

Communities, Cities and Networks

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Any group of human beings creates a network. Like many animals, we construct webs of family, friends, enemies, supporters and acquaintances that help us navigate the social world, collaborating and competing. Some people have bigger networks than others, or networks which are composed of more powerful or influential people. Other people have narrow networks, few people that they can call on for help.

'Social network' analysis is a way of describing the characteristics of social groups. A long time before social media, sociologists were analysing different sorts of societies, with one particular area of interest being the difference between a traditional 'community' and a larger modern society. Often communities were described as being small, dense networks, within a village for example, in which pretty much everyone knew everyone else. The support networks were strong, but so were the social sanctions if you did something or were someone that didn't fit in.

No wonder that many people saw the city as a freedom from the constraints of community, a place where someone could be anonymous and free. It wasn't easy to be gay in a small community, or to be a migrant from somewhere else, eating different food and worshipping different gods. Communities are good at harbouring their own but can also be powerful instruments of exclusion.

AskingBristol is an attempt to produce community-like relations within a large modern city, so in some sense is trying to capture elements of both sorts of social systems. Imagine a social network diagram of Bristol, or what sociologists would call a 'sociogram'. Each part of the city would have its own social network of people connected by lines, based on neighbourhoods, shared schools and pubs.

Overlaid on this spatial sociogram would be communities based on common identities, who might also live in particular parts of the city. The Bristol Somali community, or Afro-Caribbean community, do not exclusively live in Easton or St Paul's, but there would be dense networks in those places. If we add to this picture networks based around places of work, such as the city council, hospitals or universities, or leisure activities such as football or rugby, you can begin to imagine a thick diagram of connections which would indicate who knows who in Bristol.

As everyone who is familiar with Bristol also understands, ours is a divided city, and the sociogram would show that too. Take the University of Bristol as an example. Spatially, its network would be densest in the northwest of the city, in a triangle stretching from the river to the Gloucester Road. As we also know, these are areas that tend to be whiter and wealthier. There are less likely to be parts of the university network stretching into Hartcliffe or Staple Hill. Similarly, the network associated with the Brislington Cricket Club is probably strongest in the southeast of the city, and probably doesn't include many people from Lawrence Weston.

Networks tend to be 'homophilic', which is another way of saying that we tend to form bonds with people like us. If you look at your Facebook friends, or who you follow on Instagram, the majority of them will be like you, in terms of education, social class, gender and ethnic background. Even within a big cosmopolitan city like Bristol, we will see these preferences for similarity which bond us together in networks which include some and exclude others.

This is a problem that AskingBristol needs to solve, to make sure that its networks are what the sociologist Robert Putnam calls 'bridging' and not only 'bonding'. If AskingBristol, or any other city based network, is not to follow the patterns of privilege and exclusion that already characterise our city then it must engineer connections that stitch across the city's divides. It needs to be, in the jargon, 'heterophilic', deliberately connecting people, networks and institutions that do not currently share links.

This is probably the hardest task AskingBristol faces - to connect different people and places and help them to share resources. This is what will distinguish 'charity' from dense forms of collaboration which address shared problems. If we can do this then we stand a chance of achieving our ambition - to create the UK's first 'hyperconnected' city.