

Web Site Portals in Local Authorities

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, practically all big cities have a Web site. The objective of this article is not to make a detailed study about their contents, but to examine their organization and underlying assumptions: indeed those choices illustrate very clearly the trends and priorities in terms of governance.

The metaphors are becoming a structuring element for software design and applications. For instance, the screens of the first Macintoshes were designed with the desktop metaphor. Nowadays, practically all existing operating systems are not only visual, but also based on this metaphor.

Those metaphors used in local authorities portals reveal the type of relationships with the public, and are a track to follow for e-government and e-democracy. When designing a Web site, it is interesting to pose the following questions:

- What is the mission of the organization and what kinds of services to provide?
- What are the potential users, what are their profiles, and what are they looking for?
- What image to confer, what information to provide?

In addition to those considerations, levels of development and cultural aspects must be taken into account.

In this article, we will analyze only portal contents and organization; including an item into the portal is assuming that it is important, and that it will act as a major entry point (Van Duyne, Landay, & Hong, 2003). For instance, if a city includes “sports” in its portal, it means that this activity is very important for the person in charge of communication. Of course, the design of Web sites is sometimes sub-contracted to specialized companies, which re-use or impose their know-how to local councillors at the detriment of the image they want to confer. In addition, some politicians underestimate the importance of Web sites letting the designing and updating to technicians, whereas a Web site must be a key-item in a consistent communication policy for governance.

This rapid analysis was made from a selection of around 200 big European and North American cities without idea of completeness. In other words, no strictly organized survey was conducted and only examples, which, in our opinion the most illustrative, are presented in this article: cities were first selected at random in some countries, namely USA, UK, France, Italy, and Spain. When several cities were found

with similar characteristics, one from an English-speaking country was selected as an example.

We will not analyze graphic quality of portals in which city logos and emblems are often given, together with the picture of the more famous monuments, and a location map in the country. Let us say immediately that the majority of them are very evolving and updated generally on a daily basis.

Let us remark that as far as we know, no systematic states of the review were done in the past except an informal study, which was conducted in 2002 (Laurini, 2002) on a similar subject. As a consequence, it is interesting to see the evolutions of the city Web sites and the new directions.

We will successively analyze the different categories of users, the structuring of user-oriented Web sites, the main used metaphors, and the evolution toward e-government and e-democracy. All portal examples were taken in January 2006.

USERS

During the design of the first Web sites, it was relatively difficult to know exactly who the users were. However, the list of information and services to deliver was very simple, giving the birth of a service-oriented Web site (See Figure 1(a) for instance). Now, since several local authorities have already constructed their own Web site, this task is easier. So, we can distinguish:

- Citizens and city-dwellers.
- Staff.
- Tourists.
- Providers and customers.
- Investors.
- Home seekers.

Citizens and City-Dwellers

At the Web site level, the city-dwellers can be considered as citizens and potential electors.

For administrative matters, the citizens must know their rights and the places where they have to go to fill forms. Now, the forms can be filled through Internet. Anyhow, the administrative machinery must be totally reorganized in order to take these new characteristics into account. In local authorities, the description of the departments is not always

given, and the names of the department heads are provided only very rarely. The barriers between the municipal staff and the citizens still exist.

Concerning city-dwellers as potential electors, the portals of several U.S. cities show a picture of their mayor so giving them the possibility to deliver a short address. This message can still be the same during time (for instance about the importance of the Web site in the municipal strategy), or to be modified according to circumstances. Some cities give a short biography of their mayor.

Many cities deliver public information—almost all give the lists of cultural and sport events. On some sites, sport results are given, sometimes in more or less real time.

Urban risks are also present in some places. After the September 11, 2001 attack, several cities have included information relative to terrorism protection.

Municipal Staff

For staff, generally, an Intranet is made for their work, and so it is not accessible by outside people. This kind of functionality is not analyzed here because generally accesses are password protected. In this category, we can nevertheless include the persons being employed by a local authority. Some cities show a list of available jobs.

Tourists

Tourists represent a moving population to attract. Let us remind you that in some cities, tourism is the number one

activity. For that, tourist offices propose lists of landmarks, museums, restaurants, hotels, etc. to visit, giving opening hours, and prices.

Providers and Customers

Commercial relationships are more or less absent in French local authority sites. In Italy and in Spain, for instance, almost all sites present a major access to opportunities for bids and contracts with the municipality.

Investors

Whereas the majority of city councillors affirm to give a paramount importance to local business. For instance in France, practically nothing is done except sometimes by means of local Chambers of Commerce. However, in some U.S. cities, opportunities are presented.

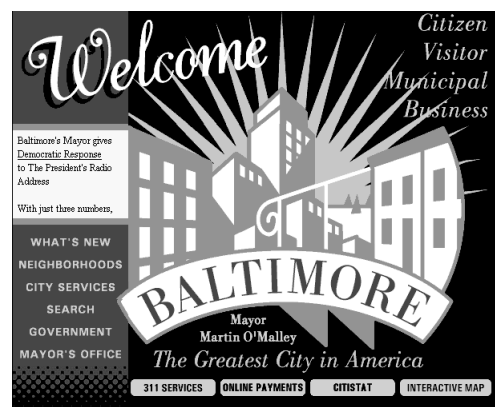
Home Seekers

Attracting new city-dwellers is also an important aspect for city governance. But alas, few sites are giving an exhaustive list of plots, vacant houses, or allotments in course of development, whereas realtors are only listing or mapping what they themselves have in stock. But apparently, no city is giving a complete list of local real estate companies.

Figure 1. First examples of local authority Web sites. (a) Williamsburg Virginia showing a collection of information to the reader and the city entrance sign (<http://www.ci.williamsburg.va.us/index.htm>). (b) Baltimore Web site organized as a news magazine cover and with user-orientation (<http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/>)



(a) Williamsburg with the city entrance sign



(b) Baltimore Web site as a magazine cover

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