

QR Codes in the Library, an interim report

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QR CODES IN THE LIBRARY is a pilot project supported by the Harvard Library Lab seeking to test user acceptance of QR Codes posted in the library that link to subject area research guides. The pilot is being carried out in the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, a unit of the Harvard College Library, over the course of the Fall semester, 2011-2012 academic year. QR (“Quick Response”) Codes, two-dimensional barcodes fast becoming ubiquitous in marketing, public spaces, and supply-chain and logistics management, are posted on signs in specific areas of the library stacks, and link users with smartphones and tablet computers to pre-existing on-line research guides relevant to materials held in those areas of the library stacks.

The origin of this project was found in an HCL committee prior to the dismantling of the library committee structure. A plan to pilot QR Code use was formulated in 2009, using the Lamont Library and the Loeb Music Library as test sites. Lamont was to have linked QR Codes with call-number maps, floor plans, and similar way-finding resources, while the Loeb Music part of the project was to link the codes to on-line research guides. After the initial project was shelved, the Loeb Music portion of the original plan was recast as a pilot project submitted for support by the Library Lab, and accepted in the second round of Library Lab awards.

The design and implementation of the project went extremely smoothly. There are no problems or obstacles to report. The on-line resources were tested successfully for mobile compatibility, and the codes themselves were easily generated and linked to the research guides URL’s. The signs containing the codes and user information were created and printed in-house. Once the specific research guides were selected for the purposes of this project, locations in the stacks related to these subject areas (“Finding Songs in Song Collections,” “Jazz Resources,” and “Finding Concert Reviews in Periodicals”) were identified and reviewed for their appropriateness. Mobile signal strength was tested and confirmed in these locations. Legacy usage data for these research guides was obtained for analytical purposes. Accounts in Google Analytics, the means by which the success or failure of this pilot will be assessed, were created, and the tracking HTML code (supplied by Google Analytics) was inserted into each web site; with testing, it was determined that the insertion of these small chunks of HTML proved harmless to the proper functioning of the web sites. The signs were posted on the first day of classes, September 1, 2011, and the trial will conclude on the last day of the semester, December 20, 2011. At this point, there are no unresolved issues, nor unmet challenges related to this project as conceived.

QR Codes are freely available from a number of web-based companies, so there are no associated costs with generating and linking the barcodes. Aside from the dedication of relatively insignificant staff time to this project, the budget was set at \$50., primarily for the purchase of flexible plastic magnet-backed sign holders. Five were bought, resulting in an actual expense for this project of approximately \$25. These sign holders have proven effective since they may be easily deployed and redeployed at will, and adhere well to the metal shelving in the library. An example of the signs is attached to this report, as Appendix I.

At the time of this writing, the pilot continues to run. At the end of the trial phase, the results of usage and conclusions drawn from them will be written and submitted to the Library Lab, in addition to recommendations. Further, a simple best-practices guide will be created for the use of other library units across the Harvard Library who might want to employ QR Codes in this fashion. It would be premature to offer any insight into usage at this time, as it remains to be seen whether usage is affected by the time of semester, with particular interest paid to the period leading up to the end of the semester when papers and exams typically engage students. One piece of anecdotal evidence as to QR Code acceptance, however, can be revealed here: some students have expressed the opinion that since QR Codes have become so integral to mass marketing, it is sometimes assumed that they are only used for advertising purposes, a negative connotation for the technology. It will be interesting to learn whether this may be an unavoidable constraint to their use in the library context.

No publicity for the existence of the QR Code signs was done in advance of deployment, nor has any been done since. The rationale for this was that would be useful to know whether QR Codes have become commonplace enough that they do not need additional explanation to potential users, the mark of a mature technology. Should the Loeb Music Library decide to continue and even widen their use after the pilot period, it is likely that some publicity will be conducted in order to better familiarize regular users with their purpose.

Aside from participation in Library Lab-sponsored events and forums, the author of this report has had the opportunity to discuss the project widely with colleagues in the field of Access Services at two library conferences over the past six months. There were opportunities to relate plans and progress of this effort at the Ivies+ Access Services conference held at Cornell University in June, 2011, and at the Access Services 2011 Conference at Georgia Tech in November, 2011. With QR Codes up for discussion during formal sessions of both meetings, the Harvard project was informally presented and very well received by colleagues, who indicated that this was a unique and valuable experiment in the deployment of the QR Code technology within libraries. Some attendees expressed a desire to learn how the Harvard project turns out, and this author will likely look for opportunities to disseminate the results of our experience to others in the field outside of Harvard, as appropriate.

The author looks forward to the full data set from the trial period, and will issue a final report to the Library Lab shortly after the beginning of the 2012 calendar year.

Appendix I. Example of QR Code Sign Text.



*Snap it with your smartphone or
tablet...*

**Research Guide:
“Finding Songs in
Collections”**

URL: <http://guides.hcl.harvard.edu/song>