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The information published by local governments. The websites of Catalonia’s municipal governments

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Abstract

[EN] **Introduction.** The information issued by government institutions must be complete and intelligible so that citizens are able to exercise their right to participation based on informed decisions and the media professionals can use consider these institutions as reliable sources of information. This article presents the results of the development and application of a method to evaluate the information offered by the websites of the municipal governments of Catalonia in order to encourage policymakers to introduce improvements to these platforms. **Methods.** The sample of study includes the institutional websites run by the government of 947 municipalities of Catalonia. The evaluation is based on 41 purpose-created indicators. **Results.** The results have been represented on an online geographical mapping tool, titled Map of Good Practices in Local Public Communication, which offers individual and general results and statistics. **Conclusions.** The publication of results has quickly led to improvements in the sample of websites under analysis, which has led the research team to apply the same evaluation method to the websites of the municipal governments of other five Spanish autonomous communities.

Keywords

[EN] Public communication; participation; information quality; transparency; good communication practices.

Contents

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1. Introduction

Thirty-five years have passed since the adoption of the Spanish Constitution that marked the transition from dictatorship to democracy. This constitution recognises the rights of political participation, information and freedom of expression, which try to guarantee a democratic coexistence. However, the many cases of corruption that have been made public by the media demand a rigorous analysis aimed at identifying the bad practices in political institutions and organisations as well as in the field of political information, in order to be able to define new lines of action to improve the quality of democracy.

It is not an easy task to put democratic principles into practice due to the persistence of conditions inherited from the dictatorship, and also the numerous social, economic, political, cultural and technological changes that have occurred during this time in different yet closely interrelated geographic areas, all of which have generated new problems: the introduction of democracy has coincided with a modification to the jurisdiction of the State both in the internal sphere, as the regional autonomous governments become consolidated and the municipal life becomes more active, and in the external sphere, due to the links with the European Union and other supranational bodies.

These political changes have been provoked and affected by those changes that have also occurred in the economic system that has connected increasingly more closely all societies in the world, which causes a constant mobility of people, goods, capital, information and imaginaries across borders, which subsequently globalises social relations and problems.

Although new technological, digital and telematic, tools have been developed to facilitate the management of all these changes, their use is revealing new challenges in the production and management of knowledge and is demanding new forms of social and humanistic knowledge, journalism and public opinion, that can facilitate the generation of fairer and more equitable organisation, that includes the participation of the citizenry in a democratic debate on the political management.

“In order for the Internet and the new technologies to actually constitute a step forward in civic participation in public decision-making, on the one hand, the government bodies must design a strategy, implement channels to disseminate information and deploy the adequate means for participation and, on the other hand, the citizens and civil society must claim and use the tools made available to participate” (Colombo, 2005: 6).

In this context, local life has become the fundamental scenario from which citizens can participate in the complex network of government bodies responsible for managing the public resources, at different levels, in order to solve the problems that affect societies globally (Borja, Castells, 1997).

Cities, where the everyday life of most people develops in today's world, and towns are spaces with transportation and communication networks that interconnect the vital system that manages all these changes and the new and old problems they generate.

It is in the local nodes where the most direct social relations and the more or less intense relations with near and far groups take place. And while the dimensions of each population centre require solutions tailored for humans, currently the information technologies allow the sharing and discussion of different local experiences, which subsequently allows these experiences to acquire a global dimension that can contribute to the renewal of society.

This is the approach we believe we should adopt to determine how to build a good government (Brugué, Gomá, 1998) and establish a governance system (Commission of the European Communities, 2001) in which a well-informed civic participation must have a decisive role.

“Precisely, participatory democracy, which is critical autonomy, is based on participation as a set of relational procedures and processes where agents come into a symmetrical and reciprocal relation of communication, cooperation and shared responsibility. The accommodation of the agents involved in the social life into this perspective of participation, as a necessity and right, is what allows recovering the transversal and relational sense of participation. That recovery requires innovations that are capable of translating civic participation into relational communication for the joint civic action” (Alguacil, 2006: 24-25).

In Spain there are 8,116 municipal governments [1] which are largely responsible for giving solutions to the problems of the population as they arise, frequently without receiving enough resources from the national and regional governments.

Since the implementation of democracy, the creation of press offices and communication departments to facilitate politicians' communication with citizens has shown their interest in developing the local public opinion, based on democratic political participation of proximity. Some historical analyses allow us to evaluate the important task that has been developed in this area, to identify the right and wrong actions and to define lines to be developed in the future (Molina, 2011) [2].

We believe that this responsibility corresponds in part to a public university that is rooted in the community to which it belongs and is committed to providing tools that allow consolidating and deepening democracy in this globalised world.

Based on the previous situation, in recent years the Laboratory of Journalism and Communication for Plural Citizenship (aka LPCCP, according to its initials in Spanish) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona developed several works about this issues (Moreno Sardà, 2012), which can publicly available in its website (<http://labcompublica.info/es>). In particular, the LPCCP designed the online platform Infoparticip@ (www.infoparticipa.cat) as a proposal of innovative journalism oriented to facilitate civic participation in the monitoring and evaluation of the performance of the political representatives and public policies.

Within this framework, in 2012 the LPCCP developed the online project titled “Map of Good Practices of Local Public Communication” (www.infoparticipa.cat/bones-practiques/estudi.html) with the objective of assessing the information provided by the websites of the city councils about the right of citizens to know their political representatives and how they manage the public resources.

This online tool was designed to generate plural knowledge, from different territorially-distributed perspectives (Haraway, 1995), and in a collaborative and networked manner. This tool was implemented, pilot-tested and validated in Catalonia in 2012. The use of this tool will be extend to other 5 regions (the Canary Islands, Andalusia, Madrid, Aragón and Galicia) from 2013 and 2015, thanks to the funding granted by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

The following section describes the research methods, indicators and results of the assessment carried out in 2012 of the websites of 947 municipal governments of Catalonia, which will serve as a guideline for the new project.

2. Justification

Citizens cannot exercise their right to intervene in public affairs and in the decisions of the politicians that manage the government institutions if they do not have transparent, complete and intelligible information about the identity of these representatives and about whether they manage the public resources with equity and justice, efficacy and efficiency, or plan the actions of the public servants and employees.

These circumstances also affect the people who produce the information, the press and communication officers of these entities, whose job appointment and continuity currently depends on the discretion of the politicians in power. As a result, these professionals, instead of managing the information of these sources in favour of the citizens, tend to act more as professionals of political marketing or strategic communication than as journalists at the service of the rights of the citizens (Canel, 2007; Sanders, Canel, Holtz-Bacha, 2011; Del Río, 2011).

That is why currently government bodies are not reliable sources of information but biased sources that pollute the public debate with partisan and even personal interests. This behaviour is reinforced by the agreements that some politicians make to favour some news media. The result is that, as Díaz Nosty (2011: 26-34) explains, journalism is currently placed between pressure and extortion.

In previous studies [3] we identified the difficulties faced by the press officers of the local governments of Catalonia to treat citizens as the protagonists with the right and ability to participate in the public debate. These findings, and the fact that neither Spain or Catalonia have approved a law on information transparency that forces the public institutions to improve the quality of their information, have led us to develop the Map of Good Practices of Local Public Communication as an instrument to report the results of the assessment of the information provided by the websites of Catalonia's municipal governments (www.infoparticipa.cat/bones-practiques/index.html).

This project aimed to promote the good practices that could serve as model for other municipal governments. In this way, this map, apart from being a tool to disseminate the results of the research on the information offered by the websites of the Catalan municipal governments, should also become an instrument to promote the improvement of the quantity and quality of the information they offer.

This online tool consists of:

- 1) A database that presents the results of the analysis of the websites of 947 Catalan municipal governments, according to 41 basic indicators about the identity of the government authorities, the

management of the public resources, the information and participation instruments that are provided. The analysis focused on determining whether these types of information were provided to demand the incorporation of the types of information not offered to the public.

2) A cartographic representation of Catalonia powered by Google in which each municipality is coloured according to its score and shows a floating window with the results of its evaluation. This geographic representation facilitates obtaining individualised or general information.

3) The “Infometro”, which is a tool for the graphical representation of the automatic calculation of the results of the evaluation according to colours ranging from white (less than 25% of positive indicators) to yellow (from 25% to 50%) and green (more than 50%).

4) A content manager that aims to facilitate the research team’s generation of plural knowledge, collaboratively and in a networked manner and thus promotes a change in the androcentric and vertical paradigm that predominates in the conventional academic research (Moreno Sardà, 2007: 343-375).

This map is, therefore, part of the initiatives that are being produced by the so-called journalism data [4], and the proposals to introduce forms of accountability for the public authorities [5].

3. Methods and indicators

This research is based on the analysis of the information published on the websites of the municipal governments in relation to the public authorities and their management of the public resources, which are essential issues for which politicians should be held accountable (Villoria, 2011; Rivero, Mora, Flores, 2007; Guerrero, 2006; Mayne, 2000).

Firstly, we unfolded these basic questions in 41 indicators, which have been defined by taking into account the principles that we formulated in 2003 in the Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication (<http://labcompública.info/es/innovacion/decalogo-de-buenas-practicas/decalogo/>), the current legislation [6], and the common sense on the types of information that must be known by any citizen, expert (Guifreu, Fuentes, 2009) and organisations with experience in the evaluating of the transparency of the governments, such as Transparency International [7].

The reasons for choosing each of the indicators can be found in the guide published in www.infoparticipa.cat/bones-practiques/guia.html. The analysis of the information published by the websites and the way it is published has led us to adjust and clarify the indicators.

In what follows we present the first phase of the evaluation, which focuses on locating and analysing each of the websites by taking into account only whether they publish or not the information. In this phase we do not assess other aspects such as the easy access or clarity of the information. These results were incorporated into the information card of each municipality in the content management system that calculates the percentage of positive indicators. In this way the results appear automatically in the map, both individually and in groups of selected municipalities.

Initially we only evaluated the municipal governments of some regions in order to pilot test the tool, the indicators and their application criteria. After the necessary modifications were made and the evaluation criteria were clarified, we proceeded to assess groups of municipal governments. Partial

reports were made about groups of municipalities that had something in common, like being the capital of a *comarca* (district) or having a population of similar size. These reports have been published in the website of the Observatory of the LPCCP and they have disseminated in the media [8].

The publication of these partial results has provoked reactions in the public authorities and the officers responsible for the management of the municipal information, which in most cases has resulted in improvements that have been reported to the LPCCP. These changes reported have been verified and incorporated into the map.

Thus the main objective of this online tool was achieved: to encourage the municipal governments of Catalonia to improve the information provided in their websites to their citizens about the identity of the public authorities and their management of the public resources, so that citizens can monitor and assess their actions and public policies. In fact, since we published the first results in April 2012, the scores of many websites have increased and the number of yellow and green municipalities has increased in the map.

Before explaining the results, the following section will examine the indicators used in the evaluation and which are crucial in this study.

3.1. Indicators

As explained, we defined 41 indicators taking into account the current legislation. Firstly, article 46 of the revised municipal law of Catalonia defines a municipality as “the basic entity of territorial organisation and the primary element of citizen participation in public affairs” and guarantees the participation of the municipality “in all public matters that directly affect its interests” (art. 46.2). This article also recognises that “the municipality enjoys autonomy, has a legal personality and full capacity to exercise the public functions that have been entrusted to it, to represent the interests of the respective community and manage the public services whose ownership has been entrusted to it” (art. 46.3); and considers that “the territory, population, and organisation are elements of the municipality” (art. 46.4).

To be able to exercise these rights, it is essential for citizens to have access to accurate information on the functioning of the democratic system, the representatives chosen to manage it, and the way they work and manage the resources of the community for the benefit of all. For this reason we organised the indicators in 4 groups of questions:

- 1) Who are the political representatives?
- 2) How do these political representatives manage the public resources?
- 3) To what extent do they inform about the management of the public resources?
- 4) What resources and tools do they offer to enable civic participation?

To avoid subjectivity, we decided to limit the assessment to determine whether the website provides information on each of the issues, and gave the same weight to all the indicators. Therefore, the maximum score is 41 points that correspond to 100%.

3.1.1. Information about the political representatives

Table 1. First group of indicators: Who are the political representatives?

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Does the website provide basic information about the mayor: name, surnames, picture and political affiliation?2. Does the website provide information about the mayor: biography and/or curriculum vitae?3. Does the website provide basic information about the representatives that are part of the government: names, surnames, pictures and political affiliation?4. Does the website provide information about the representatives that are part of the government: biography and/or curriculum?5. Does the website provide basic information about the representatives that are not part of the government: names, surnames, pictures and political affiliation?6. Does the website provide information about the representatives that are not part of the government: biography and/or curriculum? |
|---|

The objective of this set of indicators is to evaluate whether the representatives of local administrations provide clear and complete information to citizens through the municipal website about the identity of the mayor and the rest of the city council members as well as of the people that are not part of the local government and constitute the opposition that monitors what the government does.

The questions related to these indicators have divided in view of the limited information provided by the websites: some evaluate whether basic information is provided about the mayor and the representatives that are part of the Government, as well as the representatives that are not part of the Government (name, photo and political party); while others investigate whether complementary information (biography or curriculum) is provided about these people. These questions constitute a total of 6 points.

In some municipal corporations, especially those from small municipalities, all the representatives are part of the government, either because only one candidate was postulated in the elections or because the government is exercised by a coalition: in that case, when the information about all the representatives was provided, the indicators referring to the representatives of the opposition were positively assessed.

3.1.2. Information about the government's organisation and activities

This group of indicators evaluated what elementary information was offered on the websites to citizens about the work of their political representatives, regardless of whether they are part of the government or the opposition. The questions refer both to mandatory information in accordance with

the current legislation and information whose disclosure is not mandatory but is fundamental to achieve good governance and to allow any person to evaluate the political management.

The aforementioned legal text, in its article 48, defines the municipal bodies and establishes that all city councils have a mayor (*Alcalde*), deputy mayors (*tenientes de alcalde*), and the plenary assembly (*pleno*) of councillors, as well as the Special Audit Commission.

The establishment of a governing commission (*comisión de gobierno*), now known as the local government council, is only obligatory “in municipal governments with a population higher than 5,000 inhabitants, and in those where the population is smaller but the plenary assembly of councillors agrees to establish it or its organic regulation establishes it” and “in all the municipalities that are capital of a *comarca*, regardless of the number of inhabitants”. This organisation may be complemented with other bodies, such as the commissions of study, report, or consultation, the bodies of civic participation, the municipal Ombuds officer, if it is accepted by the absolute majority of the plenary assembly of councillors after a municipal group has proposed it, the urban planning advisory council, the local board of security, and any other body established by the city council.

The three first questions of this group of indicators (7-8-9) aim to assess what information is provided in the Catalan municipal websites about three government bodies: the plenary assembly of councillors, the local governing commission, and the informative commissions.

We consider that in order for citizens to have a clear idea of how their political representatives are working it is essential to know the skills, the composition of these bodies and the work schedule that, according to article 97 of the revised law, must be established in “ordinary periodically pre-established sessions, and extraordinary sessions, which can be, if necessary, urgent”. Given that the plenary assembly is mandatory in all municipal governments, we consider that it a municipal website provides information about this municipal figure this suffices to evaluate the municipality positively in these indicators.

Table 2. Second group of indicators: How are public resources managed?

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">7. Does the website provide information about the competences of the government bodies: the plenary assembly of councillors, the local governing commission, and the informative commissions?8. Does the website provide information about the members of these government bodies?9. Does the website provide information about the work calendar of these government bodies?10. Does the website provide information about the holding and agenda of the upcoming municipal plenary sessions?11. Does the website publish the proceedings of the plenary sessions?12. Does the website publish the agreements reached by the governing commission or the council? |
|---|

13. Does the website provide information about the Government's Plan (*PG*), the Plan of Municipal Action (*PAM*) and/or the Strategic Plan?
14. Does the website provide information about the Municipal Urban Development Plan (*POUM*) or other urban development plans?
15. Does the website provide information about other municipal plans: Agenda21, Youth, Civic Participation, etc.?
16. Does the website provide information about the job positions and categories of the government and their salaries?
17. Does the website provide information about the remuneration of the elected positions?
18. Does the website publish the municipal ordinances?
19. Does the website publish the government's budget?
20. Does the website provide information about the use of the budget?
21. Does the website publish the annual reports on the General Balance and the Economic management of the Special Audit Commission?

The following two questions (10-11) are formulated specifically to see what information is provided about the municipal plenary assembly of councillors. Specifically, on two essential aspects for all citizens, what is the agenda of the session and what agreements have been reached: are the dates of the sessions and their agenda published in advance? And are the proceedings published after they have been approved in the following assembly?

In accordance with article 98 of the aforementioned law, the plenary assembly of councillors must meet "at least each month in municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants [...]; every two months in municipalities with a population between 5,001 and 20,000 inhabitants; and every three months in municipalities with up to 5,000 inhabitants".

The plenary also holds extraordinary session when it is requested by the President or at least the fourth part of the legal members of the municipal council". This article also states that "the plenary sessions have to be convened, at least, two business days in advance, except for urgent extraordinary sessions, whose call must be ratified by the plenary. All the proceedings on of the issues included in the agenda which should guide the debate and, in its case, the voting, must be available to councillors in the Secretary of the Corporation prior to the issuing of the call".

Article 103 states that "the councils' call for meeting must include the agenda to be treated".

Article 110 states that "a minute should be produced in each meeting" and that "this minute must be put to the vote at the next regular meeting of the body and must be previously read or distributed among its members. The minute must include the approval of the previous minute, and also the

necessary rectifications; and in any case the background of the agreements can be modified, and the corrections have to be limited to material errors”.

As we have mentioned, it is also mandatory in all municipal councils to have a Special Audit Commission, which is regulated by article 58 and is responsible for “the examination, study and the production of reports on the annual balance of the corporation”. This Commission is “composed of members of all the political groups that are members of the corporation” in a “proportional number according to their representativeness in the municipal council or equally for each group”. According to article 101, “the commission must meet before the first of June each year to review the General balance of the corporation, and to bring along the supporting documents and records, and to issue a report”. The last question of this group investigates whether the municipal websites publish these annual reports which must be issued by this commission.

The rest of the commissions of study, reporting, and consultation, which examine the agenda of the Plenary are only mandatory (article 60.1) “in all the municipal governments of more than five thousand inhabitants [...] In the other municipalities these commissions can exist, provided that the organic regulation has established it or the plenary approves it. In any case, these commissions must be established in the municipalities that are the capital of a *comarca* regardless of their number of inhabitants”. Moreover, article 60.2 establishes that “these commissions are responsible for the previous study and evaluation of the issues that will be voted upon by the plenary assembly or the governing commission... They can also intervene in relation to issues that have to be voted on by the governing commission whenever commission requests this intervention”.

From question 12 onwards we evaluate the information that allows citizens to monitor and evaluate the action of the governments and the public policies even if it is very basic information.

Question 12 investigates whether the municipal websites publish the agreements of the government of the governing commission, which is a mandatory body in municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. Article 54 of the revised law defines its composition: “The governing commission is composed by the mayor, a number of councillors not exceeding a third of the councillors of the plenary assembly, freely named and separated by the mayor, who has to notify its appointments to the plenary”. The deliberations of the governing commission are secret, but the agreements should be public.

The following questions refer to the political representatives’ work management and take into account four aspects:

1) The planning of the actions of the government, which should be done at the beginning of the mandate, or any other document that outlines the objectives of the government. We believe that a careful, effective and efficient political performance requires a Government Plan (*PG*), a Plan of Municipal Action (*PAM*) or a Strategic Plan (question 13). In addition, it requires urban planning tools like the Municipal Urban Development Plan (*POUM*) or the Municipal Urban Development Programme (*PAUM*) or other urban planning tools (question 14). We also believe that the performance of the government can improve if it also develops other plans to take measures in relation to specific aspects such as the environment, civic participation, or specific needs groups that are not usually taken into account in the allegedly generic political approaches (question 15).

2) The retributions received by the municipal government staff, according to the categories (full-time officers, temporary workforce, etc.) that the plenary has to approve each year, and the retributions

and compensation received by the political representatives for the exercise of their duties which can be performed in an exclusive or part-time basis (questions 16-17). These data, which have to be established in the plenary assembly, should always be easily accessible in the municipal website and not only in the minutes or the news.

3) Municipal ordinances, which are measures adopted by the corporation to regulate municipal life. They also have to be approved by the plenary assembly (question 18).

4) The municipal budget and its implementation, based on which the government must develop the political and economic management by following the lead of the mayor, and under the monitoring of the representatives of the opposition (questions 19-20). It is in this framework where placed the question on the Special Audit Commission (question 21).

3.1.3. Information about the government's management of public resources

The indicators of this group are designed to assess whether the websites report the activities carried out by political representatives, and whether this information allows citizens to assess whether the proposals made in the election campaign have been fulfilled and become part of the government's plan.

In principle, the people responsible for the government's press or communication offices are in charge of producing this information and making it available to the media for its dissemination. The development of the Internet has facilitated the dissemination of these press releases through the municipal websites in the form of news. The study of the construction and content of this information requires both quantitative and qualitative analyses which our team has carried out.

Table 3. Third group of indicators: how the government manages the public resources?

22. Does the website publish these types of news?
23. Does the website inform about the management of the public resources by the members of the government?
24. Does the website inform about the performance of the members of the opposition in the monitoring of the government's management of public resources?
25. Does the website publish contrasting the information provided by the members of the government, the opposition and the specialists?
26. Does the website inform about the people and companies that supply paid-for products and services to the government?
27. Does the website inform about the agreement of the plenary to support the Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication?
28. Does the website publish the Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication?

We formulated four questions to assess some basic aspects in relation to the news published in the municipal websites. The first questions investigates whether the news are published in the website. The second question investigates whether the published news describe the performance of the members of the government in the management and accountability of what their responsibilities. The third question investigates whether the news describe the performance of members of the opposition in the monitoring of the government's management of public resources. The fourth questions assess whether the news contrast the information provided by the members of the government, the opposition and the specialists.

The fifth question of this group investigates whether the website provides basic information about the management of the economic resources: the profile of the products and services suppliers of the municipal corporation. So far we have only assessed whether a section is dedicated to this kind of information, whose disclosure is mandatory according to article 277 of the revised law. At a later stage we will look at the quality of this information.

Finally, we incorporated in this group two questions that investigate the commitment of the municipal government to provide quality information and communication, through the acceptance of the plenary assembly or the council members of our Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication, and through the publishing this document and its principles on their website.

3.1.4. Information about the resources and tools for civic participation

Finally, we formulated a set of questions to assess what resources and tools were offered by the government in the municipal websites to facilitate civic participation in the democratic control.

Table 4. Fourth group of indicators: what tools and resources are provided for civic participation in democratic control?

- | |
|--|
| <p>29. Does the website inform about the situation of the municipal government: the duration of the current administration, the registered population, social diversity, economic and cultural activities, etc.?</p> <p>30. Does the website provide historic information about the municipality?</p> <p>31. Does the website provide the email address of the members of the government?</p> <p>32. Does the website provide the email address of the members of the opposition?</p> <p>33. Does the website provide access to the social networks of the corporation?</p> <p>34. Does the website provide information about the regulation on civic participation?</p> <p>35. Does the website provide information about other mechanisms of participation: territorial councils, city councils, sectoral councils, etc.?</p> <p>36. Does the website provide an agenda of the municipality's governmental and civic activities?</p> <p>37. Does the website offer a directory of its different populations?</p> |
|--|

38. Does the website offer tools for the population to participate in the creation and monitoring of the Government's Plans, Plan of Municipal Action, or the Strategic Plan?

39. Does the website offer tools for the population to participate in the creation and monitoring of the budget plans and other governmental plans?

40. Does the website provide citizens with tools to community accidents in the public thoroughfare, complaints or suggestions?

41. Does the website publish contact information about the person responsible for the press or communication office of the government?

The first two questions focus on citizens' need to be informed about the current and past situation of the municipality (like the duration of the current administration, the population, and the economic and cultural activities and its social diversity). We believe that this information is necessary for the population to assess the political decisions made every day about the management of the resources.

Most of the websites provide this information. However, this information has been generally produced according to conventional criteria that should be renewed to encourage citizen participation in the construction of collective knowledge about the past and present of each population centre, which is a possibility that we have already explored in previous studies and online tools such as the websites *Paseo por las redes de comunicación desde...* ("A walk by the communication networks from...") [9] and particularly the deceased *Soctortosa.cat*

Questions 31, 32 and 33 aim to determine whether the websites currently offer basic tools such as email addresses or forms to get in touch with the members of the government and the opposition, as well as links to their social networks.

Questions 34 to 37 investigate whether the websites offer information about other resources such as the regulation on citizen participation, and other mechanisms of participation (like the territorial councils, the sectoral councils, the city councils, etc.) and whether they offer the directory of municipal institutions and the governmental and civic agendas.

The following questions (38-40) investigate whether the websites provide more sophisticated tools to monitor and evaluate the performance of the government and the execution of its plans (the Governmental Plan, the Municipal Action Plan or the Strategic Plan, the Budget Plan, and other municipal plans) and tools to communicate incidents in the public thoroughfare, complaints or suggestions.

We consider that this is an area in which little efforts have been made so far and should be more attended in the future in order to achieve a more transparent public administration and enable the informed civic participation. This is an area in which we have worked in recent years in the framework of the *Infoparticip@* project (www.infoparticipa.cat/icd) of which this map is part [10].

Finally, the last question investigates whether the contact details of the press and/or communication officer of the corporation are published (41), since we believe any citizen should be able to reach this person to communicate its demands.

4. Results

The analysis of the websites of the 947 Catalan municipal governments, as of 8 March, 2013, indicates that the information they offer is inadequate and deficient.

If we select all the districts and all the municipal governments in the website of the Map of the Good Practices in Catalonia's Local Public Communication (www.infoparticipa.cat/bones-practiques/estudi.html), we can see that there is a predominance of municipalities represented in white, i.e. those that have not got 25% of positive indicators. Another significant number of municipalities are yellow, i.e. they achieved between 25% and 50% of positive indicators. Only a very small number is green, i.e. they have achieved over 50% of positive indicators. The detailed colour description of the websites of the municipalities can be seen in table 5.

Table 5. Summary of the data presented on the Map of Good Practices in Catalonia's Public Local Communication (www.labcompublica.info).

Number of municipalities	Number of inhabitants	Websites with more than 50% of positive indicators	Websites with 25% -50% of positive indicators	Websites with less than 25% of positive indicators	No website / data
10	More than 100,000	10	-	-	-
13	50,001 to 100,000	12	1	-	-
40	20,001 to 50,000	19	21	-	-
58	10,001 to 20,000	13	43	2	-
88	5,001 to 10,000	7	70	11	-
259	1,001 to 5,000	2	75	182	-
151	501 to 1,000	-	11	139	1
303	101 to 500	1	5	294	3
25	Less than 100	-	-	21	4
947 municipalities		64	226	649	8
		7%	24%	68%	1%

The data in table 5 shows that the green municipalities decreases as we go from the largest to the smallest municipalities (only 2 greens among the municipalities with a population between 1,001 and 5,000 inhabitants and 1 green among the municipalities with a population between 101 and 500 inhabitants) and that the white municipalities are the most common among the smallest municipalities. We can also see that all the municipal governments that do not have a website have a population of less than 1,000 inhabitants.

To be precise, of the 947 municipalities of Catalonia only a minority, 64 (7%), achieved more than 50% of positive indicators and appear on the map in green; less than a quarter, 226 (24%) obtained between 25% and 50% and appear in yellow; the vast majority, 649, have not obtained 25% of positive indicators and appear in white; and 8 appear in grey because they do not have a website. In short, more than 90% of the municipal websites offers insufficient information.

However, the publication of the map has led to improvements which demonstrate the willingness of many political representatives and communication officers to improve the information they offer to citizens. To notice these positive changes it is necessary to compare the results of the first evaluation of all the websites, which appeared in the map in 14 October, 2012, with the results obtained by 21 March 2013, when we finished the first round of assessments. In the last evaluation a larger number of websites reached higher scores and there were improvements on the overall statistics of the municipal governments of Catalonia.

Table 6. The 64 municipal websites that obtained more than 50% of positive indicators

Municipality	Inhabitants	1 st evaluation		Data from final evaluation 21/III/2013
		Data from the 1 st evaluation	Publication of report	
Barcelona	1,615,448	80 %	15-XI-2012	83 %
l'Hospitalet de Llobregat	256,065	56 %	15-V-2012	76 %
Badalona	219,786	68 %	15-V-2012	68 %
Terrassa	213,697	68 %	15-V-2012	83 %
Sabadell	207,721	83 %	15-V-2012	100 %
Lleida	138,416	68 %	15-V-2012	68 %
Tarragona	134,085	61 %	15-V-2012	61 %
Mataró	123,868	68 %	15-V-2012	71 %
Santa Coloma de Gramenet	120,824	68 %	15-V-2012	80 %
Reus	106,709	66 %	15-V-2012	68 %
Girona	96,722	66 %	1-VI-2012	68 %
Cornellà	87,243	56 %	1-VI-2012	63 %
Sant Cugat del Vallès	83,337	76 %	1-VI-2012	93 %
Sant Boi de Llobregat	82,860	68 %	1-VI-2012	83 %
Manresa	76,589	51 %	1-VI-2012	73 %
Rubí	73,979	73 %	1-VI-2012	73 %
Vilanova i la Geltrú	66,905	66 %	1-VI-2012	66 %
Viladecans	64,737	63 %	1-VI-2012	63 %
El Prat de Llobregat	63,499	54 %	1-VI-2012	54 %
Castelldefels	63,139	63 %	1-VI-2012	63 %
Granollers	60,000	63 %	1-VI-2012	63 %
Mollet del Vallès	52,409	73 %	1-VI-2012	73 %
Esplugues de Llobregat	46,687	56 %	21-VIII-2012	56 %
Gavà	46,250	51 %	21-VIII-2012	51 %
Sant Feliu de Llobregat	43,096	68 %	21-VIII-2012	100 %

Vic	40,900	73 %	21-VIII-2012	73 %
Blanes	39,834	46 %	21-VIII-2012	61 %
Vilafranca del Penedès	38,785	73 %	21-VIII-2012	73 %
El Vendrell	36,453	49 %	21-VIII-2012	80 %
Tortosa	34,432	61 %	14-IV-2012	68 %
Sant Adrià de Besòs	34,157	63 %	21-VIII-2012	63 %
Olot	33,725	49 %	21-VIII-2012	54 %
Barberà del Vallès	32,033	61 %	21-VIII-2012	61 %
Sitges	28,617	51 %	21-VIII-2012	51 %
Premià de Mar	28,310	51 %	3-VIII-2012	66 %
Pineda de Mar	26,040	56 %	21-VIII-2012	56 %
Santa Perpètua de Mogoda	25,331	59 %	21-VIII-2012	59 %
Olesa de Montserrat	23,924	39 %	21-VIII-2012	59 %
Castellar del Vallès	23,238	78 %	21-VIII-2012	78 %
Palafugell	22,816	56 %	21-VIII-2012	56 %
Manlleu	20,445	54 %	21-VIII-2012	54 %
Vilassar de Mar	19,840	56 %	X 22, 2012	56 %
Sant Quirze del Vallès	19,051	54 %	X 22, 2012	54 %
Franqueses del Vallès, les	18,693	61 %	X 22, 2012	61 %
Parets del Vallès	18,113	66 %	X 22, 2012	66 %
Caldes de Montbui	17,186	61 %	X 22, 2012	61 %
Tàrraga	17,129	59 %	X 22, 2012	63 %
Arenys de Mar	14,863	54 %	X 22, 2012	68 %
Vallirana	14,409	51 %	X 22, 2012	59 %
Sant Sadurní d'Anoia	12,345	49 %	X 22, 2012	51 %
Santa Coloma de Farners	12,305	51 %	X 22, 2012	51 %
Abrera	11,611	51 %	X 22, 2012	51 %
Torroella de Montgrí	11,385	46 %	X 22, 2012	54 %
Sant Andreu de Llavaneres	10,406	56 %	X 22, 2012	56 %
Alella	9,570	51 %	X 24, 2012	51 %
Solsona	9,304	63 %	21-VII-2012	80 %
Llagostera	8,105	49 %	X 24, 2012	59 %
Santa Coloma de Cervelló	7,931	61 %	X 24, 2012	61 %
Begues	6,426	34 %	X 24, 2012	66 %
Sant Feliu de Codines	5,990	51 %	X 24, 2012	51 %
Sant Vicenç de Montalt	5,854	59 %	X 24, 2012	59 %
Celrà	4,772	29 %	7-I-2013	56 %
Castellví de Rosanes	1,792	54 %	1-I-2013	54 %
Tavernoles	307	29 %	1 27, 2013	59 %

A) The number of websites with over 50% of positive indicators has increased.

As shown in table 6, there have been noticeable changes in the number of websites that have achieved more than 50% of positive indicators. The number of green websites went from 54 to 64 because 10 websites that appeared in yellow made improvements and exceeded 50% of positive indicators. Two websites achieved the maximum score, 100% of positive indicators: Sabadell and Sant Feliu de Llobregat. Moreover, 17 websites already have a score greater than 70%.

All the municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and (with just 1 exception) all the municipalities with 50.001 to 100.000 inhabitants are green. Although this proportion decreases among the municipalities with less than 50,000 inhabitants, some large and even small municipalities have made efforts to change and improve their websites.

B) The websites' information has improved in relation to some indicators.

Table 7. Results by indicators. Changes from the end of the first phase to the beginning of the second phase.

	14 October 2012	21 March 2013
Who are the political representatives?		
Does the website provide basic information about the mayor: name, surnames, picture and political affiliation?	42 %	43 %
Does the website provide information about the mayor: biography and/or curriculum vitae?	7 %	7 %
Does the website provide basic information about the representatives that are part of the government: names, surnames, pictures and political affiliation?	23 %	24 %
Does the website provide information about the representatives that are part of the government: biography and/or curriculum?	3 %	3 %
Does the website provide basic information about the representatives that are not part of the government: names, surnames, pictures and political affiliation?	17 %	17 %
Does the website provide information about the representatives that are not part of the government: biography and/or curriculum?	2 %	2 %
How are the public resources managed?		
Does the website provide information about the competences of the government bodies: the plenary assembly of councillors, the local governing commission, and the informative commissions?	9 %	9 %

Does the website provide information about the members of these government bodies?	17 %	17 %
Does the website provide information about the work calendar of these government bodies?	9 %	10 %
Does the website provide information about the holding and agenda of the upcoming municipal plenary sessions?	12 %	14 %
Does the website publish the proceedings of the plenary sessions?	32 %	32 %
Does the website publish the agreements reached by the governing commission or the council?	10 %	10 %
Does the website provide information about the Government's Plan (<i>PG</i>), the Plan of Municipal Action (<i>PAM</i>) and/or the Strategic Plan?	5 %	6 %
Does the website provide information about the Municipal Urban Development Plan (<i>POUM</i>) or other urban development plans?	62 %	65 %
Does the website provide information about other municipal plans: Agenda21, Youth, Civic Participation, etc.?	20 %	21 %
Does the website provide information about the job positions and categories of the government and their salaries?	2 %	2 %
Does the website provide information about the remuneration of the elected positions?	4 %	4 %
Does the website publish the municipal ordinances?	45 %	45 %
Does the website publish the government's budget?	24 %	24 %
Does the website provide information about the use of the budget?	2 %	3 %
Does the website publish the annual reports on the General Balance and the Economic management of the Special Audit Commission?	1 %	1 %

How is the management of the public resources reported?		
Does the website publish these types of news?	60 %	62 %
Does the website inform about the management of the public resources by the members of the government?	4 %	4 %
Does the website inform about the performance of the members of the opposition in the monitoring of the government's management of public resources?	1 %	1 %
Does the website publish contrasting the information provided by the members of the government, the opposition and the specialists?	2 %	3 %
Does the website inform about the people and companies that supply paid-for products and services to the government?	84 %	88 %
Does the website inform about the agreement of the plenary to support the Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication?	1 %	1 %
Does the website publish the Decalogue of Good Practices in Local Public Communication?	0 %	1 %
What tools are offered for civic participation in democratic control?		
Does the website inform about the situation of the municipal government: duration of the current administration, registered population, social diversity, economic and cultural activities, etc.?	71 %	75 %
Does the website provide historic information about the municipality?	74 %	77 %
Does the website provide the email address of the members of the government?	23 %	24 %
Does the website provide the email address of the members of the opposition?	10 %	11 %
Does the website provide access to the social networks of the corporation?	29 %	31 %
Does the website provide information about the regulation on civic participation?	9 %	9 %

Does the website provide information about other mechanisms of participation (like territorial, city or sectoral councils)?	9 %	9 %
Does the website provide an agenda of the municipality's governmental and civic activities?	65 %	67 %
Does the website offer a directory of its different populations?	64 %	67 %
Does the website offer tools for the population to participate in the creation and monitoring of the Government's Plans, Plan of Municipal Action, or the Strategic Plan?	1 %	2 %
Does the website offer tools for the population to participate in the creation and monitoring of the budget plans and other governmental plans?	4 %	5 %
Does the website provide citizens with tools to community accidents in the public thoroughfare, complaints or suggestions?	52 %	54 %
Does the website publish contact information about the person responsible for the press or communication office of the government?	7 %	8 %

As shown in table 7, which reflects the results of the whole sample of analysis, the municipal websites have increased significantly the information they publish about some indicators but have not made improvements in some other indicators.

B.1. Information about the profile of the political representatives

As table 7 shows, there have not been significant improvements regarding the limited information about the identity of the political representatives.

Currently, only 43% of the websites provides basic information (name, photo and political affiliation) about the mayor (it went from 42% to 43%) and only 24% publish this information about the members of the government (it went from 23% to 24%). However, only 17% of the websites provide basic information about the representatives who are part of the opposition and this figure has not changed whatsoever. Significant improvements have neither occurred in the provision of the biography and/or curriculum vitae of the members of the government and the opposition.

An analysis of the statistics of the 64 websites that have obtained more than 50% of positive indicators shows that this is a problem that must be solved as soon as possible: the basic information (name, photo and political affiliation) of the mayor is provided by 98% of the websites; of the members of the government by 84%, and of the representatives of the opposition by 81%. Therefore, a website of this group does not offer this information in relation to the first authority of the municipal government, and few others in relation to the rest of the political representatives.

The biography and/or curriculum vitae of the mayor is only published in 66% of the websites; while the biography and/or curriculum vitae of both the representatives that are part of the government and those that are not part of the government is only provided by 39% of the websites.

B.2. Information about the management of public resources

Information on the management of the public resources is also very limited. While the legislation clearly establishes which bodies should be part of the municipal government, their powers and their composition, and that they must have a work schedule, only 17% of the municipal websites provide information about the composition of the governing bodies and 9% about their competences, and these data have not changed during both evaluations. A slight improvement has occurred in the number of websites that publish information about the work schedule of these bodies (going from 9% 10% of websites) and the websites that publish the dates and agenda of the Municipal Plenary Assembly sessions (which has gone from 12 to 14%).

However, although some websites have incorporated the publication of the minutes of the Plenary Assembly sessions and the agreements of the governing commission, this number is so small that it does not affect the total percentage. In any case, the publication of the agreements of these bodies is essential because it allows citizens to know how the public resources are managed.

These data improve if we look at the statistics of the 64 websites that obtained over 50% of positive indicators, although it must be noted that none of the indicators is positively evaluated in 100% of the websites. In addition, negatively, only 56% of this group of the best websites publish the work schedule of the governmental bodies.

Another element that we consider fundamental in a good government is planning. Although it is not mandatory to develop a Plan of Government, a Municipal Action Plan or a Strategic Plan, we believe they are essential to effectively and efficiently manage the public resources. According to the statistics of the websites of the 947 municipalities of Catalonia, only 5% of them publish these plans, and this figure has increased one point since we started to publish this map. If we examine the statistics of the websites that have achieved more than 50% of positive indicators, only 55% of them publish these plans, which is worrying considering that most of these websites correspond to the largest municipalities.

In terms of Urban Development Plans or other planning standards, currently they are only published by 65% of all the websites of Catalonia, which indicates an increase of 3 points with respect to the first evaluation, by 95% of the websites that obtained more than 50% of positive indicators, which is also worrying since the percentage should be 100% in this group.

Information about the budget was only published in about a quarter, 24%, of all the websites of Catalonia and this figure has not changed since the first evaluation, although the number of websites publishing information about the implementation of the budget has increased one point, going from 2% to 3% of the websites. Of the group of websites with a score greater than 50%, the information about the budget is published by 95%, not 100%, while the information about the implementation of the budget is only published by 20%.

Other types of information that are published only by a limited proportion of websites are the information about the salaries of the elected officials, which is published by only 4% of all the websites, and the information about the job categories and salaries, which is published only by 2% of

the websites. If we compare these figures with the websites that achieved more than 50% of positive indicators, the level of transparency continues to be limited: only 25% of these websites publish the relation of jobs categories and salaries, and 41% publish the salaries of the elected officials. Certainly, this information should be clear and accessible in all websites.

Another weakness shown by the municipal websites from Catalonia is in the publication of the municipal ordinances, which are only published by 45% of all websites, although this information is found in almost all the websites (97%) with a score greater than 50%.

B.3. The news

Most of the websites publish news and this indicator increased 2 points, from 60% to 62%; but only 4% of these news are about the performance of the members of the government in accounting for the use of resources; only 1% are about the actions carried out by the members of the opposition to monitor or control the government's management of public resources; and only 2% contrast the information provided by the members of the government, the opposition, and the specialists (although this initial figure has increased to 3%).

In the case of the websites with more than 50% of positive indicators, all of them publish news, but only 28% of them publish news about the performance of the members of the government in the management of public resources; only 16% publish news about the actions carried out by the opposition to monitor the government's management; and only 23% publish news that compare the information provided by members of the government, the opposition, and the experts.

In contrast, the majority, 88%, of the websites of the Catalan municipalities inform about what the law calls "the profile of the contractor" and the contracts and concessions signed by the Corporation with companies, entities or individuals. And this information is published by all the websites with more than 50% of positive indicators.

B.4. Civic participation

The statistics have shown that most of the websites offer, although to varying degrees, tools to promote citizen participation. The problem is that it is difficult for people to participate if the information provided by the website is inadequate and insufficient. In addition, these participation tools do not allow a direct interaction on the political management, especially due to the poor planning of the actions of the local governments.

Only 24% of all the websites from Catalonian municipalities publish the email address or forms to communicate with the members of the government. But due to the limited number of municipal governments that produce a Plan of Government, only 1% of the websites offers citizens the possibility of participating in the production of these plans, and this figure has only increased one point.

In the case of the websites that obtained more than 50% of positive indicators, the majority, 92%, offers the e-mail addresses or forms of communication of members of the government, but a lower percentage offers the contact information of the opposition representatives. Moreover, only 23% of the websites with the best scores offer tools to participate in the production of the Governmental Plan, the Municipal Action Plan or the Strategic Plan, which is the cornerstone for the efficient and transparent management of the municipality.

5. Conclusions

As we have explained, this study aims to facilitate innovation and improvement in the provision of information and communication by public administrations, specifically the municipal governments in this phase of work, but taking into account the future development of similar procedures at other levels and their interrelation.

The tool that we have developed and the indicators that we have defined in the Map of the Good Practices in Local Public Communication has allowed us to show the criteria and methods that we have used to assess the information published in the institutional websites of 947 municipalities of Catalonia; to carry out the first phase of assessments from April 2012 to 21 March, 2013; to publish the results on the Internet and encourage policy-makers, experts and citizens to compare the research results with their findings and make contributions. In particular, political representatives and government officers have been able to make improvements to their websites to increase their score and thus the transparency and quality of the information they offer. Thus, this map has also become a guide that has contributed to the improvement of the information of the websites managed by the municipal governments.

The colour representation of the evaluation results, which was defined in the “infómetro” (white, less than 25% of positive indicators; yellow, between 25% and 50%; and green, more than 50%), facilitates people’s understanding of the information that should and is included in the institutional website of their municipality, and allows people to contrast this results. In this way we resolved another issue that we consider to be essential: the information provided by the municipal administrations must be not only transparent and complete but also intelligible so that it can be used by any person to make informed decisions and democratically participate in the public affairs.

At this stage the tool has been tested, the indicators have been adjusted, the suggestions have taken into account, and the improvements made in the websites have been incorporated in the partial reports that have been published. Therefore, the data published in this article demonstrate that we are fulfilling the initial objective: to promote the improvement of the information published by the municipal websites.

From this moment, we begin a new phase that will introduce changes, thanks to the help received from the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness to develop the R&D project entitled *Comunicación y periodismo para la participación ciudadana en el seguimiento y la evaluación de la gestión de los gobiernos locales* (“Communication and Journalism for civic participation in the monitoring and evaluation of the management of local governments”) (reference CSO2012-34687). Among the most important changes is the new collaboration of the research team of the Autonomous University of Barcelona with research groups from others universities of Catalonia and other 5 Spanish autonomous communities (the Canary Islands, Andalusia, Madrid, Galicia and Aragon), which will allow to extend the Map of Good Practices in Local Public Communication.

To this end, we are preparing a new version of the platform that will cover the whole of Spain; will allow the incorporation of data from the wider analysis of the municipal websites that will be carried out by the new larger research team; will incorporate the information of each municipality (population, capital, ruling political party, sex of the mayor, and date of the input of data); and will have new features like the possibility to manage more complex data and automatically publish more detailed historical reports.

The information accumulated in the current map, focused on Catalonia, will be transferred to the new platform. We will carry out a second phase of assessments of the websites of the local councils of this Community and will promote their improvement. At the same time, the first wave of assessments will be carried out in the other autonomous communities.

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7. Notes

- [1] Spanish National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, aka INE): <http://www.ine.es/daco/daco42/codmun/codmunmapa.htm>. data last updated on 01/01/2013.
- [2] See also: Corcoy Rius, M. (2012), *Comunicació i periodisme a les corporacions locals a Catalunya (1979-2009)*. Thesis to obtain the Doctoral degree in Communication and Journalism, Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences, School of Communication Sciences, Bellaterra; and the study of Corcoy, M., Carrasco, M., Gámez, I., Gómez, P. (2001), *Les corporacions locals i la informació pública (1979-2001)*, directed by Moreno Sardà, A., presented at the Conference “La comunicació municipal al segle XXI”, Ripollet, 20/11/2001, available at: <http://labcompublica.info/recerques/corporacions-locales-2011>.
- [3] The results and tools developed are available at <http://labcompublica.info/es/investigaciones/visibilidad-de-la-participacion-de-las-mujeres-en-los-proyectos-de-mejora-de-barrios-2010-2011/> and <http://www.infoparticipa.cat/icd/>.
- [4] See, for instance, in Spain www.espanaenllamas.es, published by the CIVIO Foundation; in Central America www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/mapas-y-datos, which is a digital newspaper sponsored by the Rafael Landívar University (Guatemala) and is focused on the analysis, research and debate oriented to “Defend human rights, democracy and the search for the truth. Aims to carry out in-depth journalism since 22 February, 2011, and specialises in the dynamics of power of public interest and the dynamics that threaten people’s dignity”. In Peru, www.clasesdeperiodismo.com/2012/09/01/periodistas-elaboran-el-manual-de-periodismo-de-datos-iberoamericano/
- [5] The Court of Auditors’ website (www.rendiciondecuentas.es/es/index.html), which is presented as “the place where citizens have the possibility to access information about the local authorities’ financial management of the money deducted annually from their accounts”, is interesting but not enough to achieve this goal.
- [6] Law 7 of 2 April 1985 (*Ley 7/1985*), which defines the Rules of the Local System (www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1985-5392), and Law 8 of 15 April 1987 (*Ley 8/1987*), which regulates Catalonia’s Municipal and Local Regime (www.boe.es/boe/dias/1987/05/22/pdfs/A14945-14974.pdf); and the Legislative Decree 2/2003 (of 28 April), which is part of Catalonia’s municipal law and local government: www20.gencat.cat/docs/CJA/Continguts/La_Institucio/Normativa_reguladora/1_4_3_4_Decret_legislatiu_2_2003_refosa_regim_local_Cat_castella.pdf
- [7] Available at www.transparency.org/ and www.transparencia.org.es.
- [8] Available at www.labcompublica.info/es/observatorio/
- [9] See www.wikis.uab.cat/passeigperlesxarxes/index.php/P%C3%A0gina_principal

[10] Results available at <http://labcompublica.info/recerques/visibilitat-de-la-participacio-de-les-dones-en-els-projectes-de-millora-de-barris/> and <http://labcompublica.info/recerques/visibilitat-de-la-participacio-de-les-dones-en-els-projectes-de-millora-de-barris-2010-2011/>

8. Sources

The websites of 939 of the 947 municipal governments of Catalonia (8 municipal governments do not have a website).

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