

Lawfare and Mediafare as Character Attacks: The Cases of Ada Colau, Mónica Oltra and Irene Montero in Spain

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Abstract

Spanish politicians have endured numerous attacks on their reputation, led by conservative parties and extra-parliamentary actors linked to the far-right (Pozas, 2024; Urías, 2024). This article examines the media coverage of criminal lawsuits against progressive politicians in cases suspicious of lawfare. Lawfare and mediafare appear as two intertwining ways of character assassination. This is because lawfare is not unidirectional, but relational; it only works if the media echoes it (De-Pádua-Andrade, 2018). Media coverage gives lawsuits the necessary "massiveness" for the character assassination to be effective (Bielsa; Peretti, 2019). Even if the targets are deemed innocent, the target's reputation and that of their parties can be damaged forever, often destroying their political career. To account for the complex intertwining between lawfare and mediafare, we have conducted a content analysis of 354 news items from three quality newspapers that represent a wide ideological spectrum: *eldiario.es* (left-wing), *elpaís.com* (centrist) and *elmundo.es* (conservative) and added the ultraconservative *okdiario.com* (Guerrero-Solé, 2022; Palau-Sampio; López-García, n.d.; Pérez, 2021). The article examines three cases that legal experts have qualified as prototypical examples of lawfare (Martín-Pallín, 2023; Montaner, 2023; Urías, 2024). These are the cases of progressive female politicians Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality; Ada Colau, former Mayor of Barcelona, and Mónica Oltra, former vice-president of Valencia's regional government. The analysis shows that mediafare operates through *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* character attacks that question the politicians' reputation, credibility and emotional stability, leading to media rather than legal judgements of guilt. By portraying all politicians as corrupt, lawfare and mediafare contribute to the normalization of corruption and discredit of democratic politics.

Keywords

Character Assassination, Lawfare, Mediafare, Judicialization of Politics, Far-Right, Spain, Logos, Ethos, Pathos, Ada Colau, Mónica Oltra, Irene Montero.



1. Introduction

Spain has witnessed a national outcry after Begoña Gómez, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's wife, was indicted in a case of alleged corruption. This led Sánchez to declare himself a victim of a lawfare (**Europa Press**, 2024) campaign led by conservative and ultraconservative media and political forces (@sanchezcastejon, 2024a; 2024b). The lawsuit was filed by the pressure group *Manos Limpias* (Clean Hands), which presents itself as a trade union yet has far-right links and is known for its public support of Franco's dictatorship (**Serrano**, 2024). The far-right party *Vox* and the ultra-catholic association *Hazte Oír* joined as popular prosecution. Many saw Sánchez's case as the tipping point of a broader process of lawfare and mediafare aimed at disgracing progressive leaders' reputations and removing their parties from power. Years earlier, Pablo Iglesias (then Second Deputy Prime Minister) had already denounced a judicial, media and military conspiracy against *Podemos* (**Carvajal**, 2021). These examples highlight how the media intertwines with political and judicial powers. While often mentioned in academic analyses of lawfare, there is a lack of scholarly research focusing on mediafare itself and we know little about how it operates.

This article aims at shedding light into the media coverage of cases suspicious of lawfare in Spain, according to legal experts (**Martín-Pallín**, 2023; **Montaner**, 2023; **Uriás**, 2024). The case study focuses on lawsuits against three progressive women leaders: Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality (*Unidas Podemos*); Ada Colau, former Mayor of Barcelona (*Barcelona en Comú*), and Mónica Oltra, former Vice-President of the autonomous government of the Valencian Community (*Compromís*). The article is based on a quantitative content analysis of 354 news items published in four major newspapers across the ideological spectrum. Having endured lengthy legal proceedings and public exposure, all three leaders were declared innocent of all charges. However, their reputation had been severely damaged by then and, while it is impossible to establish a causal link, none remains in office. The data indicates that lawfare and mediafare constitute two intertwined types of character attacks based on the weaponization of the law and the media.

Lawfare here is not used as a synonym of judicial prevarication but as the strategic use of the courts in political disputes (**Uriás**, 2024). Lawfare is often discussed in the context of two broader phenomena, the politicization of the judiciary and the judicialization of politics. On the one hand, the politicization of the judiciary occurs when politicians try to turn the courts partisan. This can happen by appointing ideologically aligned judges to key positions, who will then make ideologically biased interpretations of the law (**Ferejohn**, 2002). For instance, US *Republicans* have aimed to install conservative justices in the *Supreme Court* by obstructing *Democrats'* nominees (**Yang**, 2024). A recent example is the *Supreme Court's* decision on Donald Trump's immunity thanks to the vote of the six conservative judges (**Supreme Court**, 2024). In Spain, progressive legal experts have accused the political, judicial, and economic (far)right of repeatedly obstructing the timely renewal of legal institutions (**Martín-Pallín**, 2023; **Uriás**, 2024). The *Constitutional Court* was renewed in December 2022 three months overdue, while parties reached an agreement to renew the *General Council of the Judiciary (CGPJ)*—responsible for ensuring judges' independence and electing those in the *Supreme Court*—in June 2024, when it was five years overdue. On the other hand, the judicialization of politics refers to the resolution of political disputes in the courts. One example is the use of litigation as a political strategy (**Dent**, 2023; **Ramos-Rollón**, 2021).

The judicialization of politics has reached such lengths that Pedro Sánchez's administration sought to pass legislation forbidding political parties from acting as popular prosecution. From a normative standpoint, lawfare is not confined to either side of the ideological spectrum. However, the left has claimed issue ownership of lawfare in Spain. Unlike other countries, only progressive and pro-Catalan independence leaders have denounced lawfare and mediafare campaigns in Spain. While Spanish cases suspicious of lawfare are relatively recent and yet to be analyzed in scholarly works, they have been explored by investigative journalists and legal experts (**Gálvez**, 2023; **Macías**, 2022; **Martín-Pallín**, 2023; **Montaner**, 2023; **Pozas**, 2024; **Uriás**, 2024).¹ This article examines the following research questions about the role of the media in lawfare:

RQ1: How do newspapers cover cases suspicious of lawfare in Spain?

RQ2: What role do newspapers play in damaging the defendants' reputations?

RQ3: Are there any differences in the coverage of newspapers with different editorial lines?

These questions are explored in the following sections, which provide the conceptual grounds for understanding character assassination, lawfare and mediafare, followed by a methodological section. The findings section analyses lawfare and mediafare along Aristotle's three modes of argumentation, following *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* character attacks, which are discussed in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Character Assassination

Character attacks constitute public and purposeful communicative acts aimed at destroying a person's reputation and credibility (**Vollenweider**; **Romano**, 2017). The main goal of character assassination attacks is to damage the reputation

¹ Conservative politicians accused of corruption have repeatedly denied being victims of lawfare in Spain (**Valencia Plaza**, 2024).

of the target by undermining public trust. While character is focused on somebody's personal traits, reputation is a matter of how public opinion makes sense of those traits. Reputation does not necessarily correspond to personality but refers to what others make out of this perceived personality. In character assassination, character attacks are aimed at influencing others' perception of a person's reputation. The individual and the collective dimensions of character attacks are closely linked. While character attacks are usually addressed to individuals, they often stand for a larger group as representatives of a specific ideology or practice. Character attacks usually draw from the targets' affiliation to a real or imagined group and the personality traits associated with it, such as race, ethnicity or gender. For instance, there is a body of literature examining the gendering of character attacks, such as the targets' gender or sexual identification. Gender and sexual orientation can shape both the nature of the attacks and public perceptions of their credibility (Shiraev *et al.*, 2021).

In the literature, character refers to a relatively stable set of a person's traits rooted in "a culture's moral, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional standards" (Samoilenko *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, character attacks can be addressed to the target's intellectual and professional abilities, social affiliations, practices, ethics and morality, and/or emotional stability (Icks; Shiraev, 2014). Works on character assassination have analyzed how Aristotle's modes of persuasion, particularly *ethos*, can serve as a means for character attacks (Samoilenko *et al.*, 2019). Character assassination can manifest through attacks on the targets' credibility and reputation (*ethos*), the use of apparently objective evidence backing the attacks (*logos*) and the mobilization of negative emotions against the target (*pathos*). *Logos* appeals to reason by providing proof of a person's qualities and abilities through evidence and logical argumentation. *Ethos* refers to the impression a person makes on the audience, and how this affects its perceived reputation and credibility. Therefore, ethics and morality are central to public perceptions of *ethos* (Smith; Eberly, 2021). Finally, *pathos* appeals to the audience's emotions and feelings, such as empathy, fear, or hatred. The literature has identified different types of character attacks that serve the purposes of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* argumentation (Samoilenko *et al.*, 2019). These include (1) insulting the target, (2) making allegations about its personality or behavioral shortcomings, (3) ridiculing or mocking any aspect of the target, (4) fearmongering by presenting the target as an enemy and a threat, (5) exposing the target's personality or behavioral misdeeds, such as immorality or crime, (6) disgracing the target by taking away its honor or status, performing public rituals of humiliation, and expelling it from its community, and (7) erasing the public visibility of the target.

The success of character assassination campaigns depends, in turn, on the credibility of the attacker. This credibility depends on the social perception of the source, its prestige, trustworthiness, and the possible hidden interests that it might have when conducting the attacks. This is relevant in cases suspicious of lawfare since the attacks are backed by judiciary procedures. The judiciary is a pillar of democracy and the second most trusted institution in Spain, scoring 4.98 out of 10 ahead of both the media (4.12) and political parties (3.82) (CIS, 2023). Even so, Spain is one of the European countries with the lowest perception of judicial independence—less than 40% of the population considers it good or fairly good (European Commission, 2024). Polls suggest that citizens' trust in the judiciary aligns with their voting behavior. While 70% of voters of *Sumar* (leftist coalition party) consider that there is a judiciary persecution of politicians, this percentage goes lower as we move towards the right—roughly half of *PSOE's* voters and one-fourth of conservative *PP's* voters believe so (Pinheiro; Sánchez, 2024). The following lines will examine the concepts of lawfare and mediafare and their use in character assassination campaigns. Lawfare and mediafare attempt to damage politicians' reputation by framing them as 'objectively' corrupt, since they operate under the umbrella of perceived judicial independence.

2.2. Lawfare Attacks

The term lawfare comes from military jargon and was first theorized within the field of International Relations. At the turn of the century, US Air Force Colonel Dunlap (2001) explained that foreign countries used the "law as a weapon of war" to discredit US-led military interventions abroad. Dunlap ended up redefining lawfare as a neutral strategy focused on the use of law as a substitute for traditional military actions for reaching operational goals (Ansah, 2011). These definitions indicate that lawfare has been strategic in the symbolic destruction of foreign enemies' reputations. However, the term lawfare is used to refer to both international and domestic contexts nowadays. One of the key debates in scholarly discussions about lawfare is whether it requires bad procedural faith (Montaner, 2023). This is complex since judges' complicity and "bad" faith can be difficult if not impossible to prove (Urías, 2024).² However, lawfare is not synonym neither implies judicial prevarication. Lawfare can be understood as "the abuse of legal instruments for purposes of political persecution, destruction of a public image, and disqualification of a political adversary". The abuse can be committed by the judges but also by other actors, such as political parties, the media, or third-sector organizations (Vollenweider; Romano, 2017).

² We share Uría's view of lawfare as not implying judicial prevarication. While most academic definitions tend to differentiate both concepts (Bielsa; Peretti, 2019; De-Pádua-Andrade, 2018; Gloppen, 2018; Vollenweider; Romano, 2017), there is still no scholarly agreement about the degree to which lawfare implies procedural bad faith (Martín-Pallín, 2023). For this reason, we prefer to refer to cases 'suspicious of' lawfare.

Previous studies have identified some of the ways in which lawfare operates. A key element consists of judges' opening proceedings based on insufficient or poor evidence. This is key because opening a case is a prerequisite and the very first step in a trial and implies that the judge sees some evidence about the targets' criminal conduct. Martín Pallín, a lawyer and emeritus judge of the Supreme Court, has criticized the misuse of the law by judges with political purposes.

Judges have the legal obligation to outright reject all lawsuits that are clearly unfounded and from which, due to their content, it can be inferred that their sole purpose is to achieve the opening of criminal proceedings, which will then be insistently amplified by the far-right media (Martín-Pallín, 2023). Another common strategy is the accumulation of lawsuits against a political leader or party, as well as the plaintiffs' efforts to extend the duration of the case. This is what Vegh Weis (2023) has called "dripping". The goals can be multiple: giving the impression that cases are piling up because the defendant is extremely corrupt, increasing the odds of finding a judge willing to open or reopen a case based on dubious evidence and, once the case is open, keeping a steady media interest. Political timing is another key strategy of lawfare (De-Pádua-Andrade, 2018). Lawsuits and litigation often follow a politically motivated timing, coinciding with key electoral contests. Whether judges are complicit or not, the plaintiffs can manipulate legal procedures, such as their right to appeal, "to maintain a judicial suspicion to the end" (Martín-Pallín, 2023). Another strategy of lawfare consists in the mobilization of negative public opinion through media campaigns (Tiefenbrun, 2010).

2.3. Mediafare Attacks

For Gløppen (2018), lawfare is a reactionary strategy based on the legalized contestation of political and social change. In this context, laws and courts become the scenario not just of a legal but also of a symbolic battle. The scholar differentiates between three types of legalized contestation: (1) legislative strategies based on appeals to laws and the constitution, (2) court-centered strategies based on the interpretation of existing laws and their enforcement and (3) social strategies focused on seeking or contesting change by mobilizing public opinion, including media, propaganda and advocacy campaigns. Mediafare is part of this third social strategy yet serves as a necessary condition for the successful development of the two others. In lawfare, it is not necessary to have a formal conviction to achieve the political death of the target (Vegh Weis, 2023). What matters is that a complaint is presented persuasively enough so it is 1) accepted by a judge, 2) covered by the media, and 3) able to gather public attention. Therefore, lawfare involves not only the judiciary but also the mobilization of other stakeholders. The pressure from the media, public opinion, and rival parties is often enough for the candidates to step down from their roles or to fall out of favor.

Lawfare, as a type of character assassination campaign, is not unidirectional but relational: it only works if the media echoes it (De-Pádua-Andrade, 2018). Media coverage is key in constructing the plaintiffs and the attacks as trustworthy, giving the case the necessary public visibility for the character assassination to be effective. "Without [its] massiveness, the discrediting is reduced to old village gossip" (Bielsa; Peretti, 2019). Mediafare (short for media warfare) refers to the role of the media in supporting, enabling, and amplifying cases suspicious of lawfare. Even if the defendants are deemed innocent, the media coverage of the lawsuits and the trial can construct frame the targets as criminals. "The publication of a photo taken at the courtroom door... under the heading 'new criminal charges against x' might be enough to disseminate the notion that the accused is guilty" (Vegh Weis, 2023). Furthermore, mediafare can contribute to the stereotyping and negative symbolization of the defendants, their parties and the ideological ideas that they defend.

While most definitions of lawfare include a reference to the media, seen as a necessary ally for its success, there is a scholarly gap in the study of mediafare. In the Spanish case, Macías (2022) analyzed *Twitter* posts about the so-called "Nanny Case", which involved Irene Montero. The journalist found over 400,000 *Twitter* posts since February 2021, 80% of which did not question the lawsuit. The most active accounts were conservative newspapers, especially *OKDiario* but also *El Mundo* or *El Confidencial*, as well as conservative parties and politicians. While these actors were highly vocal about the lawsuit, they remained silent once the judge filed the case. This led Macías (2022) to conclude that mediafare and lawfare operate through a strategic distribution of media attention: "hundreds of hours in talk shows, hundreds of news stories, hundreds or thousands of references during rallies and in Congress, hundreds of editorials" followed by silence when the targets are declared innocent. Irene Montero and Teresa Arévalo, also denounced the unequal media coverage of the case as a clear example of a "media persecution" (@IreneMontero, 2022). and "MEDIAFARE" (@Arevalo80MT, 2022).

3. Methodology

This paper analyzes the press coverage of three cases suspicious of lawfare in Spain, focusing on the role of the media in the character assassination of progressive women leaders in Spain. The case study focuses on three lawsuits against Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality (*Unidas Podemos*); Ada Colau, Barcelona's former mayor (*Barcelona en Comú*), and Mónica Oltra, former vice-president of Valencia's regional government (*Compromís*).

3.1. Sampling

The authors retrieved the coverage of the lawsuits from the digital versions of three quality newspapers that represent

a wide ideological spectrum: *eldiario.es* (left-wing), *elpaís.com* (center-left), and *elmundo.es* (conservative). Additionally, they included *okdiario.com* which, although not qualifying as quality media, represents the voice of the far-right. These criteria have been backed by recent studies. *Political Watch* (Pérez, 2021) analyzed newspapers' ideological position and trustworthiness based on an analysis of their media coverage. In the study, *okdiario.com* ranked as the most rightist media outlet and the only newspaper in Spain that clearly offered "selective, incomplete and unfair persuasion". The other three newspapers were seen as providing a mix of facts and analysis. In the study, *eldiario.es* ranked as the second most leftist outlet; *elpaís.com* was positioned at the center-left and *elmundo.es* at the center-right. There are also several national studies about readers' reported ideology and the newspapers they read. Palau-Sampio and López-García (n.d.) conducted a national survey in 2023 and found that *eldiario.es* and *elpaís.com* were mostly read by respondents on the left and the far left. *elmundo.es* was mostly read by respondents on the center and right of the ideological spectrum. Finally, *okdiario.com* was mostly read by respondents on the right and far-right sides of the spectrum. *Público's* analysis of the 2023 *CIS barometer* on media audiences also threw similar results (Morales, 2024).³ Finally, Guerrero-Solé (2022) measured the ideology of Spanish newspapers according to users' interactions on *Twitter* and found that *El País* was the most retweeted media outlet by *PSOE* and *Okdiario* by *Vox*. *ElMundo* was mostly retweeted by conservative parties *Ciudadanos*, *People's Party (PP)* and *Vox*, and *El Diario* by *Unidas Podemos* and *PSOE*.

In the first phase, we explored the use of the term "lawfare" in the four selected digital newspapers (*eldiario.es*, *elpais.com*, *elmundo.es*, *okdiario.com*) through a keyword search on *MyNews* between June 1st 2020 and June 1st 2024.⁴ The goal was to understand the context in which the term "lawfare" has been used and its main targets. We coded all news items and assigned them to a target group (the predominant one), even if it could contain references to several others. The table in Annex I illustrates how the term "lawfare" became popular in the context of the amnesty agreement negotiated between the Spanish *Socialist Party (PSOE)* and Catalan nationalist Parties. Most target groups referred to broad and heterogeneous movements and would not be suitable within a character assassination analytical framework. For this reason, we focused on the media coverage of lawsuits against *Compromís*, *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common) and *Podemos*. The first two cases were clearly personalised, focusing on attacks against Mónica Oltra and Ada Colau, respectively. In the case of *Podemos*, most of the coverage revolved around the so-called *Neurona* macro-case, which involved several leaders. Within this macro-case, we focused on Irene Montero. Existing literature has documented organized hate campaigns against her persona (Iranzo-Cabrera *et al.*, 2024; Sánchez-Meza *et al.*, 2023) and legal experts have identified Montero as target of lawfare and mediafare within the *Neurona* case (Macías, 2022; Mastrodomenico, 2024).

Once the case studies were selected, media coverage was followed from the day the news broke until the full/provisional legal ruling. The case of Irene Montero was followed from February 2, 2021 until July 30, 2022 (the day after the case was filed by the judge).⁵ The case of Ada Colau was followed from January 19 until November 25, 2022, when the judge declared her innocent. Finally, the case of Mónica Oltra was followed from June 16, 2022, until June 8, 2023, when the police released new evidence that supported her innocence. She was declared innocent in April 2024 in a widely publicized verdict, yet the far-right managed to reopen the case two months later (Marco, 2023).⁶ The coverage was retrieved through a keyword search on *MyNews* within the selected dates and newspapers. The researchers tried different keyword combinations and then selected those that yielded the highest hits. The selected keywords were "Montero+niñera" (nanny), "Oltra+abusos" (abuses), and "Colau+asociaciones" (charities). We first conducted an automated selection of hits that met the 50% relevance criteria on *MyNews*. The resulting pieces underwent a second round of manual qualitative evaluation. During this process, we discarded (1) redundant news stories and (2) irrelevant results that were not directly linked to the evolution of the judicial process but to secondary characters and subplots.⁷ A total number of 354 news items were analyzed (Montero N=166, Colau N=46, and Oltra N=142). Colau's lawsuit received the lowest media attention. This can be attributed to different reasons: the high number of lawsuits against her means that media coverage was more scattered. In addition to this, the administrative rather than personal nature of the lawsuit could have made it less appealing.

3.2. Coding

The data was analyzed using a quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2016) of media attacks. An "attack" is defined as any communicative act aimed at negatively impacting the public perception of an individual's character, ultimately harming their reputation. All news stories were manually coded through a combination of theory-

³ *CIS* stands for the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, or Sociological Research Center, depending on the Ministry of the Presidency, Relations with the Courts and Democratic Memory.

⁴ We conducted several searches by using the keyword "lawfare" and its most common translations in Spanish: "guerra judicial", "guerra jurídica", "persecución judicial". We selected "lawfare" for the study since it was more widely used throughout the papers.

⁵ Extending the search by a few more days did not yield any further results.

⁶ In Mónica Oltra's case, the judge declared her innocent of all charges in April 2024. However, two months later, Valencia's Provincial Court obliged the judge to reopen the case following an appeal led by far-right party *Vox*, former *Vox* leader Cristina Seguí, and the neo-fascist lawyer José Luis Roberto.

⁷ In the case of Mónica Oltra, the ultraconservative newspaper *okdiario.com* published a significant amount of news stories that were not directly linked to Oltra's lawsuit itself but to secondary actors and plots, such as her former husband and the guarded minor victim. These news stories were not included because they did not meet the second criteria.

driven and ad hoc open coding. In the initial phase, the researchers developed theory-driven codes based on existing literature related to lawfare and character assassination (**Samoilenko et al., 2019; Samoilenko et al., 2018; Simmons, 2021**). This provided a framework for identifying the types of attacks that the attackers could launch against their targets. However, it was hard to predict what the media would do of those attacks given the lack of scholarly works on mediafare. Consequently, the researchers conducted a second phase of inductive research, using an ad hoc open coding derived from a close reading of the data.

Table 1: Coded Types of Character Attacks, Author's Own Elaboration. When Attacks are Common to All Three Cases, they Appear in Bold. When they Appear in Two Cases, they Appear in Italics.

Type of Character Attack	Mode of Persuasion	Target	Categories
Coverage	<i>Logos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Amount
Political Timing	<i>Logos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Dripping	<i>Logos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Erasing	<i>Logos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Presumption of Innocence	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Fearmongering (source of fear, hatred, disgust)	<i>Pathos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Immoral/ unethical traits or behavior	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Disgracing and taking status away	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Attacks on credibility /reliability/ lack of transparency	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Attacks on authenticity (saying vs. doing)	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
Ridiculing in pictures	<i>Pathos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent/ Present
Attacks on emotional state	<i>Pathos</i>	Montero, Colau, Oltra	Absent / Present
<i>Insults and attacks on personality</i>	<i>Pathos</i>	Montero, Oltra	Absent/ Present
<i>Attacks on feminism</i>	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero, Oltra	Absent / Present
Anti-men	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero	Absent / Present
Sexist attacks	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero	Absent / Present
Class-based attacks	<i>Ethos</i>	Montero	Absent / Present
Attacks on ideology	<i>Ethos</i>	Colau	Absent / Present

Table 2: Case Studies and Lawsuits.

Leader	Party and Role	Timing and Charges	Plaintiff	Context
Irene Montero	Unidas Podemos Minister of Equality	2 February 2021-29 July 2022 Misappropriation of public money. Using a personal adviser from the Ministry of Equality as a private nanny	-Former Podemos lawyer Popular accusation: -Far-right party Vox -Conservative association Juristas Prolege	In April 2021, a former lawyer of Podemos sent a letter to the judge instructing the Neurona Case, which investigated the possible illegal funding of the party. In the letter, she stated that Irene Montero used a personal adviser from the Ministry of Equality, paid with public money, as a personal nanny. Montero was not indicted due to her immunity.
Ada Colau	Barcelona en Comú Mayor of the Giving subsidies to Barcelona	19 January-25 November 2022 Giving subsidies to charities connected to her without a public tender	-Failed previous attempt by the conservative lobby Abogados Catalanes por la Constitución -ATCD, Opaque Association for Transparency and Democratic Quality	Colau received 15 criminal lawsuits and complaints while in office and faced the 2023 municipal elections with five of them still open. She also received over 1800 administrative complaints since 2015 (twice as many as former administrations). Colau was accused of giving generous subsidies to charities connected to her without holding a public tender. The lawsuit was identical to one filed one year earlier by another opaque association, and which had been dismissed by a judge.
Mónica Oltra	Compromís Vice-president and Minister for Equality and Inclusive Policies of the Valencian government.	16 June 2022- 2 April 2024; reopened the 20 June 2024. (The 8 June 2023 new evidence supporting her innocence was released, only a week after the regional elections) Using her Ministry for covering up her ex-husband's sexual abuses to a warded minor	-Failed attempt by a Oltra was sued in June 2022 by a conservative association led by former Vox' leader Cristina Seguí -Victim of sexual abuses, represented by José Luis Roberto, lawyer and leader of the neo-Nazi group España 2000 Popular accusation: - Vox joins the popular accusation - Vox, Seguí and Roberto manage to force the judge to reopen the case	Oltra was sued in June 2022 by a warded minor, accused of allegedly tracing a purposeful plan for covering up the sexual abuses that her ex-husband committed against the minor, and for which he was convicted. After enduring great media and political pressure, she was forced to resign a few days later.

The resulting codes were classified into two main categories. The first category examines the media coverage of the judicial processes. This codes aspects such as the extent of coverage, political timing, dripping, erasure and adherence to the presumption of innocence. The second category concentrates on the media portrayals of the defendants and aims at identifying instances of character attacks. The codes encompass fearmongering, ethical and moral attacks, attempts to disgrace the targets, challenges to their credibility and authenticity, mockery, assaults on their emotional stability, insults, gendered attacks, class-based attacks, and ideological critiques. The table below illustrates the final coding categories. Each of the three researchers conducted an initial intercoder reliability test independently and separately on a sample of 15.5% of the news items (N=55), out of a total corpus of 354. These articles were randomly selected and proportionally distributed according to the specific corpus of each case (Montero N=25, Oltra N=21,

and Colau N=9). The reliability calculation was performed using the ReCal3 0.1 software (Freelon, 2013). The resulting Krippendorff Alpha coefficients were $\alpha=0.81$, with an 88.9% coding agreement in the Irene Montero corpus; $\alpha=0.86$, with a 91.4% coding agreement for Ada Colau's corpus, and $\alpha=0.84$, with an 89.9% coding agreement for Mónica Oltra's corpus.

4. Findings

This article has analyzed the media coverage of lawsuits against progressive female politicians in Spain in cases suspicious of lawfare. The data indicates that lawfare and mediafare operate as two intertwined types of character attacks. In consequence, the targets become victims of a twofold harassment in courts and in the media. The following lines explore how *eldiario.es*, *elpaís.com*, *elmundo.es* and *okdiario.com* covered character attacks against Irene Montero, Ada Colau, and Mónica Oltra in the context of key lawsuits addressed against them. The data is organized according to Aristotle's modes of persuasion. The findings first explore *logos* attacks aimed at providing apparently objective evidence and arguments against the targets; these are followed by *ethos* attacks aimed at damaging the target's public credibility and reputation and *pathos* attacks focused on provoking a negative emotional response in the audience (Samoilenko et al., 2019). The three types of attacks are intertwined since the defendants can use emotionality as a way of damaging the politicians' reputation while providing what looks like objective evidence of their guilt. While interconnected, the distinction is useful for identifying the main character element that is under attack.

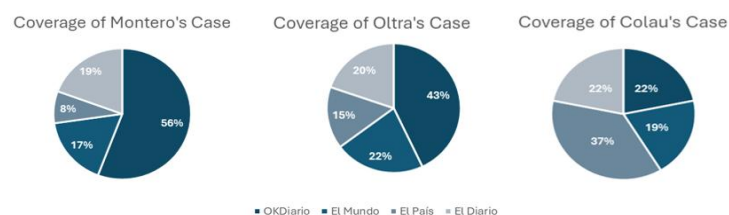
4.1. Logos Attacks

Logos attacks consist of using apparently objective and reliable data and arguments in character assassination campaigns. This can be done through various strategies, using data and statistics, presenting material or immaterial evidence, expert evaluation and analysis, correlations, or just logical arguments. This section looks at four interrelated types of *logos* attacks: (1) political timing, (2) media coverage, (3) procedural normalcy, and (4) erasing. It is important to highlight that all newspapers covered the lawsuits and all of them published attacks against the targets. However, this varies significantly from paper to paper.

Lawfare attacks follow a strategic political timing aimed at causing the greatest reputational damage. Timing shares two main goals: impacting elections and extending the length of the process –a strategy also known as dripping. In terms of electoral damage, the lawsuit against Irene Montero saw the light three months before Madrid's 2021 regional elections, Ada Colau ran for the 2023 municipal elections with five open cases (and six already dismissed). Finally, in Oltra's case, the judge held a crucial police report that exonerated her from the main charges and only released it after the 2023 municipal and autonomous elections, even though it was ready two weeks prior. In terms of dripping, the attackers can use judiciary procedures to pile up evidence, indictments and cases against the targets, or to simply appeal court decisions. By combining strategic political timing and dripping, the plaintiffs can generate a steady flow of information that keeps the case on the front page, constantly generating debate.

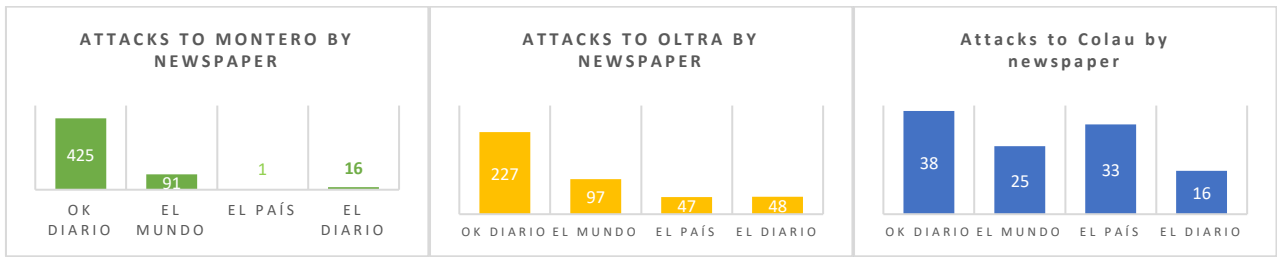
The data suggests that mediafare operates through strategic coverage, foregrounding or backgrounding the lawsuits along editorial interests. While coverage could be interpreted as logical, based on the duty to inform readers, the data finds a correlation between higher coverage and a higher number of attacks. This suggests that coverage can constitute a type of mediafare attack on itself inasmuch it amplifies the reach and magnitude of the lawsuits. Since the lawsuits are based on the text of the complaints, uncritical coverage helps disseminate the attackers' message.

The findings point to a disproportionate coverage of lawsuits against political leaders that challenge the papers' editorial line. The ultraconservative *okdiario.com* published around half of all news items about the Montero and Oltra cases. The paper also contained a significantly higher number of character attacks, perpetrating twice as many attacks than *elmundo.es* in the case of Oltra, and four times as many in the case of Montero. Ada Colau also received the highest number of attacks from *okdiario.com*. However, it is worth noting that *elpaís.com*, despite its center-left editorial line, led the coverage of Colau's case and ranked second in terms of attacks.⁸ The charts 1, 2 & 3 illustrate the coverage and total number of character attacks by newspapers.



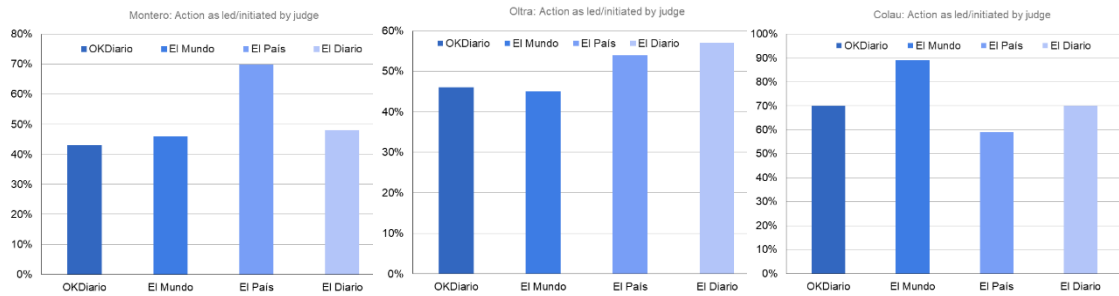
Charts 1, 2 and 3: Percentage of coverage by case and newspaper.

⁸ The charts are color-coded according to the newspapers' editorial line, with the darkest shade of blue representing the ultraconservative *okdiario.com*, and the lightest one the leftist *eldiario.es*.



Charts 4, 5 and 6: The total number of attacks on the targets by newspaper.

The data indicates that *logos* attacks appeal to procedural normalcy and, by doing so, can erase any traces of the original plaintiff. In this context, lawfare functions as a hit-and-run strategy by which the attackers skillfully manipulate media and public attention. Once the cases are in court, the plaintiffs are no longer the focus of attention, the defendants are. Lawfare campaigns use the media to foreground and overexpose the targets yet background the attackers, their role and their possible motives. In the case studies, all three lawsuits involved conservative associations, and the far-right party *Vox* joined as popular accusation in Montero and Oltra’s case (see Table 2). However, these are barely acknowledged in the coverage. Media erasure is widespread in all newspapers and is often more prominent in progressive ones, which seem more prone to appeal to procedural normalcy. The charts 7, 8 & 9 illustrate media coverage that presents the judiciary, rather than the plaintiffs, as leading the litigation.



Charts 7, 8 and 9: Show the Erasure of the Plaintiffs from Media Coverage.⁹

“The Provincial Court of Madrid orders the judge of the Neurona case to investigate the nanny case” (*El Diario*, 2022a), reads a headline, while backgrounding that this is in response to an appeal made by the far-right popular prosecution. Other examples can be seen below:

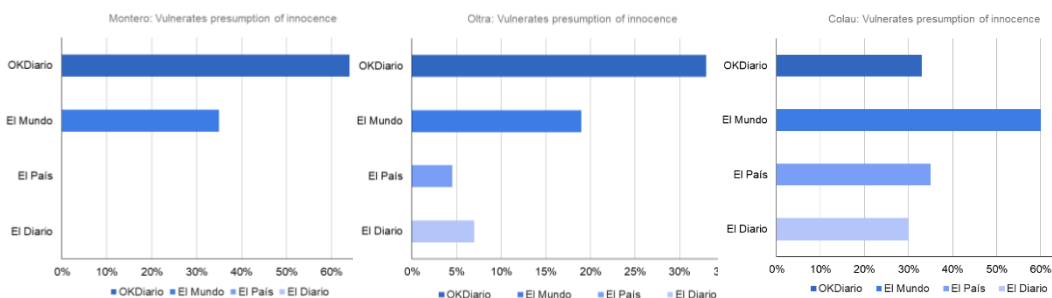
okdiario.com: “A *Barcelona* court has summoned Mayor Ada Colau on March 4, under investigation for several corruption offences” (*Guirado*, 2022).

elmundo.es: “Mónica Oltra, in the hands of a *meticulous judge* who seeks ‘the real truth’” (*Lidón*, 2022).

elpais.com: “The judge indicts the treasurer and the manager of Podemos for the ‘nanny’ case” (*Gálvez*, 2021).

eldiario.es: “Nanny case overturned: court invalidates all investigations” (*Eldiario.es*, 2021).

Finally, by violating the defendants’ presumption of innocence, the media perpetrate an attack that portrays them as guilty. This shows that the cases are judged in the media well before the judge has issued a clear ruling despite weak or dubious evidence.¹⁰



Charts 10, 11 and 12: Showing the Percentage of News Stories that Violate the Leaders’ Presumption of Innocence.

⁹ We coded news stories with (a) headlines focusing on the role of the judiciary and (b) no trace of the plaintiffs in the text.

¹⁰ Charts 10, 11 and 12 illustrate instances in which the politicians’ legal right to a presumption of innocence is clearly violated. However, the data does not reflect other cases in which such innocence is questioned by uncritically citing the text of the criminal complaint, statements by the plaintiffs or other oppositional leaders.

The data reveals that conservative papers are more prone to violate the defendants’ presumption of innocence. Montero’s innocence is violated in one third of *elmundo.es*’ news items, reaching two thirds in *okdiario.com*. Once again, *elpais.com*’s coverage of Colau differs from that of the other leaders and her presumption of innocence is violated in one out of three news stories, just as many as in *okdiario.com*. In Oltra’s case, this type of attack is less prominent but still significant in the conservative press. In the following example, *elmundo.es* forgets to mention the alleged nature of Oltra’s charges in the headline: “Mónica Oltra resigns from the Valencian Government and the Valencian Parliament following her indictment for covering up sexual abuse by her ex-husband” (De-la-Torre, 2022b).

4.2. Ethos Attacks

Ethos attacks are the most common type of mediafare attacks. The *ethos* of a politician refers to the skills, experiences, and personal characteristics that make a person seem credible. *Ethos* can be constructed through appeals to the target’s personality, professionalism, authenticity, or style, among others, as well as the attributes and behaviors expected from them. We have coded five types of *ethos* attacks: 1) credibility, 2) authenticity, 3) ethics and morality, 4) disgracing, and attacks based on the leaders’ 5) membership to specific groups. Politicians must convince their followers that they are truly who they claim to be if they want to be trusted. The data reveals that the most common character attacks are conducted against the targets’ claimed credibility and authenticity. Newspapers portray Montero, Otra and Colau as inauthentic, having changed their stance once in power or saying one thing and doing another. These attacks are constructed by identifying inconsistencies in the leaders’ narrative. For instance, they are accused of campaigning for other politicians to step down if indicted but not wanting to do so themselves. The underlying idea of these attacks is to construct the targets just as corrupt as the rest. This has significant implications for normalizing corruption and destroying any hopes of an honest political leadership.

Irene Montero’s credibility is questioned by highlighting incongruences between her ideals as Minister of Equality and her personal life. The ultraconservative *okdiario.com* accused the then Minister of Equality of having a sexist and violent partner, referring to Pablo Iglesias, then Second Deputy Prime Minister (Liberal Enfurruñada, 2021; Sela, 2021). In Oltra’s case, there is a recurring portrayal of her as a liar. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from *elmundo.es*, questioning what she knew about her ex-husband’s sexual abuses: “The prosecutor, in the face of Monica Oltra’s evasive responses: ‘For more than two years you knew nothing of this serious accusation to the father of your children?’” (Lidón; De la Torre, 2022). Finally, Ada Colau is also accused of lying, trying to avoid testifying despite promising transparency. In the following excerpt, the judge “Rejects the appeal filed by the mayor to avoid testifying, despite promising that she would go and give explanations” (González, 2022b).

Questioning the leaders’ ethics and morality is also a common character attack. For instance, the far-right media portrays Montero as “cynical” and immoral (OKDiario, 2022e). Colau is framed as morally dubious for allegedly encouraging the judge to indict her councilors and not herself (Gómez, 2022). In Oltra’s case, it is the “moral superiority of the left” that is questioned as a whole (Díez, 2022). In addition to attacks on their morality, the leaders are also shamed for allegedly breaching their party’s ethical code. This is the main type of character attack against Ada Colau. “Salary caps or public agendas. Colau’s code of ethics clashes with reality,” states a headline from *elpais.com* (Blanchar, 2022). In Oltra’s case, it is the third most common attack and it can be seen in headlines such as this one “Mazón (leader from the conservative People’s Party) asks *Compromís* to clarify if its code of ethics is still in force” (El Diario, 2022b). It is precisely because the leaders are framed as morally corrupt that they can be imagined as politically corrupt. The alleged lack of ethics and morality functions as a prerequisite for corruption, creating a false yet powerful correlation between their supposed personal flaws and their fitness for politics.

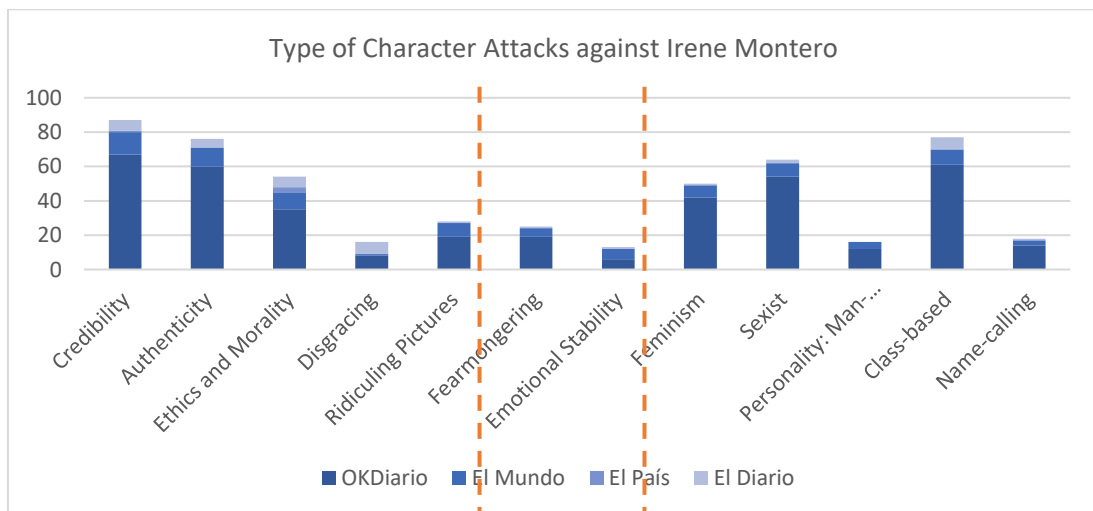


Chart 13: Type of ATTACKS AGAINST Irene Montero, by NEWSPAPER.

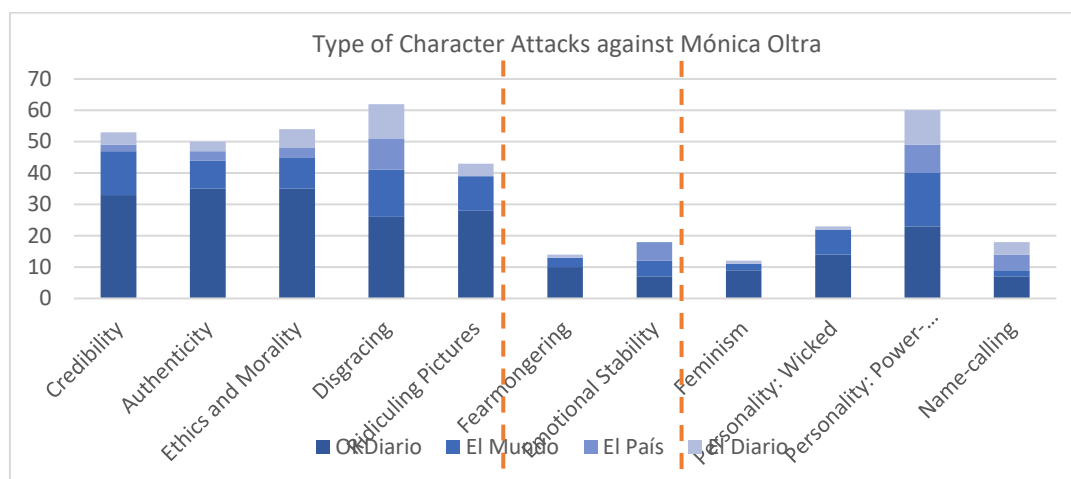


Chart 14. Type of attacks against Mónica Oltra, by newspaper.

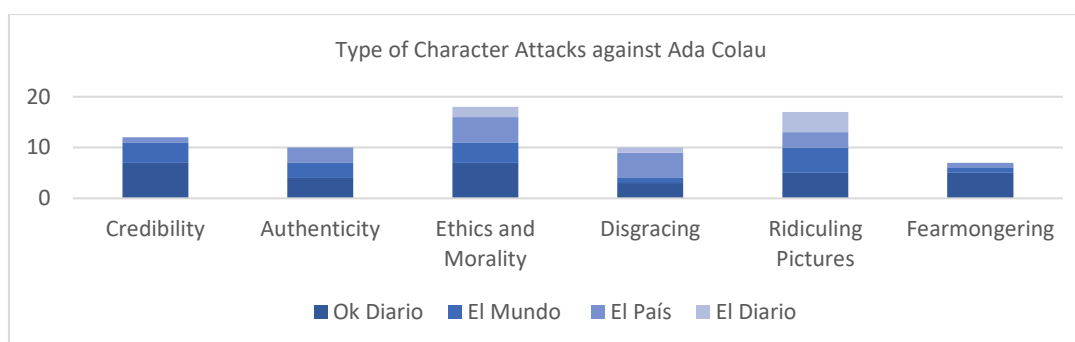


Chart 15: Type of Attacks Against Ada Colau, by Newspaper.

Character attacks on Montero, Oltra and Colau's lack of ethics go hand in hand with disgracing campaigns. Disgracing is a pervasive attack across ideological lines, echoed even in progressive newspapers. The media spread of disgracing attacks operates by uncritically reproducing the opposition's requests for the defendants to resign. Conservative and far-right leaders led a noisy campaign against Oltra and Colau, questioning their integrity and that of their parties. Disgracing was the most common character attack against Oltra, and she ended up stepping down due to what she called a campaign of "political, judicial and media infamy" (García Santamaría *et al.*, 2024). The case of Montero was slightly different because she was never formally indicted due to her immunity as Minister of Equality. While there were opposition leaders who asked her to step down, disgracing took place mainly through the opening of a congressional investigation against her.

Finally, *ethos* attacks also focused on the leaders' membership to specific groups. These attacks were almost exclusive of the far-right newspaper *okdiario.com*, with some instances in *elmundo.es*. The data found instances of gendered attacks that framed the targets as fake feminists. The far-right media constructed Irene Montero (then Spain's Minister of Equality) and Mónica Oltra (then Minister of Equality of the Valencian Government) as fake progressive leaders and fake representatives of women, thus inauthentic. The conservative media questioned Mónica Oltra's feminism for allegedly neglecting the victim of her ex-husband's sexual abuse, and siding with male abusers. This can be seen in the following excerpt, quoting a female leader from the conservative *People's Party (PP)*: "Ayuso reveals the real Oltra: 'A supposedly feminist woman who protects and hides the abuse of a minor'" (OKDiario, 2022a). Montero received the highest number of gendered attacks, perhaps due to her ministerial role. She was also the only leader who was framed as anti-men, leading policies that purposely threatened men's rights. Montero was framed as a privileged woman using an army of servants at her service, including several nannies, as can be seen in the excerpt below:

But what conception do these people have of women's equality? What the Minister of Equality did was precisely denigrate three women, who were used as domestic servants and subjected to her whims. (OKDiario, 2022c).

Irene Montero was the sole leader to receive class-based attacks. While they appeared in almost 50% of the coverage, they concentrated on the conservative press. She was accused of being a fake feminist but also a fake leftist, abandoning the people and joining the political caste. The coming to power of a party that nourished itself and created its social bases by denouncing a corrupt establishment has corroborated that its goal was not to end the privileges of what they called the "caste", but to co-opt them (El Mundo, 2021).

4.3. Pathos Attacks

When we examine gendered attacks, both *ethos* and *pathos* intertwine as modes of persuasion. Therefore, they should

be further contextualized within gendered debates that position women as too emotional and, thus, unfit for politics. All three case studies contain traces of sexist and essentializing narratives that frame women as too emotional, to the point that their emotions can override rational choices. The data shows that media *pathos* attacks focused on three strategies: ridiculing, insulting and fearmongering.



Images 1, 2 and 3. Emotional depictions of Irene Montero in *Okdiario.com* (Baena, 2022), Ada Colau in *eldiario.es* (Solé-Altimira, 2022b) and Mónica Oltra in *elmundo.es* (De-la-Torre, 2022b).

The data shows that all newspapers questioned the leaders' emotional stability. In the case of Montero, this amounted to 25% of all news items. All newspapers published ridiculing images of the leaders while seemingly experiencing extreme joy, shame, or despair. These extreme emotions played a relevant role in the construction of their guilt. Mónica Oltra was mocked for dancing in a public reaffirmation act a few days after her indictment. Dancing was framed as proof of her emotional instability and lack of touch with the gravity of the situation.



Image 4: Mónica Oltra Dancing.

With a standing ovation for their leader, hugs, and a music band, as if nothing had happened, they danced to the rhythm of the music in a true act of reaffirmation (De-la-Torre, 2022a). While insults are a clear example of *pathos* attacks due to their temperamental and emotional appeal, direct name-calling was rare in the press. The only leader who received direct insults was Irene Montero, and only in conservative papers. Montero was framed as being cheeky and a dork (Gil, 2021; *OKDiario*, 2021), unburdened (*OKDiario*, 2021), and making a fool of herself: "You can't be more of an asshole than Minister Montero" (*OKDiario*, 2022d). All these insults were linked to her personality. While Mónica Oltra only received direct insults on a few occasions, she was portrayed as a power-hungry and wicked leader who purposely hurt the victim of her ex-husband's sexual assault to protect her reputation and hold onto power. Oltra's alleged crime was framed in the conservative media as equivalent to the sexual abuses committed by her ex-husband. She was accused of being a despicable human being: "We're facing a particularly reprehensible case" (*El Mundo*, 2022), or "A behavior that is 'simply vomituous and disgusting', concluded the director of *OKDIARIO*" (*OKDiario*, 2022b).

Finally, fearmongering constructed Montero, Colau, and Oltra as sources of fear, hatred, and disgust. This was achieved by linking the defendants to causes or groups able to instill fear. In the case of Irene Montero, both herself and *Unidas Podemos* were framed as illiberal communists and compared to authoritarian leaders and states (Venezuela, Iran), as well as to the terrorist group ETA. Fearmongering was most common in the ultraconservative paper *okdiario.com*. However, the left-leaning press also contributed to fearmongering by unproblematically reproducing the fearful statements of conservative leaders. The excerpts below illustrate how fearmongering was used in *okdiario.com* and *eldiario.es*: "Podemos trivializes violence," Begoña Villacís, a member of the conservative party *Ciudadanos*, said. The language they use reminds her of the language used by the PNV or Batasuna when justifying terrorism (Gil, 2021).

Podemos is a "communist and populist" force that "beat" Sánchez in some territories a year ago. "There is no European government with a minister or vice-president as radical as Pablo Iglesias," he added (Pablo Casado, leader of the conservative *PP*, quoted in *Eldiario.es* (2021)). Finally, Colau was portrayed as close to groups often mobilized in culture wars, such as the LGBTIQ+ and feminist movements and pro-animal rights and environmental activists (Pomares; Gómez, 2022). Fearmongering mostly focused on Colau's support of the squatting movement, linked to her pro-housing activism. This can be seen in the following excerpts from *elmundo.es* and *eldiario.es*: "The court investigates whether Ada Colau encouraged 'squatting' by subsidizing an entity that provides guidance on housebreaking" (González, 2022a) or "the document includes subsidies and political criticism to the city council for 'advising' squatters" (Solé-Altimira, 2022a).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the media coverage of three cases suspicious of lawfare in Spain. The analysis has looked at key lawsuits against progressive leaders Irene Montero, former Minister of Equality (*Unidas Podemos*); Mónica Oltra, former Vice-President of the autonomous government of the Valencian Community (*Compromís*) and Ada Colau, former Mayor of Barcelona (*Barcelona en Comú*). The analysis reveals that lawfare and mediafare are two intertwined parts of character assassination campaigns aimed at damaging the reputation of their targets and removing them from the electoral contest. This was achieved by launching court-centered (lawfare) attacks that were then echoed and amplified through media-centered (mediafare) strategies (Gloppen, 2018; Vollenweider; Romano, 2017).

The existence of procedural bad faith is not a prerequisite of lawfare (Urías, 2024). The plaintiffs can skillfully use legal procedures to manipulate the judiciary and to attract media attention without the purposeful complicity of judges (Tiefenbrun, 2010; Vollenweider; Romano, 2017) or journalists. The degree to which the judiciary and the media are complicit in lawfare and mediafare is hard, if not impossible, to prove. However, it is possible to examine the role of the media in lawfare by analyzing the coverage of key cases. In Spain, cases suspicious of lawfare have been linked to the far right (Pozas, 2024; Urías, 2024). However, mediafare goes beyond the conservative press. All newspapers participated in the character assassination campaign of the defendants, damaging their reputations. By doing so, they amplified the reach and impact of the attacks. This demonstrates the centrality of mediafare in lawfare and the importance of understanding how media coverage operates (RQ1).

The analysis shows that newspapers have been complicit in lawfare by framing progressive leaders as a threat to democracy while backgrounding the plaintiffs, thus obscuring the ideological and economic interests behind lawsuits. While the type of attack varied from one case to another, all three leaders suffered attacks on their credibility, authenticity, ethics and morality. To a lesser point, they were also ridiculed, humiliated and pressured to step down from power (RQ2). While all newspapers perpetrated attacks, those varied from case to case. Attacks concentrated in conservative newspapers and were more sporadic in progressive ones (RQ3). The ultraconservative *okdiario.com* led the amount of coverage and number of attacks, followed by the conservative *elmundo.es*.

Examining case by case, attacks against Irene Montero (*Unidas Podemos*) were almost exclusively perpetrated by conservative newspapers. Besides the shared types of attacks, the leaders also suffered case-specific ones. Montero received a considerable number of sexist attacks and was framed as a fake feminist. She was also framed as being changed by power, and part of the same privileged elite that she criticized. Mónica Oltra (*Compromís*) also suffered a character assassination campaign led by conservative newspapers. However, she was the leader most attacked by progressive newspapers. Oltra was framed as a power-hungry and emotionally unstable leader who had to step down from power. Therefore, she was a victim of disgracing attacks aimed at expelling her from the electoral game and politics altogether. Disgracing her enabled one of the plaintiffs –far-right party *Vox*– to take power through a new coalition government with the conservative *People's Party (PP)*. Finally, Ada Colau received the lowest number of attacks. Colau was framed as an unethical leader who had abandoned her ideals once in power and was also ridiculed in pictures.

It is worth noting that the leftist newspaper *elpais.com* came second in terms of coverage, number of attacks and the questioning of Colau's innocence. While the newspaper never violated Montero's innocence, it violated Colau's in a third of news items. Furthermore, the analysis has identified only one attack against Irene Montero versus 33 against Ada Colau. A possible explanation is that both Oltra and Montero were in coalition governments with the left-centre socialist party (*PSOE*), which has been identified as ideologically close to *El País* (Guerrero-Solé, 2022; Morales, 2024; Palau-Sampio; López-García, n.d.; Pérez, 2021). Yet, Ada Colau belonged to *Barcelona en Comú*, a rival of the *Catalan Socialist Party (PSC)*. Therefore, she could be perceived as a threat to the paper's editorial interests.

Previous literature has examined character assassination through *ethos* attacks on the targets' credibility (Samoilenko *et al.*, 2019). However, this article goes beyond the state-of-the-art by exploring how *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* attacks worked together. Mediafare relied on *logos* attacks based on apparently objective, unbiased, and logical evidence. We identified four types of *logos* attacks based on 1) political timing, 2) strategic media coverage, 3) appeals to procedural normalcy, and 4) erasing. The data indicates that all three lawfare campaigns were launched in moments of high political impact (De-Pádua-Andrade, 2018) and that media coverage was also strategically calculated. The data shows a biased coverage that magnifies the charges against leaders ideologically opposed to the newspapers' editorial line. High media coverage correlated with more attacks and a systematic violation of the targets' presumption of innocence. Yet, newspapers kept silent when the leaders were acquitted of all charges. Therefore, the unequal distribution of media coverage constituted a type of attack on itself.

Newspapers framed the legal proceedings through the lenses of procedural normalcy, despite their prolongation and the judges' recognition of a lack of clear evidence. This went hand in hand with a backgrounding of the plaintiffs and their ulterior motives (Vegh Weis, 2023). In lawfare, the plaintiffs are also the attackers. However, the media focus on the legal proceedings meant that the plaintiffs were able to launch the attacks and disappear from the public eye. Therefore, *logos* attacks constructed a reversed narrative that portrayed the attackers as defenders of democratic checks

and balances rather than manipulating them. While pro-democratic leaders are framed as corrupt, economic lobbies, far-right parties and the ultraconservative press are presented as watchdogs that help ensure democratic well-being by conducting regular checks and balances on the political class.

A second strand of media attacks focused on the targets' *ethos*, damaging Irene Montero, Mónica Oltra, and Ada Colau's reputation. This was done by systematically questioning their 1) credibility and 2) authenticity, as well as their 3) moral and ethical standards with the goal of 4) disgracing the leaders and pushing them to resign. Finally, all three leaders' 5) identity was questioned through gendered and class-based attacks. Attacks on ethics and morality go hand in hand with media attacks to the leaders' authenticity and credibility. The targets are constructed as fake and unreliable, having been changed by power and betraying their own ideals. Apparent inconsistencies in trivial statements are used as evidence of them lying. By portraying Irene Montero, Mónica Oltra, and Ada Colau as leaders who are as corrupt as the rest, the media contributes to the normalization of corruption, presented as inherent to politics. This intensifies the discrediting of politics, the intensification of citizens' cynicism, and the support of actors who wish to operate at the margins of democratic checks and balances.

Character attacks can target various aspects, such as the defendants' moral principles and emotional resilience (**Icks et al.**, 2019; **Samoilenko et al.**, 2019). This paper has found that *ethos* and *pathos* go hand by hand in cases of gendered attacks. While the literature has explored the existence of specific gendered character attacks (**Shiraev et al.**, 2021), the data provides interesting insights into how the media contributed to a gendered character assassination of the leaders. All media outlets participated in the ridiculing of the three women politicians, often portraying them as too emotional. This was done by publishing pictures of them while apparently experiencing strong emotions. The leaders' alleged excess of emotionality can be interpreted as blinding rational thought, affecting public perceptions of their credibility (**Shiraev et al.**, 2021). Furthermore, this framework fits within broader narratives that portray women as unfit for or even a danger to politics.

The data shows that there are distinctively conservative ways of assassinating the targets' reputation. Gendered attacks appeared almost exclusively in conservative newspapers. Gendered attacks were pervasive in the coverage of lawsuits against Irene Montero and Mónica Oltra but not in the case of Ada Colau. It is worth noting that Montero and Oltra were the national and Valencia's regional Ministers of Equality, respectively. However, they were attacked for being fake feminists who bragged about gender equality while reproducing gendered stereotypes and hurting other women along the way. This is not to say that Colau has not been victim of gendered attacks but that they did not appear in the media coverage of this specific lawsuit. One explanation could be that gendered attacks are more likely to appear in cases that are related to political leaders' private lives rather than cases that have a more administrative nature.

Conservative newspapers were more likely to question Irene Montero's class belonging, attacking her for having abandoned the people and joined the political caste. Insults and fearmongering were also used in conservative newspapers but very rarely appeared in the leftist press. Newspapers *okdiario.com* and *elmundo.es* used the leaders' progressive ideological leaning as a way of linking them to authoritarian regimes such as Iran or Venezuela, the Catalan pro-independence movement, squatters, and even terrorism and organized crime. The most common types of character attacks in the progressive press consisted of disgracing and questioning their ethics and morality. The leaders were framed as having to resign, something that would expel them from their positions and perhaps from the electoral game. The defendants were criticized for not doing so (Montero and Colau) –or for taking too long (Oltra) and were accused of breaching their party's ethical codes.

This article has contributed to better understanding an under-researched phenomenon, the role of the media in cases suspicious of lawfare. However, it presents certain limitations in terms of scope. Despite its comparative nature, the findings could be specific to these cases and cannot be generalizable to other contexts. The article does not examine accusations of lawfare in the context of the Catalan pro-independence movement, which has received significant media coverage. From a normative standpoint, lawfare and mediafare are not confined to either side of the ideological spectrum and do not only affect women. It is also important, then, to analyze how the media produces and reproduces character attacks against conservative and male politicians. Another relevant comparison could look at how different types of media, with their unique affordances, contribute to mediafare, with a special focus on social media. Finally, the complicity of the media in character assassination campaigns can have a significant impact on public opinion and voting behavior (**Bielsa; Peretti**, 2019; **De-Pádua-Andrade**, 2018). Therefore, further research needs to explore the impact of lawfare and mediafare character assassination campaigns on public opinion and voting behavior.

Used as a political weapon, both lawfare and mediafare can operate as part of broader character assassination campaigns (**Bielsa; Peretti**, 2019; **Samoilenko et al.**, 2019). Their ultimate goal is to influence public opinion and modify voting behavior (**Sigelman; Shiraev**, 2002). If the campaigns work, the targets will step down from their roles and/or fall out of grace. As Oltra's case demonstrates, this enables the plaintiffs/attackers and those ideologically close to conquer new spaces of power. Lawfare and mediafare could be used for counter-hegemonic purposes. However, they can have

disastrous consequences when far-right parties and economic lobbies manipulate the judiciary and the media in a quest to normalize corruption and erode citizens' trust in democratic politics.

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6. Annexes

Annex I: Sampling of case studies.

Target group	<i>El Diario</i>	<i>El País</i>	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>OKDiario</i>	TOTAL	Reason for inclusion/exclusion
Catalan Independence Movement	66	33	64	45	208	Involves possible cases against a whole movement, rather than a specific target.
International Cases	21	9	9	4	43	Outside of the article's geographical scope.
Compromís	28	3	4	3	38	Case closed at the time of writing this article, then reopened. Significant coverage. Personalised.
PSOE	17	4	6	9	36	The case against Pedro Sánchez's wife is still open.
Podemos	22	2	4	5	33	Cases closed. Significant coverage.
Judiciary - CGPJ	19	5	2	1	27	Focuses on the renewal of the General Council of the Judiciary, rather than on a specific leader.
Comuns	8	2	1	1	12	Most cases closed. Personalised.
People's Party (denial)	4	6	0	1	11	While some news stories revolve around possible cases of lawfare against PP's leaders, the leaders themselves end up denying it.
Other leftist parties	1	2	0	3	6	Scarce coverage of cases against <i>Sumar</i> , <i>Adelante Andalucía</i> , <i>Eusko Alkartasuna</i> .
Journalists	4	0	0	0	4	The main victims are not politicians.
Not relevant	10	1	0	0	11	News stories not related to lawfare.
TOTAL	200	67	90	72	429	

Table 3. Use of the term "lawfare" in *eldiario.es*, *elpais.com*, *elmundo.es* and *okdiario.com* by target group, according to a keyword search on MyNews between June 1st 2020 and June 1st 2024, showing results above the 50% threshold of relevance.

Annex II: Links to Cited News Stories

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