COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Interpreting *escraches*: the role of the Spanish press in the public opinion process

Abstract

This paper presents research into the journalistic treatment of the *escrache* phenomenon led by the anti-eviction movement in Spain in 2013. For this purpose, an analytical model has been constructed that helps to understand how the mass media, the social elite, social movements and the virtual public sphere interact in the public opinion process. Based on this analytical model and using frame theory, the coverage of *escraches* by two Spanish newspapers, *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, is analysed, comparing it with the main statements made by the spokespersons of the movement, and the social elite. The results confirm the hypothesis: the social elite sets the predominant overall frame for the journalistic treatment of the phenomenon. The *escraches* case, however, is exceptional in that the argument frames proposed by the movement acquired a greater degree of 'legitimacy' than those proposed by the elite.

Keywords
Mass media, *escrache*, public opinion process, anti-eviction movement, framing

"The press is, par excellence, the democratic instrument of liberty. I will say something analogous about judicial power."
Tocqueville (1980)

"In sum, the mass media of the United States are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion."
Herman and Chomsky (1990)

1. Introduction

This article recounts a study whose general aim was to look at the public opinion process created around the *escraches* campaign organized by the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* ("Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages" - hereinafter PAH as per its Spanish initials) group in 2013. The intention is to understand the social and

collective process in which the opinion formation process, including the formation of public opinion, takes place.

After an *Iniciativa Legislativa Popular* ("Popular Legislative Initiative" - hereinafter ILP as per its Spanish initials) asking for the mortgage law to be reformed, the PAH began a campaign of *escraches* by which it attempted to put the debate about this law onto the political agenda and to make public opinion favourable to reform. At this moment, as part of the political struggle, a public opinion process began in which the anti-eviction movement, the social elites, the mass media, and the bulk of the population negotiated the meaning of the events, highlighting certain aspects over others and proposing interpretations depending on their interests.

Authors such as Gamson (2006), Park (1940) and Tarde (1986) have identified the mass media as central elements in the public opinion processes in the modern era. This article particularly analyses the role played by three of the most important Spanish newspapers (*El País*, *La Vanguardia* and, to a lesser extent, *ABC*) in the *escrache* campaign undertaken by the PAH. The study looks at the frame, the representation and the interpretation they offer of events, as well as the transformation of this representation through the interaction of the newspapers with real events and with another two actors: the anti-eviction movement and the social elites.

2. Context. The *escrache* phenomenon: a brief chronology of events

The financial crisis that broke out in the Spanish State in 2008 brought a significant rise in the number of evictions carried out (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, Colau and Alemany, 2012). In this context, a social movement against eviction and in favour of decent housing came into being, whose main organising body was the PAH. This platform managed to set in motion a significant amount of citizen mobilisation with a high degree of social legitimacy, putting the matter of evictions at the centre of the political, public and published debates.

One of the most striking initiatives carried out by the anti-eviction movement was the collection of almost a million and a half signatures supporting an ILP to reform the mortgage law[1]. On February 12, 2013, after the procedure of passing the law reform proposal had begun -with a vote in favour by the Partido Popular (PP), the governing party, despite the fact that just days beforehand it had announced it would vote against- and in view of its upcoming parliamentary debate, the PAH undertook an awareness campaign called *"Hay vidas en juego"* ("There Are Lives Involved") which consisted of two stages. The first began on 26 February with the mass sending of messages to members of parliament (MPs), inviting them to meet with the PAH. The second began on March 7 and announced demonstrations outside the homes and workplaces of PP MPs: the *escraches*[2]. Such actions had a two-fold goal: firstly, to raise awareness of the experiences of people evicted or under threat of eviction among the MPs who would be discussing and voting on the ILP, in order to convince them to vote in favour; and, secondly, to denounce these MPs in front of their

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[1] See: http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/category/propuestas-pah/iniciativa-legislativa-popular

[2] *Escraches* are events that address certain people at their homes or in other public places they frequent in their daily lives, by means of songs, acting out of plays, whistling, graffiti, etc., with the aim of denouncing their impunity and publically repudiating them. They were originally used in post-dictatorial Argentina to denounce those responsible for torture and killings during the military regime but who had not been made to answer before the law. Using *escraches*, people affected by an act they understand to be unjust or immoral show their ethical and social condemnation of those responsible, at the same time as highlighting the disparity between the justice of the powerful and the injustice of the vulnerable. For a more extensive definition, see Flesher (2015: 8-9) and Flesher and Montañés (2014: 22-23).

neighbours given that, if they were going to vote against the reform, they would be responsible for future evictions[3].

The first *escrache* event took place on 11 March in front of the Ritz Hotel in Madrid, aimed at Mariano Rajoy (Chairman of the Government and the PP) and María Dolores de Cospedal (the PP's General Secretary). From that time onwards, the *escraches* spread across Spain. The reaction of the PP leaders and spokespersons, and of some of the principle mass media companies, was predictable, and they began a campaign to delegitimize this kind of protest, defining it as harassment, calling it anti-democratic, and linking it to the Basque nationalist left. The *escrache* campaign and the struggle between the anti-eviction movement and the PP leadership to build the social meaning of this new form of protest, either 'legitimate protest' or 'illegal harassment' lasted two months, until, on May 18, the last *escrache* took place.

3. Theoretical framework: the public opinion process and the mass media

An important tradition in the study of public opinion situates its rise and consolidation in an interdependent relationship with the very emergence of modern societies, with its normative basis being the democratic -or polyarchic- system based on consensus and legitimization by the people (Grossi, 2007) and the operational basis for its creation being the constitution of a public sphere (Habermas, 1994).

Understanding the origin of public opinion, linked to polyarchic regimes characterized by a high degree of political openness (the right to participate in political life) and public debate (Dahl, 1997), situates the public opinion process in the centre of the political struggle. At the same time, understanding public opinion as tightly linked to the confrontation of ideas in the public sphere necessarily refers us to the process in which a range of actors bring into play different communicative and symbolic strategies. It is therefore necessary to analyse the process of "social construction" by which the contenders, within a competitive and dialectic tension, attempt to implement a cognitive influence to give form to that immaterial entity that is public opinion. In this way, public opinion is transformed into a privileged object of political and democratic competition. Furthermore, the idea of process appeals to an evolutionary state, with different stages and a plurality of actors in interaction.

Given this interpretive framework, the extension of the sphere for public discussion needed for public opinion to emerge is linked, as Habermas says (1994), to the emergence of the mass media. Two elements stand out in this view: the mediated nature of the public opinion process and the role played in this respect by the mass media. For Gamson (2006), the mass media constitute the privileged forum in which the negotiation of meanings takes place in the public sphere. From other positions, however, it is stated that the role of the media in this process is not neutral, given that their activities favour "the development of states of opinion convenient to the measures adopted by governments; or serve to articulate (create or show publically) states of consensus by which leaders are supported as an almost infallible formula of government, etc.". Furthermore, "given that the governments of these regimes operate in a way that is subordinated to economic demands [Offe, 1990], in serving politics, the media are also serving the interests of the capitalist economic system" (Bretones, 2001: 227).

In this way, the media form the mechanism of continuous social intervention in the service of the social elites that functions in polyarchic systems. However, on certain occasions, special circumstances occur: "the media -coinciding with the elites and the government- disseminate a public opinion that by and large goes against that seemingly proposed by citizens. These special circumstances could be called a *crisis of opinion* or, more

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[3] See: http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/

fully, a *crisis of public opinion*" (Bretones, 2001: 235). The *escraches* phenomenon tackled in the research reported in this article is presented as an interesting example for analysis of a crisis of public opinion of the kind just mentioned.

The discursive strategies used during the *escrache* campaign both by the anti-eviction movement and the Spanish elites have been looked at in depth in previous studies (Flesher & Montañés, 2014; Flesher, 2015). However, in these the mass media have been considered solely as actors undifferentiated from the political elites in that which Flesher calls "the State" (p. 11). In the present study, the mass media receive special attention as a separate entity, one differentiated from the elites, allowing us to understand the way in which the elite, the movement and the media interact. In this way it is possible to have a sharper focus when looking at the dynamics of public opinion production, observing to what extent the media act merely as amplifiers for the social and political elites, and to what degree, and more importantly, how and in what situations media content can be conditioned by a successful mobilisation of grassroots movements and by a climate of opinion strongly influenced by a successful communicative strategy used by these movements.

The longitudinal strategy employed for this purpose makes it possible to observe when and with what success the different argumentation resources of the *escrache* dispute are used, allowing a more profound understanding of the narratives proposed by the actors involved in this dispute and, particularly, of its dynamics.

4. Analysis model

The model presented below (Figure 1) shows the elements present in the public opinion process and the role played by each of them in their interaction when negotiating the interpretive framework around the *escraches* phenomenon. There are, then, three reference points within the public sphere identified by Grossi (2007): the elites –social groups with greater access to the resources of power, the political class, business executives, civil servants and high level bureaucrats, etc.; the media –with a major role in the process, given that they are important actors, channels (mediators, facilitators) and bearers (interpreters, observers, disseminators of public opinion); and the public –a social group constituted based on the emergence of a matter that generates interest or conflict, which has the characteristic of being both actor and spectator, input and output. Together with these, it is possible to include the cognitive products that constitute the heart of the struggle: frames, around which actors intend to build consensus, trust and legitimization, or create dissent, criticism and delegitimization; and the social movements, emphasising their difference from the elites and the public.

In the upper part of Figure 1 are the actors that, directly involved in the political struggle, whether because they began it, because they are addressed directly, or because they have interests affected by that struggle, establish the first interpretive frames regarding which the frame dispute, or struggle for meaning, is begun. The social movements are distinguished here from the elites. The movements' engaged role as actor with clearly defined interests in the political struggle in which the public opinion process takes place distinguishes them from a more general public; their different capacities, power resources and strategies for orienting the confrontation grants them a role that is different to that of the elites.

The meanings brought into play by elites and the social movement are reproduced and/or contested by an active audience in a variety of spaces or forums. The name 'public sphere' can be given to the set of forums in which public negotiation over the meaning of a phenomenon takes place. The mass media have been identified as the major forum in which this process takes place (Gamson, 2006). However, in recent years, the rapid spread of

information and communication technologies have given rise to the appearance of a new arena in which the public debate takes place: the constellation of blogs, forums and social media that make up the virtual public sphere[4].

Figure 1. Analysis model
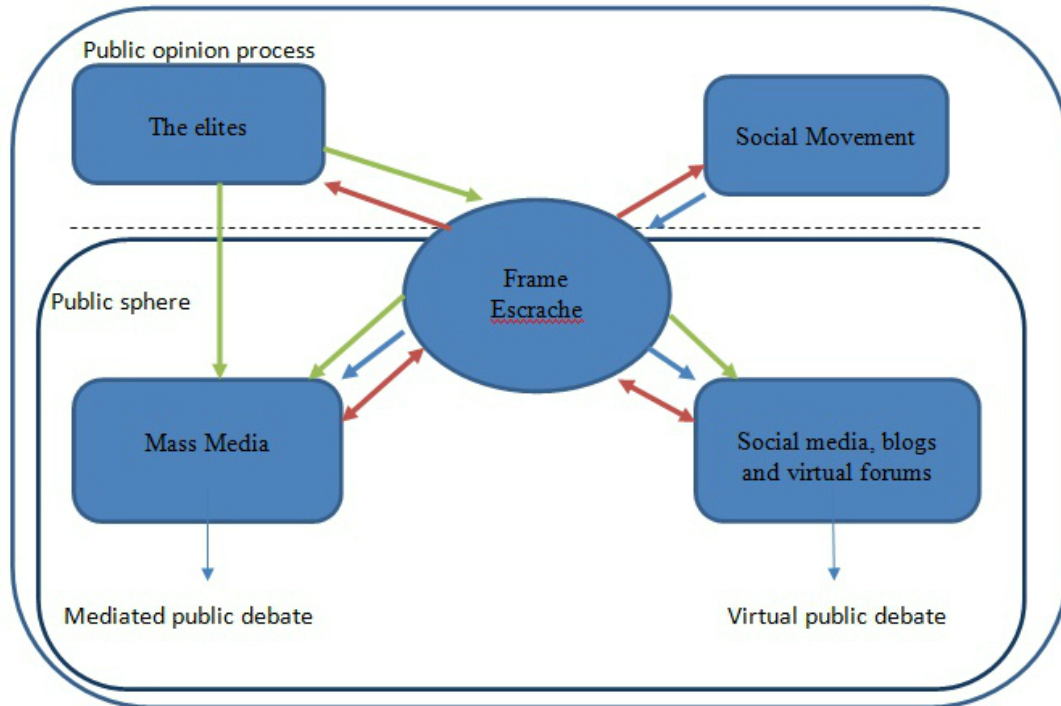
The central part of the figure shows the interpretive frameworks, or frames, that are at the heart of the cognitive confrontation. By boosting collective action dynamics, the social movements propose frames through which events -in this case, *escraches*- can be viewed. In this way, actions will reach the public sphere accompanied by these first, proposed frames (frame building), and as they gain space in media (and virtual) coverage they will give rise to a mediated -and virtual- public debate. Mass media, elites and the public will reinterpret and resignify events, now converted into a cognitive product, based on a set of values, convictions, orientations, preferences, judgements and interests from which to observe the world. Then, influenced by an existing climate of opinion -an orientation thought to be a majority one on the matter in question and that, although it does not have immediate effects on acceptance of the 'pressure of conformity', "it creates a perception of the degree of agreement (or alignment) between one's own cognitive position and that supposed to be present (and therefore the winning one) among the community" (Grossi, 2007: 151)-, they will propose new frames (frame building) or reproduce those proposed by the movement.

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[4] The research project initially observed the introduction into the analysis of a third actor -along with the movement and the social elite- that confronted the journalistic coverage of the *escraches*: the blogs, forums and social media that make up the virtual public sphere. In the end, however, it has not been possible to collect relevant data for analysis. Nonetheless it can be understood that this sphere plays a growing role in the public opinion process and for this reason, in the description of the model presented, we continue to grant it an important role. For a discussion about the extent of the democratising role played by the virtual public sphere in the public opinion process, see: Fuchs, 2012; Fung, Gilman & Shkabatur, 2013; Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari & Mazaid, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Piñeiro-Otero & Costa Sanchez, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, 2013; Zhou & Moy, 2007.

The confrontation of the different actors' discursive strategies will result in a set of dominant frames that will prevail in the media coverage of the events. This result, in turn, will determine new strategies of action and new discursive strategies both by the movement and the elites; that is to say, they will have an effect on their further action and both what they say and how they say things. Both new and previous frames will be made visible and invisible, questioned, modified and reinforced by and in the mass media, the social media, blogs and virtual forums, in media and public debates. In this way, the movements, elites, media and public participate directly in the cognitive confrontation of negotiating the frameworks of interpretation.

The four actors bring frames into play, they legitimize them and promote consensus about them, or they delegitimize them. The mass media and the social media, blogs and virtual forums, as well as being actors, are also channels and bearers of public opinion, as well as spaces in which mediated and virtual public debate takes place, and so they acquire an important role in this process.

The best known definition of 'frame' is probably that proposed by Entman, for whom framing is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 52). However, as a number of authors state (Sádaba, Rodríguez-Virgili & Castro, 2012; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman 1993) 'frame analysis' is a fractured paradigm in which different operational definitions of 'frame' can be considered.

On the one hand, it is possible to find studies that, following definitions such as Tuchman's, for whom frames constitute the parameters within which people discuss public events, use general frames like the five identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000): attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, morality and economic consequences. On the other hand, authors such as Charry see frames as "argumentation tools [...] by which social agents try to understand and explain circumstances, facts and actions" (2011: 64).

In this study, these two conceptions of frame will be used, analyzing both general interpretive frames that determine the parameters of discussion related to *escraches*, and the argumentation tools or frameworks by which the different actors try to explain the phenomenon. The first will allow a view of the negotiation of the relevant *aspects* for understanding *escraches*, while the second will provide an approach to the negotiation of the *arguments* employed.

Snow and Benford (2000) highlight the importance of frame alignment between the movement and society or, which amounts to the same, the identification of society with the frames proposed by the movement, so that the movement's demands can be successful. In order to observe the degree to which this alignment takes place, Koopman and Olzak (2004) studied the visibility, resonance and legitimacy of a message (its Discursive Opportunity Structure, DOS). Visibility is understood as the number and prominence of the communicative channels in which a message is included. Resonance is understood as the degree of reaction that it creates in other actors or the mass media, giving an idea about an interpretive framework's permeability. Legitimacy is understood as the degree of positive reaction that greets the message. In the present study, resonance and legitimacy will allow us to observe the degree to which the interpretive frameworks of Spanish newspapers are aligned with the frames employed by the elite and the movement in the open conflict over the *escraches* in support of the ILP.

5. Design of the study

5.1. *Hypothesis*

General: The predominant frame that defines topics or events in the public space is established, above all, by the position and interests of the social elite; the particular case of the *escrache*, although it represents an exception to a certain extent in that it is the social movement that sets up the interpretive frame around which the negotiation of meaning begins, confirms the general norm.

With the aim of understanding the scope of the influence of each of the two actors, the elite and the social movement, three specific hypotheses, accompanying the general hypothesis, are drawn up. The specific hypotheses distinguish three spheres on which this influence is exercised: what is talked about, how it is talked about, and what arguments are used. The verification of these three hypotheses and the study of the temporal development of their validity carried out in this research permit a more complete and nuanced validation of the general hypothesis.

Specific hypotheses:

H1: The social elite has a greater capacity than the social movement to situate a phenomenon (in this case the *escrache* campaign) at the centre of journalistic interest.

H2: The social elite has a greater capacity than the social movement to determine the general interpretive frames within which the public debate about a phenomenon at the centre of journalistic attention is articulated.

H3: The social elite has a greater capacity than the social movement to impose, in terms of legitimacy, its argument frames on the public debate reflected in the newspapers regarding a phenomenon at the centre of journalistic attention.

5.2. *Sample*

The study focuses on journalistic coverage of the *escrache* phenomenon between February 5 and May 31. This has been compared with the declarations and statements by the anti-eviction movement and the main social elite actors, with the goal of observing the extent to which these declarations condition coverage. This is a longitudinal study based on the frames (understood on two levels: general interpretive frames related to the parameters based on which the phenomenon is studied, and argument frames understood as argumentation tools) employed by the different actors. This allows us to analyse the way in which these spheres interact, observing their different capacities to impose their frames, as well as the way in which reciprocal influence occurs.

Firstly, an analysis has been carried out of the frames set up and used by the anti-eviction movement and the social elites to tackle the *escraches* phenomenon. To study the movement's frames, the most important -in terms of either the effect they had or the significance of the time when, or place where, they were made- declarations and interviews given by the spokeswomen of the PAH, Ada Colau, during the *escrache* campaign have been selected; other texts taken into consideration have been the notifications given by the PAH on its website regarding campaign details. In total 6 declarations and 7 notifications have been analysed. The study of the elites' frames has been carried out based on the declarations regarding the *escraches* by the main PP leaders that, due to their media repercussion, have been considered to be the most important. In total 14 declarations by PP leaders or members of the Spanish Government have been identified, of which 6 have been considered relevant for this study. Together with the declarations by members of the PP, the following have also been considered relevant: statements by Eduardo Torres-Dulce (April 12), Director of Public Prosecutions; Juan Calparsoro (March 31), Public Prosecutor in the Basque Country; Carlos

Cuesta (March 23), chief writer at *El Mundo*; and articles by Rosa Díez (March 25), spokesperson for the UPyD party; and José Antich (March 22), editor of *La Vanguardia*; all representatives of the Spanish elite in their positions as professional politicians, political leaders, politically allocated high-level civil servants, or editors of newspapers with a mass readership.

Secondly, this study examines the media coverage given by the *El País* and *La Vanguardia* newspapers of the *escrache* phenomenon, with the addition of leading articles by *ABC*, thereby including three of the four general, pay-to-read newspapers with a mass readership in Spain (Estudio General de Medios, May 2014). The unit of analysis considered is the news item, following the work of Muñiz and Igartua (2004) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)[5].

In total, 593 news items and opinion articles have been classified. These articles were obtained by entering the term '*escrache*' into the newspapers' search engine, and rejecting the news items in which the *escrache* is a fringe topic, used in a way other than that employed for our object of study, or is outside of the time period set for this research.

6. Results and analysis

The analysis of the data has been carried out in four stages. Firstly, the frames present in the discourses of the movement and the elite are identified. Secondly, the relationship between the statements of the elite and the movement, the number of news items related to *escraches*, and the cited sources of these news items is observed. Thirdly, the relationship between the general interpretive frames present in the media coverage and those frames employed by the movement and the elite is analysed, along with the development of this relationship. Lastly, the resonance and legitimacy of the argument frames employed by the movement and the elite in opinion articles is observed.

6.1. *The movement and the elite*

The statements made by the main PP leaders show, from the beginning, a clear intention to situate the main thrust of the debate in the territory of legitimacy, both the legitimacy of the *escraches* as a form de social protest and that of the very anti-eviction movement, the main organisation behind these protests: a general interpretive frame also identified in other studies like those by Flesher and Montañés (2014) and Flesher (2015). The goal was to stimulate their delegitimization.

The statements made by Cristina Cifuentes on March 25 on RNE (*Radio Nacional de España*), saying that the PAH supported "groups friendly to ETA" and related the *escraches* with the *kale borroka*[6] and those made the following day by Mariano Rajoy pointing out that *escraches* are anti-democratic, are interpreted in this manner. A similar role is played at this time by signed articles by non-PP members of the elite: the one published by Rosa Díez in *El Mundo* (March 25) which treats *escraches* as "harassment" and a "violation of democracy"[7], the one signed by José Antich (March 22), under the headline "Protest yes, harassment no"[8], and declarations like those by Carlos Cuesta (March 23), on Telecinco's TV debate

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[5] For research in which the statement is used as the unit of analysis, see: Gerth & Siegert, 2012; McCombs, López-Escobar and Llamas, 2000.

[6] See: http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/live_audio_PopUp.shtml?idAudio=1733370&vp=4.1.12&lang=es&v=0.75. The *kale borroka* is the name given to the violent street movement linked to the Basque independentist left.

[7] Díez, Rosa, "No", *El Mundo*, 25-3-2013.
http://quiosco.elmundo.orbyt.es/ModoTexto/paginaNoticia.aspx?id=13867698&tipo=1&sec=El%20Mundo&fecha=25_03_2013&pla=pla_11014_Madrid

[8] Antich, José, "Protesta sí, acoso no", *La Vanguardia*, 22-3-2013.
http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2013/03/22/pagina-2/91627460/pdf.html

programme, *El Gran Debate* [The Big Debate], accusing the PAH of supporting terrorist groups[9]. All these statements were made between 10 days and two weeks after the anti-eviction movement undertook the *escrache* campaign.

Later declarations by members of the elite seem to reaffirm the same strategy: Cristina Cifuentes said, on April 4, that *escraches* are a type of harassment and coercion that is incompatible with democracy, and on April 13, María Dolores de Cospedal did not hesitate to call them "pure Nazism"[10]. In this way, the argument frames brought to bear by the elite in these statements can be summed up in the following way: identifying *escrache* and harassment, its definition as an anti-democratic form of protest (comparison with the *kale borroka* and Nazism), reproduction of the argument of 'not everything is valid' and references to collateral damage and innocent victims (children, family members, neighbours).

Joining the principal frame of legitimacy, the legality frame begins to take on importance: Juan Calparsoro (March 31) felt he perceived coercion in the *escrache* and, therefore, a "a criminal offence"[11], Cifuentes interpreted the *escrache* as a criminal act (April 4), and Eduardo Torres-Dulce stated that the public prosecution service would not remain passive in the face of these *escraches* (April 12). This framework of legality was brought to bear after that of legitimacy, and its main arguments consisted of 'the *escrache*, as harassment and coercion, constitutes a criminal offence' and that 'peaceful coexistence makes it necessary to put limits on protest'.

On the other hand, there were two general interpretive frames employed by the anti-eviction movement in their frame building. Firstly, they presented the *escraches* as a tool for mobilisation against the drama of the evictions and in favour of the ILP to reform the mortgage law, proposing a focus that relates the protest to the context that provoked it. The notifications made by the PAH on the 4th and 23rd of February, and March 7[12], which set out the successive stages (virtual *escrache* and physical *escrache*) of the *Hay vidas en juego* [There are lives at stake] campaign, are along these lines. Once the public debate was situated around the matter of legitimacy, the declarations by PAH spokesperson Ada Colau of March 23, 27 and 29[13], the open letter addressed to Rajoy[14], and the PAH video aimed at PP voters of 5 April ("We are victims of the crisis and the property racket, not enemies"[15]) were attempts to return people's attention to the campaign and the context that motivated it, despite the fact that media coverage of it was coming from the point of view of its legitimacy. After the first declarations by members of the PP that situate the *escraches*' legitimacy at the centre of the public debate, and during the whole of the time during which this frame was hegemonic (these data are presented below), the PAH, through its spokespersons and other related groups, complained about the attempt to 'criminalize' social protest and the attempt to

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[9] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xyfm9l_7-8-el-gran-debate-de-telecinco-23-03-2013-la-crispacion-inoculada-de-ada-colau-escrache_news#.UekzO5ygpoo

[10] "Cospedal tilda los escraches de 'nazismo puro' propio de antes de la Guerra Civil", *El País*, 13-4-2013. http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/04/13/actualidad/1365848717_144600.html

[11] "El fiscal vasco ve coacción en el escrache", *La Vanguardia*, 31-3-2013. http://www.lavanguardia.com/20130331/54370800246/el-fiscal-vasco-ve-coaccion-en-el-escrache.html

[12] PAH, "Carta a los representantes de los grupos políticos", "Calendario del ¡Sí se puede!", and "Segunda fase de 'Hay vidas en juego'" http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2013/03/09/segunda-fase-vidas-en-juego/

[13] "La PAH defiende su comportamiento prudente y ejemplar y acusa a las entidades financieras de acoso", *La Vanguardia* 23-3-2013. http://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20130323/54369520229/la-pah-defiende-su-comportamiento-prudente-y-ejemplar-y-acusa-a-las-entidades-financieras-de-acoso-a.html

[14] Colau, Ada, "Carta al Presidente del Gobierno, Mariano Rajoy", in COLAU, Ada, ALEMANY, Adrià, *¡Sí se puede!. Crónica de una pequeña gran victoria*, Destino, Barcelona, 2013. http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2013/04/22/carta-de-ada-colau-al-presidente-del-gobierno-mariano-rajoy/

[15] PAH, "#LaPAHalVotanteDelPP", 5-4-2013. http://escrache.afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2013/04/05/la-pah-presenta-mensaje-a-los-votantes-del-pp/

'create a smokescreen to avoid talking about corruption and the deficiencies of government'[16]. In this way, they tried to introduce a new framework to confront the controversy, understanding this controversy as an attempt to distract people's attention [17].

As we see below, the general interpretive frames proposed by the elite in their frame building process had more media repercussion than those proposed by the movement, transforming them into the dominant general interpretive frames. The media's capacity to impose the general interpretive frame is shown by the incorporation by the movement of the legitimacy frame in many of its statements, in which they take the trouble to describe the *escrache* as "peaceful", and which is also reflected in the central idea of the video aimed at PP voters: "we are not the enemy".

6.2. *Media agenda and sources*

The total number of news items related to the *escrache* campaign promoted by the anti-eviction movement and linked to parliamentary discussion about the ILP in *El País* and *La Vanguardia* was 462, of which 440 were published between the months of March and May. Of the total news items, 306 were published in *La Vanguardia*, 153 in *El País*, and 3 in *ABC*; 241 come from news agencies (181 from Europa Press), 47 have as their source the newspaper itself, and the other 174 appear under a particular name. As regards to the sections in which they were published, 217 appeared in the Local section, 131 in Politics, 79 in Opinion, and the other 31 in Economics, Culture or Society.

The time period of the news items shows that most of them were concentrated during the 13th and 16th weeks of 2013. That is to say, the *escrache* received preferential attention in the third week of the campaign, immediately after the President of the Government, the General Secretary of the PP and the Government Delegate in Madrid referred to it in different statements that were widely reported in the media, when it had passed relatively unnoticed until that time. During the previous weeks, the PAH had carried out various press conferences presenting the second stage of the "There are lives at stake" campaign without being able to focus media attention on the *escraches*. This fact seems to corroborate the first hypothesis, referring to the elite's greater capacity to condition the journalistic agenda.

Furthermore, this hypothesis is reinforced if the source of these quotes is observed. Journalists' information about *escraches* makes considerably more use of elite sources than of sources within the movement (49% of news items, compared with 35%), with a greater difference in 'political' news items (57% compared with 33%) and opinion articles (27% compared with 3%) than in 'local' news items (52% compared with 46%) and 'culture', 'economic' and 'society' articles (55% compared with 58%). That is to say, the presence of elite sources in journalistic coverage is greater than movement sources, and this difference is even greater in the most important sections for the public debate on a phenomenon of political interest: 'politics' and 'opinion'.

The development over time of the cited sources once again supports the hypothesis. Graph 1 shows the comparative development of movement sources and elite sources for the news items analysed. It is worth observing that at first news items that only cite movement sources predominate. At the moment when the phenomenon begins to capture the media's attention, in the last two weeks of March (weeks 12 and 13), there are almost the same number of news items citing movement sources or social elite sources, news items that do not give quotes from either of the two sources, and news items that cite both sources.

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[16] "La PAH acusa al Govern de querer criminalizar los movimientos sociales", *La Vanguardia*, 6-4-2013. http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20130406/54370998299/pah-govern-criminalizar-movimientos-sociales.htm
[17] For a more detailed analysis of the frames used in the discourses of the elites and the movement, consult: Flesher and Montañés (2014) and Flesher (2015).

However, in the first three weeks of April, when the phenomenon acquires its greatest degree of attention, although the number of news items that use only movement sources increases considerably, the political elites become the main source of information. It can be seen that, while the phenomenon seems to be residual, its main actor, the anti-eviction movement, is practically the only source used by the media, but as the *escraches* come to take a place on the political agenda, attention shifts to the principal actor in political, economic and social life, what we know as the elite. That is to say, the elites do not only have a greater capacity to put a phenomenon on the political and media agenda, but when this happens, they work as a privileged information source.

Graph 1. Sources

Cifuentes: 'harassment', Rajoy: 'anti-democratic'
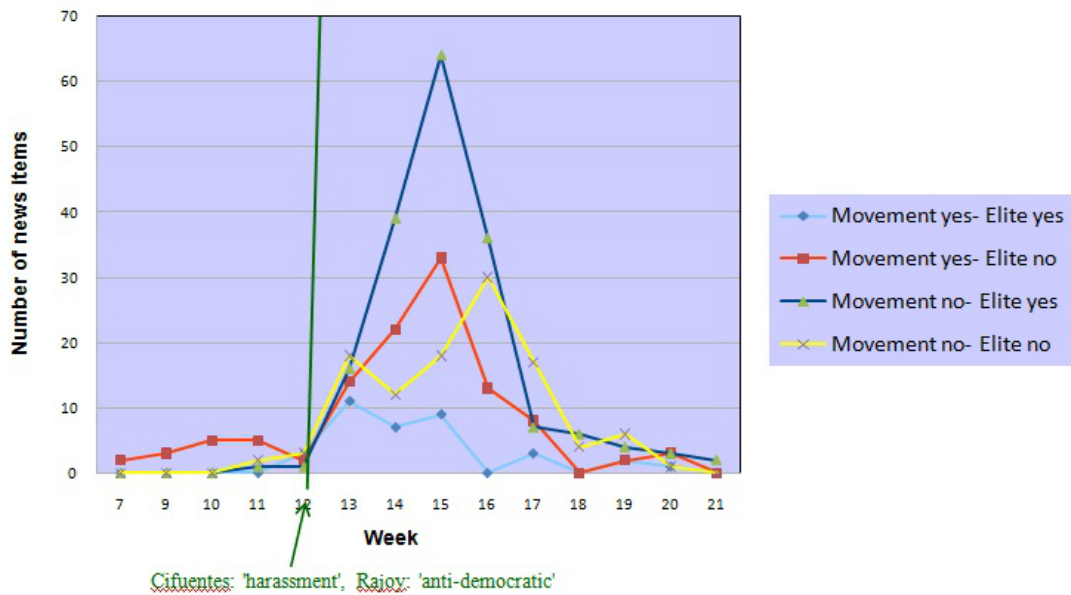
6.3. *General interpretive frames and their development*

Inductively -based on a first exploration of the material, allowing repeated cognitive categories to be classified-, 15 general interpretive frames have been identified in the media coverage of the *escraches*, with 15 or more news items classified into each of the following 7 categories[18]: 'Campaign', 39 news items; 'Distracting attention and criminalization', 15; '*Escrache*', 73; 'Legal–judicial', 106; 'Legitimacy', 137; 'Political manoeuvring', 25; and 'Social protest, crisis and political response', 21.

What stands out, then, is media coverage that focuses on a description of the facts, the *escrache* and the related Legal–judicial departure, and particularly that presents and reports the debate about the legitimacy of this form of protest, a debate proposed by the elite when they refer to the *escrache* as harassment and compare it to Nazi practices and the *kale borroka*. Less important are the approaches that examine the phenomenon, presenting it as part of a campaign in favour of the ILP, and those approaches that look at the debate or reactions to statements by actors who are not talking directly about the '*escraches*' or the ILP. Lastly, it is possible to observe how the news items that allow us to perceive the controversy around the *escraches* as a form of distraction, taking our attention away from

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[18] Both Miller and Riecher (2001) and Muñiz and Igartua (2004) highlight the importance of the inductive identification of these frames. For a study of the use of multivariate analysis techniques in the identification of frames, see: Albizu (2014).

the problem that gave rise to them, the evictions; or which tackle the matter from a broader perspective, as part of a new wave of protests related to the economic crisis and the Spanish political system's difficulties in responding to the economic, social and political needs of the population, are clearly in a minority.

The analysis of the statements made by members of the elite and of the movement makes it possible to identify the Legitimacy frame with the discourses of the elite and the Campaign and Distracting attention frames as frameworks brought to bear by the movement. The Legal-judicial frame, although it is pertinent to the developments of the events themselves, is related to the behaviour of the elite who have, by this time, first reported the matter and issued the first sanctions; this frame is also brought into play by the elite when, as a natural development, it goes from asking 'Are *escraches* legitimate?' to asking 'Are they legal?' -the Public Prosecutor of the Basque Country, for example, said that he viewed the *escraches* as coercion and therefore as a "criminal offence"[19].

In this way, it can be seen that the framework brought to bear by the elites is reproduced in 30% of the news items and opinion articles related to the *escraches*, with another 23% of Legal-judicial-related items, while the frames proposed by the movement only occupy 12% (9% and 3% respectively) of news items.

The social protest, crisis and political response frame (used in 5% of the news items and articles) can be understood to have arisen in Spanish society since the emergence of the 15-M movement[20], however, despite the fact that at the time it was a frame employed by a movement of which the anti-eviction campaign was a part, it was not used in a clear manner by any of that campaign's spokespersons during the *escraches*, and it can therefore be understood that it forms a part of the background of the reigning climate of opinion.

The influence of the elite when it comes to determining the overarching frames, based on which the newspapers analysed tackled their coverage of the *escraches* phenomenon, becomes even more significant when looking at the development over time of the percentage of news items based on one of the main frames, compared to the total number of news items based on these frames. Graph 2 shows how, during weeks 7, 9 and 10 of 2013, 100% of the news items that dealt with '*escrache*' did so referring to the campaign in favour of the ILP. In week 11, when the first physical *escraches* took place (the previous ones had been virtual) the percentages changed and 50% of the news focussed on describing what an *escrache* is and how it is carried out, 25% continued reporting the *escrache* as part of a campaign supporting the ILP, and another 25%, widening the focus, presented the *escrache* in relation to the economic crisis and the difficulties experienced by state institutions. However, the panorama once again changes sharply in week 12, in which, coinciding with the first statements by the main PP spokespersons that questioned the legitimacy of this kind of protest, 50% of the news items published tackle the phenomenon from this angle. During the following weeks, this was the dominant frame (42%, 39%, 26%, 43%, 36% and 44%), and it was only approached, as events unfolded, by the Legal-judicial frame.

The week immediately after the first statements by top-ranking PP members referring to the *escrache* as a form of harassment, different members of the anti-eviction movement referred to the debate about the *escraches*' legitimacy as an attempt to 'distract attention and criminalize' the movement, but this frame appears in just 9% of the news items and articles, while the Campaign framework had a merely token presence (7%).

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[19] http://www.lavanguardia.com/20130331/54370800246/el-fiscal-vasco-ve-coaccion-en-el-escrache.html
[20] This movement arose on the 15 May, 2011, and involved makeshift camps which sprung up in squares in the main Spanish cities as an objection to representative, party politics and the control of the banks and large companies over society in general, and the authorities' decision-making processes in particular, which gave rise to a new cycle of protests.

Graph 2. General interpretive frames development

Cifuentes: 'harassment', Rajoy: 'anti-democratic'
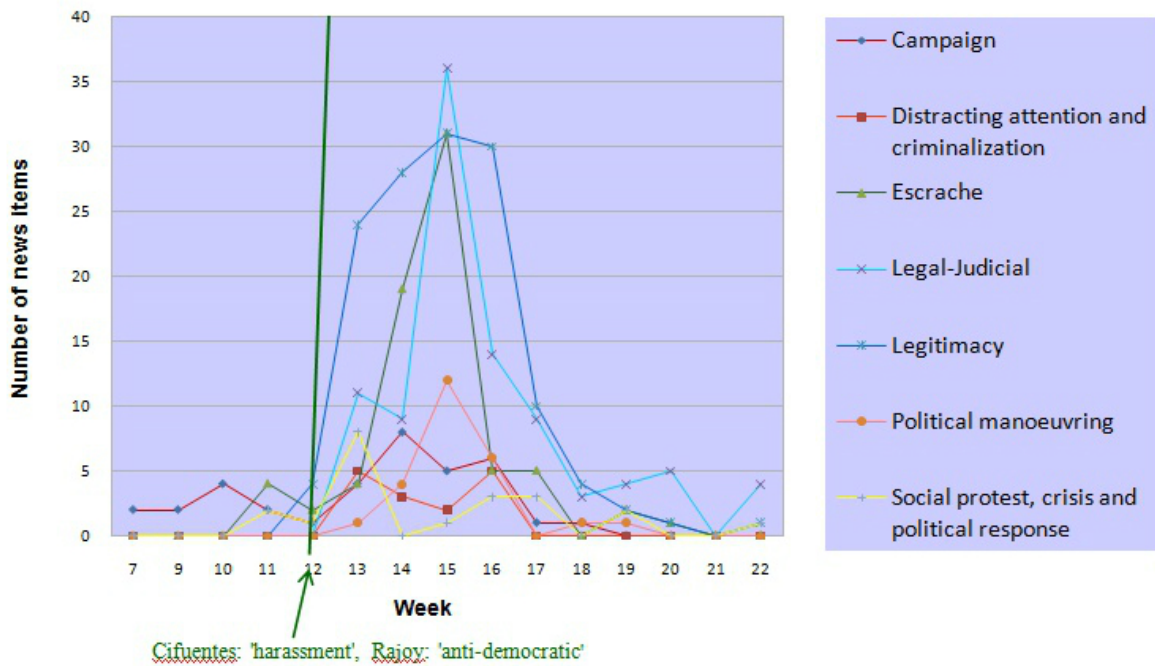
It can be seen, then, how the frames proposed by the social elites acquire a much greater presence than those proposed by the movement from the time when the elites introduce these frames. Therefore, the second hypothesis, which refers to the elite's greater capacity to determine the prominent aspects upon which the public debate about a phenomenon focuses, seems to be supported.

6.4. *Argumentation tools and their development*

From the group of 80 opinion articles, editorials and letters to the editor that make up the third graph, 45 reproduce the argument frames proposed by the movement, and 35 are positive reactions in response to them. On the other hand, the argument frames of the elite are present in 54 articles, and are defended in 21 of these. That is to say, the resonance is 56% in the case of the movement's arguments and 68% for those of the elites, and legitimacy is 44% and 26% respectively. The resonance is, therefore, rather greater for the elite's frame, although the difference is not major and is relatively high in both cases. The difference in terms of legitimacy, however, is significant. Consequently, it can be said that, although the opinion articles tend to deal both with the arguments proposed by the elite and those proposed by the movement regarding the *escraches* controversy, the coverage is considerably more positive in the case of the movement's arguments than in the case of the elite's.

With respect to the development over time, although it is possible to perceive similar patterns for the resonance of the arguments of both elite and movement, with peaks in weeks 13 and 16, major differences can be observed in the case of the development of legitimacy (Graph 3). In this case, the pattern of development is similar for the arguments of the two actors during the early weeks, with a peak in week 13, in the same way as occurred with resonance and coinciding with the statements of the elites, who put the debate about the legitimacy of the *escrache* in the centre of the Spanish political agenda. The development in the second half of the period analysed, however, is different. During week 16, immediately after explosive declarations by María Dolores de Cospedal, in which she referred to the

escraches as "pure Nazism" and once the legal processes linked to the phenomenon were underway, the legitimacy of the movement's arguments showed a significant peak, as did the resonance of these and the resonance of the elite's arguments. This peak, however, is not observed in the elite's arguments; that is to say, despite the fact that during this week there were more opinion articles related to the *escraches*, and that there were more dealing with the elite's arguments, there were no more which were favourable to these arguments, and there were, on the other hand, more which were favourable to the movement's arguments. It can therefore be said that, at this second moment in which one aspect of the *escrache* phenomenon acquired a particular relevance in Spanish newspapers, the opinions expressed in these were closer to the movement's arguments than to those of the elite.

Graph 3. Argument frames legitimacy
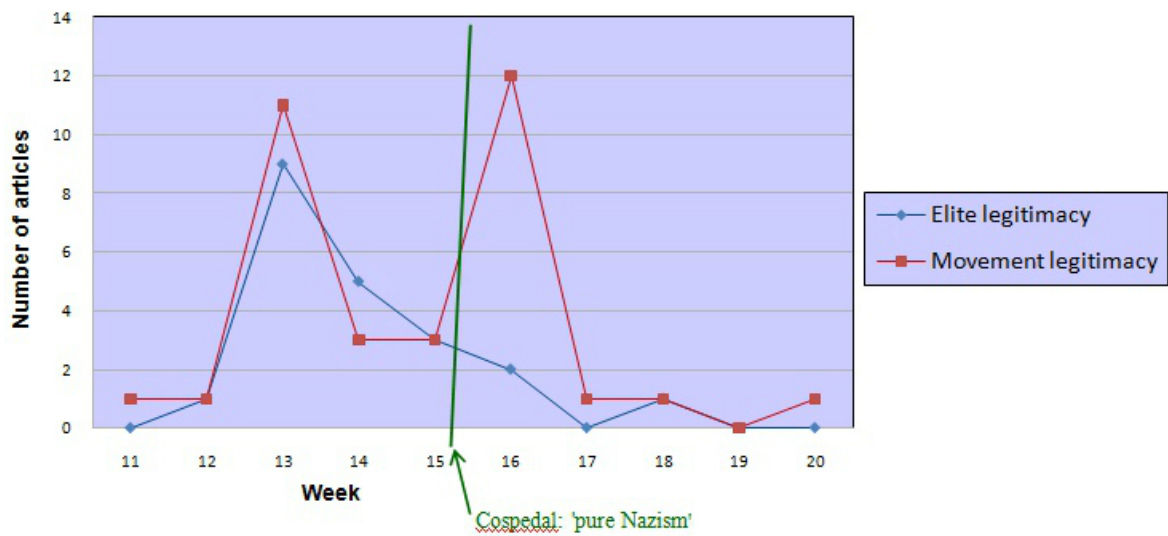
The results related to the reaction of the opinion sections of *La Vanguardia* and *El País* to the statements of the PP, describing the *escraches* as "pure Nazism" refute the third hypothesis, which stated that the elite have a greater capacity than the movement to impose its argumentation tools on the mediated public debate, and show how, although the elites have a major influence when determining the general framework based on which the mass media tackle the coverage of a certain phenomenon, the reaction to the arguments proposed by these elites is not always a positive one. To put it another way, the elite's argumentation strategy can be defeated.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The main goal of the research presented in this article was to understand the role played by the mass circulation newspapers in the public opinion process regarding the *escraches* in their relationship with two of the main actors in this process, the Spanish social elite and the anti-eviction movement. It was argued that, although the predominant interpretive frame in the media coverage of an event of political interest is essentially set by the social elite, this case could constitute an exception, due to the social legitimacy that the anti-eviction movement had at the beginning of the *escraches* campaign, and this translated into a favourable climate of opinion. The specific hypotheses drawn up were intended to permit the measurement of this exceptionality, distinguishing three spheres in which the media could exercise an influence: the phenomena that attract the newspapers' interest, the

general interpretive frames within which these phenomena are tackled, and the argument frames employed in the mediated public debate regarding these phenomena. The results show that:

1) Although the anti-eviction movement had a certain recognition that allowed them to direct media attention towards a new phenomenon, it is not until this phenomenon attracts the elite's attention that it is treated as an element of the first order on the national political agenda by the mass-circulation press. That is to say, in general the newspapers focus the attention of their main sections on the social elite, and this is the filter or loudspeaker through which a phenomenon has to pass in order to receive coverage on the front page, in editorials and in important sections, such as Politics and Opinion. Despite the fact that the anti-eviction movement was recognized by the Spanish media as a legitimate spokesperson, it was only the social elite, which in any case continues to attract more attention than the movement, that can put a phenomenon in a privileged place on the political and media agenda.

2) Since the social elite acts as a filter through which a phenomenon has to pass in order to receive a privileged place on the journalistic agenda, it is also the general interpretive frames brought to bear by this elite that predominate in the media treatment of the phenomenon. So, although during the early days of the campaign the discreet attention cast by the newspapers on the *escraches* covered this phenomenon through an interpretive framework involving a context of economic crisis and situating them as an extension of the drama of the evictions, when they passed to the opinion sections, they were now set within the legitimacy frame proposed by the elite.

3) The fact that it is the social elite which dominates the media's attention, especially in the Politics and Opinion sections, and which therefore has the capacity to situate a matter on the political and media agenda and hence determine the interpretive framework surrounding thinking on that matter, does not necessarily mean that the argument frames proposed by this elite achieve a higher degree of legitimacy in the mediated public debate. In the case of the *escraches*, the favourable climate of opinion which previous events had created with regard to the anti-eviction movement allowed the alignment of the majority opinion manifested in the mediated public debate with the argument frames proposed by the movement; furthermore, there was a resulting distancing with regard to the argument frames brought into play by the elite and the newspapers themselves through editorials, giving rise to a crisis of opinion.

Therefore, in the case of the *escraches*, although the general rule is met by which the political and media agenda, and the general interpretive frame that defines events in the public space, are essentially set by the position and interests of the social elite, this is an exceptional situation. The legitimized argument frames in the opinion sections of the major newspapers coincide with those proposed by the anti-eviction movement and with those taken in surveys of opinion, and confront those demonstrated by the social elite and the newspapers themselves. That is to say, although in the *escrache* case the mass media reproduced, in their approach to the phenomenon, the general interpretive frames proposed by the elites, producing an alignment between these two actors, their permeability with respect to the argument frames of the movement was greater, a circumstance that was taken advantage of by the movement, creating a gap between the elite and the mass media.

However, the results obtained do not indicate that a social movement's activity does not allow a matter to be put at the heart of public debate and onto political and media agendas. On the contrary, they show that it is possible, and allow us to understand better how this occurs. In the case of the *escraches*, at least, it is not the case that the journalistic coverage of a phenomenon resulted directly in the doors of the political agenda being opened, and opinion articles appearing in the major newspapers. In the case studied, it is outside the mediated public sphere that the *escraches* attracted the attention of the social elite and, with

it, that of the media. The circumstances that allowed this are probably connected to the disruptive and innovative nature of the form of protest, to other elements of the DOS, and even to the strategic calculations of the elite itself.

At first the anti-eviction movement was defeated in its attempt to situate the debate within the sphere of housing problems. However, once the *escraches* managed to attract the attention of the mass media, the imposition of the legitimacy interpretive frame allowed it, as Flesher (2015) argues, to question, using what has been called here argument frames, the model of Spanish representative democracy upheld in what Flesher, as well as Sampedro and Lobera, call a "Transition Culture" (2014: 1-3). The movement took advantage of this to begin with the second of the two demands that motivated it, that for 'real democracy' (Flesher, 2015). The elites' reaction consisted of moving the debate to legal terms when faced with the danger that the debate about the legitimacy of a form of protest also became a debate about the legitimacy of a democracy in which conflict is vetoed.

The longitudinal design of this study makes it clear that, faced with the closure of the DOS for the movement's interpretive frames with the imposition of legitimacy as the only valid horizon in the confrontation of ideas, the movement felt obliged to change tactics, focussing on argument frames that, in the end, were imposed.

It still remains to clarify the role played in this process by the group of social media, blogs, and virtual forums that make up the virtual public sphere, and its democratizing capacity in the public opinion process in advanced capitalist societies. Undertaking this task is one of the outstanding tasks for future studies that take, as their central subject, the public opinion process.

As regards methodological matters, the use of an inductive method in the identification of frames has revealed, in our research, a useful strategy in the study of very specific phenomena that have not been dealt with in previous studies; this helps avoid the risk that dimensions that are relevant for the study, such as, in this case, the Social protest frame, remain hidden and are not revealed in the analysis. However, the use of this method requires a major input of time and can give rise to problems of reliability with respect to results, and both these matters should be taken into consideration. Finally, the distinction between interpretive frames and argument frames has meant that the results have been very nuanced, and at a theoretical level it can help to bring the conceptual field of frame theory into sharper focus, distinguishing two notions that are often confused in a single term: 'frame'. Overcoming this theory's current fragmentary state will certainly happen as empirical research is accumulated. Meanwhile, the variety of proposals and perspectives creates a fertile environment for research.

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