

Toxic Talk:

New Research Center Seeks to Understand and Counter Character Smears

By Kristin Leonato



Sergei Samoilenko



Eric Shiraev

The Department of Communication launched a new and timely research lab in fall 2016. The Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP) Research Lab is led by an interdisciplinary research team of scholars particularly interested in the deliberate destruction of an individual's reputation or credibility through character attacks. More importantly, the team is examining how to combat these attacks in an ever-changing media landscape.

Sergei Samoilenko, MA Communication '07, is a Mason alumnus as well as a faculty member. With his expertise in public relations, crisis communication, and new media, he is well-equipped to lead the CARP Research Lab. Samoilenko's interest in the study of character assassination began several years ago, inspired by the work of his friend and Mason colleague, Eric Shiraev.

A political scientist and an expert in the role of identity and culture in politics and international relations—and a faculty member in the Department of Psychology and Russian and Eurasian Studies Program—Shiraev co-edited *Character Assassination Throughout the Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) with Martijn Icks of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Samoilenko was fascinated by the book, especially when viewed through his own scholarly lens in the field of communication.

Keenly aware of the overlapping influences of media and politics, Samoilenko and Shiraev developed a new special topics course for undergraduates, Character Assassination and Reputation Management in Public Relations. Offered for the first time in fall 2015, and open to students majoring in either communication or government and international politics, the interdisciplinary course struck a chord with Mason's politically savvy students.

Communication major Mary Chris Cobb, BA '17, was one of those students. She remembers the class as "primarily discussion-based, and the conversations were both engaging and stimulating. I found myself becoming more interested in character assassination as the class went on . . . Scholars on Mason's campus have moved the phenomenon

forward a tremendous amount, and to hear them speak firsthand with passion and dedication immediately peaked my interest."

Cobb says what she learned in the course continues to inform her study of communication and her life outside of class. She shared that "as a student living close to the nation's capital, it is important to educate yourself on politics. Looking at the 2016 presidential election cycle, reading transcripts of debates, watching social media, and getting all the information possible on scandals was not a way I anticipated to learn about candidates. Since my eyes had been opened to character assassination, I viewed this election differently."

Samoilenko also intently followed the 2016 U.S. presidential election, but with a sense of alarm; he found his academic interest playing out in real life in the daily coverage of the presidential primary elections and caucuses. Samoilenko recalls feeling completely "overwhelmed by the incivility of the political discourse." Worse, his research had informed him that such incivility, symptomatic of "a toxic media environment," could very well "lead to a legitimacy crisis" not just for individual politicians, but also for government institutions and the basic tenets that underpin a democratic society.

Samoilenko and Shiraev often discussed the extraordinarily negative tone taken during the 2016 election cycle. Their research, expertise, and experience gave them a unique insight into the causes and effects of the various political tactics on display, but that same research, expertise, and experience inspired them to do something about what they saw as a vicious cycle with dire consequences. The idea for the research lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP) was born, and they quickly got to work.

Jennifer Keohane, a recent addition to the Department of Communication faculty, joined Samoilenko, Shiraev, and Icks in their efforts. Keohane's research interests make her a natural fit for the CARP research team. Her doctoral research centered on character attacks used against political and labor movements, specifically the practice of

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Jennifer Keohane

“redbaiting” in the 1950s and beyond, and her current focus is on the particular and often gendered rhetoric used in the organizing of labor movements in the United States. Keohane’s expertise in rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, and the underlying ethical issues at play make her an effective professor of public speaking and public communication, and her scholarly pursuits bring additional depth to the CARP team.

With the final addition of Mason alumnus and international professional political operative Jason Smart, BA ’07, the CARP Research Lab has garnered immediate interest among scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields. Samoilenko says the most common response is “We’re so glad someone is working on this!” He continues to be surprised and pleased by the level of “enthusiasm and engagement” of those interested in their work.

Samoilenko shares that the lab’s first challenge has been to consolidate “the scattered research on a social phenomenon that has been around for centuries under one umbrella.” It is this work that truly proves the importance of maintaining a multidisciplinary research team.

Keohane feels this work has already demonstrated that the concept of character is “real and is important” and that character attacks “can have very real implications. And not just for individuals, but also for entire groups or even geographic regions.”

Samoilenko says his truest hope is that the CARP Research Lab can become a place to really test new research or best practices. He finds that studying the impact of character attack is especially interesting because “it’s very scientific, but also very hands-on.” He says he’s often asked “Why would you actually study this or teach [character assassination] to students?” He feels it’s an important example of how science can help people, and he studies character assassination “like doctors study a disease. You have to understand the disease to know how to counteract it and fight against it.”



Communication majors Julia Ruiz (left) and Mary Chris Cobb pose during a rare free moment while working as research assistants for the Character Assassination in Theory and Practice conference in March 2017.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY CARP.

CARP’S INAUGURAL CHARACTER ASSASSINATION CONFERENCE

To further the discussion, those involved with the CARP Research Lab spent much of the academic year organizing their first conference. Held at Mason’s Arlington Campus March 3-5, 2017, the two-and-a half-day conference, Character Assassination in Theory and Practice, hosted 40 presenters and participants from across the United States and eight other countries.

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—Sergei Samoilenko, CARP Research Lab

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Richard Sheehe, a senior research fellow and practitioner in residence at Mason, describes the ultimate goal of the conference as the beginning of an “attempt to overlay a critical perspective based on thought, analysis, and research, on to what’s already happening.” He notes that it is only from this critical perspective that we can find the answers to why character assassination “seems to be so prominent, how to fight back, the ethical boundaries, and best practices for reputation management.”

Panels included historical and theoretical analysis, but mostly focused on contemporary issues surrounding character assassination and the many forms it can take in the modern media landscape. The majority of speakers and panelists concentrated on character attacks on political candidates, campaigns, or movements in the United States and abroad (including multiple presentations on the 2016 U.S. presidential election), but the gathering of scholars and practitioners also took on issues of reputation management for private individuals, publicly held companies, nonprofit organizations, and even terrorist groups.

Samoilenko says his favorite aspect of the conference was its inherent multidisciplinary nature. He jokes, “Where else can you find an expert on Cicero and an astrophysicist studying climate change on the same panel?”

Given her continued interest in the subject, communication major Mary Chris Cobb says she “jumped at the opportunity” to be a research assistant for the conference and was one of several Mason undergraduate and graduate students who attended. Aside from boosting her research and organizational skills, Cobb says, “My experience with [the CARP Research Lab] allows me to bring a different insight to my classmates as we discuss character attacks, social media posts, and communication theories. I have had stimulating conversations with students in and out of the classroom about the meaning of character assassination, reputation management, and where the phenomenon is headed. CARP is helping advance the study of communication and it is always exciting taking knowledge I have directly gained through CARP to my fellow Patriots.”

Following its conference success, the CARP Research Lab is already on to its next project. The information presented at the conference is now being synthesized into a white paper highlighting the main takeaways from the inaugural gathering. The research and best practices presented at the 2017 conference and elsewhere will also be collected and published as the *Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management*, edited by Samoilenko, Shiraev, Icks, and Keohane, and due to be published by Routledge in 2018.

The team also plans to hold its second conference in 2019, hopefully at a location abroad. It’s been an auspicious start for the CARP Research Lab and a good indicator of what’s to come.

KeepupwiththeCARPResearchLabthroughitswebsite at communication.gmu.edu/research-and-centers/carp, or on Twitter at @CARP_Lab.



Communication major Jeanne Abella was one of several undergraduate and graduate students who provided invaluable support during the CARP Research Lab 2017 conference.

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