narcissism

According to Thomas, character assassination is an intentional attempt, usually by a narcissist and/or his or her codependents, to influence the portrayal or reputation of someone in such a way as to cause others to develop an extremely negative or unappealing perception of him or her. It typically involves deliberate exaggeration or manipulation of facts, the spreading of rumours and deliberate misinformation to present an untrue picture of the targeted person, and unwarranted and excessive criticism.[7]

Psychopathy in the workplace

The authors of the book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* describe a five phase model of how a typical workplace psychopath climbs to and maintains power. In phase four (confrontation), the psychopath will use techniques of character assassination to maintain their agenda.[8]

In politics

In politics, CA 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 target. Another purpose is to force the target to respond in terms of time, energy, and resources.

CA is also a form of negative campaigning. Opposition research is the practice of collecting information on someone that can be used to discredit them. A smear campaign is the use of falsehoods or distortions. Scandalmongering can be used to associate a person with a negative event in a false or exaggerated way.

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 additional issue of correcting the false information, rather than being able to focus on their response 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 negative aspects of an opponent or of a policy rather than emphasizing one's own positive attributes or preferred policies.

Charging an opponent with character assassination may have political benefits. In the hearings for Clarence Thomas' nomination to the Supreme Court of the United States, supporters claimed that both Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill were victims of character assassination.[9]

In a totalitarian regime

The effect of a character assassination driven by an individual is not equal to that of a state-driven campaign. The state-sponsored destruction of reputations, fostered by political propaganda and cultural mechanisms, can have more far-reaching consequences. One of the earliest signs of a society's compliance to loosening the reins on the perpetration of crimes (and even massacres) with total impunity is when a government favors or directly encourages a campaign aimed at destroying the dignity and reputation of its adversaries, and the public accepts its allegations without question. The mobilisation toward ruining the reputation of adversaries is the prelude to the mobilisation of violence in order to annihilate them. Generally, official dehumanisation has preceded the physical assault of the victims.[10]

The International Society for the Study of Character Assassination

The International Society for the Study of Character Assassination (ISSCA) specializes in the academic study and research of how character attacks and assassinations have been executed in both history and during contemporary times.[11] In July 2011, scholars from nine countries gathered at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, to debate "the art of smear and defamation in history and today".[12] They formed a group to study character assassination throughout the ages. The group included historians, political scientists, and political psychologists.[13]

The Research Lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP)

Founded in 2016 in cooperation with the ISSCA, the CARP Lab includes scholars with disciplinary homes in psychology, history, communication and public relations.[14] With investigators from George Mason University, the University of Baltimore, and the University of Amsterdam, the CARP team focuses efforts along three main dimensions: research on historical and contemporary examples of character assassination; education for academic and public audiences about character assassination causes, impacts and prevention; and risk assessment to determine vulnerabilities and mitigation strategies for public figures concerned about their reputations. The Mason CARP website features materials about the lab and its activities. The CARP Lab additionally publishes a blog[15] and is affiliated[16] with the Global Informality Project, a leading online resource for the world's open secrets, unwritten rules and hidden practices, broadly defined as 'ways of getting things done.'[17] This global and growing collection of invisible, yet powerful informal practices is made possible by remarkable collaboration of scholars from five continents.

In 2017 and 2019, CARP hosted two international conferences that welcomed numerous U.S. and international researchers and academics studying different aspects of CA. The proceedings and report of the CARP 2017 conference 'Character Assassination in Theory and Practice' can be found on the Mason website.[18][19]

The CARP 2019 conference 'Character Assassination and Populism: Challenges and Responses' featured critical input from practitioners in crisis management, journalism, and public relations. The event attracted scholars from twenty countries around the world.[20]

In 2019, the CARP Lab published its first handbook titled "Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management".[21]

See also

- Black propaganda
- Fair Game (Scientology)
- Information warfare

- *Pittura infamante*
- Kompromat
- McCarthyism
- Hollywood blacklist
- Damnatio memoriae
- Smear campaign
- Social undermining
- Personal attack
- Tone policing

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