

SII – Sustainability Innovation Inventory

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Yellow Arrow Project



Executive Summary

Originating in New York City, the Yellow Arrow project is a “massively authored artistic publication” that allows anyone who wants to do so tell mini-stories about different locations around the world. People who come across a Yellow Arrow sticker can text-message the number on the sticker to receive a message in response, which tells them something about the history and culture of their location, alerts passers-by about local organizations and upcoming events, or simply shares a relevant quote, poem, or musing.

Pedestrians who find themselves momentarily phone-less can also look up the sticker online later.

The Yellow Arrow system of creating accessible links to virtual information in physical space is a tool cities could use for supplying information about a variety of issues related to sustainability, including recycling and energy efficiency tips, ecological and geological data about the city, publicity for groups doing local sustainability work in particular locations, or contact information for programs they might want to join. It could also draw attention to infrequently used public spaces, or timesaving detours. Finally, as a publicly authored project, it could be used to connect citizens interested in starting their own projects to preserve or improve local spaces.

Sustainability

In a special coverage of mobile technology for *The New York Times*, journalist Ethan Todras-Whitehall describes the Yellow Arrow project as creating a “geospatial Web, the Internet overlaid on

the real world” (2006). The Yellow Arrow project enables people to create easy-access links to information all over their cities in an unobtrusive, optional way. Yellow Arrow co-founder Christopher Allen explains that the project chose to use text messages and stickers intentionally to be as inclusive as possible, by relying on “the lowest common denominator” technologies in urban communication (Todras-Whitehall, 2006).

Yellow Arrow stickers have already been used for many social sustainability projects, including education, cultural heritage preservation, and political engagement. Some example applications around the world include:

- In 2006, the music label Dischord Records collaborated with the Yellow Arrow project to develop a self-guided interactive street tour called “Capital Punk,” which tells the history of punk rock in Washington D.C. (*Baltimore Sun*, 2006).
- In Copenhagen, political candidates have started using Yellow Arrow stickers to connect their thoughts to local spaces for voters to find and engage with (Todras-Whitehall, 2006).
- The travel guide company Lonely Planet designated 300,000 yellow arrow stickers in 2005 for a project on participatory tourism (Nguyen, 2005).

The real sustainability aspect of Yellow Arrow is that, more than an art project, a movement, or a collective text, it is a *tool* – a way of communicating and connecting place to information in an infinite variety of ways. It also creates a simple system for distributing information electronically to people on the go, thereby discouraging paper waste and encouraging educated decision-making. Ultimately, any system of effectively distributing public information helps create a cohesive community and promotes public action. Though the Yellow Arrow project is not currently focused on sustainability exclusively, its ability to draw city residents together through creative uses of technology makes it an important technology for city designers and policy makers to have in their toolkits.



Figure 1: A Yellow Arrow sticker with a political message, placed by Copenhagen mayoral candidate Mai Christiansen in 2006 at the Children’s Animal Farm.

(Photo from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/technology/techspecial2/25geo.html>)

Current Technology

Yellow Arrow stickers are 4.75 inches long and cost 50 cents each online at <http://www.yellowarrow.net>. Contributors who purchase Yellow Arrow stickers can send their geographically situated stories to the Yellow Arrow website using their mobile phones as soon as they tag a new location, just as future passers-by can retrieve the story via phone. Each sticker has the Yellow Arrow phone number and a unique alphanumeric identity code written on it, which allows people passing by to text Yellow Arrow without any prior knowledge of the program and request information about the sticker-adorned site. People who find a sticker and want more information

simply text the sticker's code to the provided phone number; they in turn receive a text message response with a story or information about the queried site. In addition to posting and retrieving information, viewers and contributors can also interact with each other by posting comments on particular stickers by phone or online. While anyone in the world can text Yellow Arrow's original New York number, the project also has regional phone numbers for Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Australia, Germany, and the UK.

The stickers are designed to be easily removable so as not to become unwanted graffiti, and Yellow Arrow actively discourages use of its stickers for advertising purposes beyond local establishments promoting a live band performance or a free cup of coffee. Are they legal? The yellow arrow project has a short answer to that: "Yellow Arrow is legal. It's simple. Ask permission" (The Yellow Arrow Project).



Figure 2: Yellow Arrow stickers can be attached to anything in the city, including moving objects. (Image from www.flickr.com/photos/kaeru/125127126/)

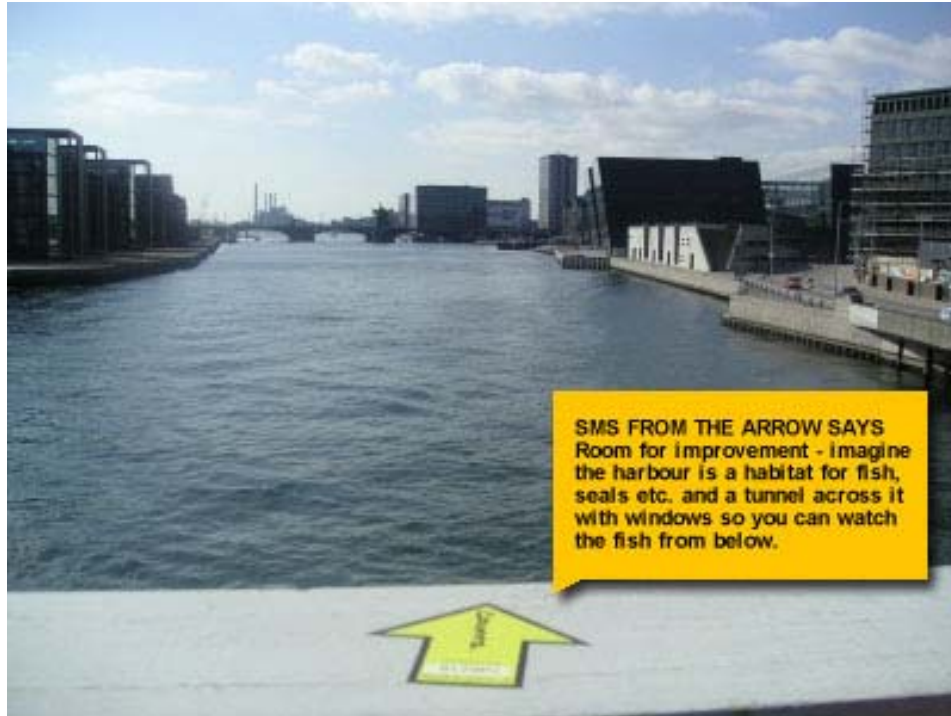


Figure 3: Yellow Arrow messages range from informational to historical to even just whimsical, like the one above. (Image from <http://blog.genstart.dk/2005/06/>)

Technology and Experience Roadmap

Cities interested in using tagging programs like Yellow Arrow should keep in mind what one might call “the iPhone test,” which is summed up by the following question: Does the information provided by a yellow arrow (or other text message-based tag) add unique knowledge to the world, or could a pedestrian with an iPhone find the same information using the Internet?

The following examples are potential areas of application for geographically situated hyperlinks that pass the iPhone test:

Informed Consumerism

Consumers who want to make environmentally and socially responsible purchasing decisions can often be overwhelmed by “greenwashing,” contradictory advertisements, and product claims not backed by recognizable standards. Many consumers find themselves confronted on a daily basis by questions such as: Is it better to buy “locally grown” conventional apples or organic apples shipped from New Zealand? What does it mean exactly that a product is made from “70% post-consumer” materials? How can I be sure that this package of athletic socks didn’t come from a sweatshop? What does the FSC label mean?

Environmental and social advocacy groups can help consumers make more informed decisions in a number of ways, but many of these don’t travel well and aren’t available in the store when you need them. Portable environmental cheat-sheets, like Monterey Bay Aquarium’s “Fish List,” are small enough to be kept in a wallet and referenced on-demand, but these pocket guides are rarely comprehensive (<http://www.thefishlist.org>).

Yellow arrow-style information links could be used by public advocacy organizations, or even as part of a company’s CSR plan, to help consumers find more detailed information about potential purchases real-time through their mobile phones. A text-message based service could, for example,

link interested consumers immediately to information about a specific item's environmental footprint, supply chain, and voluntarily-imposed restrictions, or a third-party assessment of a product's environmental and social impacts.

Public Transportation Tracking

Public transportation is rapidly becoming connected to communications and tracking networks, and many transportation authorities are now able to track public vehicles real-time throughout the city. People waiting at a bus stop or train station could take advantage of this connectivity with a service that lets them text a number to find out the expected waiting time for the next bus or train. The service could also alert them to potential severe delays. The website <http://www.nextbus.com>, which currently provides GPS bus-tracking in several cities in North America, could serve as a helpful example for cities interested in implementing a similar service.

Buy/Eat/Play Local

Neighborhood associations could help local businesses by keeping an up-to-date schedule of events and store/restaurant hours and allow pedestrians to query this information by block by texting codes on individual intersections. While this information is usually available on the Internet for each individual venue, it is not always available in an aggregated list, and keeping text-queries *really* local can help people make decisions without being overwhelmed by information. Keeping timetables of what's open now could also help pedestrians find services quickly late at night.

Neighborhoods could also use interactive text-messaging to get public feedback on potential programs and developments or just take informal surveys of neighborhood trends.

Works Cited and Sources for Additional Information:

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Yellow Arrow Project:
<http://yellowarrow.net/index2.php>

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