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### Character assassination

*Theoretical framework*

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# 1

# CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

## Theoretical Framework

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### Introduction

For years, researchers and practitioners from different fields such as sociology, political science, history, management and crisis communication have been interested in issues related to character assassination (CA). Individuals, public institutions and corporations spend significant time, energy and money defending against character attacks and attempts on their reputation. Moreover, there is still no holistic picture of CA as a complex social phenomenon. Scholarly knowledge of CA is fragmented, scattered and illustrated by numerous seemingly unrelated case studies. There is very little understanding of what CA means and how it appears across disciplinary, cultural and political boundaries. This introductory chapter is a joint attempt to offer a theoretical rationale for studying character assassination as an integrative and interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry.

The contemporary media environment is conducive to incivility, especially where political communication is concerned. The prevalence of character-centred competition in political discourse legitimises the use of character assassination (Icks et al., 2017). As a result, the importance of understanding character assassination will only continue to grow. We argue, correspondingly, that a unified lexicon for discussing the hallmark features of character attacks will be necessary to push forward research into this phenomenon. While the specific aspects of character attacks that are most interesting to researchers will likely vary from discipline to discipline, our goal is to provide both a flexible lexicon and a theoretical toolbox for inquiries into character assassination. We offer the framework laid out in this chapter as only a beginning to the conversation, while the contributors to this volume expand on, challenge and confirm some of the insights that we have identified here.

To further the construction of a unifying framework for the study of CA, this chapter first defines character, then provides definitions of character assassination and distinguishes it from other, related concepts. We highlight the strategic nature of the phenomenon, then discuss five pillars that we believe are necessary to consider in a thorough analysis of a character attack, and finally introduce some of its dynamics and methods.

### On Character

Before the 1920s, the terms character, personality, and temperament were used almost interchangeably in American social sciences and psychology. While *temperament* gradually came to

be associated with biological and early formative factors such as a toddler's activity level, early eating patterns and attention span, the term *personality* gradually acquired a broader meaning and is now used to indicate the totality of an individual's stable features (Danziger, 1997). The same is true for *character*, except that this term stresses a moral dimension, attaching value judgments to a person's behaviour and experience. Someone of "good character" ought to exhibit personality traits like honesty, industry, humility or other social markers that are defined as "good" by society. It should be noted that these positive traits are strongly dependent on time and culture, as well as on individual factors such as the class and gender of the person in question. For instance, a "good" medieval woman would have exhibited very different traits than a "good" woman in a modern Western country. Each culture and epoch develops its own ideas about the appropriate virtues and modes of behaviour for members of different social groups. Often, these ideas are contested even *within* a culture, for instance between progressives and conservatives.

For our purposes, we define *character* as "a relatively stable set of a person's traits rooted in a culture's moral, cognitive, behavioural and emotional standards." Note that we explicitly include other than moral standards in our definition, since character attacks can be aimed at personal features that do not necessarily have a moral dimension, such as intellectual capacity and emotional stability.

It is important to distinguish between *character* and *reputation*. While character is mostly concerned with traits that a person actually possesses, reputation is a matter of public opinion. The perception of what is *reputable* is in "the eye of the beholder" (Schreiber, 2011) and does not always reflect someone's actual personality traits. Reputations can be constructed and then maintained by social actors themselves or by media professionals to meet the accepted norms of a certain social setting(s). Oftentimes, they can be artificially improved through impression management techniques that focus on a handful of attractive personal characteristics. Any precarious issue or risk leading to potential reputational damage is estimated in terms of declining confidence in leadership and an erosion of public trust (Coombs and Holladay, 2002).

Because character assassination is carried out in persuasive communicative acts, it is important to address how scholars of communication have talked about character. In his fundamental treatise *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle identified *ethos* as one of the three modes of persuasion, and one that is based in the speaker's credibility. "In its simplest form," writes S. Michael Halloran (1982), "*ethos* is what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe" (p. 60). Tied up in this complex concept, then, are questions of character and credibility – what Aristotle talked about as good will, good sense, and moral character (Kennedy, 1991). Classical theorists of rhetoric have wavered about whether *ethos* refers to the *actual* character of the orator or the *impression* that the speaker leaves on the audience. While the Roman rhetorician Quintilian famously declared that the orator was "the good man speaking well," others have spoken of *ethos* as akin to the credibility the speaker builds within the speech. In sum, though, understanding character assassination requires understanding how the speaker creates a credible appearance before and after they launch an attack. Demonstrating good will and character often entails providing careful evidence for one's claims, abiding by the norms of good discourse, and responsibly and ethically using persuasive appeals. One uses public communication to display the relatively stable set of traits that encompasses character.

## On Character Assassination

*Character assassination* is the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation or credibility. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is not harming character per se,<sup>1</sup> but altering the way character is

perceived and judged by others. The character assassination of an individual dramatically affects her reputation.

CA is an inclusive concept that can be addressed from various academic perspectives, such as rhetoric, political science, psychology, and media and propaganda studies, among others. It refers to both the process (e.g., a smear campaign) and the outcome of this process (e.g., a damaged reputation). A single CA event or a long-term campaign may be composed of various communication acts, a series of efforts and assaults, traditionally referred to as *character attacks*. These attacks may come in different shapes and forms, from an op-ed in a mainstream newspaper to a conspiracy theory circulating within an online community, and use different framing techniques.

In an exclusive definition, character attacks are aimed at individuals. They often include assumptions and facts related to personal traits, social and professional affiliation, and individual decisions and actions (Icks and Shiraev, 2014, p. 4). However, a case could be made that corporations, institutions or even social groups and countries possess a form of “character” as well. Moreover, it should be noted that the individual and the collective are often intertwined, because the reputation of organisations, nations and social groups can be affected by CA campaigns aimed at their leaders or prominent figures. Some character attacks on individuals and groups overlap when individuals are targeted because they seem to represent an ideology, a practice, or an advocacy cause. Likewise, negative stereotypes about religious or group practices, political orientation or adversarial regimes (e.g., communism, fascism) can be applied to an individual in order to undermine his character. For the purposes of this chapter, we will focus on character attacks against individuals, but some of our contributors will employ a broader definition and examine attacks against non-individual entities.

A CA campaign is defined by the following characteristics:

- *It is intentional.* Character attacks are by definition meant to damage someone’s reputation. This means that accidental reputation damage – for instance caused by a microphone inadvertently left switched on, a Freudian slip or a thoughtless remark – falls outside the scope of our study. Evidently, it is not always possible to establish someone’s intention to cause damage with absolute certainty, especially since character attackers often disguise their actual motives or launch their attacks anonymously. However, the intention of the attacker is usually clear enough from the context and contents of the attack. We will discuss various possible motives for character assassination in a later paragraph.
- *It is public.* CA campaigns are intended for audiences. The target of an attack is usually an individual who has a recognised social status or good reputation. Indeed, “one needs a socially approved character before it can be damaged” (Shiraev, 2014, p. 17). When someone’s reputation comes under attack in the public sphere, audiences may negatively change their opinion about her. This can happen regardless of whether the allegations happen to be true or false. All that matters for a character attack to be effective is that enough people are persuaded.

We should not take the term “assassination” too literally. After all, character assassination is about the *perception* of character. A character that is completely and utterly dead to one person may be fully alive in the eyes of another. Moreover, even a “dead” character can be revived when faith in the person is restored, although this is quite a hard feat to achieve.

CA can overlap, but is not completely identical with, the following forms of negative communication:

- *Ad hominem.* The CA process may involve various kinds of defamation attacks that are similar to the abusive *argumentum ad hominem* (literally an “argument to the man”) used

in adversarial contexts to steer attention away from the debated issue to the opponent's personal traits or reputation. However, unlike *ad hominem* attacks, character attacks do not have to take place in the context of an open discussion or debate. Unlike CA, the use of an *ad hominem* argument is often perceived as justified (as suggested by Walton, 1987) when the claims made about a person's character or actions are relevant to the conclusions being drawn. A supporter might argue that a politician's private life is not directly relevant to his or her ability to govern. At the same time, a politician's inability to adhere to the truth when answering questions about his or her personal life could call into question the veracity of his or her statements on other subjects.

- *Libel and slander aimed at corporate brands and products.* CA practices such as smear campaigns during corporate or political competition can be discussed in the context of image studies and political marketing when organisations and leaders find their legitimacy questioned. At the same time, the proposed CA framework is different from studies in marketing that view corporate character as brand imagery affecting employee and customer satisfaction (Chun and Davies, 2006). Specifically, most assaults on brands, such as brandjacking (Langley, 2014), may not necessarily target individuals, even when the brand is personified by a telegenic CEO. In addition, marketing is concerned with creating and promoting products and services almost exclusively to a brand's consumers. Thus, an attack on brands becomes the topic of interest of a limited audience of invested stakeholders and brand followers. A newsworthy CA event is a substantive matter on the public agenda that may resonate across societies and nations. For example, the "Weinstein Effect" rippled across the world as the #MeToo hashtag, originally created to denounce the misogynist behaviour of a handful of individuals, became a global movement.
- *Insults.* Individual and spontaneous insults ("you are an idiot!") often occur in a private context and intend to hurt someone's self-esteem and affect her emotional stability, whereas CA primarily aims at causing maximum public damage. However, deliberate insults conveyed to a wider audience via speeches, memes or tweets can be a part of a CA campaign.
- *Other forms of incivility* in the political and media arenas, including rudeness, hostility, threats and sporadic emotional behaviour, such as refusing to shake hands, gesturing and refusing to interact. The term also refers to non-substantive forms of incivility such as disruption of speech (Spary, 2010). There is a debate as to whether this framework should include examples of demagoguery, "sabre rattling" and populist rhetoric (such as Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign in the US or the 2017 Marine Le Pen campaign in France), which are not necessarily intended to undermine an opponent's social base or cause reputational harm, but merely to conjure political polls, media ratings and public opinion. Herbst (2010) considers incivility to be a strategic tool that is frequently exploited by political actors for personal gain.
- *Enemy images and othering.* An important distinction needs to be made between character assassination and the construction of enemy images (Keen, 1986). The latter refers to the creation of a negative perception of a person or group of people as hostile outsiders, possessing values and characteristics foreign and threatening to members of an in-group. In a process called "othering," unwanted features – weakness, irrationality, barbarity, etc. – are projected onto outsiders, who are represented in a simplified and stereotypical way, providing a counter-image to the virtuous "self." It should be stressed that "image" does not necessarily imply that the hostility is not real, but that the focus is on the way in which the real or perceived "enemy" is constructed and cultivated in the public imagination. This allows people to treat "enemies" in a way that would normally be considered inhumane, but

which is cognitively restructured as worthy and moral because they deserve such treatment (Bandura, 1999).

Unlike a character attack on an individual, the propagation of an enemy image is usually directed against a group of people. However, a particular person can also be portrayed as the “enemy,” especially if he is the leader of an adversarial and allegedly hostile regime or a popular opposition leader who represents dissenting voices against the ruling government. Notable examples include Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong Un, all of whom have been depicted numerous times as “enemies” and “terrorists” in Western media. In these cases, there is indeed overlap between character assassination and the construction of enemy images. In other cases, enemy images and stereotypes relating to groups may be drawn upon to commit character assassination on individuals. Characterising a target as a Jew, Communist, witch or member of another supposed “enemy” group may trigger feelings of hostility or anxiety in the audience and prompt them to turn away from the individual in question. In other words, enemy images and stereotypes can be effective instruments in the character assassin’s toolbox.

### **The Goals and Motives of Character Assassins**

As we have established, character attacks are by definition deliberate acts, which means they are undertaken with certain goals in mind. Of course, the immediate objective is to damage or destroy the target’s reputation in the eyes of relevant groups. Sometimes, that is as far as it goes: An attacker may act out of sheer malice or because she wants to exact revenge for an (or a perceived) injustice that was done to her. In most cases, however, the destruction of a target’s reputation is itself a means of obtaining a further goal. One possible motive is the removal of a rival for a certain “prize,” or at least reducing a rival’s chances of winning that prize while improving one’s own. This is probably the most common motive for character assassination, as it is par for the course in democracies whenever candidates are running for political office. However, it can also occur when businessmen, religious leaders or scientists are competing for public favour. In these cases, the “prize” to be won is not political office, but for instance more customers shopping in your store, more faithful attending your church or more people accepting the scientific theory you are advocating.

Character attackers and their targets are not always in direct competition for the same prize. Another motive for character assassination may be the undermining of a leader or regime, without the attacker necessarily wanting to step in the shoes of the leader themselves. When dissidents seek to expose the crimes and vices of a dictator, for instance, they do so because they want to see him removed from office, not necessarily because they are making their own bid for power. In turn, the dictator may seek to silence critics to stabilise his regime, without necessarily regarding them as direct rivals for his position. A third motive for character assassination may be the discrediting of a religion, ideology or movement through attacks on a person who is regarded as its representative or icon. Often, this person is the founder of the creed in question. For instance, character attacks on the Prophet Muhammad or Karl Marx can serve to discredit Islam or communism, respectively. Fourth, character assassination can be used to create a convenient scapegoat to divert feelings of public anger that could otherwise damage the attacker himself. In the case of a corporate scandal, for instance, the company management can decide to shift the blame to one particular board member to let the rest escape scot-free. Finally, character assassination can occur for material gains. Here we can think of the tabloid press, which thrives on its ability to create or highlight scandal, often committing character assassination in the process.

## Five Pillars of Character Assassination

A character assassination event is a multidimensional process that is conditioned and moderated by five main factors: *the Attacker*, *the Target*, *the Medium*, *the Audience*, and *the Context*. These components can be examined independently in relation to a single character attack or together in a more complex manner in order to estimate the probability of reputational damage and public outrage before and during an elaborate CA campaign. These factors may vary from case to case, and relate to each other in complicated ways. It is our contention that a complete analysis of a character attack should include some consideration of the interrelationship of these pillars. This view has been previously examined in our studies (Icks and Shiraev, 2014; Icks et al., 2017; Samoilenko et al., 2018). In the next section, we present a review of previous scholarship, which is relevant for understanding these components of an attack.

### *The Attacker*

It is critical to address CA from the attacker's side, as it helps us not only understand the motivation of the assailant, but also estimate the choice of an attack strategy. This may further provide clues about the selection of communication channel and method. The *character attacker* is an individual who commits a deliberate assault on the reputation of the targeted individual, aiming to trigger a public reaction (emotional response, judgement, outrage, etc.) and subsequently undermine the social standing of the subject.

Political scientists have devoted much attention to the motives and strategies of character attackers, mostly in the context of negative campaigning. They have demonstrated that character assassination can be an effective means of alarming voters and swaying them toward a desirable course of action (Riker, 1996; Sigelman and Shiraev, 2002), creating uncertainty (Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995) or preventing defections (Doron and On, 1983). Political actors also employ character attacks to force the target to respond in terms of time, energy and resources. It helps the attacker to steer the public's attention away from the debated issue or promote his agenda at the opponent's expense.

The literature on the rhetoric of attack is one of the richest and has been discussed by numerous scholars. Of particular relevance to our topic is the theory of persuasive attack (Benoit and Dorries, 1996; Benoit and Glantz, 2017; DiSanza and Legge, 2016), which explores the nature and functions of blame and accusations. According to Benoit (2015), persuasive attack can be viewed as "an attempt to create (or strengthen) a negative attitude toward the target" (p. 10). This theory is based on Pomerantz's (1978) analysis of complaints, which holds that complaints (or criticism or attacks) have two key components: offensiveness and blame. In other words, when the attacker criticises someone, she must allege that a certain act is bad (offensiveness) and that the target is responsible for this bad act (blame). The extended version of the theory includes two basic components of attacks on character: declaring that the target possesses a trait and arguing that this trait is offensive.

When the attacking sources appear credible, their attacks have a greater chance of achieving their strategic outcomes. Empirical research has consistently supported the central role played by "source credibility" in persuasive discourse (McCroskey and Teven, 1999). For example, political communication is often seen as an open competition for credibility of the messenger, as an important factor in winning over the public at the expense of the opponent. In disputes, "[it] is an enormous advantage to occupy the moral high ground" (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991, p. 109), as such positioning implies power to position others. Studies show that people evaluate political actors based on several personal characteristics, including appearance, likability,



charm, charisma and warmth (Pancer, Brown and Barr, 1999). Thus, source credibility is often determined by the public's perception of the extent to which its relationship *with the source* is determined by their stake in this relationship, common interests, concerns of mutual benefit and/or similar outcomes from the source's persuasion attempt. When attackers do not appear credible to their audiences, their attacks run the risk of backfiring and tarnishing the reputation of the attacker.

### *The Target*

The CA target is typically a prominent individual who has achieved high social status, public recognition or fame and is the person who is the subject of the attack. We prefer the term "target" to "victim" because not every person who becomes the subject of a character attack is perceived by the public to be a victim. For example, according to Kaufman (1985), becoming a victim is a social process that requires a cognitive decision by someone coping with a wrong to assume such a status. The victim's status can also be socially constructed by the media (Smolej, 2010; Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010). Analysis of a victim's perceived agency and social evaluation helps us better understand why some reputational attacks are successful and considered persuasive while others receive contempt despite the truthfulness of their claims (Dunn, 2004).

The target of a character assassination attempt may not only find their public standing damaged, but also encounter a loss of social capital. *Social capital* is a "network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). In that sense, character assassination is an invasion of someone's social field, composed of a network of relationships held and protected by a social actor trying to accumulate, conserve or convert different types of resources (money, friends, connections, etc.). The outcome of a CA attempt is generally observed in terms of reputational damage experienced by the target. It can also be assessed by the degree of public trust in a targeted individual and his ability to respond and recover from reputational crises.

Attackers often focus on specific aspects of the target. These may include attacks on status or *affiliation*, attacks on an individual's past *behaviour* and more general attacks on their *personality*. The first category entails a person's social affiliation or his or her unique identity (real or alleged), such as being a woman or a man, young or old, white or black, a native or a foreigner, liberal or conservative, gay or straight, and so on. This is not about what the individual does. It is mostly about who she *is* and subsequently – and even stereotypically – what this person is supposed to do as a member of a social group. If one says of a female political candidate, "What do you expect from her? She's a woman," this is a character attack against the candidate because the statement implies that she is incapable of doing particular things, like holding public office and making tough decisions, due to her gender. The next category refers to an individual's behaviour. This is about what this person does, is doing, has already done or is likely to do in the future. To illustrate, if a television ad suggested that a politician has accepted bribes throughout his career, this is an attack on that politician's actual or presumed behaviour. The final category is about an individual's personality traits. Traits are stable, cross-situational and enduring characteristics, not just passing emotional states.

From the target's perspective, Benoit's (2015) strategies of Image Repair theory, such as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification, are especially applicable to mitigating image damage following a threat to a reputation. Prior to employing any image restoration strategy, individuals and organisations must consider a few other elements essential to reparation: the role of persuasion, source credibility, corporate social responsibility and the nature of crisis.



### *The Medium or Media*

Media ecology theorists (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) suggest that the media must be understood as the complexity of the medium of communication: its speed and directionality affect our socially constructed world of meanings, and constantly shape our perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. Thus, medium becomes an extension of ourselves as we consume new media products and adopt its most salient narratives and frames for daily conversations. For character attackers, a medium is a means of communication, such as a pamphlet, poster, tweet, or negative ad targeting its intended audience. However, a medium can also be a news channel, online forum or other venue that possesses agency in the process of character assassination, helping some attacks to spread while ignoring or debunking others. The symbols prompted by the mass media are then processed by various audiences and formed into cognitive models that later serve “as guides for judgement and action” (Bandura, 2009, p. 95). Consequently, it has become even more important to understand why some media materials have the potential to spread virally and cause reputational damage, while others never enjoy the public’s attention. Thus, character assassination events should be examined in relation to media logic and media effects.

Today’s mass media provide a conducive environment for character attacks amplified by the negative effects of mediatisation, such as simplification of content, personalisation and infotainment favouring conflict, drama and negative representation of social and political life (Esser, 2013). In recent years, domestic and international politics have become highly mediated, aggressive and candidate-centred. Persona-based stories and ads in US politics are becoming more critical because issues are more likely to become salient to voters if they are linked to popular personalities (Farnsworth, 2018). Thus, it is often personalities, not parties, that decide policies (Wattenberg, 1991).

The media are often criticised for normalising uncivil politics and polarising viewers (Maisel, 2012; Mutz and Reeves, 2005). Television entertainment has legitimised personal ridicule as a backdrop for CA in political discourse. Numerous studies demonstrate that comedians and late-night show hosts tend to lead the conversation about politics (Lichter, Baumgartner and Morris, 2014; Lichter and Farnsworth in this volume). Negative portrayals and caricatures of politicians often contribute to how people form opinions about them and influence candidate trait ratings (Geer, 2006; Young, 2004). This, in turn, desensitises the public, making it easier for character attacks to become acceptable.

The Internet environment amplifies the threat of manipulation through hearsay and falsehoods (Garrett, 2011). Online users who tend to post negative comments or incorrect information (fake news) without identification of the source or lacking supporting evidence can also conveniently exploit anonymity. Partisan online media often encourage incivility (Levendusky, 2013) by disseminating negative and misleading content. Rumours and conspiracy theories come from venues like online chat rooms, digital news shows, various social media platforms and “gated” invitation-only online communities (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Internet anonymity is also easily abused by impulsive and manipulative practices such as trolling and harassment. Oftentimes, antisocial behaviour results from *disinhibition* when people act without regard for social norms and consequences (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012).

In sum, mass media play a critical role in accommodating CA events and shaping public attitudes towards them. By favouring certain agendas, the news media engage in framing, selecting some aspects of a perceived reality while obscuring other elements. It is critical to understand how frame-building and frame-setting processes of media coverage can affect mass opinion by attaching memorable labels or assigning blame to political actors.

### ***The Audience***

Each character attack is addressed to a target audience, the group of individuals the attacker hopes to reach and whose perceptions the attacker hopes to sway. The credibility of the attacker and the audience's belief system are intertwined. The audience is involved in the process of constructing shared meaning and realities, and therefore has the power to accept or reject the allegations made by the source. The audience becomes an inseparable element of character assassination, as the target's reputation is damaged when the audience sees it this way, regardless of the truth and relevance of the allegations. The reputation of politicians, celebrities and other prominent figures is thus judged in the court of public opinion, which focuses on a mix of publicly established principles, including ethics, social and political values, or cultural or religious beliefs. If an audience's perception of the target's character differs from the target's true attributes, it is the perception and not the reality that determines the degree of public belief (Lupia, 2013).

There is research evidence to suggest that norms play an especially large role when evaluating members of the same social group. According to the cognitive balance (Heider, 1958) and cognitive dissonance theories (Festinger, 1957), people tend to fit perceptions of reality into a mould that is heavily influenced by their preferences. People are highly selective in what information they choose to believe, preferring to accept information that is most congruent with existing attitudes or expectations and/or these people's actions, such as actual voting record or supporting a candidate (Dolan and Holbrook, 2001). Thus, when character attacks confirm what the audience thinks they already know, they are more likely to resonate. For example, if there is a predisposition to dislike a candidate for political office, a negative ad tends to reinforce it (Chang, 2003). A receptivity to negative messages may be associated with one's level of political knowledge, trust in government, gender or related personal factors (Sigelman and Kugler, 2003). The audience can also become resistant to attitudinal attacks in the same way that bodies are immunised against viral attacks (McGuire, 1964). Thus, a weak dose of a counterargument will cause the belief to become more resistant.

### ***The Context***

Character attacks take place in a political, cultural and social context that influences their effectiveness. Because character attacks are embedded in symbolic acts of communication, understanding the social context in which that communication takes place is of the utmost importance. Moreover, because character attacks are strategic – they are intended to have some effect in the world – the situational relationship between the character attacker, the attack and the audience must be examined. Part of this context comes from moral codes embedded in social norms and cultural traditions. What is morally acceptable depends on where in the world one lives and where a message circulates. For example, in the US there is a partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats on what is morally unacceptable (Poushter, 2014). Likewise, character attacks launched in different historical epochs feature different moral and cultural standards. Analysts of character attacks also need to comprehend the linguistic context – the vocabulary, grammar and idioms of the time (Lucas, 1988).

Context shapes character attacks in other ways as well. One important factor is the political environment in which attackers and targets operate. In an open, democratic society, the possibilities to launch or respond to attacks will be more evenly distributed than in authoritarian regimes. It also matters to what extent potential targets are protected by libel and slander laws. In ancient Greece, where such laws did not exist, practically all personal smears were considered fair game, even when speaking in court. Finally, we need to take the technological context into

consideration. This is a determining factor in the speed and scope of character attacks. As the invention of the printing press did five centuries ago, the Internet has recently caused a paradigm shift in practices of character assassination, opening up venues for character assassins that did not hitherto exist.

### **Interactional Dynamics of Character Assassination**

Character attacks are dynamic, which is to say that they are determined by the interaction between the various involved parties. Based on this interaction, we can differentiate character attacks in terms of *scope*, *timing*, *momentum*, *direction* and *opacity*.

- *Scope: Individual versus Collective Character Attacks*  
While we have limited our definition of character assassination to attacks on individuals in this chapter, we have already seen that individuals can be attacked because they represent an organisation, movement or ideology. In these cases, damage to the target's reputation is a means of damaging the collective they represent. We term these attempts to damage a collective via an individual "collective" attacks.
- *Timing: Live versus Post-Mortem Attacks*  
Character attacks may target either living individuals or the deceased. For example, many twentieth-century leaders, including Joseph Stalin in Russia, Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Mohandas Gandhi in India, are still publicly mocked or scorned long after their deaths, their flaws and missteps exaggerated, their memories cast in a negative light. What is the point of attacking the deceased? Post-mortem attacks can discredit a cause, a fallen dynasty, a political party, an idea, a theory or an ideology that these individuals represented or stood for. Targeting a dead leader's character can thus be an effective method of attacking his current-day supporters.
- *Momentum: Planned versus Spontaneous (Drive-By)*  
Although character attacks tend to be premeditated, attackers do not always take significant time to contemplate and execute. These attacks can be very much spontaneous and opportunistic. Drawing an analogy to an infamous method of gang violence, we call them "drive-by" attacks. A quick and timely character attack may be effective because the target does not have enough time or resources to defend herself.
- *Direction: Horizontal versus Vertical*  
Sometimes, character assassination occurs between two people on relatively equal footing, for example two candidates for the same political office. In other instances, however, a large organisation or regime takes on an individual, or an individual attempts to bring down a regime. The resource disparities in vertical character attacks make them well worth studying.
- *Opacity: Anonymous versus Transparent*  
Sometimes, the attacker's identity is readily known. Yet more and more in our mediated political environment, unverifiable rumours circulate, making it impossible to pin down the original source. Even if the identity of the attacker is unknown and the facts do not add up, the target's reputation can remain tarnished.

### **The Complexity of Character Attacks**

Although character attacks are strategic by nature, the extent to which they reflect a carefully conceptualised and sophisticated plan varies. Thus, attacks differ in their complexity. At times,

Table 1.1 Methods of Character Assassination

<i>Method</i>	<i>Intended Effect</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<p><b>Name-calling</b> No argument is made, but a derogatory term is applied to the target. If this is done consistently, we speak of labelling.</p>	<p>The target is reduced to a single trait or notion that triggers negative associations.</p>	<p>Denouncing people who follow alternative religious doctrines as “heretics.” Labelling opponents as “socialists” or “tree huggers” in US politics.</p>
<p><b>Making allegations</b> The broadest category. Allegations can be true or false, explicit or implied, but the point is that the target is accused of specific defects in personality or behaviour.</p>	<p>The target’s moral integrity, mental capacities and other personal features are cast into doubt.</p>	<p>Accusations of corruption or incompetence in numerous election campaigns. Insinuations that US President Donald Trump is mentally unbalanced.</p>
<p><b>Ridiculing</b> Making jokes about the target or presenting them as a caricature. Mockery is not limited to personality, but can also target appearance, physical disabilities, etc.</p>	<p>The target is no longer taken seriously, but becomes a source of amusement.</p>	<p>The depiction of Emperor Napoleon as a toy soldier in British cartoons. The circulation of pictures of politicians taken at inopportune moments to make them look stupid.</p>
<p><b>Fearmongering</b> Presenting the target as an enemy or threat. If the target’s basic humanity is denied, we speak of dehumanization.</p>	<p>The target becomes a source of fear, hatred and disgust.</p>	<p>Cicero branding Catiline as a threat to the Roman people in his Catilinarian Orations. Martin Luther depicting his religious opponents as demonic creatures in the Reformation.</p>
<p><b>Exposing</b> Publishing evidence (either real or forged) that reveals the target’s personality flaws or misdeeds.</p>	<p>The target is exposed as immoral, criminal or otherwise flawed.</p>	<p>The publication of forged letters during the American Civil War to “prove” that George Washington was a traitor to his country.</p>
<p><b>Disgracing</b> The opposite of honouring. There are various ways to signal that a target is in disgrace: taking away tokens of distinction and status, putting them through rituals of public humiliation, or expelling them from the community altogether.</p>	<p>The target’s honour and status are taken away; sometimes they are completely renounced by the community they belong to.</p>	<p>Vandalising statues of political and historical figures. Tarring and feathering criminals in the Wild West. “Slut shaming” on the Internet.</p>
<p><b>Erasing</b> Authoritarian regimes can attempt to destroy someone’s public presence completely, for instance by Photoshopping pictures and writing an individual out of history books.</p>	<p>The target is completely removed from the public sphere/collective memory.</p>	<p>The disappearance of politicians who fell out of favour from photographs in Stalinist Russia.</p>

attacks emerge as a simple cheap shot, such as labelling a proponent of a woman's right to choose abortion a "feminazi" to discredit her advocacy. On the other hand, character attacks can appear as drawn out strategies, such as a series of campaign advertisements with carefully evidenced claims about a candidate's support for women's rights to terminate a pregnancy. Often, however, attackers leave portions of their argument unstated, asking the audience to make the leap between an allegation and the intended effect. We term these complex attacks "enthymematic attacks," in line with the rhetorical concept of the enthymeme, wherein an audience "fills in" a portion of the argument for the speaker. For instance, to argue that former US President Barack Obama was born in Kenya may circulate as an enthymeme wherein the audience fills in the gaps in the argument with racist assumptions about blackness as difference and the implication that this makes Obama not "one of us."

### Methods of Character Assassination

Building on work done by Icks and Shiraev (2014), we propose seven methods by which attackers generally attack their targets. We have categorised our list based on the method's intended effect on the target's reputation. After all, there are various ways in which an individual can gain a negative status in the public sphere. Among other things, she can acquire a reputation for immorality or incompetence, be reduced to a laughing stock, be portrayed as a monster, or be placed outside "good" society as an emblem of disgrace. Evidently, these categories may at times overlap: For instance, targets who suffer public disgrace are often dehumanised as well, although one can occur without the other. This list is necessarily incomplete and will evolve as more research is done on how attackers plan, execute and accomplish their goals. It is our hope that the list given in Table 1.1 will provide a lexicon for talking about the ways that attacks happen.

In sum, character assassination research requires an interdisciplinary framework that pays attention to how the attacker, target, audience, media and context intersect to determine the effectiveness and longevity of attacks. In this chapter, we have only sketched a theoretical framework and identified several important methods and aims of character assassins. The contributors to this volume at times challenge and expand on our framework, with the goal of advancing research in these important dimensions.

### Note

1. Cf. Ivan Havel's observation in Klicperová-Baker (2014).

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