



## **Sponsored Post: Virtual Graffiti in the Read-Write City**

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Augmented Reality (AR) is a form of media that we can use to access, analyze, communicate and create new messages layered onto our physical space. In a sense, this layer of augmented content is a way to "read" additional information and it gives creators a chance to "write" and layer new stories for people to engage with. In this regard, AR effectively expands the concept of literacy. It can create a "Read-Write City," one that can very much reveal what is hidden and encourage civic engagement.

Pokémon Go by Niantic Labs was this summer's craze, with a staggering 7.5 million people downloading it in the first week. This helped AR gain a broader acceptance to read-write our cities. Though the level of playing Pokémon Go has decreased, it continues to leave a layer of "virtual graffiti" that will not be erased, and even if it could be erased—would we want it to? AR layers an additional level of media onto the physical world, whether it is sound, images, graphics, or GPS data to name a few. AR can be a democratizing force, one that encourages communities to contribute to their culture, tell their stories, reflect on history and inspire others to actively inquire, think and reflect on our shared public spaces.

Take, for example, artist Amir Baradarin, who in 2011 subverted The Louvre in

France to have the Mona Lisa come to life through a video performance called Frenchising Mona Lisa. Leonardo DaVinci's Mona Lisa is a French icon-one that over time has become representative of French nationalism. Yet, in essence, the painting is of an Italian Noblewoman from a wealthy Italian family that questions the juxtaposition of opulence versus the common man, or elitism versus the general public. During the video performance, the public could hold their mobile screen up to any picture of the Mona Lisa and the woman in the painting would transform into wearing the French flag as a hijab, an Islamic head scarf that has been a cry out for religious persecution since the time the French government banned hijabs from being worn in public schools.

Amir's goal was to encourage people to question both French nationalism as well as ownership of the curatorial museum experience, which poses a question of freedom of expression from two points of view.

The first is from the artist's perspective. The artist, Amir Baradarin, wanted the public to see with new eyes and ponder, "Who gets to dictate what viewpoints are forced on others?"

This points out the concern that the content we view is actually already dictated to us. The illusion is that it is personalized to our interests but in actuality, it is that we choose to live in a "filtered bubble" (a term coined by internet activist, Eli Pariser). While some will want to blame it on how Artificial Intelligence is customizing our media experience, it is also about who and what we choose to follow or unfollow.

Facebook is a good example of this. How often have you read a post from one of your family or friends that you disagreed with and chose to hide or unfollow that person because you disagree with their views or posts? This can escalate to the point of living in a world where with whom you communicate is of the same cultural or ideological norms as you. Over time, that can cause negative impact on civil discourse and democracy.

AR can help burst this "filtered bubble" and offer virtual moments that allow us to stumble upon "graffiti-covered" walls by pure chance. Graffiti always has been surrounded by controversies where disagreements have arisen over whether it's legal or not, and where it should be displayed or not, but what usually happens is the images are stumbled upon in unexpected places that encourage you to re-think the meaning of that place. Augmented reality has the power to reveal that which is hidden, to give rise to alternative storytelling, and to mediate the stories between the present and the past.

Let's return to Amir's Frenchising Mona Lisa. From the Louvre's point of view, the museum thought themselves the content experts in charge of upholding the integrity of Leonardo DaVinci's masterpiece. So, when an artist, Amir, comes in and layers his own interpretation on the Mona Lisa and shares it with the public

to question what the painting really represents, the Louvre felt as if it had been hacked!

The Louvre had not given permission to Amir so it felt violated for changing the conversation on a national treasure. We saw this also happen with Pokémon Go this summer when players pursued PokéStops in locations that didn't choose to participate, such as the Holocaust Museum, Arlington National Cemetery or the Hiroshima Memorial. These were somber spaces wanting to respect the dead, and protect their sense of place. Catching Pokémon at these locations seemed to re-contextualize the place and felt like a violation for not having a way to opt-in and choose to participate.

However, there are no digital trespassing laws. Rather than shut down innovation or set policy too soon, isn't it better for experiences like this to provoke social good and civil discussion? If everyone asked permission first, these provocative messages might not happen.

For the record, Niantic Labs did remove the PokéStops from locations that requested to be removed from the game. What's interesting is many teens have taken to YouTube to offer tutorials for their peers on how to respect the places they visit while also playing the game, and others have shared that Pokémon Go has breathed renewed life into cemeteries, which historically were considered public parks and places for recreation.

This is the start of National Media Literacy week, a time for everyone to reflect on how we use media to access, analyze, evaluate, communicate and create messages. In its simplest terms, media literacy builds upon the foundation of how we read and write through new forms of media, such as using AR to tell new stories throughout your city. If you are designing an AR experience for the public-- whether it's to market a brand, give voice to an under-represented community, or build a new playable story--critically think about the messages you are creating and ask yourself these questions:

- What is your version of the Read-Write City?
- Are you offering alternative voices in your message?
- Are there opportunities for serendipity and stumbling upon something new?

What started as a summer hit opens up a Pandora's box of using augmented reality to tag our world, shape the future of location-based storytelling and knit the digital and physical worlds more tightly together. It also has given us a glimpse into the future where the moral codes and ethics of creating this new layer and choice to participate needs to be unpacked.

Note: Erin Reilly designed and organized an "Ideation Huddle: Banksy" on every corner at USC's Annenberg Innovation Lab. Fifteen people attended with Artifact Technologies, BC Biermann, Cynthia Wang and Jeff Watson as

provocateurs. The above piece represents her summary of the huddle, a wealth of knowledge and conversation from all who attended.

## BIO

Erin Reilly is managing director and research fellow at USC's Annenberg Innovation Lab. She is a graduate of Emerson College and has her Masters of Fine Arts degree from Maine Media Workshops + College. She is a member of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, vice president of NAMLE (National Association for Media Literacy Education) and serves on advisory boards, such as Disney Junior and PBS Emmy-award winning SciGirls. Reilly presents and consults with companies in the areas of audience engagement, creative strategy, media literacy and the future of media and entertainment.