

Poetry in Public Space Using a Network of Scattered QR Codes

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1. Introduction

Even though there is a number of people that read and write poetry in Greece, the vast majority are left with a distorted impression of this literary medium, emanating from their school days. Poets are commonly beatified and poetry is often associated with beauty, rhyme, wordplay or esotericism rather than a wide range of emotions, imagery and style in tune with the times. The academic experience of many and the prevalence of prosaic approaches to reality leaves most with little appetite or aptitude to experience a poem, let alone create one.

Our primary goal was to reconcile the public with poetry by raising its awareness and to promote a reflective dialogue with space. To achieve that, we decided to showcase verses in an original way on public surfaces. In other words, we wanted to take poetry out of its traditional setting and into places where people don't expect it to exist. To achieve that on a relatively big scale we combined smartphones, Quick Response (QR) codes and the internet to create a distributed game in the city. Scattered QR codes invite you to discover the poetry hidden in unexpected places and with the help of a smartphone the scanned QR leads you straight to a random poem from the constantly updated, curated, online collection.

Realizing that the QR code contains a poem, before its actual content is read,

is enough to change, even temporarily, the lay impression about poetry. Combining the elements of discovery and decryption along with two seemingly incompatible concepts such as poetry and technology, takes members of the public by surprise and positively predisposes them to the random poem that they are served.

2. Poetry in Public Spaces

In antiquity, when oral traditions were strong, poetry was used to strengthen communal ties, teach moral values, relieve people from sufferings and even combat oppression. At that time poetry was at the center of public life. With the advent of written tradition, poetry was gradually displaced to a more private sphere. There have been a few attempts to place poetry again more prominently in the public realm. Some of these are examined below.

2.1 Poetry on Public Transport

Starting in 1986 some of the advertising space on carriages of the London Underground was reclaimed and short poems have been on display. The endeavour has been praised extensively and has been extended to London buses. Unsurprisingly, it has been adopted by many cities around the world [1]. As the creators themselves have noted "Poetry thrives on paradox, and the poems seemed to take a new life when they were removed from books and set among the adverts" [2]. The best poems have been printed on paperback, with the ninth

edition selling an impressive 250,000 copies [3].

In our native Athens, in 2011 and for a whole month, the National Book Centre of Greece (under the auspices of the Ministry of Education) decorated the insides of trains, buses and other means of transport with verses of Odysseas Elytis, Greece's Nobel prize laureate, in order to celebrate the 100th anniversary since his birth.

2.2 Poetry on Walls

Since 1992, in the Dutch city of Leiden, a small group of artists started the project “Dicht op de Muur” (Poetry on the Wall) where they paint poems from all languages in the city center. They are usually painted along the building fronts and the type and style of the lettering is chosen so as to match the poem [4] and it has been emulated in other cities [5].

Similar efforts have taken place in Toronto where the city's Poet Laureate launched an initiative to transform public spaces into "an illuminating forum for the written word" [6].

3. Our approach

Poetry adds a layer of codification on top of language. We attempted to introduce yet another layer by encrypting poems using technology before placing them in public view.

3.1 Choice of Physical Materials

Quick Response Codes - In order to encode the poems we chose Quick Response (QR) codes originally created by a subsidiary of Toyota [7]. Despite their industrial origin, they are becoming increasingly popular in commercial settings [8].

QR codes have certain characteristics that make their use in our project most suitable. Firstly, they are widely adopted as they are an open ISO

standard and the patent holding company has chosen not to exercise her rights. Secondly, QR codes can be easily scanned. The rise of smartphones has provided fertile ground for the technology to flourish as people effectively carry a personal barcode scanner with them. All widely used mobile platforms offer applications allowing easy scanning. Thirdly, their great storage capacity and high redundancy allows for strong error correction capabilities (decoding is still possible with up to 30% QR code damage). This is particularly important in our case as the QR impressions are exposed to the elements of nature and resistance to decay is necessary.

Even though a QR code can easily store a very long poem, we chose not to encode poems into the QR code itself. Instead, we encrypted a link to the project's page (www.codepoetry.gr) where a dynamically chosen poem is served to the visitor.



Figure 1. (a) QR code containing link to online collection (b) Spray painting the QR code using a metallic stencil

Finally, we placed below the QR code the phrase "THIS IS A POEM" and above it, its Greek equivalent “AYTO EINAI ENA PΟIΗΜΑ”, in order to hint at the contents of the QR code and to ease the possible reservations of a suspicious public as to its purpose. Figure 1(a) shows the resulting QR code.

Stencil and Spray - The short lifespan of stickers along with the non-trivial

cost of printing, led us to switch early on to stencil and spray. Figure 1(b) shows the application of paint with a metallic QR stencil. We used free and open source software [9] in order to convert the image of the QR code into a vector-based stencil pattern suitable for laser cutting (see [10] for details on conversion).

As of September 2012 we have put up more than 500 QR stamps in central Athens and some busy peripheral neighbourhoods. We applied most of these in popular, central locations where people go shopping or out at night.

3.2 Choice of Software Platform

For content delivery we chose Wordpress [11], the free and open source website platform and optimized it for touch interfaces by installing a mobile theme on top [12]. As soon as someone scans the QR code (Fig. 2) the mobile phone detects the URL embedded within it and offers to launch the browser automatically. We found that the experience is so seamless that most people believe the poem is embedded into the QR code itself. Figure 3 shows the poem as it is displayed on the smartphone.



Figure 2. Using a smartphone to decode the QR code after it has been spray-painted on a wall

The ability to deliver dynamic content allows for an evolving collection as well as the temporary introduction of a

poetic theme to commemorate a historic event or poet. Furthermore, we get to enhance the experience by delivering a random poem each time a QR code is scanned. Randomness is a vital element as it enhances the sense of uniqueness. Each scan of the QR reveals a different poem.

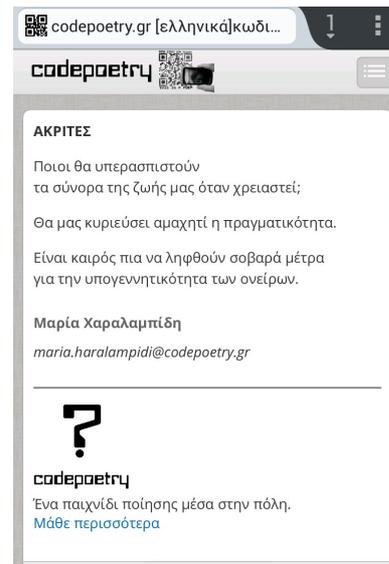


Figure 3. A poem displayed on the smartphone after scanning the QR

Finally, our decision to dynamically serve the content enables interactivity as visitors may respond to the poem they have just read by commenting underneath it or by sending a personal message to the contributing author.

3.3 Choice of Content

While traditional publishing routes often focus on established names, the nature of our project led us towards contemporary and emerging ones. Having greater affinity for city culture and technology, they contributed poems enthusiastically. What is more, we let the door open to the general public and as a result about 20% of the poems have been contributed by unpublished authors. Once we receive a poem we make a decision whether to include it in the collection, based on our personal notion of what we would like to stumble upon.

4. Results

The reaction from people to our effort has been very positive and supportive and we assess that with various means. With about 300 surviving QR stamps across the city we are now getting on average 100 visitors daily, with the average visit lasting a minute and a half. The average number of pages per visit is 2.5. Of these, on average, about 80% are direct hits resulting from scanning the QR code with a mobile phone and 20% come from social networks, newspapers [13,14], blogs [15,16] or other referrals. We expect these numbers to grow as smartphone penetration and QR code recognition rate increases.

Because smartphones are particularly popular among the young, who are also more likely to know of QR codes, it is natural that our project has had a greater impact that demographic, a group that would otherwise be less likely to count poetry readers among its ranks. Modern technology and its popular incarnation, the smartphone, works like a trojan horse in getting contemporary poetry known to a new audience.

Finally, a number of people are interested in starting codepoetry chapters in other cities and languages. The modular design of the site has made that relatively trivial. We recently opened up the French, English and Italian sites and we are in the process of recruiting volunteer poetry curators and graffiti vigilantes to spread rhyme on walls and tiles. Visitors to the site are forwarded to poems written in their language based on their IP address. Moreover, embracing the principles of free culture and the free software movement, we have setup instructional documents outlining our approach (technical tutorials, printer-ready codepoetry

stickers and general advice) to help foreign teams startup.

5. Future Work and Discussion

We expect traffic to increase as our network of QR stencils and smartphone penetration rates grow. Export.gov estimates that mobile phone penetration in Greece is at 25% while WIRED magazine puts it at 35% [17,18]. Furthermore, QR code technology is relatively at its infancy. The Pan-European average of people that report using their smartphones for scanning QR codes is at 14.1% [19].

Principles of our technique and our online platform can be used to create poetry-based street games. The codepoetry team has designed and has been commissioned to implement and conduct a group street poetry game for the Athens Plaython 2013 [20], festival dedicated to street-based games. Participants will walk in small groups through the city planting QR poem-stencils and experiencing poetry out of its usual setting. They will combine poetry with a game of discovery & technology, and explore it as a collective, oral event.

Taking advantage of new media and the city's concrete canvas, we hope efforts such as the above will help poetry regain its public voice and enter the civic landscape more dynamically.

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