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# The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality

*Understanding Social and Cultural Complexity*

## **Volume 2**

Edited by Alena Ledeneva

with

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## 8.6 ***Character assassination*** (general)

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‘Character assassination’ is a practice in which a deliberate and sustained effort is made to damage the reputation or credibility of an individual. Social groups or institutions can also be the target (Icks and Shiraev 2014). Character assassination refers to both the process (e.g. a smear

campaign), and to the outcome of this process (e.g. a damaged reputation). It may involve various kinds of defamatory attacks, which are similar to the abusive and circumstantial attacks (*argumentum ad hominem*) used in adversarial contexts to steer attention away from the debated issue to the opponent's personal traits or reputation (Walton 1998). However, unlike *ad hominem* attacks, character assassination does not have to take place in the context of a debate. It consists of a variety of possible attacks in the form of verbal and non-verbal assaults including spoken insults, rumours, campaign ads, pamphlets, cartoons and tweets. As a result of such campaigns, individuals may be rejected by their professional community, or by members of their social or cultural environment. Damage sustained in the process of character assassination can last a lifetime and has been likened to annihilation.

Character assassination is a cross-cultural phenomenon that reveals itself in a variety of forms and methods in every political and social environment. The issues of character assassination have been addressed in psychology, political science, history and communication studies (Icks, Keohane, Samoilenko, and Shiraev 2017). As a field of scholarly inquiry, it is often explained by the organising concepts of rationality and intentionality, source credibility, political and societal image, public opinion, social norms and cultural values. The phenomenon of character assassination should be addressed from four different perspectives: the attacker, the victim, the media and the public. Character assassination should also be addressed in relation to studies of public opinion, reputation management and image restoration.

In 2014 Icks and Shiraev introduced a classification of seven character assassination methods, which they defined as 'anonymous lies', 'misquoting', 'silencing', 'acts of vandalism', 'name-calling', 'mental illness' and 'sexual deviance'. The authors identified the website of Wikipedia as a common context for 'anonymous lies'. Examples of 'contributions' found here include falsifications of a person's early biography, suggestions of inappropriate sexual behaviour or sexual deviance and forged evidence about an individual's inappropriate social ties or political associations. The second method, which the authors defined as 'misquoting', is an amalgam of two practices: omitting significant details from a quote and/or quoting out of context. This method can also refer to manipulatively selecting unfortunate or poor photographs taken in awkward situations, which then promulgate ridicule. A common aim for journalists or bloggers is to show a politician in a poor light: for example, a politician holding a crying baby is a deliberate use of an inopportune photograph.

‘Silencing’ is a further long-term method of character assassination, which often occurs post-mortem. The distortion of history is an example of silencing. ‘Memory erasing’ also refers to the practice of avoiding any reference to an individual and their work by the attacker, in an attempt to erase their public record from collective memory. Even in antiquity, the Egyptians, the Romans, and other cultures applied memory sanctions against disgraced rulers and public figures, such as Pharaoh Akhenaten and the Roman Emperors Caligula and Nero. Their images were destroyed and their names erased from public consciousness. However, the art of memory erasure and the distortion of history were taken to a new level in totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Some of the most notorious examples of symbolic ‘vandalism’ were in Stalin’s Russia, where Trotsky, Yezhov and other prominent political and military figures were removed from pictures and history books. The concept of ‘memory hole’ was introduced by George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, where the Party’s Ministry of Truth systematically re-created all potential historical documents, and in effect, re-wrote history to match the often-changing state propaganda.

The character assassination method of ‘name-calling’ usually appears in a form of a quick, short insult, ridicule or in the application of specific, demonising labels. In politics, ideological labels such as ‘communist’, ‘fascist’, ‘Nazi’, ‘capitalist’, ‘imperialist’ or ‘terrorist’ 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, stupid, unbalanced, irrational or hypocritical. If successful, it puts a negative slant on a candidate and his/her policies so they appear less meaningful or important than they actually are. Incompetence and ignorance are favourite themes of ridiculing.

Allegations of an individual experiencing a mental illness in the past or currently experiencing mental illness is a common character assassination ploy that is successful because of the strong social stigma attached to psychological disorders. This label associates the individual by implication with other negative notions such as lack of rationality and instability. In 2014, for example, during the tensions between Russia and Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea, a number of articles appeared in the press claiming that President Putin was erratic and unstable. Authors based their reports on rumours that ‘Putin has become increasingly withdrawn and isolated’ and ‘is appearing live on television less frequently’ (Hahn 2015).

Finally, with the growing influence of public opinion, moral behaviour has emerged as a desirable standard; any deviation, especially with

regard to sexual conduct, leaves an individual open to character attacks. Short-term character assassination attempts are frequently based on alleged inappropriate acts, such as having an extramarital affair. Long-term character attacks require allegations about a person's persistent pattern of 'deviant' behaviour.

Character assassination can be applied in a number of contexts. In politics, character assassination is usually a part of a political 'smear campaign' that involves intentional, premeditated efforts to undermine an individual or group's reputation and credibility. 'Negative campaigning', also known more colloquially as 'mudslinging', is the process of trying to gain advantage by referring to negative aspects of an opponent or of a policy rather than emphasising one's own positive attributes or preferred policies. In US presidential politics a variety of strategies are employed including 'cheap shots', 'falsification' and 'smears'. 'Cheap shots' typically allude to a victim's individual features, including, but not limited to, his or her credibility, competence and honesty; 'falsifications' are lies, which by the time they are used in an attack are often difficult to distinguish from facts. Direct attacks involve strong accusations about a person's character flaws and tend to be based on facts.

'Smears' often consist of *ad hominem* attacks in the form of distortions, half-truths or even outright lies. The attackers may involve double-speak, raising false accusations, spreading innuendo or deliberately misinforming others about the opponent's morals, integrity or public image. It may also involve manipulating and spinning technically true information, but presenting it in a misleading manner, devoid of necessary context. Even when the facts behind a 'smear' campaign 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. Rather than responding to the original issue, the target of the smear has to correct the false information.

'Political rumouring' is not innocuous chatter, but rather a phenomenon with important electoral consequences. It may include painting an opponent as soft on criminals, dishonest, corrupt or as a danger to the nation. In modern election campaigns, individuals are more willing to believe the negative rumours about an opposition candidate than negative rumours about their own party candidates.

In the mid-1990s, political marketing specialists in Russia introduced a practice known as 'black PR' (public relations), which was used as a potent smear campaign tool. Unlike 'negative advertising' used in

Western politics, 'black PR' is best known for using compromising materials (see *kompromat*, 8.4 in this volume) about politicians and other public figures. These 'black PR' techniques were used in 2014 during regional elections in Russia. Examples included compromising material about the alleged criminal connections or past conviction of candidates, as well as information about their wealth, property and income. Such materials were used for a variety of purposes, including creating negative publicity, blackmailing and ensuring loyalty. The wave of *kompromat* was generated not only by the demands of the media owners, but also by the journalists themselves. Credible falsehoods, transcripts of taped telephone conversations and pseudo-events were thrown to the press in the guise of 'news'. This questionable practice was able to flourish under Russian law, as journalists were not obliged to reveal their sources, except when ordered to do so by a court. Russian news reports showed compromising materials in a biased or incomplete way. The aim was not only to report negative news about an individual or an organisation, but the intent was also to obfuscate and confuse the viewer.

Fundamentally, an attack on one's image, reputation or brand is dependent on audience perception. Studies in the field of motivated reasoning (Icks and Shiraev 2014) show that consumers are highly selective regarding what they deem is 'credible' information, preferring to accept what is most congruent with existing attitudes, expectations or actions. Five strategies of 'image restoration' for victims have been identified. Suggested responses include 'denial', 'evading responsibility', 'reducing offensiveness', 'corrective action', and 'mortification' (Benoit 1995). This image restoration theory is used to mitigate image damage following a threat to a reputation. As well as the strategies mentioned above, other tactics might also include attacks on the accuser.

Situational crisis communication theory (Coombs 2007) suggests that the level of reputation threat is determined by whether the public believes the organisation caused the crisis, is dependent on the organisation's crisis history and the organisation's prior relational reputation with the public. Unfortunately for the victim, crises serve as an excellent source of news material. Dramatic events often draw the attention of the media industry whose sole purpose is to shock their audience and to sensationalise events by showing them in a tragic or politicised context. It is evident that character assassination techniques are increasingly employed in the news media along with 'hate speech' and other methods of psychological warfare. The surge of hype, hysteria and sensationalism in the media is particularly evident when events are positioned as major threats to national security, political stability or foreign policy. The rise of



character assassination techniques in the twenty-first century proves to be consistent with many observations that focus on the negative effects of the media on politics and society, such as simplification, and the negative representation of politics, which favours conflict and personalisation.