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CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT:
Theory and Applications
New York and London: Routledge, 2021
ISBN 9781138609181, 280 Pages

E. B. Shiraev, J. Keohane, M. Icks, and S. Samoilenko have produced an impressive and timely multidisciplinary, cross-cultural study on character assassination and its intersection with reputation management. Structured as a textbook and spanning fourteen chapters, the volume offers a comprehensive examination of character assassination, one of the most pressing reputational challenges in the contemporary media environment. Each chapter is systematically organized, beginning with learning objectives and incorporating various visual and analytical tools, including images, graphs, tables, and notable case studies for discussion. Each chapter concludes with a concise summary, critical thinking questions, a glossary of key terms, and a curated list of references.

In the introduction, the authors define character assassination as "the deliberate destruction of a person's reputation or credibility through character attacks" (p. 10), and demonstrate its significance in politics and public life. They outline the foundational pillars of character assassination and clarify essential terminology and concepts necessary for understanding the phenomenon.

The second chapter, "Character Assassination in History," offers a historical overview, tracing the phenomenon from ancient Egypt and Rome through the Protestant Reformation, and concluding in the 19th century with illustrated character attacks against U.S. President Abraham Lincoln.

The third chapter, "Approaches to and Methodology for Studying Character Assassination," presents key approaches to the study of character assassination, including rhetorical and communication studies as well as sociocultural and political psychology perspectives. This chapter also discusses major research methods and provides tools for critical thinking to help overcome research bias when studying character assassination.

In the fourth chapter, "The Actors in Character Attacks," the authors clearly define *attackers*, *targets*, and *audiences* involved in character attacks, examining the interactions among these key actors.

The fifth chapter, "Content and Types of Character Attacks," presents various types of allegations used to attack a target's character. The authors analyze methods such as ridiculing, disgracing, and erasing, while also considering factors such as hierarchy, timing, and complexity in distinguishing between types of attacks.

The chapter titled "Means and Venues of Character Attacks" explores the role of both legacy and social media in facilitating character attacks. The authors analyze media practices and processes such as agenda-setting, framing, labeling, and the use of memes in character attacks. The chapter concludes with a discussion of three cardinal strategies in mediated campaigns: provocation, contamination, and obliteration.

The seventh chapter, "The Impact of Character Attacks," examines the outcomes of character attacks across domains. It explores their effectiveness and the varying degrees of character damage they can cause – mild, moderate, and profound. The chapter concludes by explaining the interconnection between character attacks and public

scandal, exploring susceptibility to character attacks and introducing the concept of "character assassination immunity" (p. 127).

The eighth chapter, "Defending Against and Managing Character Attacks," defines core ideas of reputation management and reputation crises. It proposes a three-stage model: preparedness and prevention, image repair, and post-crisis communication. The chapter explores activities such as issues management, risk management, and inoculation strategies during the first stage. In the second stage, it addresses the management of reputational crises through *image repair theory* (highlighting its five core strategies) and *situational crisis communication theory*. The third stage is devoted to strategies for managing reputation once the crisis has subsided.

The ninth chapter, "The Culture Factor," explores how culture influences the process of character assassination. It demonstrates how cultural norms shape perceptions of *good character* and how cultural diversity and division create fertile ground for character attacks. It also conceptualizes key cultural dichotomies and illustrates how character attacks can become a driving force behind many public scandals.

The tenth chapter, "Character Assassination in Democracies," investigates the relationship between character assassination, information, and democracy. In contrast, the eleventh chapter, "Character Assassination in Authoritarian Regimes," focuses on the dynamics between character assassination, information, and autocracy. It discusses authoritarian methods of character attacks, such as organized direct attacks, censorship and silencing, scapegoating, and show trials, and considers scenarios in which authoritarian leaders become targets themselves.

The twelfth chapter analyzes character assassination in international relations. The authors explain why character attacks against foreign leaders are launched domestically, showing how such actions can strengthen or weaken a government's foreign policy goals. They examine wartime propaganda and the stereotyping of entire populations as "evil." A distinction is drawn between attacks meant for domestic versus international audiences, with the latter including forms of false allegations, exaggerations, bogus translations, scoring, and slander (p. 207). Examples include the targeting of international figures such as George Soros and Bill Gates. The chapter also shows how character attacks—such as mocking and humiliation – launched from one country can influence public opinion in the targeted country, weakening its government. It concludes by examining attacks in self-defense and defending against attacks, emphasizing that such strategies can negatively affect not only the target but also the attacker's own government.

The thirteenth chapter, "The Gender and Sexuality Factor," opens by examining the case of one of history's most famous female politicians, Margaret Thatcher, and explores how sex, gender, and sexuality can be exploited in character attacks. The authors provide numerous examples of how these aspects are weaponized to accuse individuals—ranging from claims of immorality, misconduct, or misleading the public, to allegations of promiscuity, extramarital affairs, or attempts to undermine one's masculinity or femininity.

The final chapter, "Character Attacks in Sports, Science, and Entertainment," examines how character assassination functions in these high-profile arenas. Using the case of singer Michael Jackson as an entry point, the authors illustrate character attacks on celebrities and compare character attacks in politics and entertainment. Similarities include the goal of defeating opponents, a broad spread of character assassination, and

the loss of endorsements. However, they point out that key differences lie in the relational level: most politicians are not idolized in the same way as celebrities, yet once celebrities enter the political sphere, they become more exposed to character attacks (p. 251). The authors note that, overall, character attacks in entertainment and sports tend to have little or no impact at all. They conclude with attacks in the scientific domain, which often focus on morality, hypocrisy, political or social affiliations, and personal motivations (p. 251).

Overall, the book presents an original, methodically structured, and engaging framework for students, scholars, and professionals in communication and political science. It serves as a valuable resource across a range of fields – including politics, entertainment, business, global affairs, religion, and science. Given the inescapability of character attacks in the contemporary media environment, this volume stands as an essential reference for navigating the complexities of reputation management.

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Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer

Democracy and Media in Europe. A Discursive-Material Approach
Routledge, 2025, 140 pages
ISBN-13: 978-1-03277-926-3

The book *Democracy and Media in Europe. A Discursive-Material Approach* arrives at a crucial moment – a time when both democratic systems and media in Europe are increasingly under pressure exerted by both internal and external forces. In an era marked by the rise of populism, the spread of disinformation, growing public polarization, and eroding trust in institutions, Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer offer a theoretically grounded yet socially engaged exploration of media as a site of struggle, opportunity, and challenge for democracy. Their discursive–material approach allows for a deeper understanding of how democracy is not only enacted through laws and institutions, but also through everyday practices, technologies, infrastructures – and, crucially, through media.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first begins with a theoretical discussion of democracy, placing particular emphasis on the elements without which democracy cannot exist. The authors then focus on the political struggles that shape and contest the very concept of democracy, emphasizing that its fundamental components are not fixed, but constantly subject to negotiation. Chapter Four explores the discursive-material factors that enable democratic functioning – elements that, although formally outside democracy's boundaries, play a crucial role in its realization. Finally, special attention is paid to threats that may undermine or weaken democratic processes.

This first part leaves a strong impression due to the clarity of its theoretical elaboration and the urgent relevance of the issues it addresses. As a result, readers become acutely aware of democracy's fragility – the delicate balance between the conditions that enable it and the threats that aim to dismantle it, all while recognizing that political struggle continuously takes place within its own boundaries. This approach encourages reflection on democracy not as a completed system, but as an ongoing process – one that demands

defence, criticism and continual reconstruction from citizens. Perhaps the most important insight from this section is that, although often passive, excluded, or victims of symbolic violence and internalized injustice, citizens remain the key agents of democratic order.

Furthermore, the first part offers both a comforting and sobering understanding of democracy. It shows that its imperfections, slowness, and unfulfilled promises are not signs of its demise. On the contrary, they are intrinsic to its nature. It is precisely its openness to disagreement and capacity for correction that make democracy worth preserving and fighting for. As the authors suggest, democracy urges us to ask questions – even the uncomfortable ones, even those directed at itself.

It is the media that play a key role in asking these questions, acting as a space where the tensions inherent in any democratic process are reflected and articulated. The complexity of democracy is mirrored in the media – its openness to dissent, but also its vulnerability to manipulation; its aspiration towards pluralism, but also the danger of exclusion. Media are not merely observers of political reality; they are active participants – tools of democratic expression and arenas where democracy is constantly questioned, tested, and shaped. This dual role of media as both a mirror and an agent of democratic tension creates a natural transition to the thematic focus of the book's second part.

In the second section, the authors explore the relationship between media and democracy from several perspectives. They begin by explaining the core democratic roles of the media, then analyze the internal characteristics that support and enhance democracy, while also underlining the battles fought around these roles. They further address the conditions necessary for the media to function democratically, as well as the threats that can compromise this potential. Although these topics are spread across different chapters and examined from various angles, the authors argue that such a multifaceted approach best captures the complexity of the media-democracy nexus.

This section offers equally important reflections, focusing on the media and their essential role in maintaining and shaping democracy. The media monitor power (the watchdog role), enable public debate, encourage civic participation, and help shape identities and values. While the authors acknowledge and emphasize the democratic potential of the media, they also introduce a note of pessimism. The democratic functions of media cannot be taken for granted; they are, as the authors stress, constantly contested. Media operate within a complex context shaped by political struggles over information control, freedom, pluralism, and the right to expression. They are also exposed to market pressures and technological changes that challenge the production and distribution of content. In addition, rising threats to journalists, widespread disinformation, and the polarization of public discourse further erode the media's ability to serve as mechanisms of accountability and platforms for democratic exchange.

To ensure that the democratic role of the media does not remain a mere normative ideal, certain enabling conditions must be fulfilled. These include stable resources (technical, institutional, human), a democratic media culture that promotes ethics, professionalism, and diversity of voices, and state regulation to counterbalance market dynamics and potential abuses. In a time when information spreads faster than ever and the boundaries between facts, opinions, and manipulations grow increasingly blurry, citizens' capacity to recognize, interpret, and critically engage with media content becomes crucial for

preserving democracy. For citizens to succeed in this, and for new technologies to serve democracy rather than manipulation, systematic critical media and digital literacy is essential.

In conclusion, the authors remind us that the media are mirrors of reality – they expose order through stories of disorder, injustice, conflict, and chaos, shaping public consciousness about what is considered legitimate and just. Media are indispensable for a healthy democracy; they actively contribute to defining who we are and what kind of society we want to build. To fulfil this potential, all the previously mentioned conditions must be met. Without them, media risk becoming tools of manipulation, control, and exclusion.

The book effectively integrates the analysis of democracy and media, demonstrating that these two spheres cannot be understood in isolation. A consistent argument runs through both parts: democracy and media are arenas of struggle, but also spaces of possibility. Ultimately, the authors offer cautious hope: although democratic ideals face serious challenges, the potential for further democratization remains open. It is this openness – to dissent, discussion, and transformation – that makes both democracy and the media that accompany it not only worth defending, but also worth continuously rethinking. With this in mind, the reader is not left with pessimism, but with a sense of active engagement and responsibility, since both democracy and media democracy are never finished processes, but ongoing efforts that call for continuous participation, involvement, and reflection.

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