

#museuobert: una iniciativa perquè els museus no s'atuessin durant el confinament

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic initially led to a lockdown that halted cultural activity around the world. Museums had to close their doors and the only means of communication was through their own digital spaces. Initiatives such as #museuobert were born out of the need to keep the cultural sector alive and at the same time helped change the paradigm of digital communication in museums. Making their collections available online is the present and future of many museums. Communication departments need to understand this and adapt to the situation in order to be present in the social and cultural conversation.

1. The #museuobert Project

The aim of this article is to recount the creation of the [#museuobert](#) project, which is intrinsically linked to the effects of the pandemic caused by covid-19 in the museum sector. Specifically, this article puts into context the situation experienced around the world since March 2020 and how projects such as #museuobert can help in the dissemination of the online heritage of museums and cultural entities when these are forced to close and to communicate only digitally.

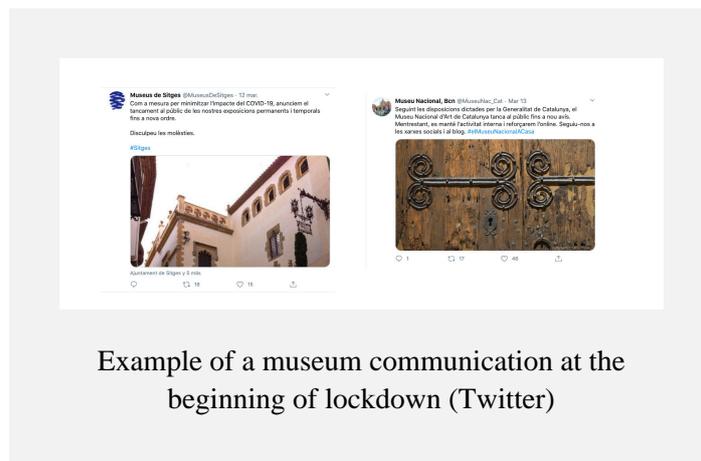
The pandemic pushed museums to extend their visibility beyond their own physical space or website. They just had to go out and seek visitors, art enthusiasts or even those who would eventually become so, even if they did not know it yet. The path to achieve this interaction is to promote initiatives such as #museuobert, which put technology at the service of museums to disseminate their heritage online to an audience that will surely end up visiting the museum if it finds content of their interest.

Lockdown meant that 70% of European museum workers had to adapt to teleworking (NEMO, 2020). If we can draw a positive reading from this situation, it must be the high degree of adaptation on the part of employees in the sector and their involvement. This must not be wasted. Many of these workers acquired technological and digital communication skills that they did not have before the pandemic, and this can deeply contribute to the return to "normality." Museums were one of the first facilities to reopen. This was partly due to their characteristics, which facilitated the scheduling of visits while respecting social distance and adequate ventilation.

2. The Birth of the #museuobert Project

[#museuobert](#) was launched at a time when museums had to stop operating immediately and without any prior planning. The lockdown took everyone by surprise, including museums, which from 14 March 2020 on would no longer receive any visitors to their facilities.

The specific case of museums was partly overshadowed by other sectors, as the lockdown caused by the state of alarm was common throughout the country and each sector had its own struggle: restaurants, traders, or even other cultural facilities such as cinemas or concert halls, among others. The first reaction of museums was to take advantage of the only tool available at the time—online communication—to inform their followers of this decision and of the uncertainty of reopening.



Example of a museum communication at the beginning of lockdown (Twitter)

The vast majority of museums issued very similar statements, in which they announced their closure without any specific reopening date. The most optimistic voices dared to propose the end of March as a possibility for getting back to business, but they had to correct their predictions only a few days later.

This lockdown situation led to the publication of various articles that analyzed the future of the cultural sector and heritage in those uncertain times, in which people could not leave home. Kulietewska (2020) came to the—quite obvious—conclusion that the digital dissemination of heritage is an option that also favors the challenges of the future. After the strict lockdown period, studies were published that analyzed the proposals made by museums during this stage. Almansa (2020) presented the results of a study based on surveys of virtual visits during lockdown. It focused on visits to archeological museums, and found that the museum's free digital activities skyrocketed, with 77.6% of surveyed users admitting to having received offers for such activities. This makes us understand that museums knew how to react, even those with heritage that may be more complex to disseminate. It is not the same to digitize and post online a painting or even an object as a whole archaeological site.

Prior to the pandemic, museums already had their sights set on the dissemination of online collections, but it has now gone far beyond what was initially planned. It is not just a matter of disseminating one's own heritage, but also the documentation of these cultural spaces. Therefore, two levels can be established: the collection and also the trajectory of a museum with all the information on its surroundings and its activities. For this reason, communication in museums must go beyond serving as a calendar of activities. It is important to create unique narratives that take advantage of the full potential that virtual spaces have to offer.

Similar situations have been experienced around the world, but museums that have come out of this stronger are those that already had a digital communication strategy 100% compatible with their physical and face-to-face existence in the museum. These two systems should not be understood as opposing strategies, but as an opportunity for joint growth that evidently demands some work and creativity.

So, as soon as the state of alarm was activated and society was confined to their homes, the companies [Nubilum](#) and

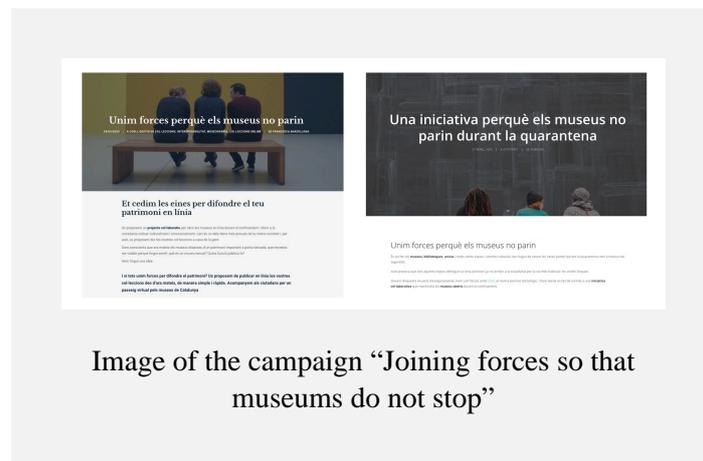
[Coeli](#) started developing a project that would support museums, as it facilitated communication and expanded the range of dissemination possibilities. The principles of the project were clearly defined: Coeli provided the technology and Nubilum provided the document management specialists so that museums could disseminate their heritage free of charge and as soon as possible during the very year 2020.

Nubilum is a document management company with extensive experience in libraries, archives and museums, which also works very closely with a large number of cultural organizations and centers. On the other hand, Coeli offers an online collection dissemination platform, which allows users to manage heritage collections in an agile and intuitive way and which also offers its services to various cultural entities.

As indicated, the need was clear—museums needed tools to continue their work. Not all of them have a system that is solid enough to withstand weeks of communicating exclusively online without opening their doors. The danger of falling into oblivion and being unable to reach visitors was very real. Therefore, the main goal of the project was to help museological facilities that did not have an online catalog with an attractive and agile offer to move into the digital field.

3. The Stages of #museuobert

The first phase of #museuobert was to create a campaign to attract museums. To get the message across as quickly as possible, the blogs both institutions (Nubilum and Coeli) launched the “Joining forces so that museums do not stop” campaign, which made very clear what the purpose of the project was. Meanwhile, internally, work was underway to shape the #museuobert project, both conceptually and technologically.



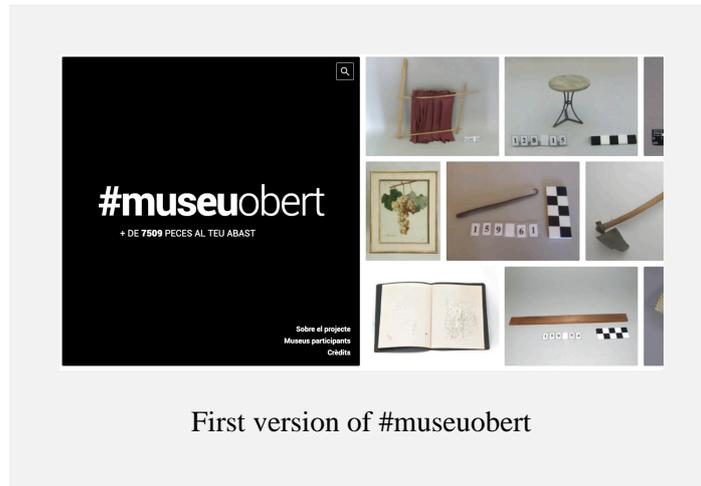
The project was launched quickly, as many Catalan museums did not have their collections online and were completely halted. They discovered that they had no way of disseminating their heritage and reaching their audience.

The initial goal of the project was to provide coverage throughout Spain, mainly because technology allows it, but the team soon realized that it was too wide a range to address at the start of #museuobert. That is why the first approach to museums was centered on the cultural entities of Catalonia. It is important to consider that, although the team was confident in the project, the reality of the context (the confinement and the state of alarm) was confusing and it was unknown how museums were going to react. There was a possibility that they would reject the platform for various reasons such as incompatibility with the closure, or directly with the lack of access to their facilities, which would have made it difficult to participate in the project.

#museuobert officially opened in the first week of April 2020, two weeks after it was conceived as a project. In this time, they managed to devise it and shape it. It required bringing together a multidisciplinary team with technicians, designers, art historians and communicators, to offer a solution to an unprecedented situation for which there were not many alternatives.

When #museuobert was launched, its design was very different from the current one. While austerity in design was

predominant, the only interface colors were black on the background and white on the letters. This left all color for the museums' pieces, and the whole prominence was given to art.

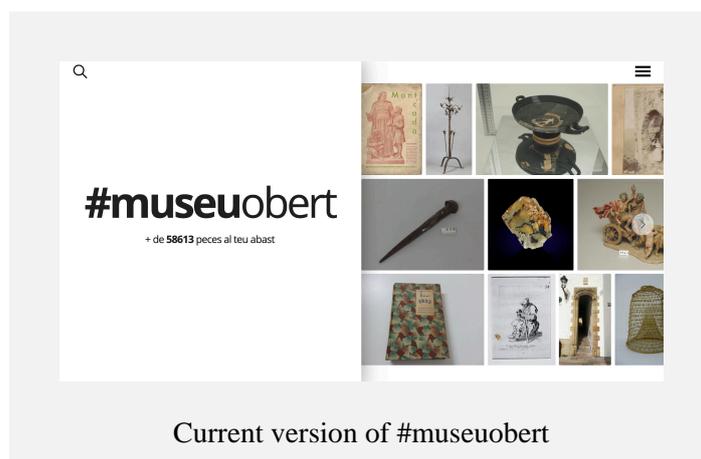


First version of #museuobert

In this first version of the project, in addition to the collections themselves, a tab with information about the project and a list of the participating museums with their linked social networks were included. Just by scrolling horizontally and without having to make more than a couple clicks, visitors could now browse through the first eight thousand pieces of the project and share them on social media. At this point, feedback was received from users and museums, who outlined their needs and preferences as they made use of the tool.

The search engine was already one of the key elements of #museuobert. With thousands of pieces from dozens of different museums, it is essential to have a search engine that allows an easy location of specific pieces. Therefore, #museuobert offers a simple, classic search, such as Google or any search engine. A term is introduced in the searching box and the most relevant results are retrieved. It should be noted that if the search term is normalized, it will appear as a drop-down below, even before you finish typing the full word. In addition to this simple search, another search interface with advanced options was enabled for users who want to further refine their results. Some of the available fields are the exact name of the object, its author, place, material or technique, and it is also possible to establish dates to further outline the results.

Listening to all the needs of museums with the tool already up and running, it was decided to switch to a much improved 2.0 version, both on the outside and the inside. Visually, #museuobert made a 180-degree change. The black background turned white, which is much cleaner, and the text turned black. Renovations did not end with this aesthetic change. The spaces of each museum took center stage: each museum now had a prominent image and its own URL. Thus, each museum maintains its own identity. However, the idea is to maintain the idea of a community. A kind of directory of Catalan museums was created with an attractive visual format. Functionality of defining searches was also amplified, which allowed each museum to make specific collections of pieces selected by themselves or suggested by the #museuobert team. Thanks to this new functionality, it was now possible to enjoy, for example, the complete collection of [fans](#) of the Museum of Arenys de Mar or the [dolls](#) of the Can Llopis Romantic Museum.



Current version of #museuobert

This is the complete list of museums and entities participating in the #museuobert project in August 2021:

- Santa Eulàlia Historical Archive
- Library of the Museum of Natural Sciences of Barcelona
- Can Falç de Mar
- Mas Iglesias Image Center in Reus
- CIP Molí d'en Rata
- Canals d'Urgell Cultural Space
- Ermengol Space
- Fita Foundation
- Palau Foundation
- Stämpfli Foundation
- Salvador Cabinet of the Botanical Institute of Barcelona
- Herbarium of the University of Barcelona
- Abelló Museum
- Museum of Alcover
- Museum of Arenys de Mar
- Museum of Cervera
- Manresa Technology Museum
- Museum of Peralada
- Terres de l'Ebre Museum
- Museum of Manresa
- Maricel Museum
- Cau Ferrat Museum
- Josep Cañas Museum
- Montcada Municipal Museum
- Pau Casals Museum
- Can Llopis Romantic Museum

- Terrassa Textile Museum
- Maricel Palace
- Vinseu

4. Technology at the Service of Museums

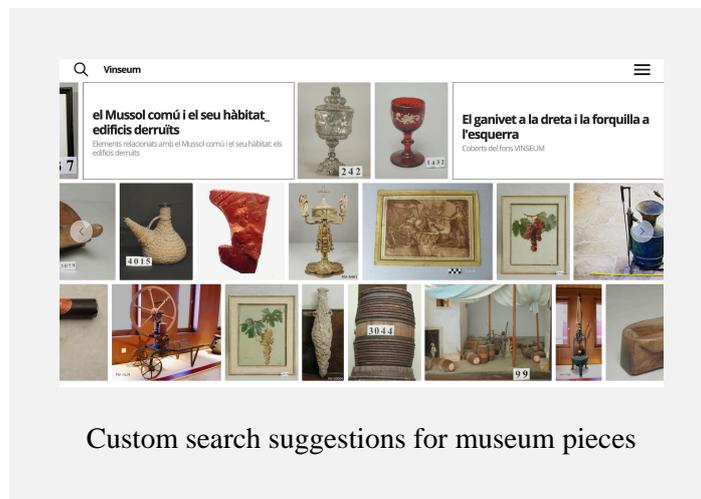
During the creation of #museuobert, it was very clear that this was not a simple publication of an online catalog—it had to be a much more dynamic proposal, focused on users, considering them as visitors interested in heritage with no access to museums whatsoever. For this reason, it was decided to opt for an intuitive design, visually attractive and with easy and direct integration with social networks, as it is the most immediate form of communication between museums and their audience.

Coeli technology works under the premise “Create once, publish everywhere.”⁽¹⁾ This is quite a statement of its focus as a tool for disseminating heritage, which saves time in the management of the museum’s website while increasing the visibility of the collections incorporated in this technology.

This tool’s operation for museums is very simple: it allows them to synchronize information directly from their database or collection manager. This means that museums have full autonomy to publish or hide their files. They can highlight a selection or create specific searches to show only certain types of resources. For example, the Museum of Arenys de Mar, which has more than six thousand works, including objects and many other items of great value, decided to create a specific collection on clothing to facilitate access to pieces in this category.

Due to the need for a quick response, #museuobert devised a very simple procedure, which them to have a collection online in just two weeks. The Museum of Arenys de Mar contacted the managers of #museuobert and provided its database. Then, the project technicians were in charge of uploading it to the system and thereafter it was ready to be published. The Coeli Sync program is ready to load new data immediately from different tools such as Access, FileMaker or Excel.

One of the cultural trends of recent years is to create narratives. Choosing different elements, pieces or works of art to tell a story, whether real or imagined. For this reason, #museuobert placed great emphasis on setting up pre-established searches, which allow the creation of outstanding groups that are also visually combined with museological pieces, facilitating serendipity and the discovery of art and culture. which might not have been known prior to that.



5. Social Networks—The Key to Museums' Communication

Social media was one of the key elements in this project, so #museuobert decided to open three communication channels: Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. All three social spaces were used to publicize the participating museums and their heritage, and also helped to maintain a relationship with both users and museums. Hence, a stable network began to be woven so that it would not be left to the simple publication of online collections. A recent study (Jarreau, P. B., 2019) on the relationship between Instagram and museums in the United States analyzed more than a thousand museum posts to show that interaction with followers is below expectations. In his analysis, the study identified that out of 1,080 posts on social networks, 591 did not exceed one hundred likes. In addition, 30% of publications dealt exclusively with activities organized by museums. This indicates that social media is used as a communication tool to announce events without expecting any user participation. Therefore, museums do not take advantage of all the possibilities of social networks and only use them as an extension of their websites.

Another aspect detected is that many of the museums participating in the project do not have a communication department or people dedicated exclusively to these tasks. Thus, a clear need for training in aspects of communication and social networks was detected, which is why the #museuobert communication team carried out various training actions.

Manuals on communication and social networks were developed so that museums had the necessary autonomy to communicate properly in their respective networks, maintaining their own editorial line and considering the fact that each channel has its own characteristics, as well as a particular tone and a different speech. Examples and success stories were provided to help. For example, the Terrassa Textile Museum, with their garments of incalculable value, has the possibility to share the image of one of their dresses on Twitter by asking fans to guess what era they think it comes from, and then tell them whether or not they got the correct answer. In this way, a conversation is generated in both directions, and the content of #museuobert is offered in a more enjoyable, fun and gamified way. Another real example was the creation of the #BestMuseumBum hashtag, which celebrated works of art showing naked bodies from behind, and from the profile of #museuobert a selection of pieces from different museums of the project was presented. Thus, museums gained visibility and a community was created, while users found an entertaining and different way of approaching art.

6. The Figures of #museuobert

In August 2021, #museuobert has almost 62,000 published pieces from 29 different museums in Catalonia. In its first sixteen months of life, without any financial investment in advertising, nearly 75,000 visits have been achieved,⁽²⁾ of which 24% come from social networks and, more interestingly, 15% are organic, the result of searches conducted by Google. This shows that a good job in describing artworks facilitates their retrieval, not only within the museum's own database, but on the web.

The data of #museuobert on social networks are positive, considering the immediacy of the project and the decision not to invest in advertising, so that all engagement (that is, the interaction with users) is generated organically and naturally.

The project obtained more than 500 followers in Instagram, 56% of whom are women. It should be noted that the most representative age range is 35 to 44 years.⁽³⁾ This is mainly due to the fact that Instagram is still considered a social network with a much younger average user profile than others such as Twitter or Facebook.

On Twitter, with more than three hundred followers also achieved entirely organically, the project combines own tweets and retweets and holds conversations with profiles of the sector or museums themselves.

Some time after the launch of #museuobert, it was decided to open a Facebook profile. The #museuobert team realized that some museum and heritage enthusiasts are quite active on this social network, and that many of their associated museums had Facebook profiles and updated them regularly. Without any investment in advertisement, the number of followers has risen up to and beyond a hundred in just a few weeks. 57% are women.

A distinct goal of #museuobert's social media channels is to facilitate conversation and direct contact with the museums included in the project. When proposing publications, the idea is to give equitable visibility to all centers, but we also value those that mention and generate content that is easy to dynamize.

Thematic content always works well. Celebrating special dates such as National Day of Catalonia, St. George's Day or Women's Day is a good opportunity to search for related content within #museuobert and spread it with its proper mentions.

The response from the participating museums has been very positive, and the involvement of the companies promoting the project is well appreciated. Thanks to the participation in different congresses such as the First International Congress of Museums and Digital Strategies (REMEDI) or the XVII Spanish Days of Information and Documentation, it was possible to promote this initiative beyond the Catalan territory, encountering vivid interest among attendees.

The celebration of the first year of #museuobert enjoyed the participation of all museums and collaborating entities, which recorded a small virtual tour of all museums, which was part of a campaign on social networks within the framework of the celebrations of this first anniversary.

7. Conclusions

Direct contact with museums facilitated the continuous optimization of the tool. The needs of museums and users to include new features have been addressed. Improvements in advanced search, metadata fields, interface formatting, or the option to share on social media have been adjusted to the requests of museums and visitors. One of the aspects in which #museuobert continues to work is in the standardization of terms to facilitate the integration of different languages, and also in the improvement of the search within the same portal.

The time margins of the #museuobert project were very tight, and for this reason it was not possible to plan a communication strategy in a conventional way. The need to offer the service as soon as possible forced for conversations with museums and informative actions with the media to be held at the same time. It should be noted that the public impact of the launch of #museuobert was positive, with many appearances in different media: *Betevé*,⁽⁴⁾ *La Vanguardia*,⁽⁵⁾ *Ara*,⁽⁶⁾ *El Periódico de Catalunya*⁽⁷⁾ or *Barcelona.cat*.⁽⁸⁾ Moreover, coinciding with a time when the whole of society was locked up at home, the media decided to give a loudspeaker to initiatives that promoted culture from home. In addition to these mentions in the media, it is worth noting the involvement of the participating museums in the project, which filled their blogs and websites with the news of their online heritage.

The continuity of the project is a reality and the new roadmap after the pandemic and lockdown is currently being drawn up. During the first phase, #museuobert has been a completely free project for entities and was funded by the founding companies. The aim for the sustainability and duration of the project is to adjust the cost to the needs and realities of each participating museum.

The future of #museuobert is linked to the evolution of the project. Although its birth was closely linked to the museums of Catalonia for a reason of proximity, its growth aims to overcome geographical barriers. Coeli's technology already has years of experience and is fully flexible and adaptable to all types of entities beyond museums regardless of their size. The project is expected to further evolve to incorporate new features, both for content visualization and collection management, but the decision on whether to continue investing will also depend on the interest it generates in organizations. The need detected during the beginning of the project exists all over the world and is not only conditioned by the pandemic. The arrival of new technologies and new forms of communication and the dissemination of the online heritage of museums and cultural institutions has raised the interest of the whole sector for a long time.

This experience served to verify that a network of museums works much better in collaboration than independently. Having a tool that brings together the different collections of various museums, united by geographical, thematic or other criteria, allows the creation of a series of interesting synergies from which collaborations and opportunities can arise. Elevating this experience at an international level could translate into good news for the dissemination of

national heritage and its link at a global level.

The paradigm of museum communication has changed—although before the priority of many was the dissemination of activities, and heritage itself was reserved for physical visits, the lockdown accelerated the process of giving prominence to the works of art. In 2020, museums turned their focus of digital communication on their works, and this experience will help them to exponentially improve the way they disseminate their collections.

Undoubtedly, the #museuobert project is a child of its time, born of a very clear need in a very turbulent time. However, it is important to recognize that this situation served to accelerate communicative actions that museums considered difficult to achieve, or that always remained as proposals that were not prioritized. If a positive reading can be drawn from the lockdowns, it is that they have helped all sectors, including culture, to remember that creativity is the key to moving forward.

Communication and technology are friends of art and heritage, as they are increasingly essential elements in their dissemination. Once we are all aware of the importance of embracing new technologies and making the most of them to achieve our goals, we can go further.

Nothing can replace the experience of visiting a museum in person, enjoying it and being inspired by its works of art and the history of our heritage. But times and communications change, and we must know not only to coexist with this, but to truly embrace it. #museuobert will surely be the start of a series of initiatives that will increase the visibility of museums in Catalonia and the world, bringing culture closer to users wherever they are.

Notes

1. Source: <https://www.coeli.cat/>.
2. Source: Google Analytics.
3. Source: Metricool.
4. Betevé [online]. “Museus virtuals: art sense aglomeracions amb només un clic”. <https://beteve.cat/artic/museus-virtuals-casa/>. [Consulted: 14/04/2020].
5. *La Vanguardia* [online]. “23 propostes culturals de la Diputació de Barcelona per a un Sant Jordi confinat”. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/encatala/20200422/48662232016/23-propostes-diputacio-barcelona-santjordi-2020-confinat-brl.html>. [Consulted: 22/4/2020].
6. *Ara.cat* [online]. “El Dia Internacional dels Museus desborda les xarxes”. https://www.ara.cat/cultura/Dia-Internacional-Museus-desborda-xarxes-coronavirus-covid-19_0_2454354673.html. [Consulted: 15/5/2020].
7. *El Periódico de Catalunya* [online]. “23 propuestas culturales de la Diputación de Barcelona para un Sant Jordi confinados”. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/civismo/20200422/23-propuestas-culturales-de-la-diputacion-de-barcelona-para-un-sant-jordi-confinados-7934008>. [Consulted: 22/4/2020].
8. *Barcelona Sostenible* [online]. “20 propostes per un estiu molt sostenible”. <https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelonasostenible/ca/entitats-i-empreses/bulleti/592/20-propostes-per-un-estiu-molt-sostenible>. [Consulted: 1/7/2020].

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