

Asking a City?

Martin Parker

If you think about the city or town that you live in, what comes to mind? Its probably some combination of the people you live with, and the places you work or study. You might add the shops and pubs that you like, perhaps a park that you walk in, or some places that you go to regularly.

If you wanted help with something you were doing, or you needed to borrow something, who would you ask? Probably someone from one of those places - a fellow student or employee, maybe someone in a club or gym you visit, or perhaps you would post a question on a social media platform where you are linked to other friends.

Any one person's networks are limited by who and what they know, where they live, where they work and so on. But what if you needed help, and could ask the entire city that you live in?

This is the idea behind AskingBristol, an experiment intended to see whether we can produce a 'hyper-connected' city. We know that there are already lots of networks within Bristol, but they tended to be limited to the areas that people live in, or the places they work and worship, or the sports and schools they share.

What we are trying to do is to knit together some of these connections. We want to create a network of networks which allows requests or 'asks' to be shared across the city. At the same time, we are collecting people and organizations who might be able to help by making 'offers' of things given, things lent, spaces lent, volunteering time, specialized expertise and advice, and even money.

Its difficult to do this with everyone who lives in the city though, so we are contacting charities, community organizations and social groups, and asking them what they need. Bristol has thousands of these organizations and they represent just about every different identity and area, from the centre to the outskirts.

But how are we collecting the asks? For this version of our experiment we are using students from the two universities as 'ask authors' to speak to the charities and collect the requests. The students are trained, and then have conversations with some representatives from the organization. The students fill in a form which details the ask, and then we try to ensure the organization receives an 'offer' from one of the organizations in our network.

Every one of us has our own small network in the city, people who would help us if we needed something. With AskingBristol we are trying to build a bigger network, one that allows people to share things, time, and expertise more widely and more easily. This won't replace everyone's small networks, community groups and so on, but it will link them together into a citywide web. Our hope is that this will be the beginning of a conversation that might lead to some really useful connections, and show that the whole city can be more than the sum of its parts.