

# Examining mainstream media discourses on the squatters' movements in Barcelona and London

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## Abstract

This article brings together separate research on mainstream media discourses concerning the squatters' movements in Barcelona and England and Wales. The previous findings are introduced and then compared. **Using the technique of Critical Discourse Analysis, we assess the presentations in the mainstream media of the squatters' movements and analyse how they individually contest these portrayals.** Mainstream media discourses often present a negative stereotype of squatters which in both cases facilitated repression. These dominant narratives both shape and are shaped by public opinion, as indicated by specific examples. The findings for London and Barcelona are compared and three specific concerns are addressed, namely how squatters are presented as a deviant other, ways in which squatters formulated new meanings of squatting through linguistic methods and how mainstream media discourses can be contested.

## 1 Barcelona

Following E.T.C. Dee's approach (2013), the media portrayal of the two specific cases can easily be broken down under the **stereotype of the 'good' and the 'bad' squatter**. The case of El Forat consists of the analysis of **news articles** where squatters are accused of being troublemakers who caused riots after a protest. These are the 'bad squatters': uncivil, violent, unpoliticised, and dangerous. The case of La Makabra allows for the study of 'good squatters', since this arts collective made a peaceful squatting action to claim a cultural space. **Finally, we study in the newspaper editorials three themes which received the most media attention. We studied El Punt, La Vanguardia, El Periódico, Avui.**

			EL PERIÓDICO	LA VANGUARDIA	AVUI	EL PUNT
« <b>Bad</b> » squatters	Forat de la Vergonya	<b>Violent squatters</b>	95% of squatters are pacifists, only 5% are violent	Organised and dangerous okupa groups	Okupa groups caused trouble	200 trouble-makers already identified by the police
		<b>Morality of squatting</b>	Laws are correct	Law should be made tougher	Laws are correct	The City Hall is doing a bad job, laws should be flexible
« <b>Good</b> » squatters	La Makabra at Can Ricart	<b>Negotiation with squatters</b>	Squatters who claim their constitutional right are legitimate, those who claim « non-basic » needs are not	Bohemians and ravers abused an abandoned factory	The patience and trust of Catalans is being abused by squatters	La Makabra should be granted a space, their labour is valuable for society.
		<b>Pacifist squatters</b>	No negotiation with La Makabra	No negotiation with any squatters	Negotiation can be justified	The City Hall must negotiate

## 2 London



In order to test whether the dominant Ideological Discursive Formation was biased against squatters, E.T.C. Dee collected 235 individual news stories about squatting which appeared from January 1 2009 until December 31 2011, using UK Newsstand. The newspapers analysed were the Daily Mail (tabloid), the Daily Mirror (tabloid), the Daily Telegraph (broadsheet), the Guardian (broadsheet), the Independent (broadsheet), the Sun (tabloid), the Times (broadsheet) and the Evening Standard (tabloid). All except the latter are daily national papers, the Standard is London-based daily (and since October 2009 is distributed for free). The newspapers cover a range of political colours and seven out of the top ten selling national newspapers are included. The image collects together some of the different discourses which were presented as well as their interpretations, since of course discourses can be read in many ways (blue denotes a discursive formation positive towards squatting and squatters, red one which is negative). Dee found that the hegemonic discursive formation was indeed negative and created squatters as folk devils, a dangerous, threatening Other in need of juridical repression. Finally concerns regarding the vulnerability of private property led to criminalisation of squatting in residential buildings in 2012.

### 3 Comparing London and Barcelona's squatting movements

The squatting movements in England and Wales and Catalonia are quite different.

- Squats in Barcelona last much longer than in London, something that has allowed for the creation of a *strong political squatters' movement*.
- Also, *very few negotiations have happened in Barcelona between the squatting movement and local administration*.

In contrast, *the squatters' movement in England and Wales is diffuse and fairly disorganised*,

- *The average lifespan for a squat is three months*
- *There is a culture in which squatters are uninterested to communicate with mainstream media*

### 4 Comparing criminalisation processes and popular responses

#### A/ Othering

In both case studies, squatters are depicted as a threat to the moral order of society.

- In the case of the Forat protest, the 'bad' squatter stereotype allowed the city mayor and journalists to explain why violence had occurred without referring at all to the actual structural violence which caused it.
- In England, the criminalisation of squatting was legitimised by a narrative concerning the vulnerability of private property (whilst the counter narrative emphasised the vulnerability of people squatting).

***Squatters are represented as folk devils requiring juridical control.*** We also presented evidence in both cases of a tendency for media portrayals to lapse into dualistic stereotypes such as the 'good' and the 'bad' squatters, or alternatively the deserving versus undeserving squatters, or violent versus peaceful. We noted this stereotyping has also occurred in other contexts and other times.

#### B/ Sidestepping

- Squatters in London were keen to sidestep the negative stereotypes conferred by the word 'squatting' (Dee 2013 p.263). They chose to create new signifiers such as 'caretakers' or 'property maintainers', to give it more positive associations.
- Some of Barcelona's squatters tried to sidestep stigmatisation by arguing that everyone has the right to be a squatter. Activists from Miles de Viviendas who did this were the first to started a public discussion with the authorities to legalise squatting (Mir et al. 2013 pp.55-56). Since then, several attempts at negotiation have been made, but none under the identity of the 'okupa'.

**Activists from both movements tried to sidestep discourse, but in Barcelona this created intense internal conflicts.** *The success of these tactics depend on popular support, but also on collective unity between activists.*

#### C/ Creating different discourses

In the cases of both Paris and Barcelona, attempts by some squatter groups to avoid stigmatisation have unintentionally reinforced existing stereotypes and have created conflicts between squats. **What motivates some conflicts is the attempt of collectives to negotiate with authorities, rather than the usage of a certain spelling or identity.** Thus, our comments only begin touch on several important issues.

**Reference must be made to Can Vies**, since the case suggests a means to oppose the discourses imposed by the mainstream media. In a press conference which gathered more than 20 television channels and mainstream newspapers, discourses about violence were directly addressed, the spokesperson arguing that the violence emanated from the authorities, not the protesters. The press conference thus became a very effective tool to sidestep discourse. *The success of this strategy rested on the popular support which Can Vies received (from the local community, in social networks, through economic solidarity with around 90.000€ raised through crowdfunding etc.) which in turn is the result of 17 years of self-management during which many initiatives from Can Vies became consolidated (e.g. La Burxa).*